A person with long hair

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What You’re Telling Yourself

September 12, 2021

Well hello Friends! I hope you guys had an amazing week.

Today I want to talk about “**What You’re Telling Yourself**.”

This topic was inspired by one of my coaching clients and something she’s been wrestling with for the past few weeks.

And as we explored the issue, it brought up so many similar situations that I’ve personally experienced myself or saw others deal with during my career that I just knew I needed to share it with you. I’ve asked her permission and while I won’t divulge the company or her name, she’s excited for what it can do to help others. As we go through this, I think you’ll be able to recognize similar situations that you’ve seen or experienced and hopefully this will give you some fresh perspective on how you might choose to handle it differently the next time.

So, for the last few weeks, one of my clients was dealing with a challenge. For context, she’s a newly promoted senior executive at a mid-sized technology company. And she’s been driving an important new initiative which was her first big priority.

As part of her strategy development, she ran all the traps, talked to all the right leaders, got their input and factored it in where she could. In doing so, she thought she’d warmed things up and that her discussions would help pave the way for easy buy-in and a seamless rollout. But that’s not what happened. Instead, she found herself publicly challenged in a meeting with their mutual boss. And she was left feeling undermined and diminished by two different senior leaders.

She’d talked to both as she was working on her strategy.

She’d factored in their input to the extent she could and was confident she’d developed an approach. But it wasn’t until she unveiled the plan at the executive leadership meeting that these same two executives raised issues with the initiative.

Publicly.

In front of their mutual boss.

Issues they hadn’t raised when meeting privately with her.

So instead of celebrating her first big win in her new position, she found herself defending her approach both in that meeting – as the two continued to volley questions and protests at her – and then privately later with her boss, who she felt compelled to reassure that she had spoken to them and factored in their opinions.

The issue swirled for a few weeks until she finally changed the strategy enough to get agreement from everyone.

But because of the way the process went, instead of celebrating her first big win, she came away feeling defeated.

Undermined.

And honestly, kind of manipulated by her two new peers – both of whom she’d interacted with before her promoted and with whom she thought she had a decent relationship.

As we talked through what happened, and the swirl of thoughts and feelings she was trying to process, it was clear she was focused on telling herself two different things. Neither of which served her.

First, she was blaming her two new peers for undermining her. She’d judged their behavior and had come to the conclusion that they’d undermined her on purpose.

So because she thought that, she was FEELING tricked, manipulated and had labeled her colleagues are untrustworthy and deceitful.

And second, she was blaming HERSELF, both for not seeing through their trickery. Because her previous boss who had just left the company, which is what led to her recent promotion, had warned her about them, but she’d always chalked it up to his own shortcomings. In her mind he hadn’t been much of a collaborator, and she considered that one of her own strong suits. So, she’d gone into it with an open mind and was sure she could build strong relationships with both. But given the way things turned out, this made her feel victimized and angry.

And she was also berating herself for bungling her first big initiative. Even though she had talked to both and had done everything she felt she could to consider their feedback and factor it in, she beat herself up. And as a result, for the first time, she was doubting her own abilities, wondering if she was up to the task of this new position.

So as my client and I worked through this issue, what I helped her to see is that The Things She was Telling Herself were going to lead to places she didn’t want to go.

And this part took awhile because you see, when things happen to us, we don’t realize that ‘what we make them mean’ is a choice. We think things happen and that our interpretation of them is a FACT. That it just is what it is.

But it’s not. As we talked through it, and took the issues one by one, she was able to realize that how she chose to look at the situation and what she told herself it meant was something she could choose. And that depending on what she chose to make it mean, it could either serve her or cause her even more pain than she’d already experienced.

You see, what she realized is that by telling herself that her colleagues were deceitful, it was only going to make it all the harder to build a productive working relationship with them.

And by blaming herself for not predicting what her colleagues might do and also for accusing herself of not being up to the task, it was only going to erode her self-confidence at a time when she desperately needed to be building it up so she could succeed in her new role.

The truth is, The Things She Was Telling Herself about her colleagues AND herself were not going to serve her.

And in fact, could chip away at her desire to work with them and her confidence in herself to such a degree that it could impact her ability to do the job.

So, you might be asking yourself…so what’s the answer for her?

Weren’t her colleagues being manipulative?

Should she pretend that it didn’t happen?

No.

Pretending isn’t the answer.

But jumping to conclusions and labeling others isn’t the answer either.

The truth is human beings aren’t predictable and they aren’t perfect.

