



PROGRAM MATERIALS
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The inner Critic and Impostor Syndrome in the Legal Profession

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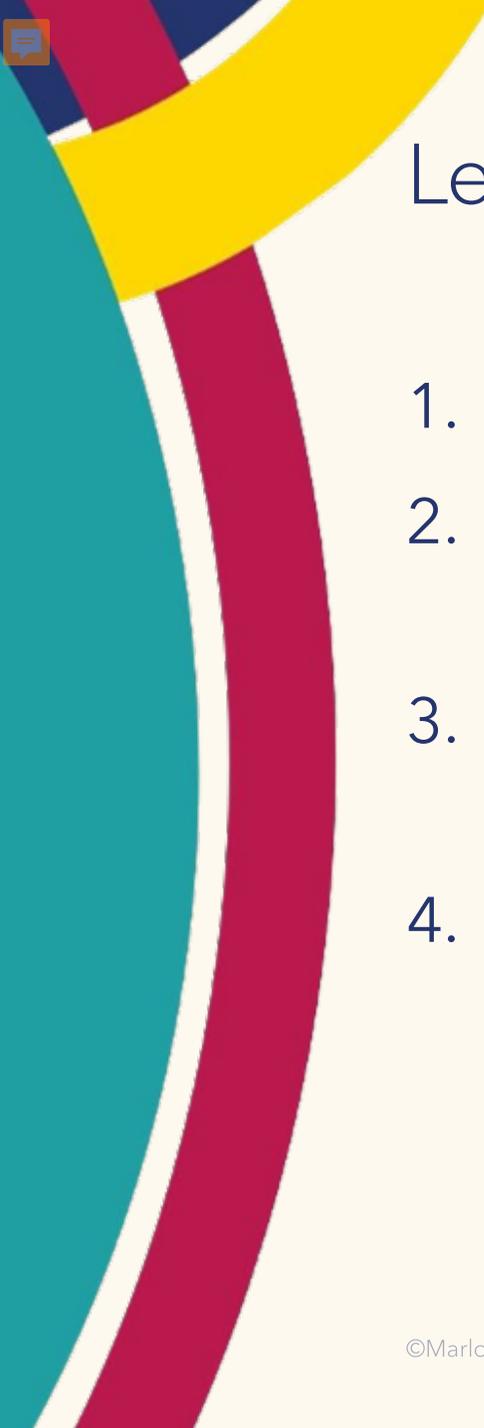
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The Inner Critic and Impostor Syndrome In Legal Practice

Marlo Lyons

J.D., Executive, Career, and Team Coach



Learning objectives

1. Define and recognize the inner critic
2. Explore how self-doubt erodes confidence in the legal profession
3. Understand impostor syndrome's impact on legal competence
4. Learn tools to help you overcome impostor syndrome

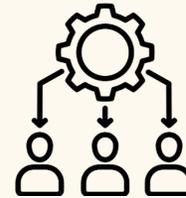
A little about me



Journalist



Entertainment
Lawyer



HR Executive

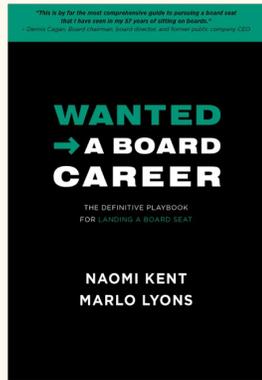


Certified Executive,
Career, and
Team Coach
Workshop Facilitator

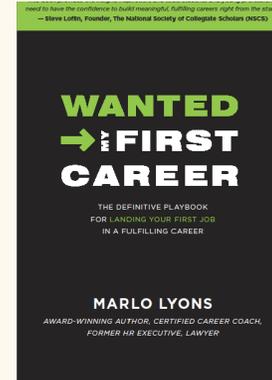
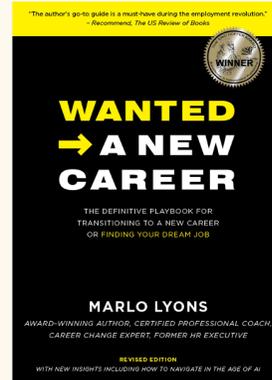
A little more about me



