



Limiting beliefs

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In this module we shall explore the idea of limiting beliefs, what their impact is and what can be done about them.

In order to succeed we must first believe we can.

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The context

Let me tell you a story. We worked in a large international company. One of the senior individual contributors was very good. He was in his 40s and his career had stalled. Younger people were being promoted over him, despite the fact that he was better professionally and a fount of solid professional information. Other individual contributors who were rated above him would turn to him for advice. In one-to-ones he was great. He was open and helpful, and the information flowed. His presentations were fantastic. He packaged the information for the audience and delivered clearly and concisely so that they understood, but in meetings with a group of others it was very different: he remained silent most of the time. How had this come about?

Observation showed that in group meetings he never spoke unless he

was invited to. This was explored with him. What emerged was that as a child his mother was strict and taught him that it was rude to interrupt. This meant that in the hurly burly of the normal company meeting he did not intervene as subconsciously he believed that was 'rude'. A man in his 40s still controlled by what his mother had said? He had a limiting belief that it was rude to interrupt, and he had not even known it.

Was he helped? Yes. The fact that he told us about his mother planted the seed of change. A bit of coaching, and he was contributing not only to meetings but also to his career.

Beliefs

We all have beliefs: some we recognise and some we don't. We have beliefs that are limiting the achievement of our full potential, and sometimes we don't recognise the limitations imposed by those beliefs. Sometimes we are aware of and accept the limitations our beliefs impose.

So what are beliefs? Beliefs are an acceptance that something is right, it is the way it should be. This is often underpinned by an emotional sense of certainty. Sometime we even think that beliefs are true. For example, I believe I can't run a four-minute mile – not that I've ever tried to run a four-minute mile. I just know I can't, so I'm not going to try.

Key learning points

- ◆ How certain kinds of beliefs can limit us and sabotage our development.
- ◆ Our beliefs are not necessarily true: techniques for identifying limiting beliefs.
- ◆ Using counter-examples to challenge the truth of our beliefs.
- ◆ Reframing to the positive.
- ◆ Beliefs and the survival instinct - why applying contradictory evidence is not enough to change beliefs.

Coaches must take account of the mind's need to maintain its belief system in order to maintain a sense of wholeness, consistency and control in life. Coaches must become adept at handling the anxiety that is stirred up any time beliefs are challenged. The task is every bit as psychological as it is information based.

Perhaps most importantly, coaches always must appreciate how hard it is for people to have their beliefs challenged. It can be a threat to their mind's sense of survival. It is entirely normal for people to be defensive or aggressive in such situations. The mind feels it is fighting for its life, and this can produce emotion-driven behaviour that can be provocative and even hostile.

There are two ways of handling defensiveness. The first is to disarm it through the building of trust, and the second is to de-escalate it. Coaches will only inculcate rational beliefs by continuing, even in the face of hostility, to use behaviour that is unfailingly dignified and tactful, and that communicates consideration and wisdom. Any other behaviour gives the client's defences a foothold to engage in a tit-for-tat exchange that justifies their feelings of being threatened rather than focusing on the required positive outcome.

Belief change cycle

We have looked at what coaches need to do to help a client change a belief. Of course, people do change their beliefs naturally and spontaneously during their lifetime.² Perhaps resistance occurs if we try to change somebody's beliefs without respecting the natural belief change cycle. Trust is the key to changing beliefs; repressing them, disproving them or attacking them

Belief change cycle

- 1 The client acts as if their belief is true. This is the natural state for an embedded belief.
- 2 The seed of change is planted, as described above. The client becomes open to doubt. 'Maybe what I believe is not valid.' The resistance to accepting the new belief is the failure of the seed to be sown or for it to root (see the parable of the sower; Matthew 13: 3).
- 3 The key to overcoming the resistance to belief change is the building of trust. The belief is not yet accepted. The seed of the new belief needs to be nurtured with support, expectations and motivations so that the person moves into wanting to believe.
- 4 The person becomes more open to accepting the belief. They are not yet convinced; the evidence is still being weighed. Support the new belief so that the client is confident that what they are doing is right.
- 5 The circle becomes complete when the client acts as if the new belief is true.

cannot change beliefs. Clearly we must respect and pace the natural process of belief change.

Conclusion

Beliefs are not necessarily true, but they are necessary for a person's physical and psychological survival.

The client is helped to change a belief by the coach who is using a set of skills following a natural belief-change cycle.

A coach's ability to help people alter their beliefs is a powerful and precious ability. Coaches must appreciate the power and the danger of what they are doing as they have a skill that may be life changing for their clients. When turning this ability on others, it should be used carefully and wisely. Helping a client change a belief must always be done with care and compassion. Coaches must always keep their eye on the long view.

References

- 1 Robert Dilts, *Sleight of Mouth*, Meta Publications, 1999.
- 2 Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, Penguin Books, 2004.

Further reading

- Albert Ellis, *Humanistic Psychotherapy: Rational-emotive Approach*, McGraw-Hill Education, 1974.
 Tad James and Wyatt Woodsall, *Time Line Therapy*, Meta Publications, 1989.

