

JANUARY 7, 2010 (10:59 PM)

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The Conversation

## How to Manage Your Inner Critic

8:40 AM Monday January 4, 2010

by Susan David | [Comments \(28\)](#)

Do you spend hours worrying that you aren't good enough to succeed? That you're just not capable or that you aren't smart enough? You're not alone.

A client — I'll call her Sonya — is typical of many top-level executives

who struggle with an over-eager inner critic. Despite numerous accomplishments, including a graduate degree from a prestigious business school and a partnership at a leading accounting firm, Sonya always feels like an underachiever. Every day she sees herself as a new graduate — tongue-tied, fumbling, and trying to prove herself for the very first time. Sonya is convinced that soon someone will find out the awful truth — that her incompetence will become clear and that she'll lose her responsibilities, her partnership, and eventually her job. Even though Sonya has never received a negative performance appraisal, she feels stressed, unhappy, and unfulfilled. Sonya is successful — and completely miserable.

Sonya suffers from the "impostor phenomenon," a psychological syndrome identified in the late 1970s by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes and expanded upon by Manfred Kets de Vries in a [2005 HBR article](#). It describes frequent feelings of incompetence despite all of the evidence to the contrary.

The impostor syndrome is common — and it can be hard to overcome. Quieting your inner critic takes a series of specific steps.

First, it is important to recognize that the most commonly used strategy — trying to ignore or suppress your inner critic — simply doesn't work. In fact, ignoring unpleasant thoughts and emotions leads to a rebound effect, [increasing their intensity and frequency](#).

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Rather than suppress your emotions, acknowledge that they are real, whether justifiable or not. Wrong or right, Sonya really does feel unworthy, ashamed, and anxious. When she tries to push these feelings away or rationalize them (by saying, "I shouldn't be feeling this way") they only get amplified. It is this response to her emotions that gets her into trouble. Psychologists call this response a "meta-emotion." When we worry about being worried, we're creating a whole new problem.

I asked Sonya how long she'd been dealing with her inner critic. "Ten years," she said. I then asked how long she'd been trying to ignore her unreasonable self-criticisms. "Ten years." I pointed out that her standard strategy didn't seem to be working. It didn't take long for her to realize that anxiously trying to avoid or ignore her emotions was actually contributing to the problem.

The trick to dealing with your inner critic is to develop a balanced relationship with it: to not ignore or avoid it and the emotions it raises, but to also not allow yourself to be bullied by it.

Easier said than done? Try the following steps:

- **Examine your inner critic.** Ask it: "Where do you come from?" This might feel awkward at first, but speaking internally with your critic is a valid psychological technique that encourages you to think objectively. In Sonya's case, we traced her inner critic back to her childhood, to parents who were harsh and difficult to please. But not all inner critics come from our childhoods. We're influenced by many factors, including competition with our peers, the media, our relationships with our spouses, and our own attitudes about winning and losing. Once you understand the places your inner critic comes from, you'll be able to recognize when it's telling the truth and when to disregard what it says.
- **Understand that your inner critic can actually help you.** Your inner critic has evolved to help you set and meet high expectations. If you're open to it (which is not the same as believing everything it tells you) then you can learn from it. Like a good coach, your inner critic reminds you that knowledge and capability are important. Ask it: "How will you help me achieve success in the task ahead?"
- **Act in spite of your inner critic.** You can learn from your inner critic, but be careful to not give it too much power. Find and maintain the right distance — keep it close enough to be useful, but not so close that it gets in your way. As soon as you hear your inner critic complaining, acknowledge the information — but always ask: is my inner critic helping me or hurting me? If what it's telling you saps your confidence, then ask it to step aside and continue on your way.

Sonya used to feel tongue-tied in important meetings, worried that other people might think her comments inane. Now, instead of surrendering to anxious, negative thoughts, she thanks her inner critic for its opinion and speaks up anyway. By taking action that's consistent with her goal of becoming a better leader she manages to dispel her anxiety and add wisdom to the conversation.

In the end, it's helpful to remember that as loud as your inner critic can be, it's just a part of you and not the whole. Don't let it stop you from continuing to learn and grow.

