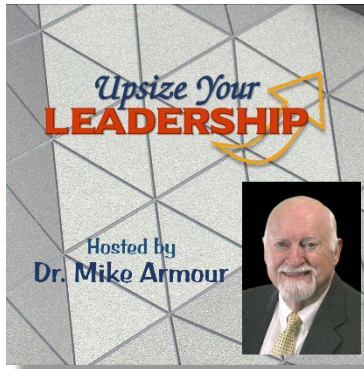


Sneaky Beliefs that Limit Leadership

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We've all heard the adage, "If you think you can't, you can't." How we think and what we believe predetermines the outcomes which are possible for us. And as leaders, how we think and what we believe predetermines the outcomes which are possible for our people. My goal as a leadership coach is to help leaders maximize success for themselves and for those they lead. And the ideas that I'll share with you in today's podcast are instrumental in setting the stage for greater leadership success.

People who shoulder the mantle of leadership usually already have a notable level of self-confidence. They believe in themselves and their capabilities. Otherwise, they would never take on the responsibility that even minor levels of leadership require.

As the leadership experience evolves and unfolds, however, it's common to hit points at which it is difficult to take our personal performance or the performance of our people to the next level. Often the problem is not in the circumstances or challenges themselves, but how we think about those circumstances and challenges. Over the next 20 minutes I'll show you how to deal with one of the most common factors in limiting the success of a leader's efforts. And by putting what I share into practice, you are certain to Upsize Your Leadership.

As small children many of us were read the story of the little locomotive that thought it could. It's determined effort to climb a challenging mountain was meant to teach us to believe in our possibilities. That childhood story, I believe, has special relevance to leaders. Like that little locomotive, leaders are the ones people call on when there is a steep hill to climb.

Leadership is tough, demanding work, in no small part because it is expected to conquer so many steep grades. To excel at leadership, we must tap into every internal resource we can muster. And none of those resources is more pivotal than what we believe about ourselves.

Our beliefs about self will be a primary determinant of whether we become truly superb leaders or whether we will be remembered as the person who had high potential for leadership, but never lived up to his or her potential.

Beliefs about self are one of five categories of beliefs which shape how we tackle life and respond to it. The other four categories are beliefs about space, about time, about the world, and about others. For instance, my personal code of ethics and the standards which I set for

myself are largely a product of what I believe about the world and how it works. Or to cite another example, my style of leadership is in large part a reflection of what I believe about others.

We can group all of our beliefs, whatever their category, under one of two headings. The first is beliefs which enlarge our sense of possibility. The second is beliefs which diminish what we think is possible. Personal development specialists, such as life coaches and motivational speakers, often refer to these groupings as enabling beliefs and disabling beliefs respectively. In most cases, however, these specialists treat enabling and disabling beliefs primarily, or even exclusively, in terms of beliefs about self. I personally find it more enlightening to explore beliefs in all five categories, to see where our beliefs are either enlarging or diminishing our sense of possibility.

And when we take up this examination, we need to be aware that limiting beliefs do not always present themselves in a straightforward way. They are adroit at avoiding our detection. They are sneaky characters in that regard. So sneaky, indeed, that I refer to them as covert limiting beliefs. And because they operate covertly, they do their damage secretly.

They are able to operate covertly because they are clever at masquerading as facts, not beliefs. Have you ever heard people say things like, "I could never be a good public speaker," or "I'm just messy by nature"?

Notice how these statements sound like they are statements of fact. "I could never . . ." "I am . . . by nature." In reality, neither of these statements is factual. They both state a belief. What they actually mean is, "I firmly believe that I could never become a good speaker." And, "I firmly believe that it's beyond me to be tidy and organized." And as the old adage goes, if you believe you can't, you can't."

Moreover, by masquerading as facts, these statements imply two things. First, they leave the impression that "this is who I am." And second, "Because this is who I am, there's absolutely nothing that I can do about it." The second statement even says, "I'm messy *by nature*." If I'm messy by nature, I must simply accept it. Right?

