Have you ever felt you were the smartest person in the room? I had the pleasure to discuss this idea with a group of students recently, and it provoked an interesting and passionate debate. They were high performers in the process of completing a rigorous coaching certification course, one that placed them in the role of coach almost immediately, and they excelled in building the other-focused skill sets that are so necessary in coaching. Yet even these students, as absorbed as they were in the mindset of serving others, were challenged by turning off this incredibly primal urge to demonstrate their intelligence and worth—to themselves and to others.

What these budding coaches were experiencing is absolutely not unique. It turns out that even when we are immersed in roles that are specifically focused on others, we often have a hard time turning off our belief—and our need to believe—that we are the smartest person in the room. What does this say about our performance? You may be surprised.

In the interesting and provocative Ego-Free Leadership, authors Shayne Hughes and Brandon Black define ego as a “constant preoccupation with our self-worth.” They argue that all individuals, regardless of how other-focused their roles may be, have specific beliefs and concerns about their value. Further, when we experience duress (which may actually be a wider swathe of circumstances than you think, not just what you consider high-stress situations), these ideas and fears may lead to knee-jerk defensive or self-promotional behavior.

We could be anywhere—in a meeting, a presentation, a coaching conversation squarely focused on another person—and be overly concerned about ourselves and completely disconnected from others. Perhaps most damaging, we may often be unaware that this is occurring. We may consider these “ego-protective” behaviors to just be a natural part of our personality—or even something to be proud of!

We may fail to see how damaging this preoccupation with ourselves is to our performance and relationships. We may think we’re not dismissive of others; we just have an incisive and sarcastic wit. We may think that our snap judgments are indicative of great intelligence and instincts, not a sharp tool that severs connection. We may consider ourselves masterful debaters without considering that having an argument about everything could be self-protective stonewalling. We may believe others expect us to be tough and powerful; whether this impedes direct conversations and facilitates distrust doesn’t seem to matter.

In short, we may consistently feel we are the smartest person in the room. Further, we may wear this belief like a badge of honor, even when we are not, nor should be, the main focus of attention in a particular situation. We may not comprehend that others can sense this disconnection, and will respond predictably with their own self-protective behavior.

This misplaced focus on ourselves often will impede the attainment of the very goal we wish to achieve in our interactions with others. We may not even understand how and why this disconnect happened. We are smart, after all, and we did our level best to present ourselves this way. This is who we are and how we’ve always behaved. It is why we were hired and put in charge; it is what others expect from us and how we’ve accomplished so much in our careers. What could possibly be the problem? It’s only natural to think it must be the other person that is the problem; something must be wrong with them.

Perhaps most damaging, these ego effects are not limited to individual interactions. If an organization cultivates a clear expectation that everyone must present themselves as the smartest person in the
room, tremendous negative impact can follow. This may include rampant distrust, nonexistent or ineffective communication and siloes, fissures related to safety and ethics, and an “us versus them” mentality within the same organization or even the same team!

In short, a constant need to demonstrate self-worth may be damaging your performance and relationships, and impeding your entire organization’s success. Like my coaching students, you may be puzzled what to do next. In my follow-up post, I’ll share a way forward to break out of this “egosystem,” and turn your attention to the source of sustainable individual and organizational performance: trust, intention, and connection.