

When Your Toughest Conversations Are With Yourself

By: Padraig Coaching & Consulting Inc.

We've written a fair bit and worked with a lot of organizations around Essential Conversations — our workshop program that helps leaders have difficult conversations with others (employees, peers, suppliers, etc).

The program works well, has a lot of a-ha moments, and helps leaders figure out how to have the conversations they've been avoiding.

However, working one-on one with so many leaders in our coaching programs, we've come to realize something else — with many successful leaders, the toughest conversations they're having are with themselves.

I recently read an article in the Harvard Business Review ¹ that dove into this topic and it hit home. So many of our clients, who are themselves respected and sometimes revered senior leaders, are pounding themselves with criticism and self-doubt.

One leader we know excelled throughout his career — rising rapidly, taking on ever-increasing responsibility for people, budgets, product delivery and organizational reputation. His teams grew from a handful of people to a few dozen, then a few hundred, and later thousands.

He exuded confidence in decision making and vision-setting, he gave speeches around the world to hundreds at a time, promoting his company's product with great success.

And yet, on the inside the successes were celebrated fleetingly while he would layer-in things like “you should have seen that coming,” or “that talk was lousy, you didn't hit the right notes when you needed to.” His team was committed to him and to the product, yet he would worry that he didn't look “strong enough” or that they would know when he was struggling with a decision and would think him incapable or unqualified.

Another executive we work with is seen as one of the most innovative and dynamic thinkers in her field. She devises new ideas and innovative approaches that leave her team in awe. Yet, she's so worried that her idea might be wrong or that there might be solid reasons for it not to work that she holds back most of her ideas. Or, she shares the idea and then tries to micro-manage their implementation, to prove it will work.

¹ Harvard Business Review, March 22, 2017 “Difficult Conversations: When Your Toughest Conversations Are the Ones You Have with Yourself”

The team that is so often in awe often ends up frustrated and exasperated. They see her creative strength but her own worries are diminishing her star power and losing the commitment of those around her.

Many of these great leaders acknowledge that they can have tough conversations with others because they have to, if they're to ensure their culture is strong and their success aligned. I hear things like "tough on the problem, gentle on the person," or "high expectations and high support," and "I decide which battles are worth fighting — where do we want to ensure we learn from a mistake and where is it ok to just let it go?"

Yet, and I'll bet you know where I'm going with this... these same folks rarely, if ever, apply those tests to their own self-talk.

When something goes wrong how often do you get tough on the issue, so it doesn't happen again, while being gentle on yourself? How often when you've set enormous expectations for yourself, do you also ensure you have enormous support? And of course, how often do you make a mistake and consciously decide this one's not worth criticizing?

Here are some of the most common negative automatic thoughts ²— which ones have you experienced?

All-or-nothing thinking: You see things in black and white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a failure.

Overgeneralization: You see a negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.

Mental filter: You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of all reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that discolors the entire beaker of water.

Disqualifying the positive: You reject positive experiences by insisting they "don't count" or "it wasn't just me". In this way, you maintain a negative belief despite it being contradicted by your everyday experiences.

Jumping to conclusions:

(a) Mind Reading. Concluding that someone is reacting negatively to you, and you don't bother to check this out.

² Burns, D. D. (1980). *Feeling good: the new mood therapy*. New York: Morrow.

(b) The Fortune Teller Error. Anticipating that things will turn out badly and feeling convinced that it's doomed..

Magnification (catastrophizing) or minimization: You exaggerate the importance of things (such as your goof-up or someone else's achievement). Or you inappropriately shrink things until they appear tiny (your own desirable qualities or the other fellow's imperfections). This is also called the "binocular trick."

Emotional reasoning: You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: "I feel it, therefore it must be true."

Should statements: You try to motivate yourself with shoulds and shouldn't's, as if you had to be whipped and punished before you could be expected to do anything. "Musts" and "oughts" are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When you direct should statements toward others, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment.

Labeling and mislabeling: This is an extreme form of over-generalization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: "I'm a loser."

When someone else's behavior rubs you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to him: "He's a jerk." Mislabeled involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded.

Personalization: You see yourself as the cause of a negative outcome.

So how do we change for the better?

Well, the BIG first step is recognizing it when it's happening. If you're on autopilot with your criticism and self-doubt, you need to become aware when it's happening. Our goal is to become an impartial observer – not denying the feelings, not criticizing ourselves for feeling bad, just observe. Just be aware.

Pick a day — today works well, or tomorrow. Try to be aware of your self-talk — remind yourself throughout the day to be aware. Perhaps that means a sticky note on your computer or your notebook. If you're finding it hard to catch yourself in the moment, spend a few days instead where you reflect back. In other words set two times each day for a 3-minute check-in.

Maybe you want to do your check-in at lunch and again on your drive home. During those 3 minutes, mentally review the day so far. What happened when you were unhappy, disappointed, critical? What were the negative thoughts? How were you feeling at the time? Make a note of these things (if you're driving home when you do

this you might want to dictate your thoughts on the handsfree recording app on your phone!).

The more you're able to recall these times and to describe the feeling(s), the more you're going to notice them the next time.

Start with articulating and acknowledging thoughts weighing you down—ones that don't serve any useful purpose beyond keeping you stuck and then letting go with statements like, "I forgive myself for procrastinating" or "It's okay for me to be angry." These statements cut short self-bashing and free up emotional resources.

The next big step is to challenge this thinking.

One of the techniques we constantly use when helping people lead others is to ask those other folks open-ended curious questions. So, we recommend the same things for ourselves. When you think "that was a lousy talk" or "you should have seen that coming" or any of the others up above, ask "Oh, is that so? What makes you say that?" And then continue questioning yourself — be rigorous in your debate — challenge that negative voice to honestly justify itself.

Here are some examples:

- What if things are better than I think? What am I depriving myself of?
- When have I felt this way before, and realized later than everything was better than I thought?
- So what if [insert worst case scenario] happens?
- How can I...?

Focus on progress, not perfection.

Another technique is to imagine someone in your life whom you care deeply for — your life partner/spouse, your adult child, your best friend, your closest confidante. If they told you they were feeling this way about themselves and they were criticizing themselves this way, what would you tell them? What would you say to help them see their positive progress, to help themselves see how good and capable they are?

Now tell yourself that. Be sincere.

Coach's Questions

- Where are you being tough on yourself?
- What steps above are you willing to try to make things better?
- What's waiting for you if you let go of this?