Podcast
Work Unscripted



Award-Winning and Best-Selling Author

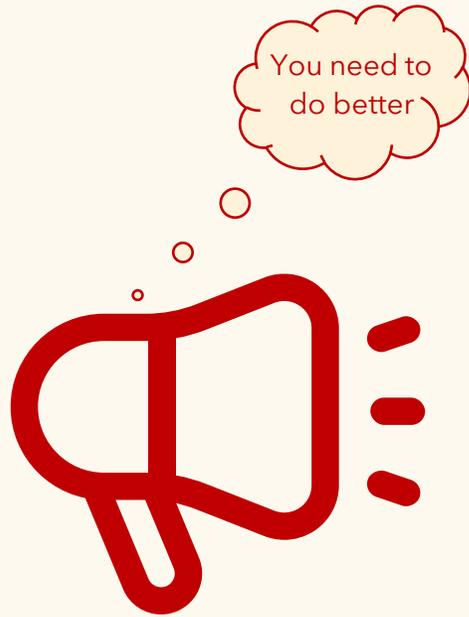


HBR Contributor

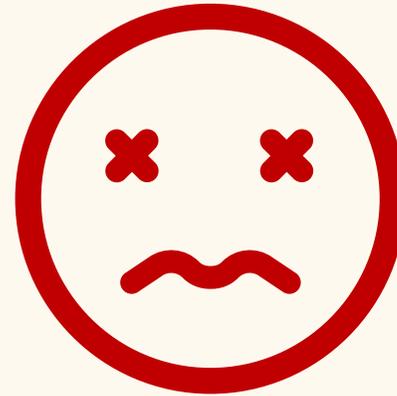
Common lawyer inner critic messages



Defining the Inner Critic



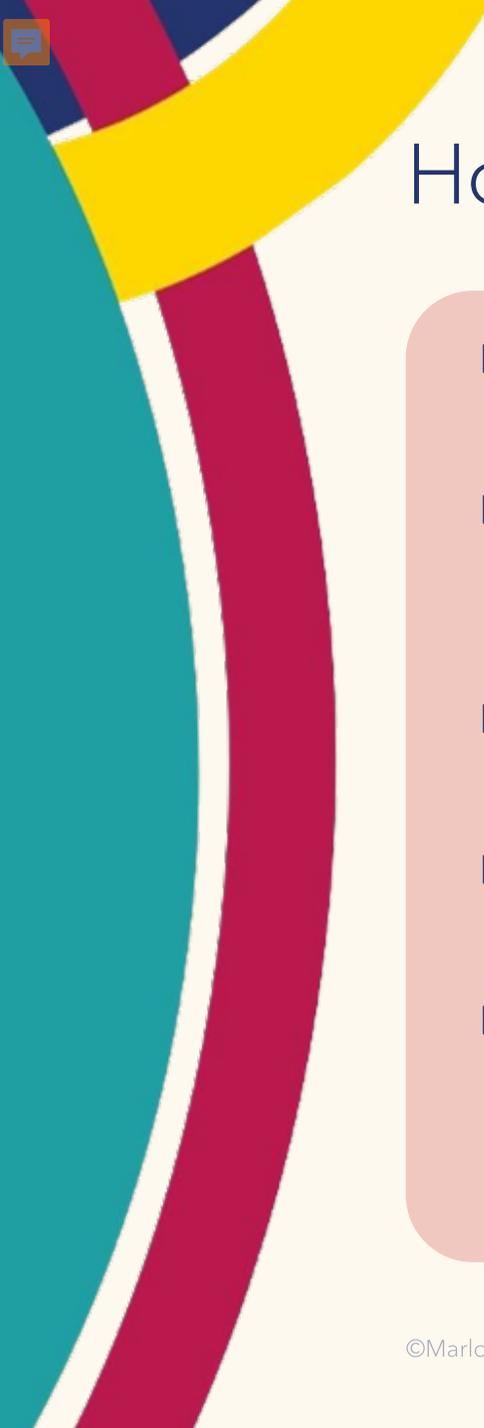
**Voice of fear disguised
as responsibility**



**Internal voice
of self judgment**



**Often echoes school,
family, culture, early
career or authority voices**



How the Inner Critic shows up

- You over prepare for interviews but never feel ready
- You avoid speaking up in meetings, even when you have something valuable to say
- You triple-check work you know is correct
- You assume praise is politeness and criticism is truth
- You hesitate to apply for roles unless you meet 100% of the criteria because you believe you are “not quite ready”

- You rewrite emails dozens of times before hitting send, overanalyzing every word for fear of being misunderstood, judged or deemed unprofessional
- You replay conversations in your head after meetings
- You downplay your contributions on performance reviews
- You avoid delegation because others won't do it “right”



Identifying your Inner Critic

What

does my inner critic sound like?

Whose

voice is it?

When

does it show up the most?

