

MANAGING PEOPLE

Make Peace with Your Inner Critic

JANUARY 14, 2016

Tara Mohr, author of *Playing Big*, explains how to deal with self-doubt (or help someone else manage theirs).

14:25

SARAH GREEN CARMICHAEL: Welcome to the HBR IdeaCast from Harvard Business Review. I'm Sarah Green Carmichael. Today I'm talking with Tara Moore, author of *Playing Big*. Tara, thank you so much for talking with us today.

TARA MOORE: Thanks for having me.

SARAH GREEN CARMICHAEL: So you argue in the book that too many of us are playing small when we actually have the capacity to do bigger things. Is it just fear that holds us back? What's the thing that's really is getting in our way?

TARA MOORE: Absolutely at the core is fear. Fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of doing something so innovative that maybe it's controversial or makes you feel alone in what you're doing. All of those are really big fears. But another huge block for people is simply self-doubt. Having that inner critic voice, and not having any tools to manage it.

SARAH GREEN CARMICHAEL: So before we get too far down the rabbit hole of the inner critic, I do want to just pause here and ask you something you wrote in the book about dealing with praise. In the book you mentioned that you have to unhook from both criticism and from praise. So why is it so important to re-evaluate your relationship with praise as well as how you feel about criticism?

TARA MOORE: Well, certainly none of this is a have to. But it is a question of is my relationship to praise really serving my biggest goals? And what I find is that for many people, they come to a juncture in their careers where to move forward they need to evolve their relationship to praise. And what I mean by that in practical terms is particularly if you've been a high achiever. And that could start early in your life or early in school.

Or it might start when you really found your groove in your career. And you're used to getting gold stars. And you're used to getting awesome performance reviews. And you're used to wowing the client. And you're used to getting the job that you applied for.

All those kinds of things, I would say are different forms of praise. And we can become reliant on that, and addicted to that. And then what that will prevent us from doing is maybe making a really important lateral career move into a new area that we need to delve into to ultimately get to the next step we want to go to. Or it might prevent us from applying for the thing that feels like a huge stretch, because we've gotten so used to getting that

positive feedback, that we don't want to have a different kind of experience. Or it might prevent us from doing our most innovative work, which is probably going to be more polarizing in the feedback that it brings.

So those are some of the ways that being attached to praise can limit us. And that's why we might want to unhook. So that we can go for greater challenge, be more innovative, express more of our unique point of view and our voice, which ultimately I think most of us know that's what's needed to get us to our long term goals. And for us to simply feel more free and fulfilled in our work.

SARAH GREEN CARMICHAEL: That's a good point. So what I'm hearing you say here is that in a way, it's all about reevaluating your relationship with risk, and sort of how you evaluate risks, and how you take risks, and decide to go for something or decide to play it safe.

TARA MOORE: That's a really interesting lens to put on it, yeah.

SARAH GREEN CARMICHAEL: Well, so I'm wondering if you're sort of learning to question these voices in your head, for lack of a better term. And you're evaluating it, a leap, in whether you should risk something or not. How do you then know how to weight these familiar voices when you're starting to question what they have to say?

How do you then decide, OK, yes. This is a time I should definitely listen to my inner critic, because this is a bad decision. Or no, I'm going to just go for it.

TARA MOORE: So your inner critic is very different from your voice of critical thinking or realistic thinking. I would say you never want to listen to your inner critic as if it's telling the truth, because the inner critic voice is not telling the truth. You might hear something

similar coming from your critical thinking or your realistic thinking, but it will sound really different.

And the way that we can tell apart the inner critic voice in us from the voice of realistic thinking or positive critical thinking really has to do with the tone of the thoughts in our head. So the Inner critic will tend to be very repetitive and like a broken record, saying the same thing over again. It might be, there's no way this is going to work. There's no way this is going to work. There's no way this is going to work, let's say, if you're starting a new venture.

Or you don't have what it takes to manage this team well. And just repeating that. It will be very black and white in it's thinking. The inner critic voice is quite binary. If it's talking to you in a way that is harsher and meaner than you would want to speak to someone you love, you're hearing the inner critic.

So all of those are some clues. The voice of realistic thinking, in contrast, will not be repetitive. It's forward moving. So it might sound like, I'm getting some clues that I am really not managing this team that well.

But then realistic thinking will move you to the next place. Like, what might I be able to do to address that? What kind of support can I get? Is this the right move for me? And it will have more of a curious generative tone, and much kinder to you.

And actually be seeking solutions and be forward moving. It's also able to see the grey, whereas the inner critic is not. That's how you want to distinguish.

SARAH GREEN CARMICHAEL: So I'm wondering, if some people are listening to this who are some kind of Zen master and don't have this complicated relationship with their inner critic, but maybe manage someone who does, what's some advice for people out there who may be managing someone with an over active inner critic or just a little too much self-doubt?

TARA MOORE: So the common mistake that we make- and we do this as managers when we're dealing with people with self-doubt, we also do it with friends, we do it often as parents if our child is feeling self-doubt- that we think our job is to argue with that person's inner critic. So their inner critic might be saying, I'm just terrible with numbers. And you as a manager seeing that this person has a potential there or you think they're good at it, might think your job is to say no you're really not, you're really not.

And occasionally that arguing with a person's inner critic occasionally rarely will be effective. It could be the right moment, that person has a special relationship with you, and in that moment they suddenly hear that this person believes in them and it causes them to see something different about themselves. But that is like one in a thousand times does that happen. Because again, the inner critic, if you think about what it is for that person, there is something in the risk of going for that thing that they're feeling very, very afraid. And the inner critic has made up one argument to try and prevent them from doing that thing.

