
THE POWER OF LIMITING BELIEFS

Edited from 'The Fifth Discipline' by Peter Senge

Many people, even highly successful people, harbour deep beliefs contrary to their personal mastery. Very often these beliefs are below the level of conscious awareness. To see what I mean, try the following experiment. Say out loud the following sentence: "I can create my life exactly the way I want it, in all dimensions - work, family, relationships, community, and larger world." Notice your internal reaction to this assertion, the "little voice" in the back of your head. "Who's he kidding?" "He doesn't really believe that." "Personally and in work, sure - but not 'community' and 'the larger world.'" "What do I care about the 'larger world' anyhow?" All of these reactions are evidence of deep-seated beliefs.

Robert Fritz, who has worked with literally tens of thousands of people to develop their creative capacities, has concluded that practically all of us have a "dominant belief that we are not able to fulfil our desires." Where does this belief come from? Fritz argues that it is an almost inevitable by-product of growing-up:

As children we learn what our limitations are. Children are rightfully taught limitations essential to their survival. But too often this learning is generalised. We are constantly told we can't have or can't do certain things, and we may come to assume that we have an inability to have what we want.

Most of us hold one of two contradictory beliefs that limit our ability to create what we want. The more common is belief in our powerlessness - our inability to bring into being all the things we really care about. The other belief centres on unworthiness - that we do not deserve to have what we truly desire. Fritz claims that he has met only a handful of individuals who do not seem to have one or the other of these underlying beliefs. Such an assertion is difficult to prove rigorously because it is difficult to measure deep beliefs. But if we accept it as a working premise, it illuminates systemic forces that can work powerfully against creating what we really want.

Fritz uses a metaphor to describe how contradictory underlying beliefs work as a system, counter to achieving our goals. Imagine, as you move towards your goal, there is a rubber band, symbolising creative tension, pulling you in the desired direction. But imagine also a second rubber band, anchored to the belief of powerlessness or unworthiness. Just as the first rubber band tries to pull you toward your goal, the second pulls you back toward the underlying belief that you can't (or don't deserve to) have your goal. Fritz calls the system involving both the tension pulling us toward our goal and the tension anchoring us to our underlying belief "structural conflict," because it is a structure of conflicting forces: pulling us simultaneously toward and away from what we want.

Thus, the closer we come to achieving our vision, the more the second rubber band pulls us away from our vision. This force can manifest itself in many ways. We might lose our energy. We might question whether we really wanted the vision. "Finishing the job" might become increasingly difficult. Unexpected obstacles develop in our path. People let us down. All this happens even though we are unaware of the structural conflict system, because it originates in deep beliefs of which we are largely unaware - in fact, our unawareness contributes to the power of

structural conflict.

Where then is the leverage in dealing with structural conflict? If structural conflict arises from deep underlying beliefs, then it can be changed only by changing the beliefs. But psychologists are virtually unanimous that fundamental beliefs such as powerlessness or unworthiness cannot be changed readily. They are developed early in life (remember all those “can’ts” and “don’ts” that started when you were two?). For most of us, beliefs change gradually as we accumulate new experiences - as we develop our personal mastery. But if mastery will not develop so long as we hold unempowering beliefs, and the beliefs will change only as we experience our mastery, how may we begin to alter the deeper structures of our lives?

Commitment to the Truth

We may begin with a disarmingly simple yet profound strategy for dealing with structural conflict: telling the truth.

Commitment to the truth often seems to people an inadequate strategy. “What do I need to do to change my behaviour?” “How do I change my underlying belief?” People often want a formula, a technique, something tangible that they can apply to solve the problem of structural conflict. But, in fact, being committed to the truth is far more powerful than any technique.

Commitment to the truth does not mean seeking the “Truth”, the absolute final word or ultimate cause. Rather, it means a relentless willingness to root out the ways we limit or deceive ourselves from seeing what is, and to continually challenge our theories of why things are the way they are. It means continually broadening our awareness, just as the great athlete with extraordinary peripheral vision keeps trying to “see more of the playing field.” It also means continually deepening our understanding of the structures underlying current events. Specifically, people with high levels of personal mastery see more of the structural conflicts underlying their own behaviour.

Thus, the first critical task in dealing with structural conflicts is to recognise them, *and* the resulting behaviour, when they are operating. It can be very difficult to recognise these coping strategies while we are playing them out, especially because of tensions and pressures that often accompany them. It helps to develop internal warning signals, such as when we find ourselves blaming someone or somebody for our problems: “The reason I’m giving up is nobody appreciates me,” or “The reason I’m so worried is that they’ll fire me if I don’t get the job done.”

In my life, for example, I often feel that people let me down at critical junctures in major projects. When this happened, I would “bulldoze” through, overcoming the obstacle of their disloyalty or incompetence. It took many years before I recognised this as a recurring pattern, my own special form of the “willpower” strategy, rooted in a deep feeling of being powerless to change the way others let me down. Invariably, I ended up feeling as if “I’ve got to do it all myself.”

Once I recognised this pattern, I began to act differently when a colleague let me down. I became angry less often. Rather, there was a twinge of recognition - “Oh, there goes my pattern.” I looked more deeply at how my own actions were part of the outcome, either by creating tasks that were impossible to accomplish, or by undermining or demotivating the other person. Further, I worked to develop skills to discuss such situations with the people involved without producing defensiveness.

I would never have developed those skills or known how to put them into practice without a shift of mind. So long as I saw the problem in terms of events, I was convinced that my problems were externally caused - “*they* let me down.” Once I saw the problem as structurally caused, I began to look at what I could do, rather than at what “they had done.”

Structures of which we are unaware hold us prisoner. Once we can see them and name them, they no longer have the same hold on us. This is as much true for individuals as it is for organisations. In fact, an entire field is evolving, structural family therapy, based on the assumption that individual psychological difficulties can be understood and changed only by understanding the structures of interdependencies within families and close personal relationships. Once these structures are recognised, in the words of David Kantor, a pioneer in the field, “It becomes possible to begin to alter structures to free people from previously mysterious forces that dictated their behaviour.”

Discovering structures at play is the stock and trade of people with high levels of personal mastery. Sometimes these structures can be rapidly changed. Sometimes, as with structural conflict, they change only gradually. Then the need is to work more creatively within them while acknowledging their origin, rather than fighting the structures. Either way, once an operating structure is recognised, the structure itself becomes part of “current reality.” The more my commitment to the truth, the more creative tension comes into play because current reality is seen more for what it really is. In the context of creative tension, commitment to the truth becomes a generative force, just as vision becomes a generative force.

One of the classic illustrations of this process is Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*. Through the visitations of the three ghosts on Christmas Eve, Scrooge sees more and more of the reality from which he has turned away. He sees the reality of his past, how the choices he made steadily whittled away his compassion and increased his self-centredness. He sees the reality of his present, especially those aspects of reality that he has avoided, such as Tiny Tim’s illness. And he sees the reality of his likely future, the future that will occur if he continues in his present ways. But then he wakes up. He realises that he is not the captive of these realities. He realises that he has a choice. He chooses to change.

Significantly, Scrooge can’t make the choice to change before he becomes more aware of his current reality. In effect, Dickens says that life always avails the option of seeing the truth, no matter how blind and prejudiced we may be. And if we have the courage to respond to that option, we have the power to change ourselves profoundly.
