A person with long hair

Description automatically generated with low confidence

From Inner Critic

to Inner Coach

December 5, 2021

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

Now that we’re into December, most of us are racing to wrap up the year at work.

And this is the time of year when most companies ask us to start capturing our accomplishments as part of the annual performance review most companies follow.

It usually begins – at least in the U.S. – with entering your accomplishments into the system to see how you tracked against the goals you set earlier in the year. This then becomes the basis for a performance discussion, usually in the very early part of the following year.

So, this was the topic of one of my sessions with a newer private coaching client earlier this week.

My client was promoted into an executive role this past Spring and since then, in her words, she’s struggled a bit. In fact, that’s why she came to me in the first place.

In the early days of her new role, she felt like she had stumbled – both in her relationships with some of her new colleagues and on one of her first big assignments. So, she wasn’t happy, and she’d spent a lot of time beating herself up. And when she got tired of that, she reached out and we started a coaching series aimed at quieting her Inner Critic.

And while she feels she’s recovered a bit and worked her way into some recent wins, this end of the year accomplishment exercise brought up all the memories of her earlier struggles. All she could think about was her struggles and stumbles and that, in her mind, she wasn’t performing as perfectly as she would’ve liked. And she was worried about what the new boss was going to say.

Now this is one of my clients who’s a super high achiever but who also has a super active inner critic. And so, as she recollected all the earlier struggles, her Inner Critic kicked into high gear, telling her things like “you’re not up to the task” and “you’re going to fail” and her general feelings of “not being good enough.”

For her, this thought pattern is deeply entrenched.

And at earlier stages of her career, she found that her Inner Critic kind of spurred her on. It generated feelings of anxiety and self-doubt, but she found it easier to push past those and keep going when she had a more junior or less visible role.

Now that she’s an executive, that same inner critic is still there, alive, and well. But NOW, the feelings of anxiety and self-doubt it produces are much more disruptive.

She’s not sleeping.

She’s over thinking and obsessing.

She’s isolating from friends.

She’s procrastinating on important initiatives.

All so she can stew about those earlier-in-the-year mistakes which she is making mean that she’s already been exposed as the fraud her Inner Critic keeps telling her that she is. And since she’s now an executive, she fears everyone is about to learn “the truth” about her…that she’s a fraud.

So, the work we’ll be doing over the next several weeks is working on how to turn down the volume on the Inner Critic and turn up the Inner Coach.

And I thought this would be relevant to so many of you because our “Inner Critic” series – episodes 6 – 9 are some of the most popular of the podcast. So, if you’re interested in better understanding your Inner Critic, you might want to go back and give those a listen.

But in this episode, we’re going a bit deeper and I’m going to share some exercises you can do to build up your Inner Coach. And to learn how to shift from the Critical Talk Track to the Coach Talk Track in real time.

So, let’s go ahead and dive in.

First, before we get into how to channel your Inner Coach, I wanted to first talk about the dangers of having a runaway Inner Critic.

See, the thing is, when we have an overactive Inner Critic, it triggers our brain’s threat detection system. This is the part of our primitive brain that detects danger. Which is really our automatic interpretation of a situation that our brain instantly thinks of or categorizes as dangerous.

That thought causes us to feel fear or anxiety.

And that fear or anxiety then generates a fight or flight response. This response can be extreme – something like freezing up, running away, or avoiding the danger or confronting it (sometimes in not very helpful ways).

But there’s a reason this inner threat detection system exists. It’s part of our primitive brain that has existing since our caveman ancestors roamed the earth. And they faced mortal danger on a daily basis, so they needed a brain that had the ability to instantly recognize a threat and then spur them into lightning-fast action. This is how they avoided becoming the lion’s lunch. This is because this Threat Detection system releases cortisol and adrenaline which enables the quick response but it can also cause cardiovascular distress and a host of other issues.

But in our modern-day careers, we don’t face lions (though it might feel like it at times). But we DO still face danger of a kind. We face danger to our **self-concept.** So instead of a physical wound, we now face the prospect of a psychological wound. Having to view ourselves as less capable, less accomplished, or less valued than we want to be.

So, in our careers, when something happens that our brain interprets as extremely dangerous (like in my client’s case when she messed up on a high-profile assignment), our mind can get confused between our thoughts or doubts about ourselves and our ACTUAL selves, which leads us to react in a very extreme way. As if we’re under attack.

Whether the attack is coming from your inner critic or your real-life boss, it’s the same. You’re still sensing danger and your body still wants to run.

For example, let’s say you have your annual review with your boss.

And you get some feedback that you interpret as being on the more negative side about your performance (which by the way is what my client is worried about).

