Confronted by a client who balks at a high fee or by a team member whose performance is imperfect, many advisors react by assuming that the problem is their own. One’s fees are lowered and the employee’s job description is remade. But this mindset exposes a lack of self-awareness, according to Stephanie Bogan. Instead, she says that by recognizing your inherent predispositions you can be on a “limitless” path to success.

For the past 20 years, Bogan has been one of the leading practice management minds in the financial services world, which makes her more-than-two-year hiatus from the profession perplexing to outsiders. Following a successful career as an independent consultant, Bogan built the profession’s first online, interactive practice management tool and sold her firm, Quantuvis Consulting, to the Genworth organization, taking a senior management role with the company. She later served as a key practice management executive at United Capital.

Then, suddenly, an important consultant and thought leader disappeared to a beach in Costa Rica.

The past two years have not been wasted, however. “It wasn’t about running away from something; I felt like I was moving toward something,” Bogan says, “but at first I didn’t know what it was. All I knew was that it was hard to walk away, because I had really wrapped a huge part of my identity into who I was and what I’d accomplished. In hindsight, business was a way to convince myself that I was significant. I was successful, I had sold my company, and I had taken on a huge new opportunity. By all accounts, I had checked all the boxes. Then I learned that the typical definition of success doesn’t solve for what really matters.

“And then,” she said, “I started to realize that I was grappling, personally, with the issue for business owners and financial planners. There’s a wholeness that I think is lacking in the work lives of advisory firm owners, where it becomes a grind. People who once loved what they were doing and approached their work with passion too often end up feeling like they have to get up every day and push the cart up the hill. Even on days where they start with optimism, by 11 AM it seems to have left the building as the frustrating reality of their work life takes over. They’re driven by obligations, expectations and profit, no longer by purpose. They’re carrying around a lot of unexamined assumptions that drive them in
ways they’re generally unaware of. I certainly was.

“And,” she says, “their firms are not serving them because they aren’t serving their firms, and they
don’t know why. What I’ve realized over the past two years is that you lead from within.”

The obstacles within

Bogan’s insight can be described in two ways. The first is that all of us are, in some way, wounded and
dysfunctional, and our success – like Bogan realized that hers was – becomes a form of therapy, an
effort to heal those internal pain points.

“One of the coaches I worked with put it perfectly when he said: we work from our wounds,” says
Bogan. “If you don’t wake up feeling validated, then you go out into the world seeking acceptance and
validation. Success is a very convincing disguise, particularly to the person wearing it. Just because
you don’t end up in a crack house doesn’t mean you’re a whole-hearted person or leader. You can look
very normal, even wildly successful, as a business owner or executive and yet still have issues that
impact you and hold you back from being happy and achieving all that is possible.”

The second part of the insight, no less important, is that many of the most important and intractable
obstacles that business owners face are self-created. “Success is so often defined by what is
happening inside of us, not by the externals,” says Bogan. “The biggest challenges are rooted in the
belief systems and internal biases that the advisor unconsciously brings to his or her business, rather
than (as most of us believe) the challenges that come at us from the external environment.”

Every advisor’s biggest challenges can be overcome only if the advisor can start consciously
addressing the hidden assumptions, self-limiting beliefs, misconceptions and subconscious cries for
acceptance that all of us acquire in our journey through life.

For Bogan, this insight had been there all along. “When I was doing practice management consulting,
it was a huge help to the firms I was working with; you could see the difference,” Bogan explains. “But
as I look back on it, the place where I was always most effective at effecting change was in these
conversations that went beyond consulting and advice to explore the mindset of the owner. My advice
worked best when I was getting people off-balance, when I was able to help them look at their
situations through a different lens.”

She now believes that these conversations are the key for advisors to build the businesses they
originally envisioned. “If you’re not whole in who and how you are, what you’re bringing, what purpose
you have, and how you bring it to your business and to your clients, then you’re building on a shaky
foundation,” Bogan explains. “The challenges that you carry around inevitably show up in your
business. So my premise is: if you aren’t satisfied with your business, don’t look out there, look within.”

