How to reach your own potential and get out of your own way

Have you ever woken up determined to hit your goals or deadlines and reached the end of the day to find you have spent most of the day on Facebook? Me too. I believe that every single entrepreneur engages in significant self-sabotaging behaviours. I am certainly no exception. Furthermore, entrepreneurs are often in denial or refuse to recognize that their behaviour is self-sabotaging and killing their personal potential, as well as that of their business.

Self-sabotage can be incredibly damaging. Every day you may be engaging in activities that are a poor use of your time, or worse, a total waste of your time. Or, even worse than that, they may be activities that threaten the very existence of your business.

For example, I have spent the last 5 years focusing on an area of business that whilst I am passionate about, I *know* isn't financially viable. Usually self-sabotage isn't so visible, but even when it's not it can be very damaging. Failure to confront issues head-on is a common example of self-sabotage. Maybe you have a marketing program that needs revision. A product that needs improvement. An employee problem that needs addressing. Maybe you even need to re-write your business plan.

Why Do Entrepreneurs Self-Sabotage?

Well, for starters, we are only human beings. Human beings are not rational creatures. Things like pride, ego, fear, and habits get in the way of how we think and how we act. Our minds have been programmed to survive in the jungle, among wild animals, not to build businesses. Our minds naturally think in terms of "fear and flight," not to make a careful, calculated risk and prosper.

We wake up in the morning, not with a brain that is programmed to think, "What great things can I do to build my business today?" but instead a brain that says, "Watch out for tigers in the jungle and get ready to run!" So it's no wonder that fear is often a major component of self-sabotage.

But we don't need to be scared of tigers (well, most of us at least!) So for the majority, self-sabotage is often driven by negative self-talk where you tell yourself you're not enough or not worth of success. You might find yourself thinking that you can't do it or you don't deserve it or if you try, you'll fail anyway. You might be worried about what others might think of you - whether if you fail people may think less of you or alternatively be jealous if you succeed. It is these deep-rooted fears that drive us into more self-sabotage.

"Self-sabotage is when we say we want something and then go about making sure it doesn't happen." ~ Alyce P. Cornyn-Selby

Denial of Self-Sabotage

Before giving you examples of self-sabotage, I want to emphasize that as entrepreneurs we particularly tend to be unaware, or in denial, that we sabotage ourselves. How could we possibly be so dumb or self-destructive as to sabotage ourselves? Besides, if we admitted to engaging in such behaviour, wouldn't we also be admitting we were deeply, psychologically disturbed and also an incredibly incompetent businessperson?

No, absolutely not. Admitting you engage in self-sabotage is simply admitting you are a human being. So, don't ignore or underestimate the signs – self-sabotage can reinforce a misplaced sense of worthlessness and provide a justification for negative thoughts that have no basis in reality. In fact, rather than implying you are an incompetent businessperson, starting to recognize your own self-sabotage puts you on the path to becoming an unusually aware and potentially highly talented entrepreneur.

Ways in which we self-sabotage as business owners

The No. 1 self-sabotaging behaviour for entrepreneurs is diving into your work without a plan

We tend to jump into the tasks that pop up each day without deeply thinking and strategizing about how we are spending our time. As entrepreneurs, we tend to work hard and work long hours. But do we think hard enough and often enough about how we choose our daily tasks? Do we strategize and have a written plan for what our personal time priorities will be for the year, the month, and each day?

If we spend 12 hours a day working, isn't it worthwhile to spend more than a couple minutes a day thinking deeply about where to focus our work? Instead, we tend to be creatures of habit, or perhaps captives of habit. We have a tendency to, more or less, do the same kind of work that we have done in the past without giving much thought to alternative ways of doing the same things. Or we fail to realize that there are different things we could be doing that might be more important in driving the business ahead.

The No. 2 way in which entrepreneurs self-sabotage themselves is not recognizing fear.