In that instance, your threat system then triggers your Inner Critic.

Which starts beating yourself up emotionally, using punitive language to cut yourself down.

And then you become anxious and fidgety. Or try to escape your inner pain and self-doubt and worry by overeating or over drinking. Or maybe just getting stuck in a cycle of self-doubt and obsessing about the feedback.

At this point you can decide if you want to let the Inner Critic be in charge. Or, whether you want to work on developing your Inner Coach.

You probably didn’t know it was a choice, right? I know I didn’t for a long time.

For most of my career I had an overactive Inner Critic, and I thought those things it said to me were just true. It took a very long time to realize that the things it said to me were old, programmed patterns of thought that got hard-wired in without my realizing it and then got flipped on when something happened that my brain categorized as dangerous or a threat.

But it is a choice. And you can choose Inner Coach.

Now this idea of an Inner Coach might be a new one for you. This is from a second internal safety system called the Caregiving System. This comes from the Oxford Handbook of Compassion Science, by KD Neff.

Unlike the Threat Detection System, we talked about earlier which spurred that over-the-top panic-driven response, the Caregiving System is about the innate ability to be soothed by warmth and affection. This deactivates the threat detection system and cultivates a sense of calm. And this warmth and affection doesn’t have to come from another person. You can give it to yourself. You can learn to self sooth. And that’s what the Inner Coach is all about. It’s all about teaching yourself to be gentle, kind and understanding of yourself. Accepting that you’re not perfect and that’s okay. And understanding that within our mistakes lie valuable lessons if we care to look for them and learn from them.

The other thing about the Inner Coach is that it affects not only our thoughts and feelings, but it triggers Oxytocin, the part of our brain that increases feelings of trust, calm, safety, generosity, connectedness. It gives us the ability to feel compassion for ourselves instead of beating ourselves up.

The Inner Coach is an inner talk track we can choose to build and shift into whenever our Inner Critic kicks into high gear. So instead of listening to the critic say things like “you’re a failure” or “you can’t do anything right” or you’re a loser” you can instead listen to your coach encourage you with thoughts like “you’ve got this” or “you’re more capable than you think” or “you’re going to crush this.”

The biggest challenge is that – for most of us – our inner coach is almost silent. Certainly, less vocal than our critic. So, I’m going to walk you through an exercise that will help you get in touch with your own inner coach, and this is something you can do regularly until you’ve got a little muscle built up.

**Critic to Coach Exercise**

1. Think of a specific time when you were critical or judgmental about yourself. Maybe it was about a mistake you made, or something you said or did, or something you performed less than perfectly.
2. Now, let’s get more detailed. Where were you? Who were you with? What were you doing? Get clear about what exactly went wrong (in your mind).
3. Now, think of all of that and notice what your brain is telling you about this situation. What is coming up for you? Write it down. What’s the tone of voice? What are the words? This is the voice of your inner critic. Don’t edit it. Just write it all down. Some of the words might be kind of harsh. That’s okay. Just get it all out. It might be a really long list. It might be just a few things. But make sure you capture it all.
4. Now, look at all the things your Inner Critic said to you. How do you feel when you look at that list? And what does it make you want to do? (Hide? Run?)
5. Now, imagine you have a magic wand and with one flick of the wrist you can eliminate your inner critic and replace it with your inner coach. This inner coach is your friend. It’s kind. Gentle. And it speaks only words of self-love, warmth, encouragement.
6. Now look at that same list of negative things your critic said and imagine the loving supportive opposite. It might say things like “you’ve got this” or “it’s okay, we all make mistakes” or “I can handle this setback”.
7. Look at those new thoughts your coach might say. How does it make you feel to look at those words. What does it make you want to do as a result?

When I shared this with my client, at first it felt too foreign to her to even be believable. To her, the Inner Critic is real. And the nasty things it tells her are simply the truth.

That’s the thing about the critic. Most of us believe that while our Inner Critic is mean and nasty, it kind of has our back. And they worry what will happen if they quiet their Inner Critic. Like, do they need it to ensure they work hard or achieve enough or whatever.

But the truth is, your Inner Critic isn’t real. And you don’t need it.

Imagine what life would be without the constant self-doubt. Without the over thinking and obsessing. Without having to listen to all the nasty things that critic tries to convince you of. Pretty sweet, right?

So, give the Critic to Coach Exercise a try. Find some favorite Coach phrases that resonate and the next time you feel that Inner Critic flare up, be aware of it and channel your Inner Coach by pulling out some of those new encouraging words.

And then take a few moments to appreciate how amazing that will feel.

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