to the limit

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A lot of our behavior stems from who we think we are. If we think we are athletic, we will quickly take up a new game or jump at a chance to ski a new ski area. If we think we are clumsy, we won't.

We actually tell ourselves a lot of stories — I'm not very good at learning languages, I'm shy, I can't speak in public, I can't carry a tune, I'm a (good/very good/lousy) C++ programmer. (Men/women) (like/don't like) me. I (am/am not) management material.

Every time we tell ourselves a story like this that defines us, it also limits us. By saying who we are, we are also saying who we believe we are not. In the face of rapid change in our industry, can we afford to unconsciously shut ourselves off from anything?

So what can we do to identify and relax these barriers? The first, and often most difficult, task is "simply" to become aware of our internal talk, the stories we tell ourselves. Whenever you say "no," ask yourself how you came to that conclusion. And remember that even the "yes" answer may have a hidden "no" in it as well, since most of us need to give up something in order to do something else. By observing ourselves and listening to the excuses that automatically pop out of our mouths, we get insight into the stories we have told about ourselves.

Often these stories were true at one time in our life. Equally often, the conditions that caused them to be true at that time are no longer in force. If you were shy when living at home with parents who pushed you to succeed, then do you still need to be shy as a parent yourself in your 40s? Or is it a habit you can break? But you can't break it without knowing it is there.

These "limiting decisions" become part of the problem, part of what keeps you acting shy, stops you from learning to sing, or interferes with whatever else you would like to do. The unconscious power of these decisions can be enormous. People who tell themselves that they are clumsy may need to trip over things to reinforce their self-image. People who feel unattractive may need to sabotage relationships. People who feel they are dumb may need to prove it from time to time on the job.

In many cases, becoming aware of the limiting decisions, becoming conscious of how you came to make this decision, and understanding that these earlier conditions no longer apply can be the first steps in changing yourself to become more effective on and off the job.

So suppose you identify yourself with a trait — suppose you tell yourself you are shy. Here are some things you can do to get more insight into this story you tell yourself.

First of all, turn the adjective into a process. You are not shy, you do the process of "shying." When do you know to start "shying"? Are there ever times you don't shy? How are those times different from the times you are shying? Look carefully at what triggers your shying — if it happened differently, would it still work to trigger you to shy? Do you do your shying in response to men, or to women, or to children? Do you do it at home but not at work? Do you shy when you are alone, or with just one other person? Can you remember times in your life when you didn't shy?

The next step is to ask yourself what is the intention of your shying. (Chunk it up, to use the terminology of an earlier article of ours.) What would happen if you didn't shy in a situation where you usually do? What doesn't happen because you are shying away from it? What wouldn't happen if you didn't shy away from it? If you imagine at some time in the future being able to function without shying, how would things be different?

Perhaps you are shy because you want to avoid failing in public. Is shyness the best way to avoid failing in public? Aren't there other ways you might achieve this end that are more effective than shying? If you could be better at some of these other strategies, could you stop shying?

Finally, it is hard for most of us to see ourselves as clearly as a good friend or a trained professional person can. So working on limiting decisions is often best done with a friend, a coach, or a counselor. It is rewarding work both for you and for them.