“If you’re bringing dysfunction to the business, the business, as a reflection of those dysfunctions, will
be dysfunctional,” Bogan continues. “What I want for business owners is to show them how to become
limitless.”
Overcoming limitations

But how can people with ingrained flaws become limitless? Isn’t that an impossible idea?

“Here is what I absolutely know to be true, based on my own personal experience and the work I’ve done over the last 20 years,” says Bogan: “anything is possible; some things are just harder than others. In my experience, your goals and desires can absolutely become reality if you’re willing to do the work. It’s just that the work isn’t what most people think it is.”

In fact, if you look around you, it seems like a lot of scientists, gurus, coaches and spiritual advisors are approaching the same insight from different directions.

“There are an infinite number of resources about personal performance” says Bogan. “Some people define it in terms of religion and spirituality, or meditation, or neurophysiology and optimizing brain functioning. Irrespective of your beliefs or approach, the commonality is that we can change and grow, and we can create a life (and business) that we love. After two years of exploring these subjects, it’s clear to me that there’s something here worth talking about, worth focusing on more purposefully. We are the creators of our reality, whether we are satisfied with it or not. I’ve experienced this in my own life in some very compelling, often painful, ways. Benefiting from this knowledge requires being open to the lessons, understanding how we work beyond the surface, and being willing to approach yourself and your work in a different way.”

Bogan notes that if you’re wondering if this applies to you, simply keep in mind that ‘feedback is your friend’. If you’re not really happy, if you’re dissatisfied with your business, your clients, your work relationships, your marriage, your bank account, your physique (or anything else) in ways that leave you frustrated, tense or wanting – that is valuable feedback, your own way of letting yourself know that things aren’t in alignment.

The real question Bogan wants to ask us is why we tolerate anything less than our limitless potential. “Either you’re living and working in ways that help you, enable you to grow and give you joy…or you’re not,” she says. The real question is whether we’re ready to do something about this condition.

The first way to overcome your own limitations is to go back to the original concept of the firm you were going to create. Chances are, you envisioned an orchestrated team effort that would work smoothly toward providing great service to clients, and abundant revenues for you. “Everybody that starts a firm has an idea of what it’s going to be like,” says Bogan. “And it is usually a great idea, until circumstances get in the way.”

Once you bring that vision back to your mind, your goal is to turn yourself into the ideal person to create and reflect that firm. And that means confronting specific internal obstacles that you probably don’t realize are holding you back.

Such as? “You look at a firm and it’s obvious that they’re not charging enough, so you recommend that they raise their fees,” says Bogan. “And immediately the founding advisor starts raising objections. They’ve gotten in the habit of quoting a lower fee, usually to avoid rejection from their prospects, which
is painful to the ego. “

The deep underlying reason for this important practice management decision is that they’re not comfortable with themselves, and therefore flinch from even the mild rejection of somebody walking away rather than pay the fees you know you deserve. “The profession was born out of sales,” Bogan adds, “and a sales-driven culture is an ego-driven culture. And an ego-driven culture is fundamentally about getting validation.”

This behavior crosses the line into dysfunctional when the personal validation becomes more important than the revenues. The advisor who is getting paid in validation rather than revenues is harming the firm – and has no idea how or why.

“It’s common to have the need to fill my tank with: I am good, I am good, I am good, because, for more people than you might guess, that tank is low or empty,” says Bogan. “You want that person across from you to say ‘yes,’ because it validates you, and so you might unconsciously, without realizing it, take steps to prevent that ‘no’ answer, and it affects everything else at the firm.”

How does this person step toward becoming limitless? The question, for Bogan, can be reframed to: How can this person get to a place where she is okay enough with herself to quote a fair fee comfortably, one that captures reciprocity, that adds value to the client, and the client is also adding fair value in return?

Limitless staff management

Looking back, Bogan finds a lot of examples of limiting assumptions in her experience consulting on dysfunctional staff issues. For instance, consider the advisor who complained about a particular employee not performing to the level that was required. Bogan asked a series of innocent questions.

How long have you had this employee?

Just under three years.

How long have you been having issues with this employee?

About three years.

Did you hire this employee?

I did.

