A Rising Superstar

K.C. and I were celebrating a bittersweet event: her coaching was ending. Again. For now.

She and I had first worked together when she was a young rising star at her global firm. The company had felt she could become a future leader, but only if she learned to “play more nicely in the sandbox with others.” To help her, they’d given her a coach – me. That initial coaching had gone well.

Over the years, we’d worked together several more times. I had had a front row seat as she made her way up an extremely competitive ladder. Now, she was poised for a promotion that would have her report directly to the CEO. She had achieved a lot.

K.C. did not take her achievements for granted. She had worked hard for them. She was proud that her first 360-degree feedback report had been full of words like, “rough edges,” “harsh,” “judgmental,” and “sharp elbows,” while her most recent report was a blanket of words like “generous,” “kind,” “caring,” and “inspirational.”

Humble and grateful, K.C. attributed much of her growth to the ideas she’d discovered during
our coaching conversations. I was honored that she thought so.

Because she liked reflecting on her growth, K.C. and I had developed a ritual. We both came to our final sessions with a list of the one or two ideas we thought had made the most difference to her during the engagement. We continued that ritual now.

She asked, “How many have you got?”

“Two.” I answered. “You?”

“Same here. Want to go first?” she asked.

**Quieting Catastrophic Thinking**

“Sure! The first one is catastrophic thinking. I’ve been listening to you talk and I just don’t hear it anymore. A lot of your stories used to take catastrophic turns, but these days I don’t hear you anywhere near catastrophic thinking.”

She shook her head sadly. “When I think back to some of the things I used to worry about. Do you remember when I almost called Paul in the middle of the night because I was so freaked out about a contract? Man, how wacky was I in those days?”

“You weren’t wacky, K.C. You were just catastrophizing. You’d been doing it all your life.”

“I know, I know. It’s a survival skill. It made me a good competitor, too. But it wasn’t fun. I’m glad to be out from under it.”

“I bet,” I said. “What do you think helped lower the volume on your catastrophe meter?”

“Reality testing. Asking myself, is that likely to happen? Is it even possible that it could happen? Then trusting that I know the answer. Don’t tie myself up in knots, second guessing myself. Move on. You know what I’ve found? When I’m not catastrophizing, I have so many more choices.”

“Choices?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, “when I catastrophize, I get super-focused on fixing whatever I think the problem is. It doesn’t feel like a choice. But once I start reality testing, it’s like I’m looking out from a hilltop. I can see all different directions. It’s so much better.”

“I’m glad for you,” I said.

“Me, too,” she said. “What’s your other one?”
Using Fewer Words

“Fewer words,” I answered. “You’re doing it more and more with me. I hear the difference. You’re using fewer words. You repeat yourself less. You speak in shorter sentences. I think it’s going to make a big difference for you in front of the senior team.”

“It already has. The way I handle myself in our business reviews is so different from what I used to do. I’m much more concise now. And d’you know where else? With my teams. I’ve gotten good at editing while I’m talking.”

“What’s that like?” I asked, curious.

“While I’m talking, I say to myself, ‘Short sounds confident. Stop talking sooner.’ And I do! I have no doubt it’s better. I can hear it. But do you know when it’s tough? If I’m tired. Self-editing takes a lot of energy. If it was a bad night with the kids, I probably can’t do it as well.”

“I’m sure, K.C.” I said. “You just said this ‘fewer words’ style is better. Was ‘fewer words’ one of the items on your list?”

Balancing Relationships & Results

“No, but, it could’ve been. Catastrophic thinking could’ve been, too. But nope, I’ve got two others. Here’s my first one. Relationships over results. I remember the moment when I felt that switch flip. Do you remember this story?”

“About you and Paul in New York?”

“Yes. It’s still in my head, like a vision. We were standing in the lobby of the hotel. All I wanted to do was go up to my room and be quiet for a little. But he wanted to tell me these ideas he had about the presentation we were making the next day. I swear, it was like there were two roads, clear as day. One road was results – go up my room, get some work done, recharge for the next day. The other road was relationships. Sit down and listen to one of my direct reports tell me his ideas. There wasn’t much debate. Clearly, I was going to sit down and listen to him. And that was different from what I’d always done before. I am so glad I did it. It was great.”

“Great how?” I asked.

“That conversation strengthened our connection. At least it did on my side. I won’t speak for him. But I think it did. He speaks up more now than he used to. That’s great. Plus, he had two really good ideas. That was great, too.”
I said, “You invested in the relationship, and the results got better, too.”

She shook her head at a memory. “You and I used to argue about that, do you remember?”

“Results versus relationships? Absolutely! That’s why this story is so great.”

“I used to be so driven. ‘Put points on the scoreboard! Points are all that matters!’ I just don’t think that way anymore.”

“How did that change happen?” I asked.

She thought, then said slowly, “I started believing that relationships matter. And it wasn’t either-or. You can get results and build relationships, too. Getting results doesn’t have to mean dead bodies.”

“Anymore,” I said with smile.

“Right! It used to mean dead bodies, for sure. Those were my ‘rough edges.’ Which brings me to my second one. I’m not over this one by any means, but it is so clear to me now how important it is: don’t take things personally.”

“Ah,” I said.

### Don’t Take Things Personally

“I don’t think I told you about this, but at our last business review, Emeka, the CFO, threw a real hardball question at me. He wasn’t being mean or anything, but he really put me on the spot. And you know what? It just felt like a volley in tennis. I played it back to him the best I could and moved on. Later that night I was thinking, at another time in my life, that question would’ve gutted me! I would’ve been so wounded. ‘How could he ask me that in front of the team? Couldn’t he at least have given me a heads up?’ It would’ve felt completely personal. Now, it barely registers.”

“It sounds similar to not catastrophizing.”

“Does it? ‘Don’t take it personally’ feels different from ‘not catastrophizing.’ To me, not taking things personally is about separation. Emeka is going to do whatever he does, and whatever he does isn’t about me. He’s him and I’m me. But not catastrophizing...”

She stopped talking, lost in thought.
Then she said, “No, actually, now that I think about it, you’re right. They’re both about perspective, aren’t they? When I catastrophize, I lose perspective on what’s real. When I take something personally, I lose perspective on the other person. I guess they’re more connected than I thought.”

I nodded. “That’s interesting.”

“Do you know another way they connect? Abundance. They both have their roots in abundance. If I believe there really is enough of everything to go around, I don’t have to take anything personally. And if I stop believing in catastrophes, I don’t have to hoard anything. I can live in abundance. And I want to live in abundance. I’m a much better person when I do.”

“Maybe ‘abundance’ should be on your list,” I said with a smile.

“Maybe it should!” she agreed.

Within a year of that closing conversation, K.C. got her promotion. She was generous with gratitude for the skills she’d learned that had allowed her to grow into *The Look & Sound of Leadership*. 
Core Concepts

- Meaningful growth requires reflection. What are you learning? What needs to improve?
- High-performing leaders manage their self-talk.
- Using fewer words is one way to sound like a leader.
- As you rise, relationship skills are equally important as skills with results.
- Don’t take things personally. Whatever people do is not about you.

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