

Why do you have to when you could want to?

Do you listen to yourself when you speak? Do you occasionally eavesdrop on your inner dialogue and thoughts? Perhaps you have noticed that an inconspicuous word creeps in from time to time; you may be familiar with the following or similar sentences: «I have to do task X today», «I have to call a friend», «I have to go to the theatre tonight». Or even: «I have to go to yoga to relax!»

Peter Näf

The word «must» is a constant driving force for many people, especially when it is combined with words like «shortly» or «quickly». Ever since I started paying attention to these phrases, I've been amazed at how often I use them. Recently, I found myself saying to myself: «I have to go shopping before 6pm as tomorrow is a public holiday». This statement instantly caused me mild stress.

The word «must» make us driven; but by whom? In the past, it was probably external drivers such as parents, teachers, or superiors. Over time, these voices inside us have taken on a life of their own and continue to drive us because we haven't realised that we could want to in the meantime.

Freedom begins with language

The mode of having to is also evident in storytelling: a client came to me for coaching to improve her self-marketing as she had not even been considered for a promotion. I asked her to tell me about a project she had successfully completed. She told me how she had reorganised an area shortly after taking up the position. She used almost exclusively the «we» form: «We then found out in workshops that...» and the «must» form:

«I then had to negotiate with various departments». In between, she even used the impersonal «you» or the passive form: «The project was then finalised». After she had finished the story, I asked her questions to be able to categorise her performance, because that's not how someone who considers themselves fully responsible speaks.

It turned out that the project was much more complex than she had presented and that she had carried it out from A to Z independently. From her «we» formulations, I concluded that she was not responsible and because she «had to» do all her actions, I assumed that someone had given her orders.

Listen up!

We reformulated her story so that she saw herself in her full competence and responsibility and recognised her personal achievements. Only after this self-recognition was she able to communicate her success to relevant stakeholders through storytelling, so that they too could see my client in her full greatness. Self-marketing follows on the heels of self-confidence.

Listen carefully to what you say or think. And steer your life in the desired direction by consciously rephrasing it. I use a trick for this: I imagine that I am rewinding a tape recorder and over-recording the old text with new text. If you do this often, over time another tape of text will unconsciously play with positive effects on your life, because: Words create reality.

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