What If the Breakthrough Isn't Trying Harder, but Asking a Different Question?

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I recently had another profound realisation - one that makes me wonder how I lived this long without seeing it.

For most of my life, I've believed that when something wasn't working, the answer was to find a way to do better. Try harder. Be more patient. Be more understanding. Find another approach.

I thought this was one of my strengths. And in many ways, it has been. As a teacher, that mindset served my students well. If they didn't understand something, I saw it as an opportunity to find another way to reach them. Could I turn an abstract concept into something tangible? Use an analogy, a metaphor or a practical experiment? Bring in music, movement, food or an unexpected experience that would suddenly make the idea click? I loved finding creative ways to make learning come alive. If one approach didn't work, I found another. I considered that my responsibility as their teacher.

But recently, it occurred to me: What if that strength could also become a blind spot? Because somewhere along the way, that habit of adjusting myself became almost automatic. When I felt resistance, discomfort or frustration, I assumed there was something in myself I needed to correct. I asked myself if I needed to be more tolerant. Less judgemental. More patient. More understanding. I rarely stopped to consider that perhaps the discomfort itself was telling me something worth understanding.

Then, recently, there was a moment. I was feeling irritated about a planned visit to see someone. Nothing dramatic, just an uneasy resistance. And for once, I didn't talk myself out of it. I listened. I changed my plans. Later, a friend suggested that perhaps my inner guidance had been speaking. And something clicked. My body had been communicating with me all along. I just hadn't understood the language.

Years ago, a dog trainer taught me how to speak to my dog. She was already a mature, experienced farm dog when I came into her life. She knew the ropes. I was the newcomer, and although we got along, I wasn't communicating with her in a language she understood. The trainer explained that I was very good at communicating with prey animals - the horses, alpacas and my cats. But I was effectively speaking 'cat' to my dog! When I learned to communicate in a way she understood, our relationship transformed. She relaxed. She became calmer. She understood what I wanted. In fact, she looked at me with an expression that said, "If you'd wanted me to do that, why didn't you just ask me?" Now I could.

And now I realise I've been doing something similar with myself. I've been waiting for my inner guidance to arrive as a neat verbal explanation: "This isn't right for you," or "You don't need to do

this." Instead, my body has been speaking in sensations and emotions: irritability, resistance, frustration and discomfort. I didn't realise they could be feedback, rather than problems within myself that needed correcting. I wasn't failing to recognise my feelings. I was failing to recognise their significance.

Perhaps some of that came from learning early in life that suppressing my natural reactions was safer than expressing them. Perhaps I just became so good at adapting, accommodating and taking responsibility that I stopped questioning whether the responsibility was actually mine.

I had become so practised at asking what I needed to change about myself that I forgot to ask what my experience was trying to tell me.

That realisation has also given me a new lens through which to examine another significant part of my life: my health and fitness journey. For years, I tried different approaches to improving my health, fitness and body composition. I knew that I didn't lack discipline. Quite the opposite. I could commit. I could work hard. I could follow instructions. And I could keep going long after the initial enthusiasm had faded. I did get results; just not consistently the results I really wanted.

When progress wasn't what I'd hoped, I tended to assume the problem was my execution. I would wonder whether those occasional departures from the plan were to blame. Those moments when I wasn't quite as strict as I could have been. Surely, if I could just follow the plan more perfectly, I'd finally get where I wanted to go? But here's the question I rarely asked: Was the plan actually serving me?

I was measuring myself against the plan, rather than measuring the plan against my goals. And there's a profound difference. Because discipline is enormously valuable. But discipline alone doesn't guarantee that the direction you're travelling is the right one. Not because every uncomfortable feeling means I should stop. Quite the opposite. I still believe in showing up when I don't feel like it, in keeping commitments, in doing difficult things. Listening to myself isn't the same as giving myself permission to avoid discomfort. It's learning to examine discomfort rather than automatically overriding it or automatically obeying it. Some discomfort is part of growth; some may be a signal that the approach needs attention.

It's recognising that perseverance and discernment are not opposites. We need both. Discipline asks, "Am I doing what I committed to doing?" Discernment asks, "Is what I've committed to doing actually moving me towards the outcome I want?" And for much of my life, I was much better at asking the first question than the second.

Then something shifted.

In early 2025, I heard Anthony Phaesse speak about *LeanSeven*, and something clicked. I wish I had a recording of that first presentation, because I'd love to identify exactly what reached me so powerfully. It wasn't new information about food or exercise; I'd spent years learning about those things. It was something in his advice about mindset. A completely different way of approaching change. I remember the feeling of recognition, the release of tension after years of banging my head against the same wall. I knew he had something for me. I knew I wanted to work with him. Looking

back, I think I understand at least part of why. He gave me a process. But, more importantly, he gave me a different relationship with that process.

Then I encountered a principle simple enough to sound almost trivial: "Doing the action is the win." That changed everything. Suddenly, success wasn't something waiting for me three months down the road. It wasn't a number on the scales, a measurement around my waist or an image in the mirror. Success was something I could achieve today. I had actions to complete and when I'd completed them, I'd won the day.

That was an entirely new feeling. Because I was no longer judging myself against an outcome I couldn't fully control. I was judging myself against actions I could control. And I knew I could do the actions. I'd been doing them all my life. The discipline wasn't missing. What had been missing was a framework that allowed me to use that discipline effectively, without constantly turning the outcome into a judgement about myself.

And there was another crucial piece. I wasn't abandoning the outcomes. I still had goals. Clear, measurable, meaningful goals. I still tracked my progress. But now those measurements served a different purpose. They became information. A map. A way of understanding whether the process was taking me where I wanted to go.

The actions were my measure of daily success. The outcomes were my measure of whether the process was working.

That distinction was earth-shifting for me. It enabled me to finally let go of the emotional attachment to an outcome without losing sight of it. I could measure progress without making every measurement a verdict on my worth, effort or discipline. And when something wasn't working, the answer wasn't automatically to demand more of myself. It was to examine the process. To learn. To adjust. To refine.

I learnt to ‘iterate, not escalate’. I didn't need to become a more disciplined person. I needed to learn how to use the discipline I already had. I stopped trying to perfect the person following the plan and learned to trust a process I could refine.

And now, this latest insight about my inner guidance feels like another piece of that same puzzle. Perhaps the most valuable question isn't always, "What do I need to change about myself?" Perhaps sometimes it's asking: What is this experience trying to tell me? Am I asking the right question? Is this approach actually serving the outcome I want? I'm learning to work with myself rather than constantly against myself.

None of this means abandoning responsibility. My feelings are information to consider, not instructions I must follow. And my plans, however carefully constructed, are tools not masters. I can commit to a process without becoming a prisoner of it. I can be disciplined without being relentlessly self-critical. And I can take responsibility for my choices without assuming that every difficulty is evidence of something wrong with me.

Perhaps that's the lesson I'm finally beginning to understand. One of my greatest strengths - my willingness to take responsibility, adapt and keep trying - has sometimes prevented me from recognising when the thing that needed changing wasn't me.

It's about becoming more discerning. Learning a new language. Learning to interpret my own signals, and to recognise when perseverance is serving me and when it's keeping me on a path that no longer leads where I want to go.

So maybe the next breakthrough isn't in trying harder. Maybe it's in asking a different question.

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