The legal mindset and self doubt

Legal Culture Expectations

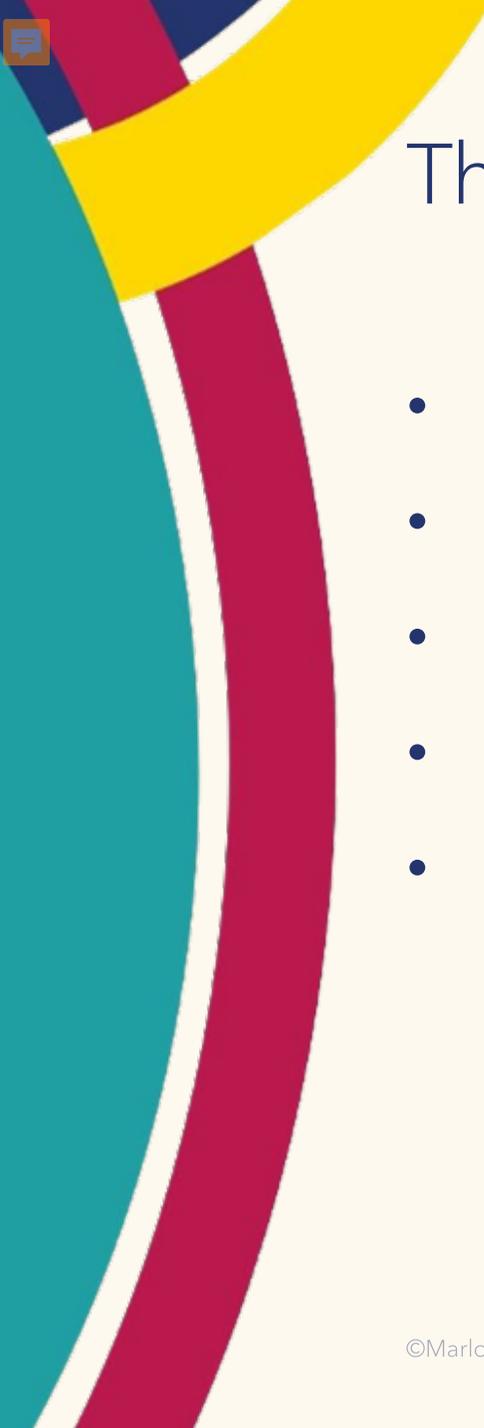


Confidence · Authority
Perfection

Internal Reality



Doubt · Fear of Exposure
Overwhelm



The legal mindset and self doubt

- Law school culture: competition over collaboration
- Fear of mistakes = fear of exposure
- Constant pressure to perform as an “expert”
- Admitting uncertainty or asking for help is taboo
- Feedback loop is minimal and often harsh

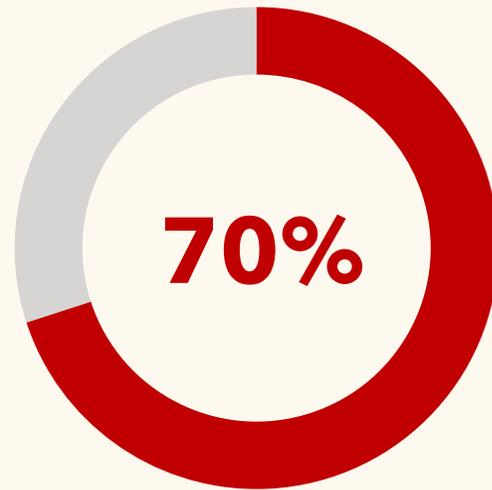


Inner Critic + Self Doubt → Impostor Syndrome

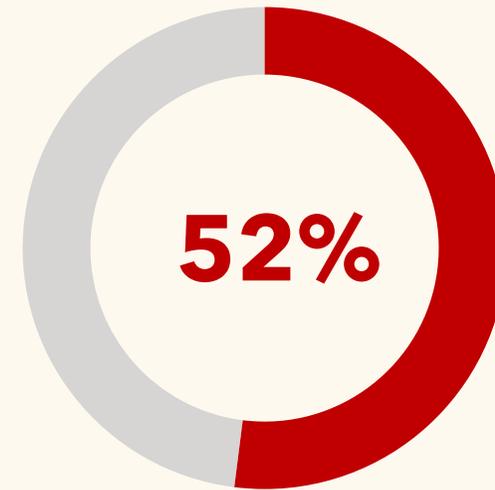
The persistent inability to believe one's success is deserved or has been legitimately achieved as a result of one's own efforts or skills.

