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IDEAS MADE TO MATTER | LEADERSHIP

How leaders can manage their own inner critic

 by Meredith Somers | Feb 25, 2020

Why It Matters

Understanding and preparing for your inner critic can help you thrive in challenging situations and help others do the same.

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You know the voice.

It's the one in your head replaying that awkward conversation with a client and spotlighting the bored faces at your presentation. It shames you into not speaking up at a meeting and sabotages your great ideas because of course they really aren't that good. And while it's got your attention: How did you even get where you are today, given all your shortcomings?

That voice is your **inner critic** — negative or self-sabotaging self-talk — and we all have one, according to [Daena Giardella](#), a senior lecturer and executive coach at MIT Sloan.

“Whether you're just starting out, or a mid-career professional, or somebody who's more or less at the end of their career trajectory, I have found that across the board, across ages and cultural backgrounds, and at different stages of career, people are universally dealing with different iterations of their inner critic,” said Giardella, who specializes in leadership, organizational culture, unconscious bias, and team development.

The inner critic — whether a loud paralyzing voice or subtle clutch of background anxiety — is a persistent part of our lives, she said. A team that can't manage its individual inner critics will end up with conflict, stalemates,

and low productivity and innovation. Not to mention the time and energy wasted on unproductive interactions, which in turn can create a judgmental environment that harms the [psychological safety](#) of a team.

“And, of course, all of this can potentially lead to a negative impact on the bottom line,” she added.

According to Gallup, in 2017 only three in 10 U.S. workers strongly agreed that their opinions mattered at work. If that ratio was six in 10, however, those companies [could see a 12% increase in productivity and a 27% reduction in turnover](#).

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Daena Giardella | MIT Sloan senior lecturer and executive coach

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Managing your inner critic is a **leadership influence skill**, Giardella said. Think of it as part of the emotional self-regulation toolkit, a resource to help you learn how to control your emotions and reactions to them.

“This capability is crucial for leaders who wish to be skillful influencers, especially during difficult conversations or stressful, fast-paced times,” she said.

Here’s how leaders can identify and manage their inner critic, and how to recognize and respect others who are struggling with their own self-criticism.

Understand the characteristics of your inner critic

The inner critic is harmful because it triggers our self-protection mode, Giardella said. It diminishes our sense of trust and confidence, and amplifies feelings of shame and insecurities that undermine our confidence to take risks and trust our choices.

The inner critic can project one’s insecurities onto others. For example, your inner critic tells you the man in the front row didn’t like your presentation based on the frown on his face, or a colleague rejected your idea because she only gave a cursory response to it. But in reality, your colleague was worrying about a lack of childcare for the day, and the man in the front row was feeling queasy after lunch.

“It’s a toxic, self-blaming message that is usually connected to a deep-seated feeling of shame that says, ‘Who I am is not ok,’” Giardella said.

And sometimes we project that self-blame onto others, and hold them responsible for how we’re feeling, she added. This is the [‘blame-shame’](#) cycle.

Engage your inner champion and inner editor

The inner critic is an intimidating opponent, but you’re not a team of one. You’ve also got an **inner champion** and an inner editor, Giardella said.

While an inner critic brings our focus to mistakes and flaws, our inner champion reminds us we’re human, we’re doing our best, and we’ve gone through tough times and come out the other side.

“Our inner champion is the part of us that offers constructive self-coaching in moments of doubt by reminding us of our strengths, our successes, our tenacity, and our resilience,” she said.