As a result, **because we mistakenly treat such statements as facts, they serve to disable us. They rob us of power and potential to change and improve.**

After all, what I am is largely unchangeable. In fact, some aspects of what I am are absolutely impervious to change. For instance, I am in my 70s. I am a father. I am a veteran. It's beyond my power to change these realities.

So, when beliefs mask themselves as "I am" statements, they are particularly insidious. They leave us feeling that we are at the mercy of "what I am."

Restate Your Beliefs, Reclaim Your Potential

But we regain our power and potential once we see such so-called "facts" as mere beliefs and then reword our self-description appropriately. Notice the difference between saying, "I could never be a good public speaker" and saying, "I've not yet learned how to speak well publicly."

The first wording expresses a belief, even though it's stated as a fact. The second statement is the genuine fact. That is, I truly do not have a mastery of public speaking at present. But

inherent in how this statement is worded is the possibility of developing the mastery which I currently lack. With this simple rewording, we replace a disabling belief with an empowering perspective.

Whenever you hear yourself making "I am" statements, learn to self-edit for a moment and ask whether you are stating a fact or a belief. Do this *especially* when an "I am" statement points to some limitation in your capabilities or options. **Only when you remove disabling beliefs do you maximize your possibilities.**

Covert Self-Limiting Beliefs

And keep in mind that "I am" statements don't necessarily always use the words "I am" explicitly. On the surface "I could never become a good speaker" does not sound like an "I am" statement. But as we saw above, it's a covert way of saying, "I am incapable of being a good speaker."

Also be aware that **disabling beliefs frequently have other disabling beliefs running underneath them.** Earlier we recast "I could never be a good public speaker" as "I've not yet learned how to speak well publicly."

This simple rewording will not empower us if we are adding the parenthetical thought (even unconsciously), "And I could never learn to be good at public speaking, either."

This second disabling belief is undercutting the effort that we've made to get rid of the first disabling belief. *Be prepared, therefore, to work through your disabling beliefs layer by layer.* In all likelihood they have been running unchecked in the unconscious mind for decades. It may therefore take a bit of work to ferret them out and identify them.

Five Clusters of Beliefs

And where do you go looking for disabling beliefs? They can be found almost anywhere in the five categories of beliefs which determine our behavior. Remember, these are beliefs about space, about time, about self, about others, and about the world. Let me give you an example of a disabling belief in each of these categories. And notice that in each instance the belief masquerades as a fact.

- First, beliefs about *space*, such as, "High productivity depends on us working close to one another."
- Second, beliefs about *time*. An example is, "I don't have time to coach my team members."
- Third, beliefs about *self*. One which I often hear is, "I'm no good at networking."
- Fourth, beliefs about *others*, for instance, "People get defensive when you hold them accountable."
- And fifth, beliefs about the *world*, as in, "There's not much future for our company, because we are in a dying industry."

Notice how significantly your perspective changes if you simply preface each of these statements with the words "I believe that." Thus, "I believe that high productivity depends on us

working close to one another.” Or, “I believe that I’m no good at networking.” By stripping away the masquerade and wording these statements as beliefs, you change your sense of possibility. So long as you state these beliefs as though they are facts, they seem like hard and fast realities that cannot be changed. Once you word them as beliefs, you can challenge them. You can modify them. You can change them entirely. After all, you’ve been modifying and changing your beliefs for your entire life, haven’t you?

And the reason that you change beliefs is because you learn something new. To change disabling beliefs, therefore, you need to use what I call the “still learning” formula to reword them. Basically, this means replacing “I cannot do X” with “I’m still learning to do X.” The word “still” implies that I’m not yet where I want to be. But “learning” implies that I’m making progress.