- Continuous self-doubt despite success
- Attributing accomplishments to luck, charm, timing or deception, but not competence
- Fear of being “found out” as unqualified
- Common among high-achievers, especially in high-pressure, high-stakes fields like law

Impostor Syndrome



of professionals experience
impostor syndrome at some
point in their careers



of women lawyers
felt like impostors

Clance Impostor Syndrome Scale

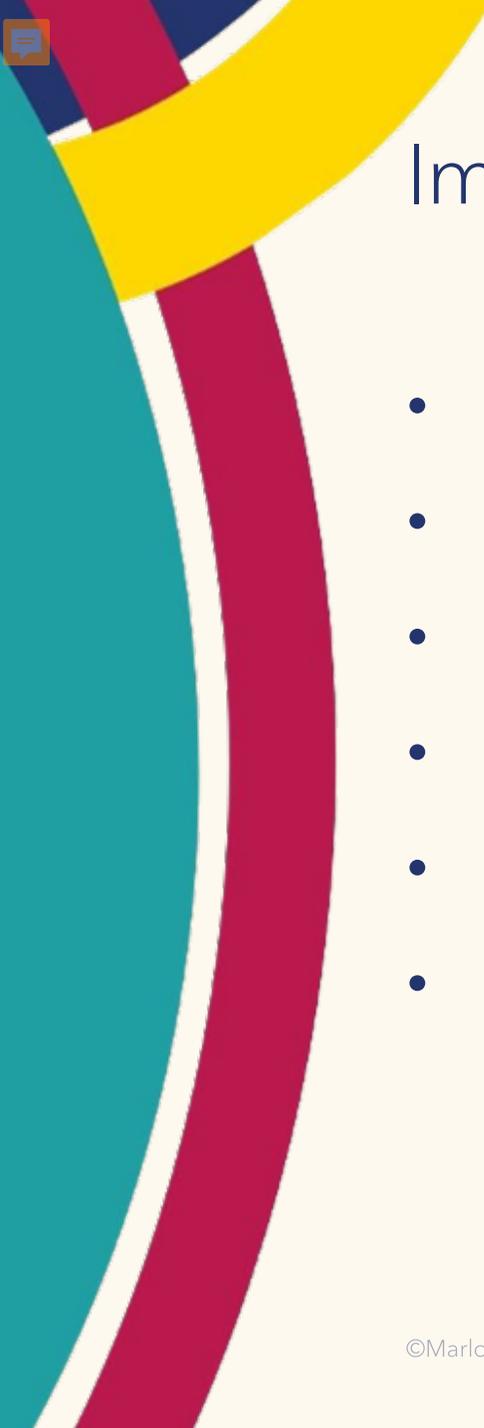
- I can give the impression that I'm more competent than I really am
- I avoid evaluations if possible and have a dread of others evaluating me.
- I sometimes think I obtained my present position or gained my present success because I happened to be in the right place at the right time or knew the right people.
- I'm afraid people important to me may find out that I'm not as capable as they think I am.
- I tend to remember the incidents in which I have not done my best more than those times I have done my best.

Clance IP Scale

For each question, please circle the number that best indicates how true the statement is of you. It is best to give the first response that enters your mind rather than dwelling on each statement and thinking about it over and over.

- 1. I have often succeeded on a test or task even though I was afraid that I would not do well before I undertook the task.**
1 (not at all true) 2 (rarely) 3 (sometimes) 4 (often) 5 (very true)
- 2. I can give the impression that I'm more competent than I really am.**
1 (not at all true) 2 (rarely) 3 (sometimes) 4 (often) 5 (very true)
- 3. I avoid evaluations if possible and have a dread of others evaluating me.**
1 (not at all true) 2 (rarely) 3 (sometimes) 4 (often) 5 (very true)
- 4. When people praise me for something I've accomplished, I'm afraid I won't be able to live up to their expectations me in the future.**
1 (not at all true) 2 (rarely) 3 (sometimes) 4 (often) 5 (very true)
- 5. I sometimes think I obtained my present position or gained my present success because I happened to be in the right place at the right time or knew the right people.**
1 (not at all true) 2 (rarely) 3 (sometimes) 4 (often) 5 (very true)
- 6. I'm afraid people important to me may find out that I'm not as capable as they think I am.**
1 (not at all true) 2 (rarely) 3 (sometimes) 4 (often) 5 (very true)
- 7. I tend to remember the incidents in which I have not done my best more than those times I have done my best.**
1 (not at all true) 2 (rarely) 3 (sometimes) 4 (often) 5 (very true)
- 8. I rarely do a project or task as well as I'd like to do it.**
1 (not at all true) 2 (rarely) 3 (sometimes) 4 (often) 5 (very true)
- 9. Sometimes I feel or believe that my success in my life or in my job has been the result of some kind of error.**
1 (not at all true) 2 (rarely) 3 (sometimes) 4 (often) 5 (very true)
- 10. It's hard for me to accept compliments or praise about my intelligence or accomplishments.**
1 (not at all true) 2 (rarely) 3 (sometimes) 4 (often) 5 (very true)