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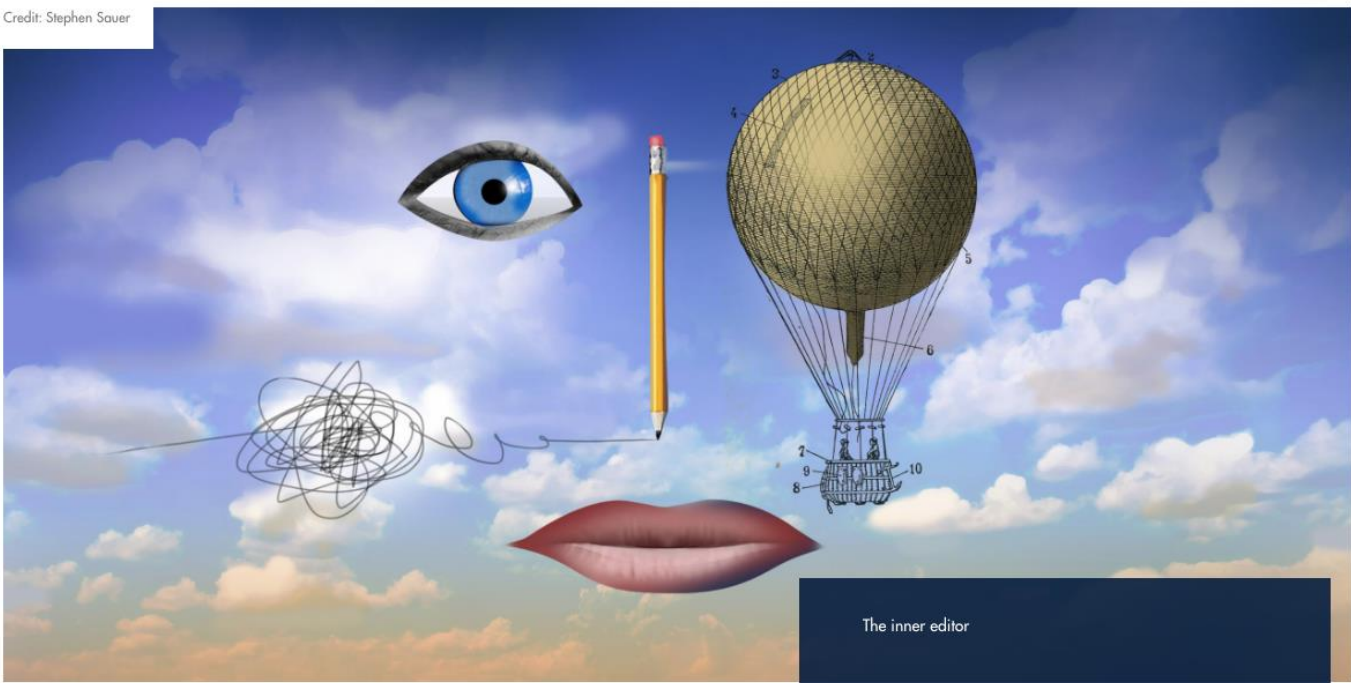


One way to tap into this voice is to ask yourself what your best friend would say to you if they heard what your inner critic was saying in your head, Giardella said. Or consider a person or role model you admire, who’s successfully handled a situation like one you’re facing; find their strengths in yourself.

The **inner editor** is a voice that can be confused with the inner critic, but unlike the latter, it offers constructive suggestions rather than shameful observations, Giardella said.

She warned that the inner editor can be “held hostage” by the inner critic, so it is important to identify and understand the differences between the two.

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“There is a big distinction between the inner critic — which brings shame, self-doubt, and negative self-image — and the inner editor, which is a vital cognitive faculty that helps us discern how to edit, adapt, or change our choices in order to make the most strategically effective moves in the dialogue or interaction,” Giardella said.

Prepare for your inner critic’s appearance

So what can you do when your inner critic raises its voice?

Start by identifying when it shows up, Giardella said. Then identify the words, thoughts, and physical or emotional feelings that your inner critic sends to you. She suggests trying these steps:

- Before a challenging situation — reflect upon your imagined worst-case scenarios and fears. Bring in your inner champion pre-emptively for a pep talk to help you gain perspective and identify your exaggerated concerns.
- During a stressful situation — take deep breaths, stay in the moment, don’t rush your thinking or responses. If this is a presentation, make a connection with the audience. Be generous and curious about them, instead of focusing on yourself.
- After a stressful situation — write down all the positive things about the event immediately afterward. Get feedback from trusted allies. Employ your inner editor to help you proactively revisit the situation with a new approach.

Recognize that everyone has an inner critic

It’s crucial for leaders to be able to handle their own “internal negotiation” between their inner critic, champion, and editor, Giardella said, and it’s equally important that a leader be prepared to manage someone who’s own inner critic causes conflicts, challenging conversations, or counterproductive behaviors.

“Discerning what their inner critic messages might be can be very useful as you try to figure out the best way to communicate and influence this person,” she said.

Consider that everyone has a backstory with tough challenges going on in their life that might impact their behavior, Giardella said. If you approach someone with blame, that kicks off the blame-shame cycle. A more strategic approach, she suggested, would be to adopt a learning mindset using [humble inquiry](#) — asking questions with an attitude of interest and curiosity in the other person to understand their perspectives.

“Successful leaders learn how to approach people and conversations with greater awareness and dexterity,” Giardella said. “Skillful leaders become adept in traversing the limiting messages of the inner critic so that they feel free to fully engage, envision, and innovate.”