

## The Leadership & Innovation Challenge :

# How Your Beliefs Can Block You

***Our beliefs have concrete effects on our health, happiness and professional success. With so much riding on them, we can all benefit from taking a closer look at how they help and hinder us.***

Though we're seldom consciously aware of it, our beliefs affect everything we do. They influence our decision-making and our values, the way we - approach situations, challenges, solve problems, learn, communicate, lead, etc. If we were to peel back the onion on every action and interaction, every emotion, every opinion and value judgment, and even our self-image and our memories, we'd find a belief at the center, exerting influence.

Perhaps the most influential exploration of the effects of beliefs on performance and achievement comes from Stanford Psychologist **Carol Dweck's** pioneering work on mindset-the internal set of beliefs we have about ourselves. "Mindset permeates every part of your life," she says, and "profoundly affects the way you lead your life. It can determine whether you become the person you want to be."

Dweck coined the terms 'growth mindset' and 'fixed mind-set' to describe two overarching types of beliefs that people have about where their abilities come from and how those beliefs determine success and achievement. People with a growth mindset believe that their abilities and intelligence can be developed and improved through effort, learning and perseverance. They're willing to put in effort, take risks and persist in the face of obstacles because they think their actions will have a positive effect. They are high in what's known as 'self-efficacy,' or the belief in your ability to achieve a task or meet a goal.

Those with a *fixed* mindset and low self-efficacy, on the other hand, believe that their abilities and intelligence are carved in stone and are unchangeable, and that whatever actions they take to improve themselves won't make much difference. They doubt their ability to handle difficulties and challenging situations and tend to give up when they encounter obstacles. Thus, they also tend to shy away from stretch goals and challenges they perceive to be difficult and are more prone to focus on negative thoughts and experiences, which can easily result in a vicious cycle of negative thoughts begetting negative behaviour and outcomes-the classic self-fulfilling prophecy.

## Supportive vs. Limiting Beliefs

In a landmark study of supportive beliefs, Harvard University Professor **Ellen Langer** and Stanford Psychologist **Alia Crum** studied a group of hotel room attendants who were on their feet and moving throughout the day. When asked if they exercised, most of them said no, because they didn't think of the physical activity associated with their job as working out; they thought of it as work. Simply by introducing the idea that their work was also good exercise resulted in actual physiological changes. After just four weeks of shifting from the belief that 'work is work' to the belief that 'work is good exercise,' the room attendants showed a decrease in weight, blood pressure and Body Mass Index. A good example of this is “ Knowing how to look at a situation for a better outcome ”.

*Limiting* beliefs, are the thoughts and assumptions we hold about ourselves, others or our context that hold us back, undermine our performance and frustrate our attempts to reach our goals. If you have limiting thoughts - assumptions that work against you rather than for you - you will have limited results. As I write this, for example, if the thought that dominates my mind is 'No one will want to read this; why should I even bother?' it will slow down my writing, if not stall it altogether. The result I will get is procrastination rather than productivity (and possibly poor writing).

*Supportive* beliefs, are just the opposite: They're the thoughts and assumptions that give us confidence in our abilities, enhance our performance and propel us towards our goals. If you start with a supportive belief that's aligned with the results you want, it will get you to your desired destination more quickly, and with greater ease. If my dominant belief while writing is, 'I know this book will help people, I will put my best effort into writing it and it,' that frees me up to write without holding back.

Understanding your beliefs turns out to be trickier than you'd think, though, because the majority of them aren't conscious. Until you become aware of them, you can't truly understand why you do what you do.

Not long ago, my life partner and I began hearing a steady drip-drip-drip coming from our bathroom. For a while we engaged in the kind of magical thinking so many busy homeowners do (we hoped the situation would somehow go away on its own), but soon the drips became a waterfall. We tried to tighten the washers, fiddled with the faucets and even went so far as to replace the showerhead. No luck. The source of the problem was coming from somewhere we couldn't see. Until we opened up the wall and inspected the plumbing behind it, we wouldn't know the true cause of the leak, and it certainly couldn't be resolved.

Working with the unconscious is a little like that. We have easy access to what we can observe externally - our own behaviours and their impact - but becoming aware of the beliefs that drive those behaviours requires us to look deeper, behind the wall.

The other tricky part of knowing our beliefs is how often they're not actually truthful. While we may like to think that our beliefs are based on verifiable facts, they are quite often based on our interpretation of the facts. And unfortunately, interpretation is fertile soil for misperceptions, mistaken assumptions, unconscious biases or faulty reasoning. This is why there is a difference between what you see (fact) and the story you tell yourself about it (belief).

Cognitive scientists tell us that we're far more likely to form a belief *first* and look for supporting evidence later. Once a belief is formed, we're also reluctant to change it. When we're presented with contradictory evidence, we tend to stick with our original belief and search for new 'evidence' to support it - even if it's illogical or directly inhibiting our progress.

This is because our brains are hardwired to look for patterns amid the deluge of information and sensory input we must process on a daily basis, and as an energy-hungry organ, our brains will do whatever it takes to conserve energy. We're selective in what we pay attention to, and we take mental shortcuts that speed up our ability to make decisions and take action. These mental processes all happen within seconds, and usually without our conscious awareness.

