

Aligned for Success: Removing Personal Barriers

By: Pat Lynch, Ph.D., President

What obstacles prevent you from being successful in your personal life? I have observed two related barriers that result in misalignment between people's abilities and their desired outcomes. Could one or both of these be holding you back?

Obstacle #1 comes in the form of conscious or unconscious beliefs that limit our expectations of what we can or cannot do. For example, when I was in my late 20s I convinced myself that I could never achieve my dream of going to law school. Since it would take three years to complete the program and I would be 30 years old by that time, my unconscious belief that 30 was much too old to be starting a new career caused me to discard this "impossible" goal. Thus in addition to the boundaries that others impose on us by virtue of stereotypes based on characteristics such as race, gender, or profession, we create our own artificial barriers to pursuing our dreams.

Obstacle #2 occurs when we wait for someone to tell us we can break through these barriers. Often I encounter people who feel, consciously or unconsciously, that they must get permission to move beyond self-imposed boundaries, which often are based on others' assumptions about our abilities. Too many people wait in vain for this permission to do things they would like to try, such as make a lot of money, or take a risk by changing jobs, or write a book, or train for a marathon. In the above example, my mother

helped me see that age is a self-imposed limitation, and in fact there was nothing to prevent me from following my dream. Since then, age has ceased to be a limiting belief for me.

The misalignment that results from the obstacles described above obstructs our path to success. We experience high personal costs when we impose barriers on ourselves and/or wait for others to give us permission to expand those boundaries. Our lives are not as joy-filled as they could be, and we miss out on experiencing the thrill of pushing ourselves beyond our imagined limits. By settling for less, we short-change ourselves because we fail to experience all that life has to offer.

Several years ago an off-hand comment provided me with the opportunity to test one of my self-imposed boundaries. I was on a kayaking trip in Maui when the guide boasted that he was the best surfing instructor on the island. Having less than full range of motion in one knee due to multiple surgeries, I had convinced myself that surfing was one of those activities that forever would be off limits to me. However, the guide's bold statement intrigued me, and I decided to challenge him by asking if he could teach me to surf in spite of my physical limitation. Expecting him to say "no," I was taken aback when he said he could. To make a long

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story short, I was able to learn how to surf! More importantly, that experience taught me a powerful lesson about pushing back against self-imposed barriers. In what other ways, I wondered, was I short-changing myself?

I believe the second obstacle – i.e., not knowing that one is underperforming and/or waiting for permission to succeed - is a major impediment to a higher quality of life for many people. When I was a university professor, I continuously met students from age 18 through those in their 60s who had no idea that they could succeed in school and in life, however they defined success. I'll never forget the student who came to see me after he failed a test to ask how he could get a D on the next exam. "Why," I asked, "do you want to settle for a D? You could get a B or even an A if you study." His response - "Really?" spoken in an incredulous tone of voice - made me realize that the possibility of earning anything other than a minimal grade never entered his mind. No one ever had set a higher expectation or told him that he was capable of much more than he suspected. That moment was a transformative one for us both: the student went on to earn a B in the class and I resolved to take advantage of every opportunity to offer people the possibility of greater success than they had imagined – and to ask others to do the same. All it takes is a few moments to show someone a different outcome than the one pictured in his/her head, and to encourage him/her to go for it.

Here are two suggestions for removing these obstacles to personal success:

Suggestion #1: identify one self-imposed barrier, something that is holding you back from achieving a desired outcome that seems beyond your reach, such as writing a poem or taking a class or

putting your needs ahead of your family's needs. Test the limits of this boundary – e.g., write a poem for yourself, sign up for a class at a university, choose to skip a family gathering in favor of doing something on your own. See what happens. I would be willing to bet that you find you are able to go a lot further than you had imagined – i.e., there is a lot more "stretch" to that boundary than you had thought!

If you find it difficult to test this barrier, ask yourself these two questions: (1) "What is the worst thing that could happen if I [name the barrier]?" and (2) "Can I live with that outcome?" In the case of my surfing adventure, I realized the worst that could happen would be that I might injure myself and require help traveling home the next day. Could I live with this scenario? Certainly! My experience is that our fears often are self-imposed and have little or no basis in reality. I have found that naming and releasing those fears is incredibly liberating, and doing so has enabled me to achieve previously unimaginable outcomes.

Suggestion #2: in addition to giving yourself permission to test your beliefs, give others that same gift. When you run across someone who appears to be held back by erroneous beliefs about his/her abilities like the student in the above example, encourage that person to test those limits. Or help others raise their expectations by challenging them to identify higher level outcomes than they had imagined possible. The reward is likely to be a richer, more joy-filled life. ➔

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