We need to recognize the innate human fear of failure that may be keeping us from charging into a new businesses, creating major new products, approaching that huge client prospect or just making that next important sales call.

The No. 3 way in which we self-sabotage is hiding your light.

Modesty is generally deemed a good trait but what if you go to the other extreme? What about when you hide your talents, stay quiet when you know the answer or you apologise unnecessarily?

Do any of those things resonate with you? It would be great for you to take a minute to put in the chat box where you think you might be self-sabotaging. I will read out the list anonymously and I have a whole other list prepared in case you need some inspiration!

Other self-sabotaging behaviours for entrepreneurs include:

- Having difficulty visualizing success. Your successful business may be down the road, but there are also day-to-day successes, such as a successful sales call, a successful presentation, or even being able to envision a well done sales attempt.
- Having negative self-critical thoughts.
- Being a creature or captive of habit.
- Procrastinating. This includes putting off the work that really matters that could really take you ahead. Of course, sometimes it even means putting off any work at all.
- Choosing a bad business idea.
- Putting off client and sales generating work.
- Staying within our comfort zone.
- Not delegating.
- Not getting feedback from others. Or worse, ignoring good feedback if you do get it.
- Setting unrealistic goals. For yourself or for what you can deliver clients.
- Failure to praise and celebrate. Whether it's the work of our employees or ourselves.
- Hesitating to outsource work. Particularly when it is rational to do so.
- Putting off key decisions. Delaying important choices by over analyzing or finding other less important things to focus on.
- Trying to focus on too many things. As opposed to focusing on the things that really matter.
- Tackling the easy tasks first. Instead of the more important or difficult ones.
- Not thinking "big" enough.
- Responding first to the "loudest" noise. As opposed to the most important thing calling for our attention.
- Not recognizing our weaknesses. Not accepting them and not trying to improve or to work around them.
- Not networking with other entrepreneurs. Whether they are inside or outside the industry.

- Checking email or social media. Also disregarding the national or financial news too often.
- Allowing personal life to overflow.
- Allowing constant interruptions.
- Constantly worrying. Fretting, even subconsciously, about what could go wrong.
- Kidding ourselves that we are brilliantly multi-tasking. Instead of realizing that we are really engaged in high-paced and inefficient task-switching.
- Fooling ourselves by thinking we will not burn out.
- Thinking we are succeeding by working all the time.
- Not recognizing that others can do some tasks as well as we can.
- Trying too hard to perfect things. Particularly with those things that don't really matter.
- Getting distracted by all kinds of things. Focusing on things that pop up and seem important today but in hindsight are not worthy of the amount of time you spent on them
- Not pricing your products high enough. (one I know that drives Ann crazy ha!)
- Not looking after ourselves physically and mentally
- Coming up with excuses or rationalizations for veering off your business plan. For instance, not considering that overspending on your budget may seem good today but you will regret it tomorrow.
- You might "forget" a deadline, or fail to prepare a presentation properly, for example.
- Maybe you start projects but never finish them. You feel unable to proceed, even when you're presented with an exciting opportunity.
- Or you may dream of doing something of great personal significance, but never get round to doing anything about it.

How Self-Sabotage stops you reaching your potential

Self-sabotage sets you up to fail in a number of ways. From reinforcing behaviours that eat away at your potential for success, so you find yourself falling short of the goals you set yourself to damaging your reputation - if you don't do what you say you're going to do, there's a risk of being seen as unreliable, uncommitted, lazy or lacking drive (or mostly likely, you telling yourself those things!) Such failures and disappointments create further feelings of guilt and frustration. And, over time, this can build up into shame, which feeds low self-esteem.

Recognize your own self-sabotaging behaviours.

Think about goals that you've had for a long time but have never accomplished. Are there particular areas where you're putting off making a decision? Are you suffering from lack of motivation , even for important things?

Consider something that you frequently fail at, for no obvious reason. Is there something you do, or don't do, that consistently frustrates other people? Is there an activity or task that nags at you and causes you dissatisfaction because you know you could do it, or do it better?