*Susan David is co-director of the Harvard/McLean Institute of Coaching, a member of Harvard faculty, and a Yale research affiliate. She is the founding director of Evidence Based Psychology, a leadership development organization and management consultancy that focuses on developing business leaders to foster positive and sustainable outcomes in themselves and their organizations. You can email her at [sdavid \[at\] mclean.harvard.edu](mailto:sdavid[at]mclean.harvard.edu).*

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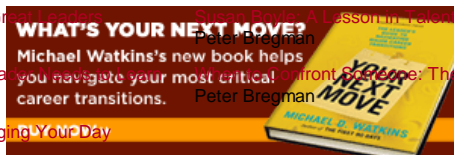
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January 4, 2010 at 9:19 AM

It is important to overcome the feelings of despair and pessimism when our inner critic starts indulging in micro-managing and micro-critiquing our self or identity. That could be tough. We will need to see ourselves through others eyes for some time to see how well we carry on ourselves. I would just tape myself or ask somebody to make a video film of me while I do a presentation to make sure for outward appearances I am not exposing myself as awkward even though, my inner critic has evolved only slightly from feelings of stage fright.

— MOHAN ARUN L

January 4, 2010 at 9:23 AM

I'd like to suggest an extraordinary book on this subject:  
Soul Without Shame  
Byron Brown

— MIRANDA WOLF

January 4, 2010 at 10:41 AM

As an artist I've had to create a thick skin to external criticisms, but the internal self-deprecating negativity has been the most difficult to combat. It's amazing how we sometimes sabotage our own success. Whether I suffer from the "imposter phenomenon" or not, I would like to thank you for the informative article and I look forward to applying some of the information to my own career.

Stephanie Donaldson  
S L Donaldson Fine Art

— S L DONALDSON

January 4, 2010 at 11:49 AM

<http://renaissanceforleaders.com/2009/04/14/your-inner-critic/>

— LIM TECK YONG

January 4, 2010 at 11:51 AM

Thank you for this article. I, for one, feel very strongly about this so called "inner critic." Despite a successful climb to the Executive Suite, I always feel sometimes that the ideas I expressed don't measure up to those of my colleagues. In my case, it is probably due to the culture in which I was raised and educated, where you are not supposed to show that you have terrific ideas to contribute, least you be labeled as "show off." Over the years, I have managed to "conquer" this fear despite the fact that the inner voice is always there.

— DANTE

January 4, 2010 at 2:53 PM

Self doubt happens in many cases because people do not know what they do well because they are so focused on what they do not do well. This creates a self fulfilling prophecy affecting self esteem to role awareness to self direction. All of these are critical to the internal decision making process. We then start second guessing ourselves reinforcing that internal negative message billboard.

— **LEANNE HOAGLAND-SMITH**

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January 4, 2010 at 7:44 PM

I spent some time listening to an actual brain surgeon speak about the neuroscience of negative thinking. It was eye-opening for me. He showed real time brain scans of the changes in blood flows, hormones etc following a negative thought (he classified 3 types of negative thought). More here <http://www.conorneill.com/2009/10/three-things-to-control-when-negativity.html>  
Great post.

— **CONOR NEILL**

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January 5, 2010 at 2:14 AM

Why won't anyone address the bully system at work? If something is wrong at work, it is always blamed on the "inner critic" or "your taking it personally". The politics at work are ridiculous. If the boss hires someone to help lighten the load, the person currently in charge of those duties immediately feels they are being replaced or usurped by the newcomer. Turf war begins with a vengeance, and the newcomer is trained incorrectly or sabotaged in some other way, usually with new ideas being stolen. Luckily for the bully, he/she doesn't remember what it was like to be terrified in the first 90 days, thinking everyone is on the ball and you are just an idiot, ready to be fired at any moment for any small infraction. Work is not "personal". Work affects the financial bottom line. If someone is messing with you at work, it is about work. And it is not someone imagining things due to low self esteem. The working world is called a jungle for a reason. What is the rocket science involved with just showing up, doing what is assigned, expected, needed, etc. and going home at the end of the day, really how difficult is that?

— **VIKKI BROOKS**

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January 5, 2010 at 9:34 AM

Great post Susan. Very relevant to many.

One question for her or for anyone else...I have heard/read that truly competent professional people are often plagued with feelings of incompetence, continuously acting as their own worst critic but also, as a result, pushing themselves to reach higher, overcome obstacles and achieve greater things. In contrast, incompetent people enjoy a misguided state of feeling competent, completely on top of their game, blissfully unaware of their faults or areas of incompetence...which usually ends up being their fatal flaw.

