 Fear of failure, the “enemy within,” is the single greatest obstacle preventing salespeople from succeeding, sales trainer Carl Harvey said at a meeting of allMass Group, Inc., Massachusetts’ largest network of independent insurance agencies.

But that gnawing fear, “the graveyard of unrealized potential” that threatens and limits success, can be overcome, Harvey said, through relevant risk-taking, the practice of small steps and perspectives that encourage salespeople to continue to act and risk even in the face of failure and disappointment.

Harvey is the author of the new book, What’s Stopping You: Building the Confidence You Need to Succeed in Sales and founder of Success & Self-Esteem, a Wayland, Mass., firm that shows salespeople how to attain the self-esteem and selling skills they need for success “in the most demanding of all professions.”

What stops most salespeople, Harvey told the allMass members, is not a lack of talent, product knowledge or hard work, but their enemy within. It is their fear of failure that explains why they don’t call at the top, why they don’t cold call or ask the tough questions, and why they often prefer procrastination and over-planning to decisive action.

But to overcome this “saboteur of our possibilities,” Harvey said, “we first need to understand its nature and why it has such a power and persistence over all of us.”

“Whereas fear of success in an issue of self-worth, the fear of failure is an issue of self-confidence. Both are issues of self-esteem. This is the source of the problem,” he said.

“The fear of failure is the fear that we may be unfit for existence—that is, unable to meet life’s challenges or unworthy of the effort. That is why the fear of failure is so powerful and so persistent. It is essentially a survival mechanism, a means for the self to avoid psychological danger.”

To make this point clear, he observed that when salespeople fail to act because of fear, the source of their fear is not the negative outcome itself, but the fear of the judgment passed if they fail—the fear that they are unable to achieve their values and needs, and thus not fit to meet life’s challenges. This self-estimate of being fit to meet life’s challenges and worthy of the effort constitutes self-esteem.

“Our fear that we aren’t enough to meet this challenge is the root of our fear of failure, and why the fear of failure is ultimately a self-esteem issue,” he told the allMass agents.

Once we understand that the fear of failure is at root an issue of self-esteem, we have to grow our self-esteem. Harvey identified two practices and one perspective to help do just that.

Step One

Step one in overcoming fear is the practice of relevant risk-taking actions, which lets you experience yourself as fit to meet life’s challenges and provides evidence that you’re competent and capable.

“Risk-taking action is the engine. If you want to improve your success rate, you must act. It’s not about attitude or affirmations but about actions. Action grows our self-esteem because it allows us to experience ourselves as fit to meet life’s challenges. Action provides evidence that our competencies and capabilities are real,” he said.

Step Two

The second step is the practice of small steps. This allows allows you to begin acting when the risk is beyond your immediate capabilities of our actual self.

Harvey advised breaking down an “overwhelming” challenge into its component parts, described in terms of behaviors (words and actions.) Then, ask, “Which of these can I reach before my fear becomes overwhelming or impossible?”

That step becomes the immediate goal. Make it the goal to be performed, and commit to performing this goal on daily basis, if applicable—for instance, making 10 cold calls each day. Then take this series of steps until it becomes more comfortable or less fearful. Then go on to the next step, applying the same formula.

Harvey told how he helped a young man who had a crippling fear of approaching women, despite years of therapy. So he told the fellow to simply go to a dance club once a week until he felt comfortable. Next, he had to ask one woman per night to dance. After he did this for several weeks, he had to go onto the next step, engaging a dance partner in conversation for five minutes. With these small steps, he completely got over his fears and today is happily married.

“Fear of failure is often fed by negative self-talk,” he added. The two worst forms involve judging yourself by standards beyond your control and taking failure personally.

Step Three

The third step in overcoming fear is adopting perspectives that can immunize against the corrosive effects of negative self-talk. One such perspective is “only the plan matters.” This perspective conveys three messages: life is about action and success is about results, so you always need a plan to work toward.

Second, judge yourself by one standard: “Do I have a plan and am I working it? If I am, I’m a success, even if the plan fails. I just need to make another plan.” That way, you focus on what you can control, your own behaviors, not what you can’t: the results.

Third, keep your focus outward on your plan, not inward on yourself. When the plan doesn’t work, it is only the plan that failed—not you.

For more information about Success & Self-Esteem write admin@successandself-esteem.com.