

Paula and Geraldine
by
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I have valued Richard Carson's notion of the gremlin since I first heard about it in a coaches training program. I have found it to be a most useful concept in coaching, even in the world of "business reality."

I was approached by an entrepreneur graphics designer who was starting a new business to see if coaching might help her work through a number of issues that were holding her back. She had built up a pretty good business before, including hiring several people to work for her, only to find that it was more than she could handle. She had fired everyone and gone back to working as a solo act. She was faced with a huge debt, incurred by her business failure. She was looking for a way to rebuild her business.

I suggested a complementary coaching session on the telephone for her to get a feel for what the coaching process was like, to learn a bit about the coaching contract and to see if there was a "fit" between us that would support an effective coaching relationship. I asked her to bring an issue to the complementary session and she did.

Paula began our conversation by telling me that fear was a major stumbling block for her. Constant internal voices were telling her that she was not competent or that when things went wrong it was all her fault. It made everything she did difficult. Despite years of therapy this constant doing battle with fear waged on and left her exhausted at the end of every day. It also led to her letting go of her hopes, dreams and aspirations for herself and her relationships — business and personal.

After taking her through a process that connected her deeply to her motivation about how this issue was important to her, I told her about the idea of the gremlin, including ways that I had found were most useful in working with that kind of inner talk. I explained that the gremlin was the voice of our past that seeks to protect us from danger. However, the gremlin hates change and sees any effort toward growth, development, changes in behavior, etc. as being a risk. The gremlin's message, then, is intended to keep the person from changing.

I further explained that the gremlin does not need to be treated as an enemy or as something to be overpowered or fooled. Those strategies don't work. "The gremlin is smarter than you are!" and will find new ways of keeping you stuck if you are successful in overcoming or challenging him in any given moment. He will change voices, vocabulary, focus, issues, even his visual image. Thus, you won't recognize that the voice is that of the gremlin. You will treat the messages of caution and resistance as reasonable and not to be questioned or as so strong that no alternative makes sense.

The most effective way I have found for dealing with the gremlin begins with being alert to gremlin-like messages in our minds. Once you are aware of them, listen. Listen intently. Really seek to “get the message.”

Once you have gotten the message, thank the gremlin. Sincerely appreciate the gremlin for reminding you of the past and for trying to keep you safe. Then make a choice. Either do what the gremlin says or choose to do something else.

Now once you do this it doesn't mean that the gremlin is going to go away. He will be with you for the rest of your life. Consequently, paying attention, appreciating and choosing becomes a way of life whenever you want to grow, develop, learn, or change something in your life.

Paula's success story? Well, I asked her if she would be willing to spend a week noticing gremlin-like messages, focusing on them, truly appreciating them and then making a decision about what she would do. She agreed.

A week later, Paula called to tell me she wanted to work with me as her coach. I was delighted and asked, “How did things go with the gremlin?”

Paula laughed, softly, and replied, “I have been working on that issue for almost twelve years in therapy. I had made no progress. During this last week everything changed. I was able to appreciate and engage with those messages from the gremlin in a way that did not feel so threatening or dangerous. The fear was still there, but somehow it wasn't so threatening. As a consequence I was able to choose to do things that were important to me.

She continued, the gremlin hasn't gone away. But now I have some successes in choosing and doing what I think is the right thing to do for me. I know now that I can choose these, even in the face of the gremlin, when it is truly important to me.

Today, about a year later, Paula has rebuilt her business with a group of associates to the point that she has almost paid off all of her debts. She is working with a group of people that she enjoys and no longer feels drained by having to “manage” them. She is clearer about the clients she wants to work with and is attracting them to her business. She has even fired a couple of clients that were over-demanding and insensitive. Not only has she built up a very successful business for herself, but for her associates, as well.

And the original issue? Sure the gremlin is still there. Once in a while the gremlin fools Paula and she finds herself once again dealing with resistance and fear. And it no longer panics her. Just the physical feelings of resistance and fear tell her that the gremlin is near. Paula calls her gremlin Geraldine. Geraldine is her constant companion and friend.