Is this true?

Bill Baker

— **BILL BAKER**

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January 5, 2010 at 10:42 AM

I have what I can call a variant of "impostor syndrome". My own is Inner Supervisor. It does not really criticise me rather it supervises everything I do to ensure I am right all the time. I have lived under the influence of this inner supervisor to the extent that I tend towards becoming a perfectionist and workaholic. My Inner Supervisor would not want me to close unless I have cleared every file on my table and everything must be done with utmost precision.

With the knowledge of Social Psychology, I beleived I picked that syndrome from my childhood days. I am the last born of my family (family of eight children)with age difference of about twenty years between me and our first born. So, I was used to taking instructions and doing everything right. I must admit that my Inner Supervisor has helped me in various ways but the most important thing is that I have learnt to ignore it whenever I choose to without any sense of guilt.

— **OLADOKUN JOSEPH**

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January 5, 2010 at 11:59 AM

Susan David has captured the essentials of an eons-old problem. Also referred to as "negative self-talk," the inner critic can be one of the most self-defeating behaviors for leaders. At the risk of an accusation of sexism, my observation after 30 years of managing nonprofits and now coaching their CEOs is that women are more likely to 1) be aware of their inner critics and the power they wield, and

2) more amenable to working on managing that critical voice. Many men I have managed or coached get a blank look when the topic of self talk or inner critic is broached.

I would be interested in learning whether others have experienced this as well.

— JUDY NELSON, JD, MSW

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January 5, 2010 at 1:38 PM

Thank you Susan for posting this most important piece. Like most people I too have wrestled with that inner critic. After many years of personal development work I now see this as a manifestation of that part of my ego-mind that is terrified that something catastrophic will happen if I am perceived by the field as less than perfect. As others have noted, this belief likely emerged early in life and it is supported by the field which highly rewards "competence and success." A core belief that life is unsafe if I am less than perfect can drive all kinds of counter-productive and self-sabotaging behaviours. My own view is that the inner critic is not something to be "coped with" but something to be "rid of" as part of the maturation process. In trusting our own higher self we can claim our liberation and our empowerment.

Rick Jackson

— RICK JACKSON

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January 5, 2010 at 10:44 PM

Wow! I am so happy to see this being talked about here at HBR. My own experience in working with my own inner critic and also those of my clients is the discovery that the inner critic has a tremendous amount of value and is generally born out of a need to protect myself. Once I am able to see and experience the inner critic as a sub-personality with the original intent of protection I have found that I am much more compassionate towards my inner critic. Also it is important to note that when the inner critic is born so is it's opposite. I have found that this is a most overlooked area. The opposite of the inner critic is that part of me which I have deemed unacceptable or unsafe to present to the world. Anyway, glad to see this conversation taking place here.

Greg Clowminzer

— GREG CLOWMINZER

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January 6, 2010 at 8:21 AM

Thank You!

— TRINIDADE FRANCO

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January 6, 2010 at 1:01 PM

It is also important to "Question your inner critic". Sometimes the doubt associated with the inner critic aren't completely accurate. It is important to thoroughly assess the realities of the inner critic's critique. Fear can create exaggerated perceptions that, upon further review, may not be completely valid.

— JASON MARTIN

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January 7, 2010 at 4:18 PM

Kudos to HBR and you for writing about this very important topic. I coach clients on becoming more aware of what holds them back from success. The inner critic is a huge piece of that. I also find that telling people about the impostor syndrome really helps people find relief. They think....ahhhhh so I'm not crazy and it's not just me. I notice that this syndrome is even more common among women - and often the more successful they are, the more the impostor rears it's head. I appreciate that you also see the learning and the good that comes from the inner critic. And the most important tactic that I've found to help people with it is simply to become very aware of when it appears and to recognize that you are NOT your inner critic. Once you separate, things get easier.

— HEIDI KRAFT

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January 7, 2010 at 4:20 PM

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— HEIDI KRAFT

January 7, 2010 at 4:21 PM

Anyone ever heard of religion? Positive thinking and new wave "social psychology" are good for kicks...turns out people have been suffering from this sort of mentality for...ummm, forever?