Note: From *The Impostor Phenomenon: When Success Makes You Feel Like A Fake* (pp. 20-22), by P. R. Clance, 1982, Toronto: Bantam Books. Copyright 1993 by Pauline Rose Clance, Ph.D., ABPP. Reprinted by permission. Do not reproduce without permission from Pauline Rose Clance, prclance@comcast.net, www.paulineroseclance.com.



Impostor syndrome in law

- Legal professionals face perfectionism
- Hyper-comparison to others
- Isolation in performance
- Continuous high stakes decisions that affect others
- Chronic self-doubt erodes competence
- Culture of certainty discourages vulnerability and help-seeking

Case study



Julia, a high performing litigation associate

5th year litigation associate
at a mid-sized firm

On paper:

strong writing skills, great client rapport
and consistently praised in reviews

Case study



Inside: feels like a fraud.

- When she submits a draft, she believes her supervising partner will “figure out” she doesn’t know what she’s doing
- Overfunctions: stays up past midnight, triple checks every citation, rewriting entire memos from scratch late into the night even when the first draft was solid
- Rarely takes vacation
- Never volunteers for speaking opportunities, fearing exposure
- Team sees her as thorough by distant
- Partner sees her as “lacking confidence” and hesitates to assign client-facing tasks

Case study



Marcus, the non-delegating partner

Senior partner in corporate law

Office presence:

Well respected, known for precision and wins high-value clients

Case study



Inside:

- Struggles with trust of others
- Micromanages
- Revises junior attorney's work excessively creates bottleneck
- Associates feel disempowered
- Can't retain high performers
- Doesn't want to be controlling
- Has no self doubt—but overcontrolling

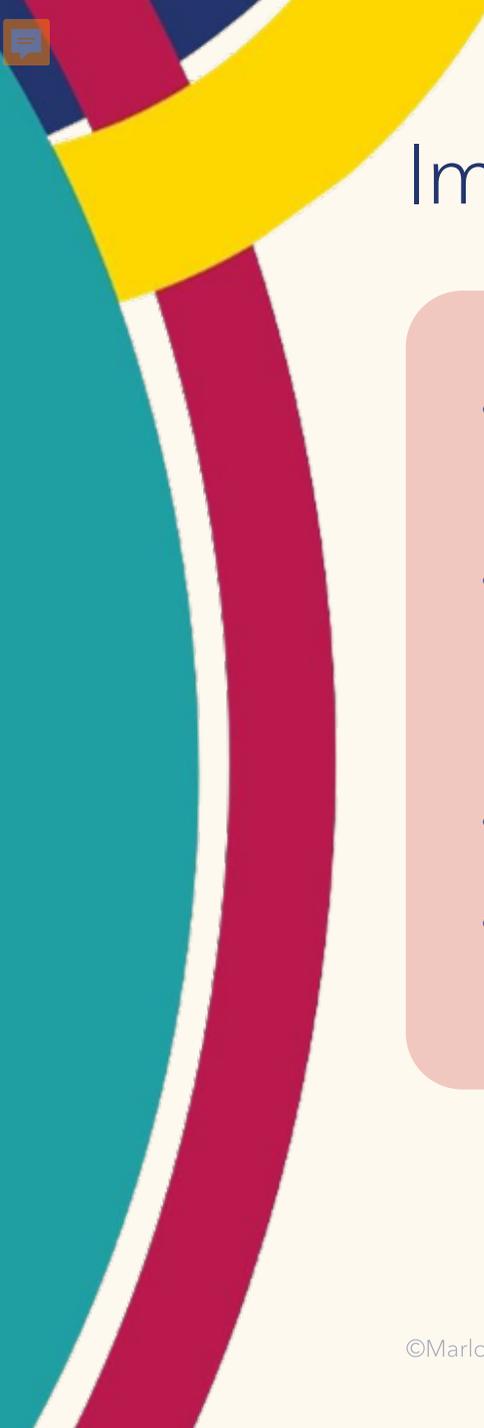
Case studies



Julia
a high performing litigation
associate



Marcus
the Non-Delegating
Partner



Impact on legal competence

- Avoid opportunities because you're "not ready"
- Overfunction, overprepare, obsess over perfection to prove your worth
- Experience burnout
- Mistakes and reduced creativity
- Hesitation which leads to inaction
- Interference with collaboration
- Lack of joy and fulfillment



Four steps to overcome impostor syndrome

1 Reframe the inner critic

2 Manage self doubt

3 Build confidence

4 Create a healthy feedback loop



Reframe the Inner Critic

Reframe the Inner Critic

Name

Externalize the voice
The Judge · The Doubter
The Committee · The Underminer

Notice

Identify its triggers
and patterns

Question

Ask: Is this voice helpful,
true, or kind?

