# LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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## Breaking Free of Disabling Beliefs
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When I'm coaching clients, much of our time is spent delving into their belief system. Most clients come to me wanting to be far more effective in some sphere of their life. And what's holding them back, I frequently find, is a belief system that stands in their way.

The word "belief" is a tricky one in our language. Sometimes it means little more than "I'm thinking about . . ." So we say things such as, "I believe I'll go to the park Saturday." Or "I believe it's time to take a break."

Then there are ideological beliefs, like those at the heart of religious persuasions or the political beliefs that identify people as conservatives or liberals. These beliefs are strongly held and particularly powerful, because they shape the behavior of vast numbers of people.

## Beliefs About Self

In terms of self-improvement, however, the most powerful beliefs are those that we hold about ourselves. We can basically divide these beliefs into two families, one which we call "enabling beliefs" and their counterpart known as "disabling beliefs."

As their names imply, enabling beliefs serve as resources that fuel our sense that we can achieve or accomplish things to which we aspire. Disabling beliefs, on the other hand, hold us back and limit our options. They fence us in. They disable us.

Disabling beliefs are such things as, "I can't handle rejection" Or "I'm not a good conversationalist." Or worse, "I'm not good enough."

**Notice that these self-descriptions are not worded as beliefs. They are worded as facts.** As though they are an unalterable reality. Therefore we often fail to recognize them for what they are — merely things that we believe about ourselves rather than irrevocable constraints.

# Beliefs, Not Facts

How do I know that these are beliefs? Because there is no law of nature, no scientific truth which prevents these "realities" from changing. Is it beyond scientific possibility for someone who recoils at rejection to learn to manage it with equanimity? Is there some rule etched in stone that people with weak conversational skills can never become engaging conversationalists?

And what about that statement, "I'm not good enough"? It begs the question, "In whose eyes? By what measure?" There's a world of difference between saying to yourself, "I'm not good enough" and saying, "In my bosses eyes I don't perform well enough." Or, "It's very difficult to get my father's approval." Worded this way, the statements are no longer about us. They are about how someone else chooses to view us.

Now, this is not to say that limiting perspectives about ourselves are always beliefs. Sometimes they are indeed facts. If I say, "I will never be six feet tall," there's solid evidence to support that conclusion. After all, I'm nearing 70, I've lost an inch in height in the last decade, and my height never exceeded five feet, ten inches to begin with.

But to say, "I'll never be able to make cold calls" or "I'll never be a good public speaker" is to state a belief about self, not an absolute truth.

# Beliefs Masked as Identity Statements

Particularly insidious are beliefs about self that pass themselves off as identity statements. I'm referring to statements such as "I'm dumb in math" or "I'm shy" or "I'm a loser." When we preface a self-description with the words "I am" or "I am not," what follows next is part of our identity.

Identity shapes our behavior profoundly. Think of what happens when we becomes parents for the first time. Once we have that baby in our arms, a sweeping identity change transpires. We are now parents. And with this new self-perception, we take on commitments and priorities that are altogether new. Moreover, what we value is likely to undergo wholesale realignment, as well.

So when disabling beliefs disguise themselves as identity statements, they exert tremendous leverage. What's more, they use this leverage to limit our sense of possibilities, and with that, our behavioral choices. *The process of self-improvement thus frequently begins by disarming beliefs that have unduly constrained us.*

# A Step-By-Step Exercise

To rid ourselves of disabling beliefs, we must first strip them of their disguise as facts and start seeing them for what they are, namely, things that we've come to believe about ourselves. Here's a simple exercise for doing that very thing.

On a piece of paper, about two inches from the top, write down something which you truly want to achieve, but which seems to persistently elude you. (Leave room above the statement, because in a moment we will put something else in this space.)

Then below what you want to achieve, write the question: "How is it possible that I've not achieved this already?" Below this question create two columns. At the top of one column put the words, "I am . . ." At the top of the other write the words, "I am not . . ."

Next, in the first column list things which come to mind when you say, "I have not achieved this already because I am . . ." In the second column do something similar using the causal phrase "because I am not . . ."

Once you've compiled these lists, go back to the very top of the page. Above the statement of what you want to achieve, write the phrase, "Beliefs that have stood in the way of me achieving my desire to . . ."

The heading of the page now reads, "Beliefs that have stood in the way of me achieving my desire to" followed by your wording of the thing that you desire. By doing this, you have suddenly transformed the "facts" listed in the two columns to a set of beliefs.

# More Than a Word Game

Now, avoid the temptation to write this off as just a silly game with words. It's much more than that. In fact, what you have done creates a profound change of perspective.

When you start looking at limitations as beliefs rather than facts, the liberating effect is immense. By converting "factual" statements about ourselves to belief-language, we immediately increase our sense of options. Why? Because beliefs can change. Facts cannot.

From this new perspective, seeing these limitations as a set of beliefs, identify the beliefs which have been the greatest impediment to achieving what you desire. For purpose of this exercise at the moment, choose at least three, but no more than five.

Write down each of these beliefs on a separate sheet of paper. As you rewrite them, state them precisely as you did on the first page, including the "I am" and the "I am not" language. But make this one modification. Precede each statement with the words "I have believed that . . ."

Next, just below your revised statement, write another one which says, "This belief has validity only because I have not yet learned how to . . ." Complete this thought with a bullet list of things which, were you to learn them, would invalidate the belief in your mind.

Perhaps one of the things that you said on your initial list is, "I'm not a good public speaker." On this second sheet you would write, "I have believed that I'm not a good speaker." Directly below these words you would then add, "This belief has validity only because I have not yet learned to . . ." The ensuing list might include such things as "control the butterflies in my stomach" or "organize my thoughts well" or "avoid fidgeting when I stand before a group."

## Taking Action

What you have now produced is the beginning of an action plan. You've cast your limitations, not in terms of unalterable beliefs, but in terms of what you need to learn. We can all learn. We learn something new every day.

So now, for each thing you need to learn, you ask, "What steps should I take to learn this added ability?" With a bit of prioritizing and sequencing, these steps evolve into a plan of action.

And finally, make a conscious decision to change the way you talk about yourself. I call it "switching to not-yet language." Here's what I mean. Instead of saying, "I'm not a good public speaker," choose the wording, "I've *not yet* learned how to speak well before a group." Rather than say, "I'm no good at cold calls," describe the situation as "I've *not yet* learned how to make cold calls effectively."

Even more powerfully, you can use very specific language. In place of "I've not yet learned how to speak well before a group," chunk it down to something like "I've not yet learned how to avoid fidgeting when I stand before a group."

"Not-yet" language implies that something is indeed possible for me. I simply have not achieved it yet. This optimistic outlook is a far cry from the stern limitations of the disabling belief which it replaces. **Disabling beliefs limit possibilities. "Not yet" language multiplies them.**

Make a concerted attempt to interrupt yourself every time that you are on the verge of using the kind of "I am" and "I am not" self-descriptions which appeared in those columns on the first page. Purposefully substitute a "not yet" statement.

Do this faithfully. Tirelessly. Consistently. *We become what we believe. And we believe what we repeatedly tell ourselves.* In addition, the way that we say it determines whether we are programming ourselves with limiting beliefs or with learning opportunities that open up untold possibilities.