



EFL “Brieflet”: Engaging with Self-Doubt

I’ve had it up to here with leaders who have no self-doubt... no curiosity, no questioning of their own certainties and self-evident truths... [T]he leader who is willing to allow self-doubt to invite tough questions and profound listening, that leader I could trust” N. Mandela

The Normality of Self-Doubt

I am privileged to work with Coachees who live and work in diverse and multiple roles: from first-time team leaders, to heads of large, multi-million dollar organisations; from first-time fathers, to grandmothers of large families. These people are strong, focused and with clear intentions to contribute to their community and, for many, to harness and influence the abilities of others to join them. The pursuit of such aspirations inevitably leads to challenges and *Self-Doubt*. Whilst it is acknowledged at an intellectual level, Coachees are not infrequently, though temporarily, caught off-guard by *Self-Doubt*. They also often experience shame or are hard on themselves - and are surprised, even relieved, when I inform them that most people go through periods of *Self-Doubt*. So, to “out” *Self-Doubt*, balance your experience with the content of this **EFL Brieflet** on **Engaging with Self-Doubt**.

Recognising Self-Doubt

The following composite or direct quotes from Coachees with whom I have worked demonstrate the normality of *Self-Doubt*:

- I’ve got imposter syndrome: I’m not old/young/experienced enough
- I should stay quiet, they’ll think I’m just another loud [national stereotype]
- I’ve hit the glass ceiling: they don’t listen to [gender/ethnic group] like me
- If I don’t spend a long time on this, I won’t do a good job
- I can’t find a good balance between work demands and being a good parent
- I will never be able to do this properly
- Whatever I decide, people’s livelihoods/lives will be lost: I can’t make a decision
- I’m worried that if I get this conversation wrong, it will ruin the relationship
- They know more than I do, I need to keep my opinions to myself
- I can’t get through this
- I don’t know when will be the “right” time
- If I don’t get this right, my reputation will be ruined
- I’ve lost my mojo - I don’t seem to be enthused by anything anymore
- I’m not sure that I believe in the same things that I did when I first started

Some of this self-talk can be linked to other types of potentially self-sabotaging thinking, such as perfectionism, fear of confrontation/conflict, and existential anxiety (the “what is my purpose in life” -type questions).

It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well have not lived at all... Such knowledge is a true gift, for all that it is painfully won... JK Rowling

Evict the obnoxious roommate in your head. A. Huffington

Engaging with Self-Doubt

Coachees with whom I have worked have taught me that understanding that they share the experience of *Self-Doubt* with many other people - even with those who appear to be flawlessly leading extremely demanding lives and roles - immediately triggers a greater recognition and acceptance of their own *Self-Doubt*. This is enhanced by an understanding that *Self-Doubt* often accompanies an openness to learning. And because learning styles differ, strategies to engage with *Self-Doubt* can be very idiosyncratic, sometimes contradicting those of other people. So it is important to find approaches that work for you. They might include:

- *Acknowledging the validity* - of the *Self-Doubt* and parking it in a comfortable mental space. And then focusing on the skills and knowledge that you do have to deal with the issue at hand
- *Dismissing the thoughts* - and focusing on prepared positive and self-reinforcing ideas and actions that contradict *Self-Doubt*
- *Restoring the balance* - by reminding yourself of the knowledge, skills and strengths that you have used to get to this point; and then continue to use them
- *Recall your values* - and passion that have driven you to this point. And perhaps remind yourself of the cause or people that you want to continue to serve
- *Checking for evidence* - that the *Self-Doubt* might be a well-founded trigger to develop further skills/knowledge/support to manage the situation
- *Reaching out* - for support, reinforcement, networking, mentoring, input
- *Reflecting* - upon the thinking beneath the *Self-Doubt* as an opportunity to review taken-for-granted personal values and behaviours - and perhaps re-prioritise what is important
- *Helicoptering* - above your Self-Doubt to question if your self-talk is being over-judgemental, and neglecting the evidence of your value in other contexts

A metaphor for Self-Doubt might be that of dam sluice gates controlling the flow of what is the best within us. These sluice gates are useful and necessary. At the same time, they need to be regulated and responsive to the dam level (the internal world) and the needs of those downstream (the external world).

You have to mentally believe that you can be here. You have to paint a picture for yourself.
M. Obama

Sources for your further interest

[Grant, A. Surprising habits of original thinkers \(TED Talk \(Feb 2016\)\)](#)

Harris, R. (2011) *The confidence gap: a guide to overcoming fear and self-doubt*. Penguin Group, Australia

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