Reframe

Replace criticism with
curiosity or compassion

Interrupt

Use evidence, not
emotion, to
evaluate performance



Manage Self Doubt

Managing self doubt



Thought records



Document wins



Impostor inventory



Coaching / Validation



Anchor behavior



Build Confidence

Build confidence intentionally



Courageous Action



Reinforcement



Visibility



Feedback

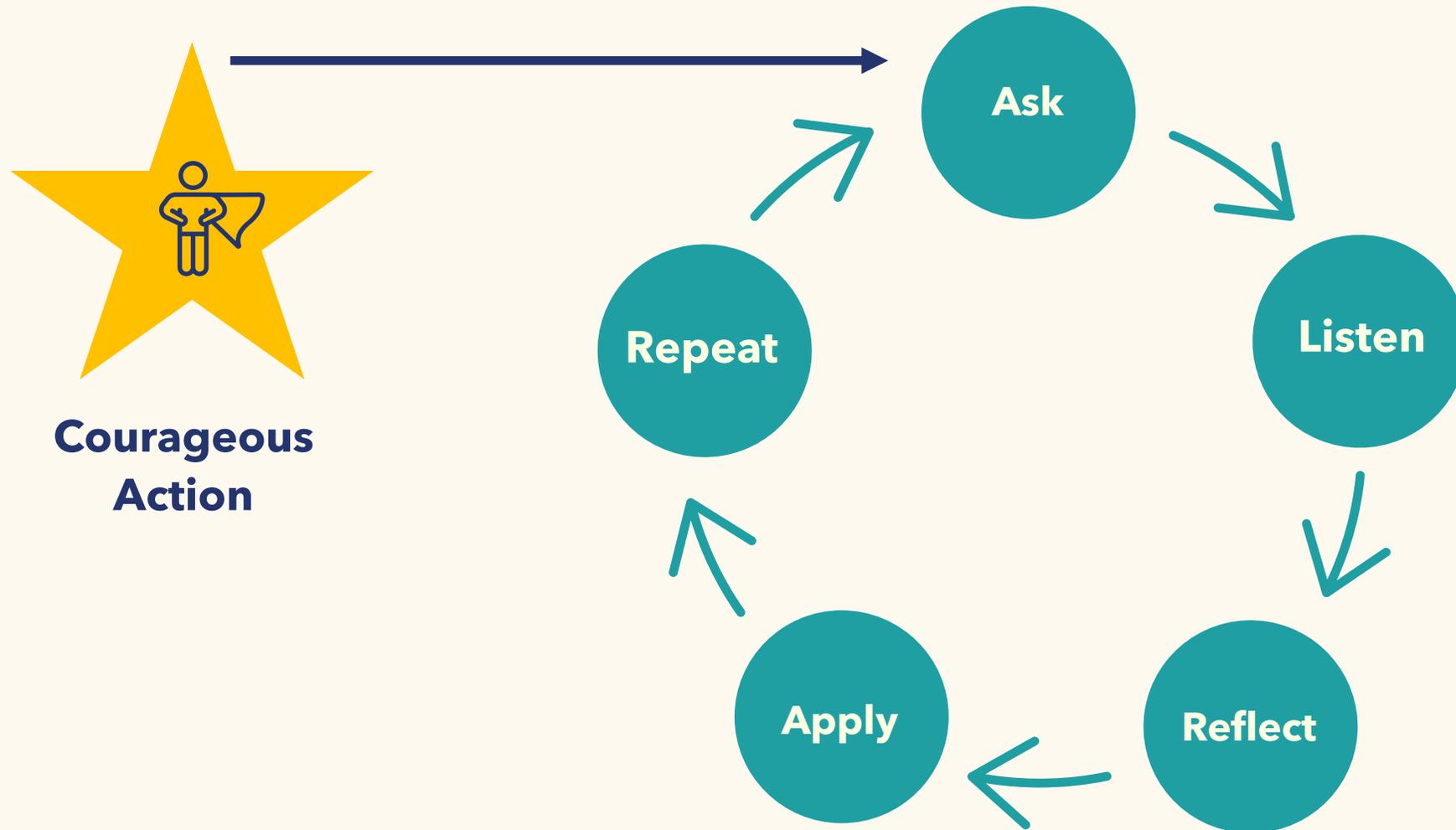


