EARNING A REPUTATION WITH OURSELVES

When we get to know people, we are, in part, building a reputation with each other. "What kind of person is he?" "How does she handle a difficult situation?" "What kind of attitude does he bring to his work?" "How does she respond to confrontation or adversity?"

Over time, we learn whether a given person is honest, whether they can be relied upon, how playful they are, to what degree their actions reflect what they say. We get a sense of their style, their likes, and their dislikes.

There are multitudes of small interactions that give us information about a person's character and personality, values and integrity. Over time we come to decide whether this is the kind of person we want to spend time with; whether we like how we feel when we're with them.

And they learn and make decisions about us.

Part of what we do in this back and forth of getting to know each other is determining whose feedback matters to us. A lecture on honesty from a dishonest person, or on manners from a rude person, is not worth listening to.

We like to be with people we feel good about being with; proud of being with.

Here is a piece that is often missing: *We watch ourselves just like we watch others, and we develop a reputation with ourselves accordingly.*

This is the essence of earned self-esteem.

What kind of a person are you, in your own assessment? Do you have values, goals, and priorities? And do you act in accordance with those values, goals, and priorities? Are you the kind of person you would like to be? And if not, what are the barriers to becoming the kind of person you would like to be?

I don't mean do you *have* what you would *like to have*. You may or may not have any say in the end product. I may want to have a billion dollars, but I may not ever earn a billion dollars, even if I apply myself fully to the task

The question is, are you a person who lives according to your values, goals and priorities? Are you doing what the person you would like to be would do? Or do you spend much of your time and energy going in another direction?

I'm not talking about perfection here. We all make mistakes, we all can take the wrong road at times; but if you often spend time and energy in ways that run counter to your highest values,

goals, and priorities, and you refuse to see it or learn from it, your reputation with yourself will suffer.

Short term, and very practically, two questions that are helpful to ask about any action you'll take (or avoid taking) is:

- Will I feel good about what I've done tomorrow?
- Will I feel proud of what I've done?

To the degree you're behaving as the person you'd like to be, your reputation with yourself will improve.

But another question to ask is this: is your assessment of yourself accurate?

If you know that who you are, what you do, and how you think about things, is changeable and accessible to your own intervention and effort – What Carol Dweck, author of *Mindset* calls a "growth" mindset – *your assessment of yourself will also tend to be very accurate*.

In contrast, if you believe that who you are, what you do, and how you think about things is fixed and unchangeable – a "fixed trait" mindset – you will then believe that you are at the mercy of forces outside of yourself, and your assessment of yourself will be predictably and dramatically *inaccurate*.

In order to make accurate assessments, we have to have accurate data. If we are faced with a poor assessment, and our belief is that we are powerless to change, then the only way to salvage any emotional hope is to skew the data, to trick ourselves into discounting it. In this case, the necessary self-reflection will feel threatening to us, containing blows to our self-concept, rather than useful information.

This can lead to incredible suffering, bad results, and can lead us to avoid challenges or difficult feedback – the very things we need in order to grow.

Here's the challenge: notice how you respond to feedback. Do you tend to reject negative feedback, become defensive, change the subject? Or do you hear it, feel the predictable emotions (nobody *likes* negative feedback; I wouldn't expect you to feel happy about it), and look for what there is to learn from it?

If you tend to reject it, chances are you are operating, in that particular area at least, within a fixed trait mindset. If you can identify this, that is very good news… because you can change it! By understanding that this is a fixed trait mindset, you can choose to change it toward a growth mindset. Look for your assumptions about yourself that are fixed and immoveable, and dispute them.

Sometimes this is all it takes; sometimes it’s more complicated and it’s important to get some help with it.

Now for an even trickier challenge: pay attention to how you give *yourself* feedback, and how you take it.

When you see that you’ve done something wrong, or make a mistake, or you’ve forgotten to do something, how do you treat yourself? Are you harsh and attacking ("You idiot!")? Do you make negative generalizations about yourself ("You can never get this right!")? Or do you look for what you have to learn, and keep your focus on how to solve the problem?

If you’re calling yourself names, or generalizing, then you’re not going to get anywhere. You’ll just feel bad, even ashamed, and you’re likely to do the same thing again, and call yourself names and generalize again, and the shame and other negative feelings will cause you to avoid the whole issue if you can, making your possibilities diminish.

If you’re looking for what you have to learn, and you keep your focus on how to solve the problem, then you’re likely to see the situation and your role in it clearly; *and you’re also more likely to actually solve the problem*. This is an expansive cycle that leads to learning and growth, and an expansion of possibilities.

Pay attention to how you give and receive feedback from others. It will tell you a lot about what you can do to improve your life. But the person you live with constantly, whose assessment you are continually exposed to, and who has the greatest impact on your thoughts, actions, and feelings, is yourself.

Do what you can to earn a good reputation with yourself; it’s the reputation that matters most.

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