Who trained this employee?

I did.

Who manages this employee?
I do.

Have you ever really talked with this person, and had a direct meaningful conversation about what is required, what is not working and what will happen if it doesn’t improve?

No.

Why?

I don’t know.

Is it an uncomfortable idea, this conversation?

Yes. Of course.

So you hired, trained and have managed this person for almost three years?

Yes.

Do you still think the employee is the problem?

Well, when you put it like that…

“You think the employee is the problem, but at the end of the day, you are the source of the relationship with the employee,” says Bogan. “In this case, all I had to say was: right now, you’re uncomfortable, and your employee is just fine. What you need to do is create a shift where the employee becomes uncomfortable, so they know they need to change their behavior. But that starts with you.”

The dialogue illustrates the assumptions that an advisor can unconsciously introduce into the firm. This advisor was assuming that all employees would know what needs to be done and what should change, and he was assuming that they would be uncomfortable whenever he was uncomfortable with them.

He was also willing to tolerate a business state that was deeply dissatisfying and harmful to his business merely to avoid an uncomfortable, non-self-validating conversation. Bogan’s suggestion is that practice management is as much about the person leading as it is business practices.

“Another firm was having issues with its employees every week,” says Bogan. “They’re telling me: so and so did this, and so and so did that. I said, okay, have you talked to them?”

Yes. Many times.

Then what?
We still give them their bonuses.

Why?

Because they work hard. They try. They’re nice people.

“I said, well, then, that’s what you’re going to get. You’re going to get ‘try’ from nice people.” says Bogan. “You’re teaching them that they can behave the way they want, and yes they’ll get some eyeball rolls and some frustration, but clearly learned that isn’t enough to change their behaviors. You’re basically saying you’ll tolerate their under-performance so long as they can tolerate your exasperated sighs and eyeball rolls.”

“The conversation then became very focused on: this is a ‘you’ issue,” Bogan adds. “What you learn if you peek under the covers is that the fear of the interaction is what’s driving the situation. If they have that uncomfortable interaction, it will create discontent on the part of another person, and that discontent will be redirected toward them, and make them somehow be the bad guy, and that can make an advisor so uncomfortable that they will literally tolerate the behavior, though complaining all the way.

“I would say to them,” Bogan continues: “you have to decide if you want the firm you have described to me more than you want the current environment. Then you have to decide if you’re willing to create the changes that will create that environment. Can you get comfortable enough with yourself to sit across from an employee and say: look, I appreciate you and I value you, but this is what the role needs, and you’re not bringing it, and here’s what I’m going to need you to change.” And then follow through if they don’t.

Standing firm on reasonable fees at the risk of losing a potential client relationship (and the rejection that entails), and confronting underperforming employees directly (and risking a lot of negative emotional backwash) both require the advisor to put the firm’s interest ahead of the personal need for validation. Most advisors, once they recognize the tradeoff, will make it every time – and actually feel good about the decision. As the firm grows more efficient and effective, this provides a different, healthier kind of validation.

“The issues are reversible; that’s the beauty of it,” says Bogan. “How you define limitless depends on you. We know that the vision that most people have for their firm and their professional life is very possible. What they need to do is layer in some self-awareness, and maybe some reality as well. You will have problems and challenges, but the biggest ones are those you’re unconsciously creating yourself.

Incongruences and compromise

Bogan says that one of the biggest reasons why the advisor is not living a limitless professional life is the small compromises they make that create inconsistencies along the way, more often than not out of fear of rejection, failure or both.
Advisors who want to provide unbiased advice may also feel that they need to make that annuity sale to drive revenue.

Advisors have an ideal service model, but can't bring themselves to charge enough to deliver it, so the current model is scaled back and unsatisfying.

They may be presiding over a dysfunctional work environment, refereeing staff conflicts, having one-off tasks fly in the door constantly disrupting their concentration or working under a boss that doesn't appreciate their efforts.

“The reason you wake up with that feeling in your chest, that stress, that persistent tension, is because there are incongruences between your business reality and the vision that you have in your head,” says Bogan. “The reality that you’re living in does not play nicely with what you aspire to, and that feeling takes its toll.”