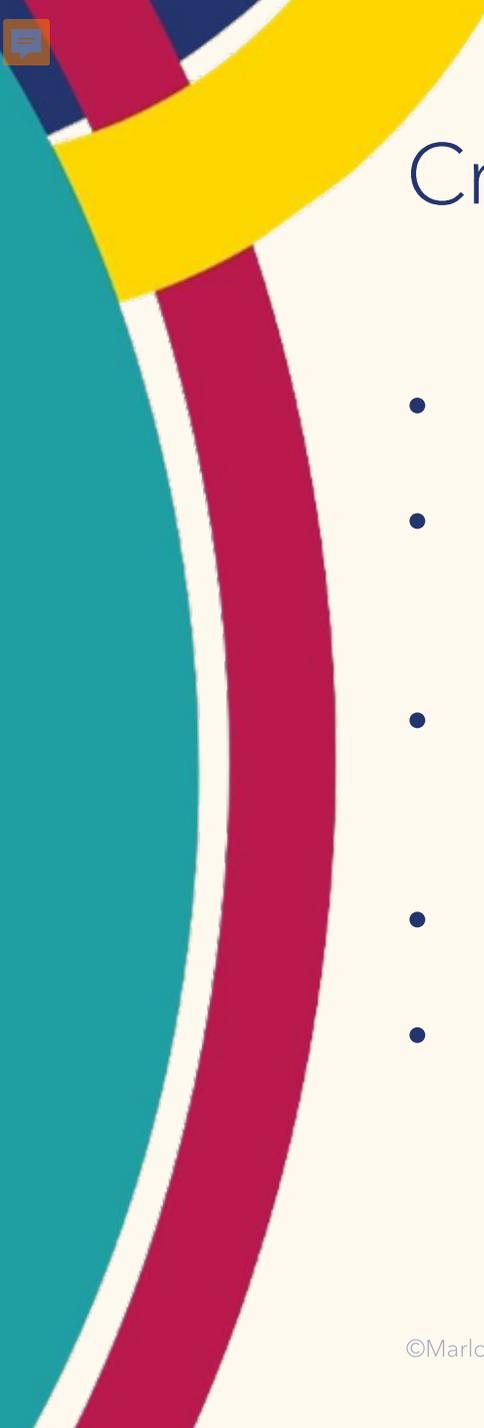
Awareness



Create a Healthy Feedback Loop

Create a healthy feedback loop





Creating a healthy feedback loop

- Feedback is a tool, not a threat
- Normalize constructive input—up, down, and across the company
- Model psychological safety as a leader or senior attorney
- Practice feedforward instead of just elevation
- Use feedback as a mirror, not a verdict