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Appreciate how hard it is for people when their beliefs are challenged

We make decisions like these about ourselves so we don't try:

- I'm not good enough.
- They won't let me.
- I'm too old.
- I can't afford it.

Any of these may well be true. Often, however, beliefs are something we decide for ourselves.

Limiting beliefs

Limiting beliefs are like all beliefs. They have certain characteristics:

- They are not necessarily true but the believer holds them to be true.
- They can be changed if the believer is prepared to allow them to be changed.
- They will influence behaviour and may impede or damage the believer's ability to achieve what they want to achieve.

Eliciting limiting beliefs

The following clients' statements and coaches' questions may help you identify limiting beliefs.

I can't achieve what I want because...

What stops you achieving what you want?

I will always have problems with him because ...

What is causing you to believe you will always have this problem?

I'll always have trouble with this because ...

What prevents you reaching your outcome?

I don't deserve to get what I want because ...

What have you done, or not done, that makes you unworthy of getting what you want?

There are many clients' statements and coaches' questions like this that help us explore limiting beliefs. Our clients may decide that their limiting beliefs are valid and give up. They may decide that they have no limiting beliefs and will go out and create miracles through their charisma and persuasive powers. They may decide that they do have some true limiting beliefs that cause them to be realistic about themselves in the real world, and they may have some limiting beliefs that it would be wise to tackle if they are to be successful.

Sowing seeds of belief change

Generating counter examples'

You can tackle your client's limiting beliefs. Let me give you an example. You may have had a client who says to you:

I'm not capable of learning to operate a computer because I am not a technical person.

Counter-examples are the questions that client could answer to overcome the problem.

- 1 Are there examples of people **who have learned** to operate a computer **who are not technical**?
- 2 Are there examples of people **who have not succeeded** in learning to operate a computer even though **they have a strong technical background**?

This is the technique of exploring the rational. Counter-examples take the form of:

- 1 A but not B.
- 2 B but not A.

You may be saying to yourself: 'I can't do this *because* I'm not clever.'

So now try with this example.

- 1 Are there people who **can** use counter-examples even though they ...?
- 2 Are there people who **can't** use ...?

Using an overriding belief

There was a long queue at the Ladies toilets, so Shirley went into the Gents.

Old lady: I would never go into a toilet marked Gentlemen.

This is an example of **following the rules**.

Shirley: What could make you go in anyway?'

Old lady: Well, only if I had no choice and I really had to go badly.

This is an example of a **higher criterion** – the embarrassment of wetting herself.

One belief may be higher on the pecking order than another. The higher belief will override the lower belief. The trick is to recognise the belief, then ask a question to see if there is an overriding belief.

Testing the belief

Granddaughter: You're unhappy, Granddad.

Granddad: Why do you say that?

Granddaughter: Because you are frowning.

Granddad: Could I be unhappy and not be frowning?

Granddaughter: Yes, I suppose so.

Granddad: So could I frown because I am trying to work something out but I am enjoying trying to work it out?

Granddaughter: Yes, I suppose so. *(pause)* How would I know if you are unhappy, then?

Granddad: Well, how might you find out?

Granddaughter: Ask you.

Her belief was that frowning equals unhappiness. Testing with questions and then proposing an equally valid assumption can plant the seed of belief change.

Using a person's experience

Boy: I'll never ride this bike. I keep falling off.

Mother: You kept your balance for about 10 metres just now, so you can stay on.

This is using the boy's experience, so is likely to be effective. Note that it is phrased in the positive. 'You kept your balance for about 10 metres so you *can* stay on.'

In the negative it might sound like this:

Mother: You kept your balance for about 10 metres just now, so you *don't* always fall off.

Always reframe to the positive.

There are two reasons. Using the negative can be heard as critical. Secondly, the subconscious tends to ignore negatives, so it may be interpreted as, 'You kept your balance for about 10 metres just now, so you ~~don't~~ always fall off.'

Why have beliefs?

Beliefs do not require immediate sensory information to feed valuable survival information to the brain. They have the survival function of providing information about the area of life that we cannot perceive. This is the area of abstractions and principles that involves such things as reasons, causes and meanings.² I cannot hear

' We all have beliefs: some we recognise and some we don't '

or see the reason called 'germs' that make me ill, so my ability to believe in germs assists me. If I were to rely strictly on my senses to determine the cause of the illness, I couldn't tell why it occurred. For all I know, it was planets coming into alignment. Therefore my mind's reliance on my belief in germs, rather than on sensory inputs, assists in my survival. An inability to believe in germs may result in treatments that exacerbate the problem.

This means that beliefs seem to operate independently of sensory data. In fact, the whole survival value of beliefs is based on their ability to persist in the face of contradictory evidence. If they did change easily, they would be useless as tools for survival.

Nurturing belief change

Because of the survival value of beliefs, disconfirming or contradictory evidence will rarely be sufficient to change beliefs, even in otherwise intelligent people. In order to change beliefs effectively, coaches must attend to their survival value, not just their information accuracy. Information is always necessary, but it is rarely sufficient.

Coaches may need to discuss the implications that changing the beliefs will have for the behaviour of the client. Unfortunately, addressing beliefs is a more complicated and daunting task than using a logical argument.