

T Performativity

THE MOST DANGEROUS ITEM IN A HEALTH club, it seems, may be the mirror. A study at Canada's McMaster University found that exercising in front of a mirror may *de*-motivate women to the extent that they won't exercise, the Associated Press recently reported.

Researchers asked 58 sedentary young women about their attitudes toward their bodies and their mood—once as a baseline, then twice more, one week apart, after the women had ridden an exercise bike for 20 minutes. When the women could watch themselves in the mirror, they wound up feeling worse—e.g., less calm and more fatigued—than when the mirrors were covered so they couldn't see themselves.

Other studies validate that looking into a mirror starts people thinking about not only their physical imperfections, but also about additional presumed flaws. Kathleen Martin Ginis, associate professor of health and exercise psychology at McMaster, told the AP: "We tend to be quite critical" of ourselves. (This study was confined to women. Ginis suspects men might have similar reactions, but less strong—because men tend to be less self-critical than women. But that's another story...)

For health clubs, the solution may be simple: Provide "mirror-free zones." But the situation is more complex in offices. Just because the walls have nothing but the occasional "employee of the month" plaque doesn't mean

there are no mirrors around. We simply can't see them.

We all have an invisible mirror in what Shakespeare called "our mind's eye." Throughout the day, our performance is reflected in our mental mirror. Who monitors that reflection? Our very own internal critic. So the more we focus on the mirror, the more flaws we are likely to find...and the more *de*-motivated we may become.

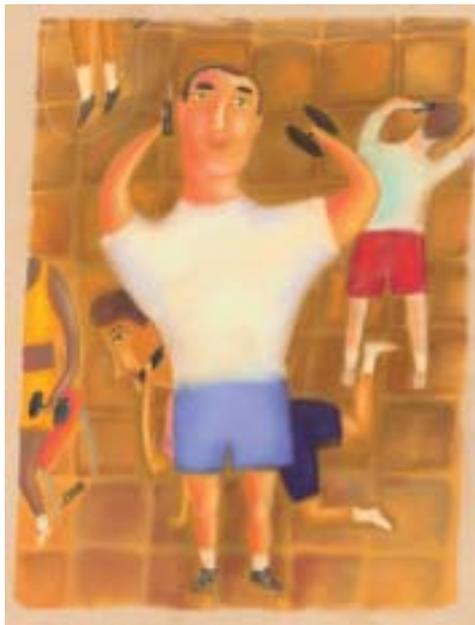
For example, at Bob's company, a senior leader recently asked a question that none of the other members of the leadership team could answer. "Why is it," he asked, "that we believe our operations are on solid ground one day, and then the very next we find ourselves in mid-air falling straight over the cliff?"

The overlooked answer: We leaders weren't listening to our key middle managers. We kept piling on accountabilities, and they, wanting to be good soldiers, weren't telling us that they were already overloaded. Too many rushed hallway conversations resulted in a growing list of missed deadlines or process failures.

The heart of the problem was in the minds of the middle managers:

They were afraid that bringing up genuine concerns would reflect poorly on them. They wouldn't be seen as team players; they would be judged to be weak or lazy or unworthy. Some executive coaches refer to this phenomenon as "performativity."

In this context, performativity connotes the urge to do



and say things that make us look good—based on what we assume to be expected or admired performance. It's a habit of behaving as if we're playing to an unseen audience, one that may, at any moment, hold up cards that score us: so much for technical difficulty, so much for artistic impression. And you just never know what score you're going to get from the Romanian judge!

In other words, performativity is the ego's playground. When we click into performativity, we are protecting or attempting to burnish our self-image. As psychologist George Pransky has explained, each of us has a baseline of who we really are; somewhere above that is another line that represents who we think we're supposed to be. All emotional suffering happens in the space between those two lines, he suggests.

The more we worry (even unconsciously) about our unseen audience, the more we are distracted by watching our internal mirror, and the less energy we have to deal with the challenges of the present moment. A flurry of thoughts—assumptions about what other people expect, worry about what they're thinking about us, judgment against our own expectations of what we “should” do or be—crowds out insight, common sense, wisdom. We cut ourselves off from the flow of fresh perspective that's available when our minds are calm.

It's a cruel paradox: The harder we try to perform well, the less access we have to the inner resources that can help us the most. Watch out for the warning signs of performativity in others and in yourself. Signs include:

- When someone gives an assignment, is it hard to ask questions for

clarification?

- Is it hard to try something completely new, to cheerfully admit to being a beginner?

- Is it hard to say “I don't know” to the boss? To subordinates? (For that matter, to kids?)

- When one person is talking, is there a tendency to interrupt, sometimes finishing her sentence incorrectly?

- When someone disagrees, is the reaction defensiveness—“They must think I'm wrong”—instead of curiosity—“Isn't it interesting that we see things differently?”

Such habits of performativity become ingrained during our years in school. All sorts of rewards accrue when we are able to absorb information and repeat it to the satisfaction of the teachers filling out our report cards. The sad irony is that we buy intellectual approval at the expense of genuine intelligence.

Consider, for example, students of global business “attending” Phoenix University online classes taught by our friend Ignacio. His final exam requires analysis of a case study in light of several complex questions. “There are always many ways to look at a business problem,” Ignacio repeatedly reminds his class, “I want to see how you think.” And yet, all too often the students strain to give Ignacio the one “right” answer—giving short shrift to their perspective, their thinking process, because of years spent in performativity mode.

Indeed, countless entry-level professionals grapple with performativity as they make the transition from school to work. You assign a task to an eager young person. She dives into it with full enthusiasm, putting in all sorts of overtime. At the dead-

line, she delivers a long, intricate, highly polished product, which just happens to be off base.

What's going wrong?

As a good manager, you look at the total responsibility of your team. You assign to your eager young employee a fair share of that responsibility—appropriate to her talent, ability, and experience. You see her work as a piece of a puzzle.

She, however, still in the thrall of academe, sees homework—an assignment designed to prove her mettle. She assumes that you expect her to do this on her own and ultimately to turn in a finished product that will earn a good grade. She doesn't feel she has permission to ask for clarification or help or to get feedback on preliminary ideas in a give-and-take process. It seems natural to her that the performativity she mastered at school will serve her well in the office.

Why is it important to break the unseen mirror? Because performativity restricts our natural creativity. Unable to access our regenerative resources, we become stressed and unhappy. Above all, we cut off our connection to the best parts of ourselves and to others. ■

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