And as we worked through this, what I helped her to understand is that by Telling Herself the things she was telling herself, she was going to not only cause herself and her relationships more harm. But she also wasn’t putting herself in a position where she could actually LEARN from the opportunity.

As we worked through it, we fully explored all the OTHER possibilities that she hadn’t allowed herself to consider when she rushed to blame and labeling of her colleagues.

For example, it IS possible her peers did what they did intentionally, not giving her all the information she wanted upfront and then waiting until the meeting with her boss to make her look bad.

That could be why they did it.

But it is ALSO possible they weren’t really paying attention when they talked to her.

Maybe they had other things on their mind and didn’t really care about her big initiative.

And it’s ALSO possible they just had more time to think it through and thought of some new issues that hadn’t occurred to them before.

Unfortunate timing to bring it up in the big meeting…but might not have been for the sinister reason she suspected.

And there’s lots more possibilities where that came from.

As she fully explored ALL the possibilities of WHY they might’ve showed up the way they did, she began to see that she didn’t really KNOW what their motivations were.

And that it was possible that maybe those peers didn’t even know. Sometimes people just do things without thinking of the impact on others.

But what she eventually came to see is that it wasn’t going to serve her to pretend to know.

And that it WOULD serve her to shift the focus away from WHY her colleagues did what they did to instead what she could learn from what happened and what she would do differently the next time. Both in a similar situation and with those two in particular.

You see, as we fully explored the situation and all the other possibilities, for the first time she looked at her own response in the meeting. And she realized that in the meeting when they raised the objections, she was so taken aback that she didn’t challenge them. She let her newness in the position and the fact that she was one of the only women in the room convince her to play small.

And one of her big takeaways was that she HAD in fact done everything she thought she could do.

She HAD sought their input and HAD factored in in.

So, if that were to happen NEXT time, she would simply continue to lead the conversation, letting her peers express themselves for sure, but also making them and others aware that they’d already weighed in and then offering to circle back with them later outside the meeting for a deeper dive. Had she done this in the meeting, it would have served to publicly make others aware that those two had been given the opportunity to input and were only now raising new concerns.

And if their intentions HAD been to embarrass or silence her – which they may or may not have been – she would’ve been undeterred and put them on notice that they wouldn’t be able to silence her.

Much stronger place to be, right?

No defensiveness.

No labeling others.

No playing small.

Just strong, leaderly, self command.

And of course, we talked about the endless self-blaming talk track she had going on as well. Which was not only going to erode her self-confidence but probably keep her playing smaller than she wanted to in this new role.

Once she let go of the self-blaming talk track and started to focus on what she might’ve done differently, she came up with many ideas for how to manage interactions with these two and with others in the future.

So, I want to ask you…does any of this sound familiar?

Have you ever seen others, or have you personally experienced this type of political drama playing out?

I’ve seen it and experienced it too many times to count.

And while it can be disheartening and can really make you feel victimized or even not up to the task when it come to your role, it’s important to understand that you only feel that way because of what you’re telling yourself.

Your true point of power is in keeping the focus on looking for the lessons in the disappointment or unfortunate thing. Not on judging or blaming or shoulding yourself or others.

If you place all your focus on others – on endlessly trying to figure out why they do this or why they do that – you’re focused on the wrong thing.

Because the truth is, you can’t know why.

And if you stay there, it’s only going to keep you stuck and maybe make you a little paranoid.

But I do want you to know and what I told my coaching client, you don’t know that they DIDN’T do it intentionally. They might have.

The truth is that humans aren’t perfect.

They can be thoughtless.

Manipulative.

Deceitful.

But it’s not going to do you any good to stay focused on that, right?

We can’t change or control other people.

And unless those people decide to tell her WHY they did what they did, she can only guess at it.

The only true value in that situation is to change what you’re telling yourself. And the most powerful thing to do is look for the lessons.

When you catch yourself in the middle of something similar or a big disappointment, it’s important to shift your focus by asking yourself questions that will lead to new perspectives and answers, like:

What can you learn from this?

What will you do differently to prevent it?

How will you show up differently?

And how can what happened actually serve you or your initiative or your team?

How will you deal with the person/people differently in the future?

You can see how this changes everything.

Now you’re not judging.

You’re not blaming.

You’re not victimized or undermined.

And you’re not drowning in self-doubt.

You’re asking smart questions. And that’s going to lead to answers that empower you.

Who knows this approach might even make you a little glad that it happened.

I know it did for my client.

And I hope it does for you too.

Until next time…make it a great week my friends.