

Resetting That Little Constraining Voice

Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2011, published in the *Savannah Business Journal* on Monday, October 17, 2011

In my recent article, I asked you to become consciously aware of that little voice in your head. Does the voice help you achieve your desired objectives, or does it limit you?

If that little voice fills your mind with gratitude, with positive anticipation, with encouragement, with curiosity, with confidence--then celebrate! Somewhere in your past, you probably experienced authority figures who were very affirming. Ah, but many individuals were not as fortunate.

Perhaps you find your little voice raising doubts, fears, limitations, or criticisms. "Are you crazy?" "You're not good enough." "You'll probably blow this opportunity; don't do it!" "You know you've never been good at this!"

Where did those limiting ideas come from? If you really want to know, you might want to spend some time with a therapist. Therapists lead you to explore the source of your beliefs. Somewhere in your past, you acquired an idea about yourself that you have accepted as fact.

I'm more interested in what you can do with these beliefs now that you realize they exist! A belief is an idea that is so firmly held that it feels like the truth. The belief is not truth, of course, but the idea is so deeply a part of you that you never question it. The voice comes, and you respond with, "Oh, yeah, I'd almost forgotten that."

Your mind is amazing. Beliefs are simply forms for storing something that you've learned. In contrast, watch a one-year old child explore the world. Every experience offers new learning. Patterns are not yet set, so everything is new. Can you imagine being your age and having to deal afresh with every little detail in your life? Just getting ready for work would take all day!

You've adopted shortcuts so that you are not overwhelmed with all the sensory stimuli and decisions you face moment to moment. You establish patterns to move swiftly through all the minutia. The expectations become so comfortable, so routine, that it seems that your beliefs are running your life.

But your beliefs are not you. And some of your beliefs are not even valid. Appropriate or not, your beliefs are deeply ingrained and will not change unless you consciously challenge them. To do that, you have to be aware of when that little voice in your head is talking to you--and you have to recognize your typical response.

Your thought patterns have become ingrained more powerfully than any physical habit. However, once you discover a limiting belief, you may begin testing that alleged truth by awakening your curiosity. You see, however it arrived, you had set aside your curiosity when that belief was deposited in your brain.

From that point on, you've validated the limiting belief each time you've blindly accepted it. Commit yourself to listen for that particular voice in your head. When it occurs, consciously stop your thought process and challenge its validity. Curiously examine what other options might be more appropriate.

This is where some help might be of value. Share what that little voice is saying with a colleague you trust. I find there is great value in expressing that voice audibly. Bring the belief out of your head and expose it to someone who knows you well. You will be able to examine it more objectively, and your colleague will contribute additional curiosity questions.

Share both your feelings and your thoughts about the belief and how it might be constraining you. As you and your colleague explore, you may experience an "Aha!" moment where a new insight will present itself.

You'll imagine immediately what you could gain if you give up this belief and adopt something different. You may even wonder why you tolerated that little voice for so long.

If you understand what you will lose by giving up your belief, and you understand what you could gain by adopting a different perspective, you have achieved the first step toward beneficial change. Your colleague will help you identify desired future thoughts and behaviors and commit to supporting you in making the change.

As a leader, know that we all have limiting beliefs. Those under your authority want to look good, so they may not expose themselves to you. Champion curiosity anyway! Providing safe space for them to examine their limiting beliefs is a wonderful gift that they will not be expecting from their boss.

Increased self-awareness is an amazing gift that you can give to your direct reports for their growth. What's in it for you? You'll gain a reputation for being a builder of future leaders. And for as long as they remain under your authority, these individuals will deliver greater creativity and productivity.