

ONE PERSON - TWO SELVES

In working with coaching, most of the topics that arise in deciding topics for a coaching process invariably float around two key questions:

1. How am I to understand myself?
2. How am I to understand my impact related to others i.e. understand others?

While these are weighty topics to consider, they are fundamental to the work I do, though coachees may not explicitly state the topics in such terms.

What then comes to mind with both questions are two vital elements or building blocks of “who we are and what we do” that are essentially intertwined yet can theoretically be “separated”, namely self-esteem (the human being part in us) and self-confidence (the human doing part of us).

In this brief article, my intention is to spark a discussion. Either one that continues with yourself, colleagues, continues with your spouse at home or one directly with me as I still find there is a lot to learn here. This is the first article of two that will address this elusive topic.

In a humble approach to loosely define these areas (is this my self-confidence speaking?), I have thus far come up with a few conclusions of my own that although are non-scientific, still based on a collection of impressions and patterns seen over the last few years.

Self-esteem vs. self-confidence

Self-esteem, a major pillar built in childhood, is for me the reputation a person acquires with themselves i.e. how one appreciates one’s self on a deeper level. Relative to self-confidence, a person’s self-esteem is not based on singular failures or successes; it acts more like a solid rudder on a sail boat, steering a firm course despite rugged conditions. Self-esteem is often cited as the core in us, where a life journey for many is separating the core from external events/happenings (which drives self-confidence) as untying the core from these events is essentially the essence of building self-esteem.

So, despite failing to reach goals or the success you want, for example, having your core in place will help in saying “even though this was not my best performance, I’m still okay”. Conversely, when one’s worth/core is equal with external events or lower, self-esteem will rise and fall along with these events. Indeed, it can be a difficult journey for some and in a “just do it” culture, these can be difficult waters to navigate.

Empty core

I know from my own upbringing, and certainly after having kids of my own, that we are more geared to infer a correlation between getting something done to equalling “you are good”. This can be a very confusing message, especially for children. What happens when things go wrong? Will they then suddenly not be “good enough”? This dynamic may then develop over time to result in an “empty” core, potentially resulting in what I sometimes hear from coachees, that even though they have been very successful over the years in adulthood, they still are not “happy” (with themselves).

When I have seen self-confidence at a “higher degree” than self-esteem, I often get the impression that a great deal of energy is being expended, often to “look good” on the outside while the “inside” is

in a profound struggle with itself. Low self-esteem is also ironically a strong motivator to “achieve and perform” and combined with a high self-confidence creates a synergy that can move mountains. However, the owner of such a combination is most likely struggling with an internal fight that may not be seen, but absolutely felt internally and takes its own exhausting toll over time. And this is also perhaps combined with continually seeking approval at the risk of not always getting it – a potential let down that certainly doesn’t build anything good, but more self-disappointment.

Conversely, high self-esteem wedded with low self-confidence brings about a person who takes things in stride, although at times looked at as an underachiever of sorts. They may rest in themselves and are not necessarily apt to “prove themselves” or “be assertive” and perhaps be looked upon in a skewed way indeed. What do we do with a person who is essentially okay with themselves, but in a sense, doesn’t believe in their own abilities?

Blind spots

Another quirky aspect considering these two “creatures” within us is too high a degree of self-esteem or self-confidence, which inescapably has a negative impact on our own self-perception and can affect others around us negatively. Have you ever met someone who is uncoachable? They may just think too highly of themselves and who they are and have a glow of smugness to them. Ever meet anyone who is a self-proclaimed God’s gift to mankind and can move any mountain? They are the narcissistic overachievers who are the “winners” of the world. Two major blind spots that are essentially too much of a good thing.

Reflecting on the above I realise there is more to say and feel that this topic can lead to many discussions. And again, my goal in this article is to turn the wind in another direction, to create a dialogue around a truly crucial part of who we are and to carry that dialogue into any circle you may find yourself in.

So, what then can I conclude from this mish-mash of two major masts that help us set sail in life? Optimally I would love to say that I have the “right stuff”, but it certainly would depend how the stuff has been playing out in the 50 years I have been alive. And if I were asked to choose, which mix would I prefer? I’ll let you decide for yourself and see whether your belief in yourself or what you can do leads you to your decision.