As you become more adroit in using this technique, you can substitute other phrases for “still learning” so long as the substitution preserves the “still learning” implication. To illustrate, let’s return to the masquerading beliefs which we identified earlier and apply the “still learning” technique to them. In some cases, we will use the phrase “still learning” itself. In others we will substitute an equivalent phrase.

We begin with the statement about space: “High productivity depends on us working close to one another.” Notice how much your outlook and attitude change if you modify it to read, “As I improve my ability to motivate the team, high productivity will depend less and less on whether we are co-located.”

Then there’s the disabling belief about time. “I don’t have time to coach my team members” becomes less constricting if it’s reframed as “I’m still learning how to create time in my weekly calendar for coaching.”

“I’m no good at networking” transforms itself into a more constructive mindset when it’s reworded as “I’m gathering tips from people who network well and looking for opportunities to put their tips into practice.”

The statement, “People get defensive when you hold them accountable” can be rephrased as, “The better I become at delivering constructive feedback, the more receptive people will be to accountability sessions.”

And finally, the notion that there’s not much future for our company because we’re in a dying industry can be recast as “We’ve not yet become adaptive and innovative enough to thrive in a declining industry.”

Are you getting the hang of how to recognize limiting beliefs, even the ones masquerading as facts? And are you gaining insight into how you can re-engineer these beliefs with language that enlarges your sense of possibilities? Simply reengineering the language, however, is not sufficient to release the hold that the disabling belief has on you. To rid yourself of it, you must immediately reaffirm the “still learning” language whenever you hear yourself repeating the limiting belief. By doing this consistently, you will gradually wear down the limiting belief and replace it with a more empowering one.

Think of the categories of beliefs – beliefs about space, time, self, others, and the world – as five closets in which limiting beliefs like to hide. Yet they pop out of the closet from time to time in the course of conversation or as part of internal self-talk. Prime yourself to monitor what you

say to others and to yourself more closely, listening intently for disabling beliefs which are either stated openly or which masquerade as facts.

As a leader, you should be particularly attentive to surfacing limiting beliefs about self and others. To the degree that you fail to fully believe in yourself and the people on your team, you are capping your potential for success.

Dismantling Disabling Beliefs

How long will it take to rid yourself of your most powerful disabling beliefs? In all likelihood, quite a while. After all, how many years have you spent building up your current inventory of beliefs which limit you? You may dismantle them more quickly than you built them up. But it won't happen overnight.

So, the place to start is by asking yourself if you truly believe that it's worthwhile to spend time ridding your psyche of disabling beliefs. I don't assume that everyone believes that such an endeavor is worthwhile. If you're one who is content with your disabling beliefs, then I apologize for taking up your time with this podcast.

On the other hand, if you are tired of disabling beliefs holding you back, I would suggest that you start with examining your beliefs about self. That's where the greatest number of self-limiting beliefs are probably lurking.

Start paying attention to how you describe yourself to others and to what you say *about* yourself to yourself. When you hear self-limiting language in your statements, take note of what you've said. Then reword what you've just said along the lines of the examples which I gave you earlier. One of the most powerful rewordings is the one which I've alluded to repeatedly today, namely, "I've not yet learned to . . ."

I should add that not all self-limiting statements are beliefs. Some are indeed facts. At my age I will never be a gold medal sprinter in the Olympics. Still, never take self-limiting statements at face value, no matter how "factual" they may first appear. Always probe them to see if they are in reality some covert belief. Always remember, disabling beliefs are sneaky little characters.

Once you develop the discipline of self-editing your statements about self, you will be surprised at how many of them are debilitating beliefs masquerading as facts.

And once you've gone through the closet which stores your disabling beliefs about self, move on to explore your beliefs about others, then your beliefs about the world, and finally your beliefs about space and time. Closet by closet, belief by belief, build and enlarge your sense of possibility. Like the little engine who thought he could, refuse to let limiting beliefs stop you short of the mountain top.

Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at www.LeaderPerfect.com.

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