Picture this scenario: A boss rushes in late for a meeting, clearly frazzled and agitated. One employee thinks to himself, 'Oh no, she's mad at me,' and starts mentally cataloguing all the things he could've missed or done wrong to make his boss angry. Another thinks, 'Oh no, she's overwhelmed, and I need to jump in,' and starts speculating on what the problem could be and how they can solve it. A third thinks, 'Oh no, there must be a problem at home,' and wonders if it's appropriate to ask about it.

These are three wildly different interpretations based on the exact same input - and who knows if any of them is even close to accurate?

We do this all the time. We constantly tell ourselves stories in order to make sense of our experience and determine a path forward. It happens automatically and instantaneously, and unless we pause to examine those stories, we could be basing our decisions and actions on mistaken assumptions, which then will lead to unproductive decisions and misplaced actions.

This is why “*Awareness*” is everything and why we need to shine a light on what's happening with our thinking. Otherwise, we will continue to operate on autopilot, unconsciously letting our limiting beliefs or unfounded opinions be in the driver's seat - compromising our leadership and ability to adapt. Further, when a person has a Low Awareness Level (LAL) or prioritizes self-interest is why there are more issues, conflicts, or disagreements than there should be ! Alternatively, with a high awareness, we won't let unsubstantiated opinions prevail or settle for beliefs that aren't supportive. Beliefs or opinions may feel permanent and immutable, but science assures us that they are not. Fortunately, they can evolve over time as we're exposed to a widening circle of influences or if we actively work to change them.

With the awareness that beliefs are malleable, we can even deliberately choose experiences and thoughts that affect our beliefs - and our outcomes - in a desired way. Research in neuroplasticity, or the ability of the brain to form new neural connections in response to experience, firmly establishes that the brain continues to develop throughout our lifespan. What we thought was hardwired can indeed be rewired - and yes, that even applies to a fixed mindset and your most firmly entrenched beliefs.

Simply realizing that beliefs aren't set in stone has been profoundly liberating for many of my clients. But it's just the beginning. To consciously pick our beliefs and align them with how we want to lead, we first need to identify exactly which beliefs support our growth, goals and effectiveness - and which ones are keeping us stuck and unable to move forward.

## Uncovering Your Limiting Beliefs

Unsure of what your beliefs are? Pause for a moment and listen to your interior monologue - that voice inside your head. Most of us have a constant backdrop of mental chatter going on, also known as self-talk, that we don't often consciously pay attention to. Much of this chatter is neutral; you think about things you need to do, you rehearse a future conversation, you play back a recent situation. But a lot of the time, our self-talk can be harsh or critical, and when that happens, chances are there's a limiting belief behind it - 'I'll never finish this', 'Any minute now', 'they'll think I'm a fraud', etc. Because of this, if we're not aware of the chatter that's going on, our negative and critical self-talk can sabotage our mood and undermine our performance - and we won't even know what's behind it. To get past this blocker, focus on goals, learnings, rewards, etc. that build on a positive perspective or influence.

Even as I sit here writing, if I pay attention to my interior monologue, I can hear limiting beliefs popping up that are working against me. *What you're writing doesn't make sense. You'll never be able to turn all your material into a book, much less one that people will want to read.*

Yup welcome to my world! This litany of limiting beliefs has all come up in just the last hour, and it's making the process of writing feel like carrying a 50-pound backpack while running uphill. But I get it. These thoughts are actually trying to help me - even to protect me. Let me illustrate how my limiting thoughts are trying to be helpful. To do that, we need to go back in time.

As early as I can remember, I believed that the better I performed - the more As I got, the more accolades I received, the more spelling bee trophies I won - the more valued I would be. That unless I was the best at what I did, it wasn't worth it. Those beliefs didn't come out of nowhere. I don't know their exact starting point, but there's plenty of evidence for how they could have formed. I remember running for student council vice president in high school and cheerfully sharing my victory with my parents. To which they responded, "That's great, Muriel. But why didn't you run for president?"

I now understand that this was my parents' way of saying they believed I could do whatever I put my mind to and hoped I wasn't selling myself short. But in my 14-year-old mind, all I could hear was, 'VP is not good enough. You are not good enough unless you reach the top.' Is it any surprise that left to my own devices, there is a part of my thinking that still goes to "If you can't be the best at something, it's not worth it" to keep me from feeling the letdown I felt that day, even though that day happened so long ago? Often, our limiting thoughts aren't based on what is happening in the here and now but arise to protect us from reexperiencing something that happened in the past.

The mind is so hardwired to insulate us from harm that we form adaptive strategies very early in life to overcome negativity, become stronger and more resilient, or to avoid dealing with a challenging situation! We figure out who we need to be and what we need to believe to feel safe in our environment, to feel seen and accepted, and to feel worthy, all of which is perfectly understandable. These are critical human needs, after all. After the basic

physiological needs of air, water, food, shelter, clothing and sleep, psychologist **Abraham Maslow** identified the next levels of human needs -

- **Safety** : to feel protected
- **Belonging** : to feel connected
- **Esteem \*** : to feel worthwhile

\* Facilitated by continuous learning, having high awareness, being creative or innovative, having the willingness to try, is confident in their abilities, persistent / resilient, resourceful, takes responsibility in finding a way forward (to achieve goals), wants meaningful financial and intellectual rewards, etc.

