

The Paradox of “Self”

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This article is for me. I will ponder it repeatedly until it finally sinks in. Why?

Because I am selfish. Because I am self-focused and self-indulgent. Because I want to control things I can't. And because I don't adequately control the things I can.

Are you a leader? You may derive some value from this article, too. Just reread that previous paragraph. Consider whether you can admit that those sentences describe you, too.

Another leader, one I admire a lot, said “I came to serve, not to be served.” That's what I aspire to. That's what you could aspire to, also.

Let's examine what I (you) control. I control my thoughts. Oops, there's the first stumbling block. I usually assume that circumstances control my thoughts. However, that concept is false. The presumption continues to exist because it's so convenient (and because it's such a common belief).

If you doubt that you control your thoughts, spend some time contemplating this point. You may be such a creature of habit that you only know of one way to respond to a given stimulus.

Assuming I control my thoughts, I can generate options for how I respond to a given circumstance. Then I can choose what option I prefer to pursue. If I desire, I then can choose to execute that option or not. (More on “executing choices” next week!)

Okay, let's recap. I control my thoughts, the options I generate, the choices I make from among those options, and the behaviors I execute. Wow! That's a lot!

So, why is it that when my wife makes a simple comment, I sometimes fly off the handle? That's not at all consistent with the guidance from that leader I admire—the one who advocates service to others. My making a disgruntled look or a sarcastic comment sure isn't serving my wife very well!

Oh, the paradox of self! My purpose is to serve: my wife, my employees, my customers. Yet I often don't control the things I know I can. And I want to control things I know I can't!

I want to control my wife—the things she says, her tone of voice, and the looks she gives. But I am not able to do that. I can't control my wife; she has an independent mind and her own opinions.

You may want to control those over whom you have authority. They probably have independent minds, too. Sorry! You can't control them! And you'll never change that.

So, with this article, I acknowledge the truth of the paradox of self. The only thing in life I can control is my “self.” Yet, my “self” can control very little. Still, I am here for the sole purpose not of serving me, but of serving others!

Here is what I think is possible. Be intentional about your thoughts, choices, and behaviors. Use them to productively influence everything else.

Influence? Sure! Many of the circumstances I face in life, I can influence. For example, I can influence my wife. She respects me, and she considers the alternatives I offer as she makes her choices.

You can influence those over whom you have authority, too. Share with them the options you are considering when faced with a tough challenge. Let them help you evaluate likely outcomes of each. Encourage them to routinely look for better, more productive ways of doing their work.

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