It may be painful to ask yourself questions like these, but it's important. Tune in to problem situations so you can better understand what is happening.

Understanding your emotions

Self-sabotaging behaviour often stems from feelings of anxiety, anger and worthlessness.
For example, you may have had your business events cancelled by Covid, and this made you angry and upset. So now you aren't running any events and you're wondering what the point is. The event triggered the emotion, which in turn led to a self-defeating action.

Always aim to manage your emotions , so that you don't commit to behaviours that have negative consequences, or that unjustly affect others. Check the warning signs of anger and anxiety before they get out of control.

Observe the thinking/belief that caused the emotion

In the example just given I think we can agree that the negative behaviour was caused by irrational thoughts. Let's consider the evidence for those thoughts - Covid didn't really cancel your events, the guidelines set meant that it wasn't safe to run them and so you cancelled them to keep everyone safe.

Notice how you talk to yourself when you engage in self-sabotaging behaviour. Write down all the negative self-talk, no matter how silly it seems.

The ideal time to do this is when you're engaged in the behaviour. Monitor your "stream of consciousness" and write it down. In our example, you might catch yourself thinking, "I'm such a failure, my business is completely ruined now!"

When you know what your negative self-talk is, ask yourself what deeper beliefs lie behind this self-sabotaging thinking. Then ask yourself - is it true? Is it helpful? What am I going to do with this information?

Change Your behaviours, Emotions and Thoughts

As you become aware of the negative emotions, behaviours and thoughts that trigger self-sabotage, you can begin to challenge them. Turn your assumptions around and gain some perspective. You might choose to use affirmations in place of the limiting belief.

When your skills, beliefs and behaviours are aligned, you can create the mental, emotional and physical states necessary to do whatever you set your mind to.

Warning: Simply changing your behaviour is unlikely to beat your self-sabotage habit in the long term, if you don't also change the emotions and thoughts that lie behind it. But it can help if you notice, learn from, and give yourself credit for more positive outcomes, as this helps to break the cycle of negativity.

How to Combat Self-Sabotage and Realise your potential

You probably now realize that you've engaged in a few of the self-sabotaging activities I've mentioned. If not, take a hard look again. Any entrepreneur who is being honest with themselves and is even somewhat self-aware can't help but recognize that they've committed some of this self-sabotaging behaviour. I know I do it all the time!

I know it may seem overwhelming. Just recognizing and admitting to yourself that you engage is the behaviour – which is not easy to do, mind you – will go a long way to mitigating this behaviour or at least toning it down.

I would suggest you don't try to change all of these self-sabotaging behaviours at once, but rather zero in on the ones that might make the biggest difference and offer the juiciest rewards for you. Maybe even focus on just one.

Develop Self-Supporting Behaviors

When you've identified and begun to defeat the false rationale for your self-sabotaging behaviors, you can start to rebuild your self-esteem. Consider the following questions:

- What can you say to yourself that is positive or encouraging?
- What options do you have? Is there more than one way to achieve your goal?
- Can you build self-confidence by setting and achieving small goals, on your way to achieving the bigger ones?

Then use your answers to come up with a message that inspires you to move in a positive direction. For example, "Even though I may not complete this project on time, I

know that I have the resources and skills I need to get me through. When I start to tackle the project, I know I will release a lot of the stress and anxiety I've been carrying around while I've been procrastinating."

We all need to get comfortable with feeling uncomfortable and to embrace it and ourselves as a whole. Taking time for reflection is essential - to understand yourself, your purpose (why) and to find balance in our busy lives. We need to own and appreciate our accomplishments, while also pinpointing and being compassionate about our limitations. We need to recognise that our thoughts are only thoughts; only then can we recognise it when we get our self-sabotage glasses on and take them off instead.