Case study

Reframe the inner critic



The Prosecutor



Case study

Manage self doubt



Tracked triggers

Created wins List

Case study

Build confidence

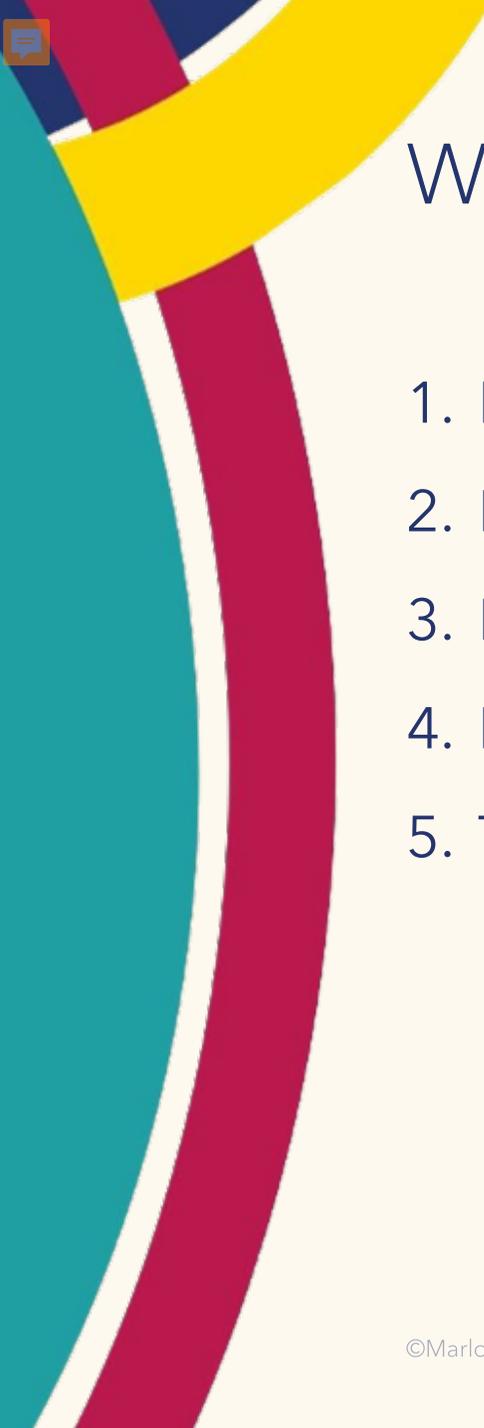


Case study

Create a healthy feedback loop

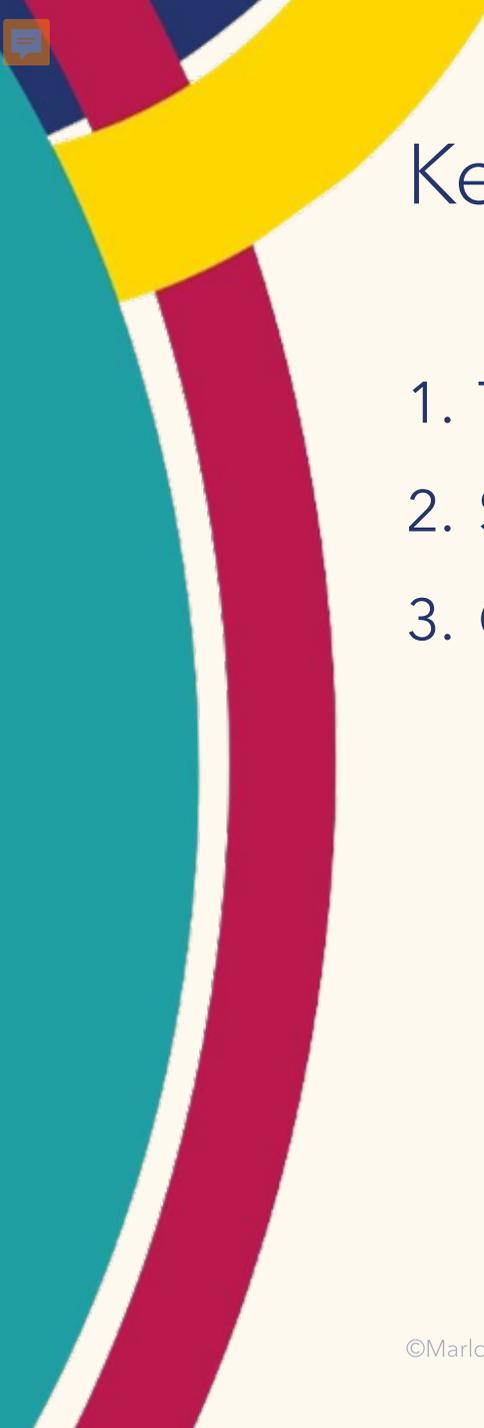


- What's one thing I do well?
- What's one thing I can improve?
- What surprises you about my approach?



What can you do today?

1. Name the critic
2. Reframe one thought with curiosity or compassion
3. Request one piece of feedback
4. Log a win
5. Take a leap and try one stretch action



Key takeaways

1. The Inner Critic is not you.
2. Self-doubt will never disappear entirely.
3. Confidence is not the starting line.

Integrating learnings

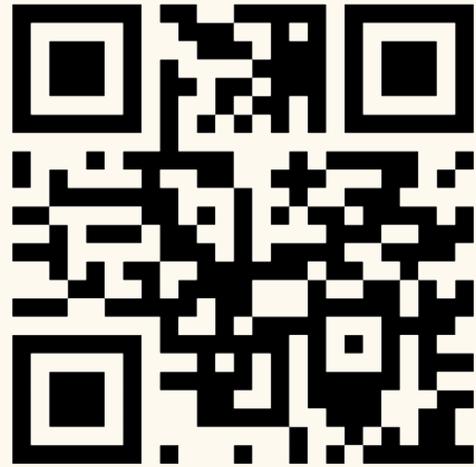


- What's one belief about your competence or worth that you're ready to let go of?
- What's one new belief you're willing to try on instead?

Final reflections



Inner Critic and Impostor Syndrome



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[Work Unscripted Podcast](#)

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