OVERCOMING SELF-DOUBT

William Shakespeare, in his play Measure for Measure, wrote, “Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt.” Vincent Van Gogh stated, “If you hear a voice within you say you cannot paint, then by all means paint and that voice will be silenced.” And Tennessee Williams shared, “I don’t believe anyone suspects how completely unsure I am of my work and myself and what tortures self-doubting the doubt of others has always given me.”

Self-doubt impacts everyone, including highly accomplished people in all walks of life. It can make us feel overwhelmed, think we are not up to the task, and pessimistic about our probability of success. Research shows that self-doubt can significantly diminish our performance in business and life. How do we as entrepreneurs, who regularly experience unique challenges, rise above our own self-doubt? What can we do to counter self-doubt’s negative impacts?

We will review five strategies for overcoming self-doubt with the goal of achieving our full potential in business and life.

**Strategy One: Recognize and acknowledge the fact that self-doubt impacts everyone, including and especially the highly successful people in every area of life.**

Many times when we experience self-doubt it can seem like we’re the only ones afflicted with this type of negative thinking. We compare ourselves to other entrepreneurs who on the surface do not seem to experience the self-doubt that we do. If we allow these types of thoughts to persist we will experience aloneness and isolation that has us retreat even further into our self-doubting thoughts.

Comparing ourselves to what we perceive others experience is not helpful for another reason. We resist the self-doubting thoughts and tell ourselves that we shouldn’t be experiencing what is natural and normal. The truth is that the more someone is up to, and the more they are moving out of their safe, cozy comfort zone, the more self-doubt is likely to occur. Once we accept that everyone has self-doubt, and that the more we are up to the more likely we are to have self-doubts, we have positioned ourselves to proactively engage in other helpful strategies to overcome self-doubt.

**Strategy Two: Proactively and selectively reach out to someone who can offer solid counsel and support.**

Once we have shifted our context for our self-doubting thoughts we create an opening to take action. If we are experiencing significant self-doubt, selectively reach out to one or two people for support. Just the exercise of formulating and verbalizing our thoughts for others can help us gain clarity and can reduce distorted thinking.

Research has shown that a combination of empathetic listening, effective coaching, and encouraging support can have an immediate impact on reducing the intensity of self-doubting thinking. It is important to be selective with whom you reach out to since not everyone has the ability and temperament to help us move past our negative thoughts. Effective counsel and support can be the fastest way to move past self-doubt and its self-limiting impact.
**Strategy Three: Examine the basis for the self-doubt and actively counter unfounded and irrational self-doubting thoughts.**

For most people self-doubting thoughts have recurring patterns. The situations in which we experience self-doubt may seem different but the underlying patterns are usually similar. The root cause for many limiting beliefs is from our experiences from our childhood through our young adult years. A key step in overcoming self-doubt is to begin searching for the underlying thoughts that are causing the self-doubt.

Once we know our repeating thought patterns we can more effectively deal with them. With practice we become better at countering self-doubting thoughts. Eventually we will experience fewer occurrences of self-doubt and when we do we can move through them more quickly and effortlessly. With time and practice the process becomes automatic, much like other helpful habits.

**Strategy Four: Intentionally create a positive distraction that will help you to relax and gain perspective.**

At times our self-doubt can be so intense that it completely stops us from moving forward. In these situations, instead of continuing to resist our situation it may be more helpful to do something that takes our mind off of our current thoughts. Change your environment, do some activity you enjoy, or just walk around the block. Creating a brief distraction can reset your thinking and put the self-doubting thoughts into perspective.

One effective distraction is being around an uplifting person or listening to a motivational speaker. Find your favorite motivational and uplifting podcast or book. If you don’t have these in place now take time to proactively find them so you have them the next time you are stopped by self-doubt.

**Strategy Five: Get into action by taking a first step.**

Sometimes just taking a small step is enough to move past the self-doubt that is stopping us. Vincent van Gogh’s quote above speaks to this. When we hear the internal voices telling us we can’t do something, just pushing ahead will silence, or at least lessen, the thoughts that are holding us back.

One helpful course of action when we are stopped is to gain additional knowledge or skills. For example, if we have a major presentation to an important audience and we are being stopped by self-doubt, an effective action step would be to listen to a podcast about giving powerful presentations. Or, practice delivering your presentation in front of one or two people and ask them to give you tips on how to improve.

Self-doubt can have a significant, negative impact on our performance and our enjoyment of our journey. As entrepreneurs we are constantly creating and re-creating our futures. The next time you find yourself stopped by self-doubt, try implementing one or more of these five strategies to experience higher levels of performance and success.