

INNER CRITIC: INNER COACH



Getting out of the perfectionism life-trap can be a challenge for those who derive great pleasure from setting and achieving high standards for themselves or their teams. Iain McCormick explains how to dial down your inner critic and build up your inner coach.

Aaron, not his real name, is a very successful marketing manager. He was a straight A student at Victoria University and had gone on to get an excellent job in a top agency in the capital. For the first 10 years, his career looked extremely promising. However, in his late thirties things started to go off the rails. Within a short space of time his long-term partner left him, saying that he was an intolerable control freak and his most valued staff member resigned saying that his constant drive for perfection was insufferable.

Aaron was perplexed and bewildered. He always felt that he must continuously strive to meet high standards and that was what made his career and the agency he was with great!

Perfectionism is a life-trap in which the individual endlessly strives for flawlessness and sets excessively high performance standards. Typically, the person is overly critical of themselves and others. Perfectionism can, in some cases, have a number of positive aspects leading to great productivity, career success and conscientiousness. However, when imposed on others, it can lead to problems delegating work and the person being seen by staff as highly critical and judgemental.

Individuals who believe that their high standards are not a personal choice, but are demanded for them by society, can be especially prone to anxiety and depression. Getting out of the perfectionism life-trap can be a challenge for many, who often derive great pleasure from setting and achieving high standards for themselves or their teams.

Aaron hit a low point following the breakup of his relationship and the resignation of his valued staff member. He felt depressed and miserable. One day, when complaining bitterly to a friend about the situation, his friend said, "You know Aaron, your inner critic is working overtime!" This comment really made Aaron think: "How critical of myself am I and how damaging is this?"

He went for a run after work that evening and started to listen carefully to the voices inside his head. For years he had been aware of his thinking patterns, but now he listened like never before. At the start of the run he clearly heard his inner critic going on and on about how unreasonable it was to be called an intolerable control freak by his partner on the day she left. Sure he was clean and tidy, but control freak—no!

In the middle of the run he became more aware of his self-criticism—how stupid he was for not seeing the warning signs before his partner walked out and how foolish he was not to have been more supportive and sensitive to his most valued staff member. By the end of the run he was starting to recognise that his father's tone in his own inner critic.

Aaron had been brought up in a family where standards were particularly high. He recalls feeling devastated at his father's harsh criticism of him at school when he only achieved an A- in maths. "What are you thinking about?" his father said, "if a job is worth doing, it is worth doing really well!"

Aaron started to recognise that he had not only blindly accepted his father's unforgiving words, but that the voice of this external critic had now become the voice of his own inner critic. Although Aaron had not seen his father for some years, the attitudes and pressures exerted by his father all those years ago was now with him every day and nearly every hour. The more he thought about the situation, the worse he felt—stuck and helpless in his life trap.

The following week, Aaron went on holiday to Fiji determined to deal to his inner critic. However, with no work pressures or distractions, his inner critic had a field day! He slept poorly, waking often during the night with disturbing dreams and feeling tired and irritable the next day. On the third night he woke thinking about his friend who had said, "You know Aaron, your inner critic is working overtime!" He got up out of bed and spent time on the balcony in the warm tropical night air. It suddenly occurred to him that it was his inner critic—not him—that was working overtime. He realised that his inner critic was a very noisy part of his mind that he could not control, but that it really was just noise, not the truth, not a set of guidelines and certainly not a set of commands.

Aaron recognised that he could not control his brain or his mind directly, but he could just sit in the warm night air, stop fighting his inner critic and see what happened. After only half an hour, he noticed that he was thinking about other things, how great the view was from the balcony, now fantastic it was to be on holiday and so on.

When he stopped fighting his inner critic, it somehow ran out of steam. He slept really well for the rest of the night and woke up in the late morning feeling more positive than he had felt for months.

The next day over breakfast his inner critic started up again: "How could you be so stupid to mess up your life like this!" After breakfast he sat with his legs in the pool enjoying the warm water and, for the first time ever, watching his inner critic like it was a stranger inside his head. He said to his inner critic: "I am going to sit here, enjoy the pool and let you go on and on." A few minutes later he was into a humorous dialogue with his inner critic: "Hey inner critic, surely you can think of a better criticism than that! Come on sock it to me!" Half an hour later he was swimming in the pool without a care in the world.

The experience of not fighting his inner critic, but seeing it as a stranger inside his head and just waiting for the noise to die down, worked. He ended up having a brilliant holiday. From time to time his inner critic started up again, but he just gave it time and it slowly went away.

A few days later, Aaron was surfing the web and went onto YouTube where he stumbled upon a TED talk by Brett Ledbetter called 'Building your inner coach'. Ledbetter was a successful US basketball player who had turned coach. He asked the audience to think about a stressful event and whether this event was in the past, present or future. For most people the event was in the past and for a few it was a future event.

Ledbetter made the point that no one can control either the

past or the future, but we can control the present. Yet most people waste their energy regretting the past or worrying about the future, when this energy could much more effectively be spent dealing with what is going on right now. Ledbetter had interviewed a range of very impressive sports coaches and the finest of them had the same philosophy—do not be concerned about the result, be concerned about doing your very best. They consistently said that the way to get to the next performance level in sport was to do a great job in the current level.

This made a lot of sense to Aaron. Having dialled down his inner critic, he could now start to build up his inner coach. He could do this by noticing when he was regretting the past or worrying about the future and deliberately turning his attention to doing his best right here, right now.

Ledbetter suggested the audience do a simple exercise at the end of each day—list all the activities that they had undertaken,

then pick two activities that they could learn from and plan how to do them better the next day. The aim here is to focus on the process and not the result—so it is ‘How can I do this even better tomorrow?’ not ‘I have to do this perfectly tomorrow’. Aaron could see that the first option is positive, rewarding and progressive, the second is negative, punishing and limiting.

On his next run Aaron could initially hear his inner critic saying that this idea was stupid and so he decided just to keep running and let the critic run out of steam. Later he could hear his inner coach clearly saying “What do I really want to accomplish, what in the past can I learn from, what can I do better right now?” It felt much better.



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