If they understood the source of the discontent, these angst-ridden advisors could address it. But who has the necessary self-awareness?

“Rather than doing what needs to be done, and deal with that – which requires unusual insight – they push on through, hoping if they stick it out, it will get better,” says Bogan. “Sticking it out is not a very effective solution.”

In her practice management consulting days, Bogan would see advisors who sensed the incongruence, but still considered their firms to be successful. “They would look at the sum of the whole, and say something like: my business has $1 billion in assets, or my revenues are $2 million,” she says, “and therefore what I’m doing is working.”

The truth, Bogan says, is that every firm is the sum of many parts, and you can only find the obstacles to ‘limitless’ if you take a more granular look.

“If you want to examine how the business is a reflection of the advisor, it is not one equals X,” she says. “It is 100 parts of one whole together equals X. If we divided your business into 100 squares, and looked at every square to see what was working and what was not, maybe 50 of them in that successful firm are green, which means okay,” she adds. “But another 25 of them are yellow and 25 of them might be red. If you can turn the yellows into greens and the reds into yellows, the firm is going to be infinitely more successful. But that requires you to have the awareness and the willingness to go through the process of assessing each of those individual variables, and see how you, personally, are impacting them.”

What would one of those squares look like? Bogan starts with client services. A lot of people say they do financial planning, but they really do reactive planning,” she says. “A client comes in for their annual review, they talk about what’s happening, something pops up, oh, you’re having a baby; you need a 529 plan. You’re getting some money. Let’s invest it.”

Contrast this with what Bogan calls ‘readiness planning.’
Readiness planning is where a client has a defined set of goals, whether they walk in with it or discover it through the planning process with their advisor, and you help people proactively use the resources that they have to live their best life. You anticipate stages and challenges and prepare for them in advance, helping people frame and follow a path to the future.

Then Bogan moves abruptly to another square, where the advisory firm is over-servicing some clients and under-servicing others. “When we define how a firm works with clients, typically it has two columns,” she says. “You have some larger clients, but they were referring friends and family who were much smaller. But suddenly you start to get questions about: why did this person get this, and I am not getting it? So, to avoid having to make those difficult explanations, the advisor got in the habit of giving everyone everything, which from a business perspective made no sense.”

The creative solution in this box is to borrow from the previous one. A practice management consultant might advise the firm to develop a tiered service structure, with A, B and C clients. The business coach who is helping the advisor create a limitless practice will, instead, incorporate that ideal service structure – the readiness planning concept – into a different kind of matrix.

“To your top clients, you offer holistic planning, where they get readiness planning services,” says Bogan. “Then the next ‘tier’ receives a service which might be just investment management, where they only want investment expertise. The third ‘tier’ might be called a collaborator, which is about meeting a specific or short-term need, such as insurance or 529 plans.”

Presto! The bottom-tier clients are receiving the reactive planning advice the firm had been giving before, and other tiers are now receiving a service package that is closer to what the advisor intended to deliver all along. Two source of internal incongruence have just been eliminated.

Then, Bogan adds, you would need to take a hard look at the pricing box, to make sure the clients on each tier are paying appropriately for their new level of service. And then it’s time to move on to the next box.

Bogan is in the process of writing a book about how advisors can get out of their own way and create a limitless firm and limitless future for themselves, and I suspect it will become a powerful influence on the profession.

She’s recently started consulting again, taking on the first of what is intended to be a select group of clients focused on business strategy and executive coaching. She says it’s not for everyone, only for those interested in fleshing out the ‘limitless’ concept for themselves. After two years of solitude, she’s poised to change peoples’ lives in more profound ways than she ever has before.

She also said she’s eager to speak on the subject, and would willingly do a few keynotes at no charge to create a forum for this important discussion.

“I think the time is right for me to take those steps in and see what unfolds,” she says. “I feel like I’m in a place where I can do it for the pure sake of doing it, not for the recognition and the validation, and
that was a level of authenticity that I needed to come to. To do it in a way that would have the impact and the ripple effect that I think it can have.

Interested readers can reach Bogan at stephbogan@gmail.com.