

Dances with wolves

By Stuart White
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When talking to a friend recently I mused how I often felt like I was two different people, both complete opposites of themselves. Not in a crazy schizophrenic way but feeling that at times I am my own worst enemy, full of self-doubt and fear and how this gets in the way of my potential and yet at other times I can be on top of the world, confident, on point and in great form. I know others often feel like this as well. It often seems as though there are two very different conversations going on within us, all the time. The first is the conversation with your higher consciousness.. It is the voice of hope, faith, trust, peace, possibility and optimism. The second is with our baser nature. It's the voice of fear, worry, problems, concerns, unhappiness and all things pessimistic. Freud defined them as the ego and the id and analysed the conflict between the two that we spend our lives trying to resolve.

My friend challenged me to stop feeding the insecure Me and integrate my emotions positively as then I would be nearer to presenting myself as a whole human being. She reminded me of this old story that I had read years before about a Cherokee Indian which has been on the email circuit recently:

One evening an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, "My son, the battle is between two 'wolves' inside each of us."

"One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego."

"The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: "Which wolf wins?"

The old Cherokee replied, "The one you feed."

So she printed out the story and I have stuck it on my fridge to remind me daily of the need to win the battle of the ego versus the id by being conscious of which one I am feeding. The fact that it is on the fridge is probably purely co-incidental with the word feed, or perhaps it was some sort of subliminal word association with more prosaic connotations of good foods versus naughty treats? At any rate it serves as a salutary reminder for both the inner and outer man.

The moral of the story and our inner battles is really all about being positive, but I have long been a sceptic about positive self-talk and books on positivity. When someone tells me to look in the mirror and repeat positive statements I laugh it off, dismissing this strategy as only suitable for the dumb and dumber. It seems a bit too 'new age' even though it's not a modern mantra. French psychologist Emile Coue, over a hundred years ago used to advocate the constant repetition of the phrase 'Every day in every way I am getting better and better' as positive auto-suggestion and the key to success, and recently I have been re-thinking my attitude - challenging my cynical dismissal of the practice especially when I realised that for years I have been promoting a form of it myself by advocating the role of positivity in team building and team effectiveness. If it can work there, why would it not have its place on an individual level?

Before I go any further let me clarify that I do not support false positiveness - in other words bull! So my scepticism comes from when it is faked. Insincere happy-clapping no-one buys into and just results in cynicism and boredom, but real positiveness and genuine enthusiasm in individuals and teams has been shown to dramatically affect workplace behaviour, hence the 1980's fad to move managers from playing a policeman type roll to cheerleader type role. There's a world of difference not only in approach but also in results.

Our job as managers and leaders is to put forward positive ideas, thoughts and visions to our employees. How else are they going to engage if all we do is feed them negative thoughts; 'you haven't done this' and 'you haven't done that' as opposed to 'look what we are achieving', 'look what we can become'... changing the thoughts by feeding what is good. Peter Thompson in his blog described it using this analogy - Our thoughts are like buckets full of water but there's a hole in each and every bucket so the water slowly runs away. Imagine for a moment one of your regular thoughts is about success and achievement - whilst another is the worry of failure.

Slowly and surely the water is dripping away through the holes in the bottom of each of these containers. If you keep adding 'water' to your success thoughts bucket - you'll be able to keep it full and clear and fresh. If you STOP adding water to your failure thoughts bucket, sooner rather than later it will empty out and rust away to nothing.

Success starts with the thoughts we regularly hold in our minds. And just as individuals we should monitor what we are putting in, so too should organisations check the messages they send to their employees daily. I have heard of companies which do communication audits looking at what is actually put out to employees in print and in person. Each negative piece of information communicated is recorded on a graph and then compared with the number positive messages. You then tally up the productivity ticks and crosses and it's easy to see whether you are feeding negativity or positivity which has a direct correlation to corporate morale, creativity and output. Feelings of positiveness translate to positive, pro-active behaviour, whereas negativity encourages defensive behaviour, low morale and lack of motivation.

So what does all this teach us? Well, if you take the letters from the words 'ego' and 'id' they form the command 'go die'. So first we have to stop throwing bones to the big, bad wolf that's inside us and just let it starve to death. Second whatever you do, don't let the wolf drink out of your success bucket, so even if it doesn't starve it will still die of thirst. Third, we need to be dusting off our batons and pom-poms and leading the team in a cheerleading routine or a victory haka to the last good wolf standing. And lastly, auto suggestion really does work, so if you want to afford that expensive new car all you have to do is talk yourself into it. That's what's known as driving ambition!

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Managing Director

HRMC

Phone: 395 1640

<http://www.hrmc.co.bw/>

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