Reflection on One Barrier to Being Proactive

One situation where perfectionism got in the way of my being proactive occurred when we had an online class in our sessions of the MIT Emerging Talent program. The instructor asked if anybody wanted to volunteer to explain something to the group. Even though I knew what it was, I had hesitated. I was continuously second-guessing myself, thinking I may have forgotten some crucial detail or described it inadequately, and felt this would look very bad before my peers. I prepared how I was going to give my response so much that the opportunity was taken from me, and someone else took over.

What stopped me was my fixation on getting it just right. I believed anything less than the perfect contribution would diminish how others viewed me, which created a mental block. This perfectionist mindset eclipsed a preexisting understanding of the material and that my effort, albeit flawed, could still contribute some value to the discussion. Instead of focusing on knowledge sharing, I focused on mistake avoidance and inaction or regret followed.

What would have overcome this barrier was reminding myself that perfection is not necessary to participate, particularly in a learning environment. It would also have helped if I knew and accepted that errors are part of development and learning, thus relieving me of some pressure. In turn, making me gradually confident, speaking up could be done first in smaller, low-stakes settings like study groups or family discussions. This might have been easier to contribute if I wrote down my main points in that instance, or at least framed my response as a question so I didn't feel the need to be perfect in the moment.

Presence Reflection: Three Opportunities

Opportunity 1: Online Class Session

My most recent online class was a time where my presence was very low-controlled. I was quiet and reserved because I didn't have enough confidence to share. As the session went on, I noticed others asking simple questions, which made me slightly feel a little more comfortable, but I still held back. I felt frustration and was relieved at the same time that I had not been gutsy enough to engage but was relieved that I didn't risk embarrassment. Afterward, I wish I had made the leap, even if it was imperfect.

Opportunity 2: Social Gathering

At a family dinner, I started with a low-uncontrolled presence by just sitting quietly and allowing others to take the lead in talking. When my cousins, whom I was close to, arrived, my presence became high-uncontrolled; I became animated and interested. This was because I felt a sense of belonging and didn't feel judgment from them. I felt very happy and relaxed at the gathering. After it was over, I was very cognizant of just how much my comfort level relates to familiarity.

Opportunity 3: Study Group with Peers

In the peer study group, my presence started as high-controlled: contribute well-thought-out points and answer questions when sure of my responses. However, as the discussion turned to unfamiliar topics, my presence became low-controlled as I listened more than participated. Insecurity about knowledge drove the shift. I was pretty nervous during the discussion but was reassured afterward when others thanked me for my input, even in areas I felt unsure.