

The Power of Being There for Yourself in the Workplace

by Jill Kanter



Few of us fully utilize the power of our own support.

In this time of cutbacks and continuous reorganization, it can seem like we have little control over our own destinies. Whether or not this is true, there is at least one very positive aspect of this period of constant change: it invites – and often requires – us to become more deeply anchored in our relationship with ourselves.

In my work with clients, I have noticed two truths that are consistently clear, regardless of the client's position or years of experience:

Truth #1: The key to progress is never ultimately dependent on anyone else in the organization.

Truth #2: Most people ALREADY have what it takes to move forward toward their goals.

Over the years, I have found that those people who are the most successful in achieving their goals also tend to be those with the strongest self-esteem—strength developed through years of taking good care of themselves across different kinds of situations. I call this inner quality *the ability to be there for oneself*. It is an inner state which requires making self-respect—and all that goes with that—our highest priority.

For most of us, being there for ourselves is an acquired ability—fortunately one that is relatively easy to learn. In the simplest terms, it means treating ourselves in the way we might treat a close friend or a favorite client. Here is a brief exercise to demonstrate what I mean:

Imagine that someone who you really care about is facing a difficult challenge. She is under a lot of pressure and is unsure if she'll succeed. What would you say to her as she described her situation? How would you help her put things in perspective and see her way through? As you reflect on how you might speak to this valued person in your life, consider what you might say to *yourself* in a similar situation. Would you use the same caring voice and completely supportive words? It is probably the rare one among us who could honestly say yes.

“Being there” for ourselves means taking care of ourselves emotionally, maintaining a sense of perspective, and going forward with positive, constructive behavior that helps us to achieve our goals. Let's take the exercise one step further.

Take a moment and identify a challenge you are actually facing in your work. Now ask yourself, “What would it mean to be truly there for myself in this situation?” See what thoughts and images come to mind. It is very common to begin noticing all the ways we are currently *not* being there for ourselves. Don't worry—just observe these thoughts and let them go, then repeat the question. Finish the exercise by trying to identify at least one concrete way to support yourself going forward.

Imagine what it would be like to experience this kind of support from yourself on an ongoing basis—the *sheer power* of that. But how do we develop this ability to be there for ourselves, and how can we practice it in a way that becomes second nature? In my experience, we begin by examining our thoughts about ourselves—the foundation for our words and actions.

Being there for ourselves through our thoughts:

I've found that it really doesn't matter where someone's self-esteem is at any given point in her career—once she puts her mind on a strict diet of purely supportive thoughts—just about *everything* improves. I'm not suggesting that we kid ourselves about our capabilities or performance, just that we operate in a way that is truly helpful to ourselves.

It sounds odd, but for most of us, thoughts tend to flow through our minds in an ongoing way, kind of like a stream coursing through unnoticed. Becoming more aware of our mind's activity is the first step in strengthening our relationship with ourselves. Then we can begin, in a conscious way, to notice and release self-critical and unsupportive thoughts, and introduce more beneficial ones.

An example:

One of my clients was disappointed recently by her inability to respond with enough detail to a senior executive's questions about her area. Her thoughts after the interaction were something like:

"I can't believe that just happened—I totally messed up...What is *wrong* with me?! He must think I'm completely in over my head—and maybe he's right..."

As you might imagine, her inner dialogue continued in a downward spiral, setting her up to attract additional negative interactions throughout the remainder of her very long day.

Let's look at what her thoughts might've been in the same situation if she'd been there for herself:

"Wow—that was so painful...What just happened? Relax—take a breath...He expected me to know *really* detailed information...I don't think that's a realistic expectation for someone at my level. I need to think about that. Even so, I wish that I'd handled it better...I need to learn what to say when I'm put on the spot like that..."

By supporting herself in the second example, she has the opportunity to regain her balance and put things in perspective. She recognizes that she wants to improve for the future, but resists the temptation to trash or blame herself over something that has already happened (which would be *completely* counterproductive).

As the example demonstrates, a large part of being there for ourselves involves figuring out what we need in a challenging situation—sometimes right in the moment—and taking action, as appropriate, to meet those needs. We can imagine my client going on to seek advice from a trusted colleague on how to handle similar situations in the future, and also how to reconnect effectively with the senior executive.

The best thing about learning to be there for ourselves is that it's never too late to start (no matter what has happened in the past). As we speak more supportively to ourselves, our interactions with others reflect improvements in our inner environment, and we make steadier progress toward achievement of our goals. The sweetest fruit, however, will always be the deepening regard we experience for ourselves.

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