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The Power of Beliefs

One of the oldest and most oft quoted phrases in the literature of change is as follows: “Whatever the mind of man can conceive and believe it can achieve”. As an introduction to a discussion regarding belief systems, this phrase bears thinking about, because author after author advises that belief lies at the heart of all achievement.

However, what is noteworthy with regards this phrase is that it stops at the word “achieve”! This is because our belief systems will achieve success or failure, depending on what those beliefs are!

So, if we have within us this system that can cause us to be achieve success or failure in our lives, then wouldn’t it be perhaps useful to more fully understand that system and use it consciously to create success?

Beliefs lie at the heart of who we are, and thus how we live in the world we live in, indeed the world we create. Think for a moment of how many common phrases we could replace with the words “I believe”...

“I think that...”

“My opinion on that is...”

“As far as I am concerned...”

“My take on that is...”

“The way I see it is...”

“Look at it from my perspective...”

Etc...

What we are really saying in all of these, and many more besides is “I BELIEVE”! What I am saying or arguing or advising is what I believe to be true for me. And if you are in any doubt about the power of beliefs, then just take a moment to think about what is going on in the world today, solely because of the beliefs that individuals and groups are holding to be true. Think of the war, the starvation and the destruction in the name of beliefs.

On a more local level think about any argument, discussion or debate you have ever had. If you think about them, you will find that deep down you were actually in some way defending or propagating a belief that you held at that point. So, our beliefs must be defended when threatened. And here is another interesting thought – if the belief is so strong, and so “right”, why is there any feeling of it being threatened? Often, it may be the case that we defend that which we do not truly believe in ourselves, but at that time have no other choices open to us.

On the other hand beliefs can be a wonderful source of inspiration and motivation...

Thomas Edison believed that he could use electricity to create light, and after 10,000 attempts he proved his belief to be true. So apart from believing that he could do it, he also believed that each attempt was not a failure but a step forward, a learning opportunity! The secret is that his belief gave him the energy and motivation to make it into an actual achievement.

Up to 1954 it was believed that the human body could simply not run a mile in under 4 minutes. That was the year Roger Bannister shattered that belief, by running a mile in under 4 minutes. Interestingly, Roger said that it was in his mind that he really made the achievement – he ran the 4-minute mile so many times in his imagination that he made it a total belief and then an achievement. Perhaps more interesting, within the following 12 months 37 other runners had broken the 4 minute mile, and within a further 12 months another 300 hundred had followed suit. What had changed in such a short period to time to allow this to happen? The simple answer is beliefs. And from deeply held beliefs flowed achievements. So because of a globally held belief that it could not be done, it wasn't. But when Roger challenged and disproved that belief, other people challenged their beliefs and believed it could be done, and it was. Thus is the power of belief systems demonstrated.

The founder of the car manufacturer Ford Motors, Henry Ford, was once interviewed and asked for the secret of his success. His surprising answer was that if you believe you can you probably will and if you believe you can't then you probably wont.

In his book *The Magic of Thinking Big*, Dr David J Schwartz makes it clear that there is a difference between wishful thinking and believing. But he is clear about the power generated through powerful belief systems. He says that “belief, the I'm-positive-I-can attitude, generates the power, skill and energy to do. When you believe I-can-do-it, the *how-to-do-it* develops.” He states that “belief, strong belief, triggers the mind to figuring ways and means and how-to. And believing you can succeed gives others confidence in you also”.

The power of beliefs is also demonstrated by the following examples:

- 1) Yale professor and author Dr. Bernie Siegel has carried out research into people suffering from Multiple Personality Disorders. This disorder is such that the sufferers believe that they are a totally different person at different times. In recorded cases, such was the potency of these beliefs that there is documented evidence of eye colour changing, physical marks disappearing and diabetes coming and going with each personality!
- 2) Norman Cousins, author and editor of *Saturday Review*, cites a wonderful example of beliefs. At a football game in Los Angeles, it seems that a small number of people experienced what looked like the symptoms of food poisoning. Each of them told the doctor on call that they had consumed a drink from a vending machine. An announcement was made to the crowd to the effect that they should not purchase from the machine until further notice, due to the possibility of food poisoning. What followed was described as pandemonium as people retched & vomited and ambulances were busy all day bringing sick people to hospital. Everything suddenly calmed down when it was discovered that the drink had nothing at all to do with the sickness. It was later reported that many of those who got sick had never even had a drink.