When we don't meet those needs, we unconsciously figure out how to get them met through external means—through relationships, family and guess what? Work and achievement. But at what cost? Every time I won the praise and approval I was seeking, it reinforced my belief that I needed to achieve in order to feel accepted and worthwhile, which sent me on an endless quest to constantly up my game. But I never felt like I'd fully arrived because the warm feelings only lasted so long. Soon I needed to be the best at something else to feel worthy again, and I was off in pursuit of the next win. I'm sure many of you can relate. This is where “ Perspective ” and deciding what’s “ Important ” are needed to be smart about what you think about, know the outcomes that matter, as well as what and how to think about situations. This is needed to avoid being on a treadmill or burnout.

Present-day Muriel knows that this belief isn't truly helpful - I am no longer a teenager running for student council, and my sense of belonging and worth is not predicated on my achievements. But I notice how that belief still exists and comes rushing out when I'm faced with the fear of not being the best. The big difference now is that I am aware of this limiting belief and know when it arises. Now I don't have to let it block me. In fact, I can even be grateful for it, because I recognize that it's trying to protect me.

This is why I will never denigrate a belief itself, even if it's limiting or outright harmful, because somewhere, deep down, it's trying to serve a protective purpose. It may miss the mark or cause unintended difficulty, but it's trying to address a deep need and provide a benefit. That said, recognizing the good intention of a belief that is blocking you doesn't mean you surrender the microphone to it. If it's no longer useful or if it's impeding your progress, it's time to change your thinking to get past insecurities, the pressure of dealing with unknowns, to better manage stress, etc. - to position yourself for positive outcomes.

## Common Hidden Blockers

Throughout more than 20 years of helping leaders achieve their professional goals, the same unhelpful thought patterns seemed to come up so often that I decided to take a closer look. I conducted an in-depth analysis of over 300 of my coaching clients from many different industries, backgrounds and levels of experience. Not surprisingly, the same patterns of unexamined assumptions and unproductive beliefs came up again and again. While there are many blockers, here are some common ones and the use of a “Qualifier” to mitigate it -

1. **' I need to be involved '** - The belief that you need to be part of every detail at every level.  
*Qualifier – Only engage on relevant or material matters*
2. **' I need it done now '** - The belief that you need to get results immediately, no matter what.  
*Qualifier – Only engage sometimes, when it's urgent*
3. **' I know I'm right '** - The belief that you-and only you-know the answers to the problems at hand.  
*Qualifier – Only engage when it matters*
4. **' I can't make a mistake '** - The belief that your performance must be flawless, above reproach.  
*Qualifier – Only engage when it matters*
5. **' If I can do it, so can you '** - The belief that others' performance must be like yours to be acceptable.  
*Qualifier – Only engage when you get a good answer to the question “ Why ? ”*
6. **' I can't say no '** - The belief that you must say yes and step up to the plate when asked.  
*Qualifier – Only engage when it matters*
7. **' I don't belong here '** - The belief that you don't fit in where you are or at your level.  
*Qualifier – Only engage if it's important*

For example, to mitigate these blockers, “ Qualify “ a situation by only engaging after assessing – Does it really matter (in the overall scheme of things) ? Is it worth it ? Is it strategic ? Are they worth it ? Will my contribution be appreciated 1 year from now ?

It's not unusual to be affected by more than one hidden blocker at once. But I've found that it's most beneficial to address one limiting belief at a time - namely, the primary blocker that is currently standing in the way of your leadership goals. With some practice, you can be your own coach to identify which of your beliefs are hindering rather than helping, and then zero in on the one that's taken over and leading to unintended impact.

## In closing

To mitigate thinking limitations or your concerns about your ability to perform because of blockers or blind spots, “ Qualify ” the situation. Fundamentally, take the approach – “ *if it’s not death or bankruptcy, we’ll deal with it* “. And if the other party isn’t collaborative to find a solution that you can mutually agree, then “ move on ” because of the –

- A. need to avoid other people’s limitations, causing an issue or limiting you
- B. problematic nature of others not learning, not asking insightful questions, not focusing on what matters, not making an effort, etc. - to overcome their blind spots and limitations
- C. importance of structuring the situation such that if issues emerge, it’s their problem
- D. greater the knowledge gap between the parties, the more problematic the situation – in the near term, and more so over time

...if the goal is to better position yourself to do the things you find rewarding

With this insight, hopefully there is a realization we have more control and autonomy over situations and your future goals than we might think. This is because our beliefs, actions and outcomes can be deliberate, empowering and aligned with objectives - rather than being unreflective, unproductive and limiting. And since we all need to be continuously learning and growing, all the best in overcoming limiting beliefs and the blockers to progress.

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