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The stories we tell ourselves that limit performance

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The most successful fiction authors are thrilled when their books are picked up by Hollywood and transformed into movies. You and I go to these movies and, even though we know they are fiction, experience emotion when we watch them. At times, this emotion is so extreme that we can barely bring ourselves to watch.

Why?

Well, when these stories engage our imagination, the experience becomes 'real' to our body and our physiology starts to change - we sweat, our heart rate increases, our muscles tense. We start to experience this imaginary world in a very real way; as if it is reality.

In a sense, we are all fiction writers; we human beings constantly create stories in our head that are not based in reality but rather on our fears, dreams, concerns, and doubts. Most of these stories are harmless, and the impact is negligible. In situations when we need to perform well, however, these stories matter a great deal. What we are feeling and how we are reacting affects our ability to perform - sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. When the margins for error are small, an errant belief can both undermine effective execution when it matters most and zap the enjoyment out of what we are doing.

This makes noticing the stories we tell ourselves, and the sensations or feelings that arise from them, crucial. We need to take conscious action to ‘change the plot’ if the stories are under-mining our performance.

As an example, I can be very judgmental. It is not how I want to be, but I often find myself thinking critically about someone who looks unhealthy, has a scowl on his or her face, ex-

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hibits negative body language, or has a tone in their voice I find irritating. In time, I usually learn that my judgment was way off base or that they were going through something in their life that led to whatever behaviour bothered me. When I am aware enough to catch myself internally judging I simply say to myself in a light hearted tone “judge, judge, judge” and take conscious action to move to a more open and receptive mindset. It is not that I don’t get judgmental anymore, but I am able to move out of it much more quickly and not have it determine my effectiveness in working with this person.

THE SOURCE OF OUR STORIES

But where do these stories come from? Well, as you might expect - they tend to arise from our past experiences and the messages we received as a child.

I was raised by a wonderful mother and father, but they had dealt with much in their lives that was not positive; my mother was one of nine children born in a small mining town in Northern Canada, and my father emigrated from Denmark on the front edge of the great depression and fought overseas in the Second World War. As a result, there were lots of expressions in my home around frugality, morality, and not taking things for granted. “Pride goes before a fall” and such expressions were designed to keep us children grounded, but years later and far removed from those times they are at best half truths and at worst active saboteurs in the campaign to build, for example, the self esteem necessary for a fast changing, challenging world of 2012.

A STORY IN FOUR ACTS

Taking a closer look at the chain of events that results in a fictional story under-mining performance reveals four ‘layers’ at which intervention is possible.

- 1. BELIEFS** If we ‘peel the onion’ all the way back we discover that, whether we are aware of it or not, we have inner belief systems that control our behaviour. Many of these beliefs are composed of half-truths, or were formed years ago in reaction to concerns that have long passed, such as the examples I mentioned above from my parents. These beliefs feel like the truth and therefore go unquestioned.
- 2. SELF-TALK** These belief systems lead to self-talk - that is, our mind forming thoughts that are relayed to the self. Much of what we say to ourselves can seem innocent enough, things like “this will be a long, boring meeting”, “I always struggle with this”, or “we always get bogged down at this point”. The challenge is that self-talk is converted to imagery, which leads us to the third layer.
- 3. IMAGERY** When our self-talk / thoughts convert to images, our physiology changes. Our heart rate may rise, muscles tighten, and our stomach churns. Images take self-talk up a notch because the body literally treats them as real experiences. If you need proof of this, consider jerking awake from a particularly vivid dream. The imagery in the dream can transform how you feel and wake you up. If you imagine, for example, you are in danger then you start to get the feelings associated with being in real danger - which brings us to layer four.
- 4. FEELINGS** Feelings are the fast track to the brain. Every moviemaker knows this and it is reflected not just in film dialogue and cinematography but also in the musical score as well. Feelings dramatically affect and therefore can undermine performance. Anything, internal or external, that affects your feelings can have a significant impact on your performance.

And so, we have moved from a purely theoretical construct—our beliefs, or a fictional movie—to an image that triggers the same feelings as a real experience.

Here’s how medical doctor Emmett Miller explains this journey: “Thoughts are essentially short-lived electrical events, like sparks. When the stream of thought is focused ... an image emerges. This image, in turn, produces a chemical state within the brain, which in turn influences how we feel. Our emotions, in turn, have a direct effect on our muscular system.” - in short, thoughts become ‘real’ events for our body.”

CHANGING THE PLOT

There are five things you can do to move the stories you tell yourself from hindering to helpful.

1. **CHALLENGE WHAT YOU BELIEVE** American sociologist Louis Werth said that the “single most important thing you need to know about yourself is what assumptions are you operating on that you never question?”
2. **REFRAME YOUR INNER DIALOGUE** Consciously work to make your self-talk more ‘action oriented’. Self-talk oriented around “what else can go wrong” or “now what?” is less helpful than seeing a problem for what it is, a puzzle to be solved. The truth is that we all have a long history of solving the problems put in front of us and dealing with change. A quick level headed look back at how we felt about other changes when they were first introduced and where we are at now in relation to them demonstrates that we are very good at this but don’t have to go through it with the same angst we did last time.
3. **BREATHE!** When you find that your inner stories or choice of words are creating stress or pressure, follow your mother’s advice, step back, take a few deep breaths, and move to a more appropriate mindset.

4. **STAY LEFT OF YOUR ‘BUT’** A hockey coach I know in Alberta encourages his players to “stay left of your ‘but’”. What he means by this is on those occasions where you are telling yourself a story such as, “I know I should be more patient with her but...” Simply stay left of your but and do what you need to do - i.e. become more patient.

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5. **QUESTION YOUR SELF-TALK** Finally you can spend some time asking yourself questions about what you’re saying to yourself. “Where did this come from? Is it helpful? Do I have to, want to, think like this?”

Now, of course, if the stories you tell yourself are absolutely fascinating and full of mystery and intrigue you might want to become one of those highly successful fiction writers whose movie hits the big screen and wins an Academy Award. And if that does come to pass I’m hoping you remember where you got the idea and at least invite me on the red carpet with you ...

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