Have courage

Focus on would be mitigating fear, specifically how innate fear or aversion to risk or change might be holding you back. This is not easy. To help me confront this, I have put at the top of my daily calendar the words, "What would do if I have no fear?"

One way I try to mitigate fear is to place hard limits on risks. When I launch a new business or a new product, I write down a hard limit of the maximum financial risk I am willing to take. I might also write down the maximum amount of time I would put into it, as well as some "must achieve" milestones.

While limiting your maximum financial and time exposure can help you see and cap the worst downside for a business, you must also try to envision the best possible upside. With a thorough business plan, for example, you should include a separate section for "Future Vision," basically what the business would look like if it succeeds. This vision, I believe, is important for you to keep in mind. You can also reinforce it by sharing it with your management team or, lacking that, with your closest friends or relatives. Imagine what could happen if you put all these things into action.

When you know something, have the courage to step forward. Approach obstacles with confidence, realizing that you have the resources to deal with them. It's not about having wealth or a big title (though that might come anyway) but more about finding your purpose, connecting to your destiny and understanding how you can be of service to others.

Practice saying no and letting go of the guilt. Set appropriate boundaries for yourself and so then the 'yes' becomes more powerful and valuable. It also involves making time to say 'yes' to yourself.

Look for evidence

I know it's easy to focus on the things you don't have because that's what feels most real to you right now. The danger is though that by focusing on the negatives you are blind to the positives. Let me give you an example. If you believe that the covid is killing the opportunities available to you then you are less likely to look. If you do look it might be fleeting as you may be thinking you are wasting your time.

When we believe something is true our mind looks for evidence to back it up. We see our world with the 'glasses' that support our perceptions and we stack the evidence in our own favour. If we see lots of people leaving a company, we assume it's a terrible place to work or that there are no opportunities there.

So if we are looking for what we don't have then we will almost always find it.

Once you realise you have potential then you can go about collecting the evidence to prove it.

1. Reflect on what you are good at. What can you do that others can't? This might be things that you find easy that others don't seem to.
2. Make a list of all of your successes. Sometimes we all need reminders that we are good enough, that we are capable to achieve what we set out to. It's not about only logging big achievements - noting the times you have finished your to-do list or gone for a 10 min walk when you didn't want to...all the way through to getting that promotion, becoming a parent and/or selling your first product/service.
3. Make a business success timeline - considering what has gone well so far and what you did to achieve that success
4. What did you love doing as a child? What were your hopes and dreams? Maybe you can't remember...what makes your heart beat faster? All of these things will give you clues as to what your potential is.
5. Listen (and acknowledge) what others say about you. If you don't know, ask someone. In fact, ask 5 people. Choose those who you consider to be honest so that you can't dismiss their feedback later as 'being kind'.
6. Consider what (or who) inspires you. If you can, surround yourself with images, quotes/mantras and people who encourage you and inspire you to be the best you can be
7. Ask yourself the following questions:
    a. Is the intention something you really want to do, that you believe in and desire deep down? Or is it something you think that you *should* be doing? By asking yourself why you are doing something it will be easier to see how committed you are to making it work.
    b. Am I living up to my true potential? Take stock of what you are really good at, your achievements and build your confidence. Then you need to start taking steps to start shining...I know it's easier said than done.

Now, these exercises might make you feel uncomfortable, like you are blowing your own horn or being arrogant. You aren't. You are acknowledging your strengths and giving yourself permission to shine your light. Your potential is your gift to the world. I know it sounds dramatic but it is. Especially important if you go on to use your gift to make a difference to others.

Pre-workshop questions

1. What does meeting your potential look and feel like to you?
2. Out of ten (with ten being your potential full realised) how much of your potential is realised?
3. What is one block that you're placing in your own path?

Just saw this that seems like it belongs in your talk: from 'Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince': *'Then, slowly but surely, an exhilarating sense of infinite opportunity stole through him; he felt as though he could have done anything, anything at all... ...He got to his feet, smiling, brimming with confidence.'*