And so if you convince them out of that one argument, the fear will just produce the next argument in them. And probably as a manager, people have recognized. And you might notice that you finally convinced that person they are qualified, but then they came back the next week and said that they don't want to do it because actually they want to focus on this other project. Or then they came back and said it doesn't fit with their priorities or their long term goals right now.

So arguing with the inner critic really usually doesn't work. And it also doesn't work to argue with our own inner critic. Instead what we want to do if you're managing someone, is you can start to have that conversation about I hear that you don't feel you're capable. I see you as really capable. I'm wondering if there's some self-doubt at play that's not grounded in the facts here.

And you can share with them here are some of the irrational things my inner critic says to me. Here's how I've learned to not listen to it and how I think of what that voice is. And the idea here is that instead of waiting for them to have confidence or thinking that that person on your team needs confidence, you can actually start to recognize a skill- it's not the quality of confidence- but the skill of managing one's inner critic as something that you want to develop in your people and talk about and have an open conversation about. Because it really is what will prevent the people you work with from fulfilling their highest potential.

It's also probably what's going to prevent them from saying the things to you that you need to know about what's really going on in the business or what the new possibilities are because those things- we feel self-doubt when we raise our hand to say something that maybe only we're noticing or that isn't being discussed yet.

SARAH GREEN CARMICHAEL: It's interesting. I noticed that you also said that we don't want to argue with our own inner critic. So what should we say to that little voice?

TARA MOORE: So the very first thing to do when you hear your inner critic is to name it for what it is and simply notice. So I'll give you an example. When my book was coming out last year, I had an opportunity to write an essay about it for The New York Times.

And when I first got that opportunity, the first that I had in my head was there's no way that The New York Times op ed page is going to publish one of my essays. I'm just simply not that fluid and articulate of a writer. There's no way. And I had that thought about five days before the first time I had the thought, wait a second, maybe that's not true. Maybe that's my inner critic.

And that's that active noticing. Which doesn't always come immediately, because when it's our own inner critic it feels so true. But then in that active noticing, it's like, wait. And then I asked myself- and this is step two- why would my safety instinct not want me to do this thing?

And when I asked myself that question, I could suddenly see yes, of course the part of me that's super scared about anything that feels a little bit emotionally unsafe doesn't want me to write an op ed for The New York Times. Like, it's going to get all kinds of feedback. And people are going to like it or not. So of course there's a reason my safety instincts are trying to talk me out of doing it. So now I have some awareness about why that inner critic voice is coming out.

And then the only other thing I need to do is allow it to be present, but not run the show. And so I wrote that entire article with the inner critic still chattering that there's no way this is going to be published and it's going to be horrible. And it was published. And it did great.

So it's that act of knowing it for what it is, being able to recognize it in the moment, and then allowing it to be present. Saying basically, thank you for your input, but we've got this covered, other parts of us. And you're allowed to be here, but you're not allowed to make the decision about what we do or don't do.

SARAH GREEN CARMICHAEL: I'm glad that you brought it back to your book there, because that kind of leads into something I didn't want to let you go without asking you about this. The subtitle explicitly mentions women. Sort of the book is sort of skewed towards women as the target audience. But a lot of your writing, including a lot of your writing for HBR has been targeted at both men and women.

So I'm just wondering, do you think that there is a sort of different way that we relate to our inner critic if we're men versus if we're women? I mean, with the understanding that we're generalizing here, and individual results may vary.

TARA MOORE: Right. So I'm really glad you asked this question. It's such an important one. A lot of people assume that women have more self-doubt than men. And when you actually look at the academic research on this topic, which I think there is not enough, but there is a small body of research, at the different studies come out with very different outcomes. So suggests that women have more self-doubt a lot, suggests that there's no gender difference. What is fairly consistently shown is that women feel more self-doubt around the things that are associated with masculinity stereotypically in our culture.

So women feel more inner critic around- as a whole population, not the individual but as a whole- we tend to feel more self-doubt around tasks that are quantitative in nature, negotiation, leadership. In a traditional hierarchical sense women will simply not see themselves as that because very typically, that's not how they've been conditioned to see themselves. And then interestingly on the other side, there's some research that suggests men feel more self-doubt around things that are stereotypically associated with femininity in our culture, such as listening skills and communication and relational skills.

The other thing is that women and men I think, get very different kinds of encouragements in how they deal with self-doubt. And I think of it a little bit like fight or flight that when we encounter something challenging as a whole, girls still get more encouragement to go into a flight response and withdraw a little bit from that risk, whereas men and boys are much more celebrated for sort of charging into battle. And so it looks like men don't have as much self-doubt, but I think it's more about what kind of response to our self-doubt is encouraged and rewarded by the collective.

SARAH GREEN CARMICHAEL: That's really interesting. Because I have seen some studies that suggest that men may compensate by appearing overconfident. Which has its own dangers.

TARA MOORE: For sure. For the men and for all the us who are affected by those overconfident decisions.

SARAH GREEN CARMICHAEL: Well, Tara, it's a fascinating book. And obviously a problem for many people of all genders. So thank you for taking some time to talk with us today.

TARA MOORE: Thanks so much for having me, and thanks to those who are listening.

SARAH GREEN CARMICHAEL: That author Tara Moore talking about her book *Playing Big*. For more, visit hbr.org.

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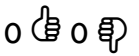
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