I find it interesting that this "syndrome" was discovered as of, ahem, 1970? Are you kidding me?

Read the secret, read pop psychology - they're all fads. There's a reason why religion prevails after all these years, a reason why, statistically speaking, religious people are "happier" and why they are more charitable.

This lady, with all her success, and all her glory, will never feel happy with her material/job success. It's for the same reasons why celebrities commit suicide and titans fall.

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— ROB

January 7, 2010 at 4:30 PM

Hi,

Really appreciate . The paragraph that explains source of critiques that we encounter i would say is perfect. Applying this technique alone to ones life will help throughout life

thanks a lot

ismayil valiyev

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— ISMAYIL

January 7, 2010 at 5:55 PM

Thank you for all of your thoughtful comments and personal emails. I'm thrilled that you found the post useful and meaningful. Bill, you raise an interesting issue about overrating competence and skills relative to actual performance. There is a fascinating research literature on this, and I've made a note to address it in a future blog, so stay tuned.

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— SUSAN DAVID

January 7, 2010 at 5:57 PM

Thank you for all of your thoughtful comments and personal emails. I'm thrilled that you found the post useful and meaningful. Bill, you raise an interesting issue about overrating competence and skills relative to actual performance. There is a fascinating research literature on this, and I've made a note to address it in a future blog, so stay tuned.

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— SUSAN DAVID

January 7, 2010 at 7:29 PM

It's helpful to remember that as loud as your inner critic can be, it's just a part of you and not the whole. Don't let it stop you from continuing to learn and grow. Excellently said !!!

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— VIJAY

January 7, 2010 at 8:02 PM

This is a helpful article to me by demonstrating toturn a negative into a positive.  
I have a big inner critic. It does not matter what part of the world I am in it follows!! . It has partially been responsible for a anxiety disorder I have. However this article embraces how to use the critic to an advantage.

I hope I can tame my inner critic.

Lisa

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— LISA

January 7, 2010 at 8:22 PM

I have been suffering from an Anxiety Disorder that has proven to make me a really productive executive. But when the anxiety goes beyond the normal limits, I inmediately associated this "Inner Critic" to this disorder I suffer because that's precisely how I feel all the time.

Thank you for posting this information, the steps to take you included in this article are going to be a

great help for me.

Greetings from Costa Rica!

— ARNOLD

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January 7, 2010 at 8:24 PM

I have been suffering from an Anxiety Disorder that has proven to make me a really productive executive. But when the anxiety goes beyond the normal limits, I immediately associated this "Inner Critic" to this disorder I suffer because that's precisely how I feel all the time.

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Greetings from Costa Rica!

— ARNOLD

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January 7, 2010 at 11:04 PM

Rob...I scanned these comments DESPERATELY looking for a post like yours! Thank you!! I came here only because someone I know tweets this sort of stuff all the time and I finally decided to read one. OH MY GOODNESS. Do you KNOW why your "inner critics" are bothering you. Because you are spending WAY too much time thinking about YOURSELVES. The real reason you're so worried is you're spending all of your time in self analysis and contemplating your navels and tweeting this junk and reading blogs! Just DO your dang jobs and then go out and do some volunteer work and spend time with your spouses and children and get your minds OFF OF YOURSELVES. Life is more than your careers people...jeeez. And, by the way, I don't have a "miguided sense of competence" You know when you're doing your job well...you see RESULTS!

— SUE

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January 7, 2010 at 11:06 PM

Rob...I scanned these comments DESPERATELY looking for a post like yours! Thank you!! I came here only because someone I know tweets this sort of stuff all the time and I finally decided to read one. OH MY GOODNESS. Do you KNOW why your "inner critics" are bothering you. Because you are spending WAY too much time thinking about YOURSELVES. The real reason you're so worried is you're spending all of your time in self analysis and contemplating your navels and tweeting this junk and reading blogs! Just DO your dang jobs and then go out and do some volunteer work and spend time with your spouses and children and get your minds OFF OF YOURSELVES. Life is more than your careers people...jeeez. And, by the way, I don't have a "miguided sense of competence" You know when you're doing your job well...you see RESULTS!

— SUE

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January 8, 2010 at 12:45 AM

A very effective article.thanks.

— DEBAMITA

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