

AN INVITATION

For more than 15 years, I have talked to thousands of audiences about the incredible capacity to think that empowers each of us to change our lives and all of us to change our world. Often, I have felt like I was talking to throngs of people suffering from infection, knowing that every one of them has pockets full of penicillin, and yet unable to explain to them adequately that they can reach into their own pockets and find what they need.

The inadequacy of the explanation has nothing to do with the potency of the penicillin, or the fact that it is right at hand, or the ease with which anyone can grasp it. There is no need for an explanation. At any moment, at any time, anyone might just reach inside and find freedom from infection.

So I invite you: don't look too closely at the explanation. Don't complain about the instruction. Don't nitpick the details. Reach inside for yourself. It's too wonderful to find the cure for what ails us to let ourselves lose the point in analysis of the pointer.

One widespread infection that plagues us all is fear. In the past few weeks, I have heard examples of the destructive effects of fear close to home in several simple human situations. Here are just three that most of us would find familiar.

(1) An executive was talking to friends about the fact that employees who saw someone engaging in increasingly odd behavior on the job and recognized turmoil in the making said and did nothing. When the troubled person caused serious harm, co-workers later said they saw it coming for months. "We've got to re-train people to report this kind of thing," the executive said. "They need to know the tools to use to address these situations before dangerous things happen."

(2) A student was explaining to an advisor why there had been extreme difficulty in one particular learning situation. The mentor in that situation had submitted a report of the student's alienation, disinterest, inability to complete work, inarticulateness, carelessness, incompetence. "I was really frightened of him," the student said. "I just froze up. I always felt I was in the way. I always felt I was going to make mistakes."

(3) The Chairman of an organization called to discuss how stressed and dysfunctional his leadership team had become and how disappointed he was in them. He offered multiple, complex reasons. "I guess I'm just too old to be 'done in' by that stuff any more," he said, "but I can see the team is bogged down and I've got to make some changes. These people don't have the ability to get the job done."

The world has well-respected solutions to each of these problems right now. In the first case, the solution is more rigorous informational training for employees. In the second case it is behavior modification techniques for the student. In the third case it is replacing the management team. None of these solutions addresses the root cause, the systemic infection of fear. The world's current solutions are like pain medication. They alleviate the sensation of pain, but they do not take away the cause of the pain and, when they run out, the pain is still there. They do not affect the virulence or persistence of the infection.

More rigorous training, in the first case, will give employees even more information, ease the mind of the executive and provide evidence that action was taken in case of any future lawsuits. But the executive acknowledges that his employees have already had good training that he thought had solved this problem. The question is: Why did the training fail to work for them when they most needed to access it?

Behavior modification will give the student coping skills to get through a repeat of being fearful under rigid scrutiny. But the student had received positive commentary from other equally important mentors. The question is: Why did the student's otherwise already successful behaviors wither in the face of a particularly tough mentor?

Firing a management team will offer the company a story to tell shareholders, provide a group to blame for problems, and buy time while a new team is recruited and put in place. But the management team to be fired had replaced a management team that failed. The question is: What happens to the strengths of these competent, hand-picked teams after they start to work?

The infection persists. The underlying fear is untouched.

What is fear and what brings it alive in us? How would fear work against employee's knowledge and impetus to serve the common good in the first instance? How would fear override the student's competencies and confidence in the second instance? How would fear immobilize a perfectly capable management team in the third instance?

I invite you: Don't take my word for it. Look up "fear" in any dictionary. The definitions will point to an emotion or state that stems from "apprehension" or from "expectation" or from "anticipation". How do we know apprehension, expectation, anticipation? They must arise within our own thoughts. We cannot apprehend, expect or anticipate anything without bringing it to mind. Implicit in our own definition is the notion that fear is an internally generated experience that results in states of mind that affect our actions. In a fearful state of panic, dread, alarm, anxiety, we do not envision the same set of options as we do when our minds are calm and at peace and free to think responsively.

Take the first case. A person begins to display ideas and behaviors that are disturbing to a co-worker. The co-worker is concerned that the person might need help, or might become

a danger to others. The co-worker remembers the “warning signs” learned in a training, and recalls the procedures to follow. The procedures always begin with reporting the observation to a supervisor. Then the fearful thoughts begin: *What if I’m wrong? Or what if the person I’m reporting is really dangerous and finds out that I’m the one that turned him in? What if my job is on the line if I get marked as a trouble-maker? If this is so awful, somebody else is bound to notice! Maybe I should just lay low, avoid the person, hope for the best. I don’t want to jeopardize my own security.* The common sense of the training and the employee’s intuitive interest in helping a human being in trouble is overridden by personal insecurity and self-doubt. But the employee has no idea why or how he has changed his mind about reporting his concerns about the distress observed in another. His thoughts look real and justified.

Take the second case. The student has heard reports from other students that a particular mentor is hard to please. The student enters the situation with x-amount of apprehension. When the student’s mind is on “getting it right” and the student is over-wrought, focusing on details and trying not to miss anything, his work is awkward, bogged down by second-guessing and worry. The mentor becomes impatient. The student’s worst fears are realized. The student’s apprehension intensifies. The cycle leads to failure. But the student has no idea that his thinking had anything to do with it; it looks to him like he’s been the victim of a mean-spirited mentor.

Take the third case. The Chairman is a highly respected, confident person. Good people are drawn to work for him and expect that he’ll teach them. But he expects them to come up with their own great ideas. Their initial ideas seem to him to need refinement. After all, they’re new to something he understands deeply. He tells them some of his ideas and sends them back to the drawing board. They start anxiously critiquing every new idea they have, wondering if it will satisfy him. Instead of thinking for themselves, they’re expending most of their mental energy trying to figure out what he wants and worrying that they won’t come up with anything equal to his brilliance. Soon the team is mired in circular thinking. But the team has no idea how they’ve thought themselves into a rut. It looks to them like they’ve been blind-sided by the Chairman.

Consider what it would mean if there were a way to neutralize the devastating effects of fear? What if fear originates within our own minds as a cluster of thoughts that are like a storm system moving through our natural common sense? What if fear is not an infection, but an auto-immune disease: the mind turning against itself, using its own power to think to create a whirlwind of negativity? Would an understanding of that phenomenon move us towards seeing that the impact of fear is the power we give it, not a power “it” exerts?

I invite you: Don’t look at the pat answers we already have. Look at what it means to be free to think. Look at what it means to be born with a creative ability that enables the brain to process new ideas with lightning speed. Look at what it means to experience all

those ideas as real, so real they seem to be coming at us from the world, and yet so easily changed that the world can look different in the blink of an eye, the flash of an insight.

Pull surprises and dreams from the pockets of your own imagination and fears become like dust motes in the cosmos of possibility, part of what creates the colors from the light, but not the light itself, and only fragments of the colors.

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