MIT Shadow Magicians: What’s at Risk

What’s at Risk comes into play when there is somewhere in my life that I am stuck. I may know the way I need to think or the action I need to take, but for some reason I still don’t do it.

What explains this? The theory we work with is that I choose all of my actions (consciously or unconsciously), and I have a good reason for every choice I make. Golden choices support my authentic self and the healthy, fulfilling life I aspire to lead. By contrast, "shadow" choices keep me safe, but sabotage my gold in the process.

Shadow has three parts:

- a WOUND (an event or relational dynamic that occurs in childhood)
- a SHADOW BELIEF I take on about myself or how I must behave in response to the wound, and
- a SHADOW BEHAVIOR that I perform based on that belief.

Shadow by definition is unconscious, although I may be aware of my shadow behavior to some degree. The belief and the wound are buried, which is why I keep playing out the behavior even though I want to do something else.

What’s at Risk helps me to uncover the buried SHADOW BELIEF so I can discover the truth about how it got buried (the WOUND) and who I really am underneath (my GOLD).

To perform What’s at Risk, I start with the behavior I want to change (the observable part of my shadow) and ask "what's at risk?" if I stop behaving that way. I then keep asking that question until I get to the catastrophic punchline I internalized as a child in response to my WOUND. Ex:

Shadow Behavior: I avoid conflict.
Golden Behavior I want to exhibit instead: engage in constructive conflict.

What’s at risk if I engage in constructive conflict? I will hurt someone's feelings.
What’s at risk if I hurt someone’s feelings? I will be a bad person.
What’s at risk if I am a bad person? I will be rejected and alone.
What’s at risk if I am rejected and alone? I will be in enormous pain. Life won't be worth living.

No wonder I keep avoiding conflict -- I believe that if I don't, I will be in enormous pain and life won't be worth living. This is my SHADOW BELIEF. If this is true, then I am attempting to take care of myself by avoiding conflict because -- as far as I can see -- that is my best (and only) option. My shadow therefore isn’t bad or shameful even though its impact is destructive -- it is trying to keep me safe and, like my gold, has my interests at heart. I developed my shadow as a
child to stay safe and get the love I needed. I deserve honor, not contempt, for caring for myself in this way.

And... my SHADOW BELIEF isn’t actually true. I can and do observe that other people engage in constructive conflict without getting the catastrophic outcome I fear. In all likelihood, that would be true for me too if I did the same. So how did I come by such a belief? I must have taken it on in a situation in which that outcome actually was threatened: my childhood WOUND. (Finding this wound is the paydirt we are seeking with this process.)

Advanced “What’s at Risk” Options:

1. Question the Status Quo

In any What’s at Risk dynamic there is a dilemma: either I DO the thing I am afraid of doing, or I keep performing my Shadow Behavior (the status quo). Sometimes, it’s fruitful to ask the question “what’s at risk” about the latter. Ex:

   What’s at risk if I continue avoiding conflict? My boundaries will be run over.
   What’s at risk if my boundaries are run over? I won’t get what I want.
   What’s at risk if I don’t get what I want? I will be miserable.

Note the similar catastrophic outcome to the one I feared on the other side. In especially poetic situations the person will use exactly the same language for the catastrophic punchline on each side, which often leads to a big emotional hit. However, even if the outcomes aren’t exactly the same or equally horrible, they are both pretty negative, and the take-away is that -- due to my shadow belief -- I have set myself up to be “screwed” either way. This realization can be a powerful motivator to explore my shadow deeper, as it drives home the COST to me of keeping things the way they are.

2. The Positive Spin

We can also attack both sides of the dilemma from a POSITIVE perspective. To see how my shadow and gold each SERVE my interests, we can ask “What’s the WIN?” First, I ask it about my shadow behavior (the default situation) -- this will show how I am keeping myself safe:

   What’s the WIN if I keep avoiding conflict? People will be happy with me.
   What’s the WIN if people are happy with me? I will be accepted and loved.
   What’s the WIN if I am accepted and loved? I will be safe.

And we can ask it about the GOLDEN behavior I want to adopt but am afraid of:

   What’s the WIN if I engage in constructive conflict? I will get what I want.
   What’s the WIN if I get what I want? I will be happy and at peace.