

Never Self Vet

Change starts with a mindset that quiets your fear of failure.

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As a 13-year-old kid growing up in Washington D.C, I wanted a fancy stereo set. And I'd like to say I washed cars to pay for it but I didn't. Instead, I asked my mom. She took me to the hi-fi shop downtown and, once I'd pointed out the object of my desire, she proceeded to negotiate the price. I was overcome with shame. I didn't even want the stereo set anymore. But she got the discount she wanted. And when I complained about the humiliation of seeing this fierce Asian woman haggling in a fancy department store, she looked at me and said, "Never, ever self vet."

She was right. The greatest enemy is the enemy within, the voice that tells you, "Don't try this. It could fail." Thanks to example she set for me, I wasted no time in silencing that voice. By 16, I was selling encyclopedias door to door. Some houses would have signs that said, "No trespassing and no solicitation." I figured those were the households least likely to have already purchased the US\$1,499 set of heavy tomes (that's about 100,000 baht adjusted for inflation.) Hence, I would always focus on them first. And it worked! Save for the occasional shout of, "Get lost or I'll call the cops!" from behind the front door, I did brisk business hitting up the "keep out" homes. Just like my mom said: "Never, ever self-vet."

I don't sell encyclopedias for a living anymore. My two most recent positions included Chief Corporate Affairs officer at dtac and Executive Vice President of Corporate Branding and Communications at TMB Bank--both of which involved deeply changing each organization's culture. As a result, now that I provide personal executive development, the bright people I coach sometimes approach our time together as a window into the minds of those at the highest levels of their organization. That approach is misguided, though. Real change doesn't come from understanding

your boss. It comes from you.

Taking control of your career starts with defining a clear vision of your brand, of a successful you. There are a thousand ways to picture failure. As a 16-year-old kid walking past “no trespassing signs,” I could certainly have visualized numerous unpleasant outcomes. But the image I had in mind was that of success. As my career progressed at Orange (the global telecoms firm whose Thai operation later became True) and then GE, the stakes kept getting higher, as did the possibility for failure. Through it all, I owe my success to my ability to maintain a clear vision of what my success would look like.

I realize this doesn't always come naturally. It can be daunting. I've had people on my teams who would tell me all the reasons why something can't be done. “We tried before,” they'd say--or maybe, “It's never been done before.” This was the enemy within talking, the one holding them back from reaching their potential.

One older gentleman on my team at TMB, let's call him Somchai, was so reluctant to embrace change, we started discussing early retirement. To his credit, he'd developed a somewhat functional intranet. But he now wanted to bask in the comfort of maintaining it, feeling that it was unfair to expect anything more of him.

At the time, I was driving the vision of TMB's transformation on a platform we dubbed “Make THE Difference.” Organizations are like people. They can sometimes think change comes from convincing someone on the inside, when they would be better served by change on the inside. If you tell your customers you're about one thing, but you don't embrace that in your values, in the fiber of every employee, your customers won't buy into your brand. This is true of your team and of you, too. If you haven't changed your mindset, forget about selling your personal brand to your boss.

That's why my success, my team's success, and ultimately TMB's rested on people like Somchai rising to the challenge of wanting to “Make THE Difference.” It rested on the ability to transform their attitude. I told Somchai, “What have you got to lose? Why not at least try these news ideas?” He didn't change overnight, but through coaching, I was able to gradually win him over.

Somchai eventually went on to build innovative internal platforms that he had come up with without any prompting on my side. One of them

was a gamified social network to connect employees cross-functionally and allow them to compete in quizzes. Somchai's projects were so loved, other departments began cajoling him for collaboration on their projects. And he was systematically on the trips we organized for our star "Make THE Difference" employees.

Quieting Somchai's inner fears saved him but it also saved me, and, combined with everyone else who made the change, it saved TMB. I'm not just proud I coached him to be a better employee, I'm proud that I looked deep down into my team to find the means to support our vision of the organization. I didn't blame TMB for not having top talent like Google or Facebook do. Instead, my team focused on the wins within our reach.

At dtac, we followed a similar approach. dtac was launching a "Flip It" brand platform to reinvent how it served customers and remove pain points that had gone unchallenged for too long. I felt this change absolutely had to be internal as well as external so we launched a Flip It Challenge to involve all employees in dtac's digital transformation. Each of the company's six functions were tasked with submitting a project that challenges a long-standing inefficiency in the organization with disruptive new ideas. To give you an example, it can take weeks and dozens of people to source a site for a cell tower. One of our Flip It projects was to crowdsource these locations online instead. Within a few months, they had some 11,000 possible sites registered in the system.

But perhaps the transformation I'm most proud of is the one brought out by TMB's Fai Fah. These community centers empower kids from underprivileged areas in and around Bangkok. They too are modeled on this idea of change from the inside. Each house gives the children a platform to learn a skill, from taekwondo to painting or music. We then push the kids to make a change in their community.

Some of these changes were cosmetic, such as cleaning up trash, fixing footpaths, or planting a garden. One community even made a playground in an old dark scary bridge. And all this started from kids, not the local headman. But the greater change was in the mindsets of the whole community. People began to ask, "If kids can do this, why can't we?"

When I'm coaching executives, I empower them in very much the same way. First we change the mindset, we envision what your

success, your ideal brand, looks like. The second step is to ask what's holding you back from reaching that ideal state. Maybe it's your ego, your fear of failure, or your addiction to being in your comfort zone. To each voice explaining why you can't succeed, the answer is, "Why not? What is there to lose in trying?" It's a question the defeatist voices in your head will struggle to answer. It's the question that will allow you to challenge those voices, shut them up and set out on a journey to transformation.

Once you've begun to reclaim your will to embody your new brand, the third step is to celebrate small wins. Here too, this applies both to the individual and the organization. Whenever your new mindset reaps rewards, make sure to take the time to notice that. Tell your friends, go celebrate, buy yourself something nice. Likewise, organizations must identify teams that have begun to transform and give them visibility. At TMB, we'd buy full-page ads to celebrate our most transformed employees. At dtac, we organized company-wide events with influential guest speakers to recognize our greatest Flip It projects.

Success is contagious. Its positive ripple effect can move through you and inspire your entire outlook. It's this contagion that transformed Somchai and the Fai Fah kids alike. As you embark on your transformation journey, look around. Who can support you and guide you? Who can act as a mentor or a coach? Great change requires great allies. Make sure you've secured the right people to help you reach your destination.