Anthony Robbins, probably the number one peak performance coach in the world, defines beliefs as being a *feeling of certainty* about something. In *Awaken the Giant Within*, he says, “once accepted, our beliefs become unquestioned commands to our nervous systems, and they have the power to expand or destroy the possibilities of our present and future.”

It is an interesting exercise to review our own belief systems by firstly making a list of about 20 things that we used to unquestioningly believe in, but now no longer do.

This seems a little bit difficult or daunting at first, but beginning the list with the belief in Santa Claus is a good starting point and they just tend to flow from there.

When the list is completed, asking yourself for each one what it was that made you take on and hold this belief, and what was it that made you move from belief to disbelief is really interesting.

Now, taking a few moments to list out our current strongest beliefs sheds more light on belief systems. What are the things that you now believe in with the same conviction as the first list used to hold for you? Is it possible that these new beliefs could also be challenged, and possibly shattered, if the information, situation or experience was right?

After reading some of the literature on beliefs, and after working through the above exercises, I have begun to understand that at birth each of us is a blank canvas onto which is painted all the beliefs of those in our world. These people are mostly our parents, our siblings and teachers in the early days. But in those early days we accept the beliefs we are given, as we have nothing to match them against, we have no other reference points. So we unquestioningly accept the beliefs our parents teach us.

Later on it's our friends, the television, music, books etc. that begin to offer us more references, and thus some of the supports holding up the beliefs begin to be challenged. Just think of a child telling the gang that his Mum or Dad said something is wrong or bad, and the gang leader replying in a sneering way to the effect of, “and you think your Mum and Dad know everything? Right!”

Right there and then, the child's belief that its parents are all knowing is under direct attack, and open to challenge and thus change. In other words, the feeling of certainty the child once held is now under scrutiny. How the belief is finally held or changed is probably down to many issues including the child's self-esteem and its relationship with its parents, but in any case a choice has to be made, and this is the nature of beliefs – they are beliefs until they are challenged, and at that point it is the strength of the challenge that determines if belief turns to disbelief.

The human mind works in such a way that it seeks out confirmation of its beliefs. In fact it seeks references and supports to hold them in place. Indeed, the mind will ensure that we act and react in such a way as to prove our beliefs. We will seek out and find evidence to prove our beliefs. In effect, our beliefs will become a self-fulfilling prophecy, making real what we believe to be true. If we believe that all bosses are unfair, then we will unconsciously seek information to support this belief!

And will we find it? Of course we will, and if not we will create a situation where a boss is unfair!

Humans unconsciously carry out three types of information filtering, all the time. We Generalise, Delete and Distort information. Each of these helps us survive and function effectively, for example generalising how elevators work means we do not have to relearn it each time. We do not need to process every piece of information from our environment, as we would be overwhelmed, so we delete most of it. And we distort information to make it more suitable to us.

But we will use the same processes to support our beliefs! We will generalise that all bosses are unfair because we had an experience of one unfair boss. To support this we will delete any information that might challenge this i.e. only focus on the bad points. And we will then distort any evidence that we cannot delete i.e. well he is only pretending to be fair to get on your good side.

So beliefs are a feeling of certainty about something. It is useful to use a metaphor of a table to think about this. The belief is the tabletop, and the legs supporting the tabletop are the proof, rationalisation or justification for that belief - the legs are the references we seek and store to hold up the belief.

If I hold a belief that I am intelligent, then that is my tabletop. Lets say that I got this belief from my parents, and that they reinforced it regularly, no matter what I did. In my formative years this belief is taken on board without question, as I have no other references. There are strong legs under this table. Then I begin to play outside and an older child tells me that I am stupid. And all the other kids laugh at this! For the first time in my young and secure life my belief in my intelligence is under threat – one of these support legs is being sawed down. My feeling of certainty is being eroded.

Now different children will react to such a situation in different ways, but if the belief is to be held strongly then the leg under attack needs to be mended, and quickly. And from that moment on, the belief will be searching for new references from which to build support legs, to keep the belief alive. If in that moment of pain the leg was actually broken from under the table, then it may be that this belief will never be rebuilt again.

Add to this that the child may begin to believe that they are not as clever as they thought they were, and question who it was that always told them they were? The answer is Mum and Dad, and for the first time the child begins to think that they were wrong, and another belief begins to become under attack.

Therefore, it seems that these beliefs that can cause such success or such misery are actually subject to modification, sometimes in an instant. This is a crucial understanding in the study of human relations.

It is useful to divide beliefs into 3 categories or levels: opinions, beliefs and convictions. One can see that inherent in the wording is the idea of the strength of the belief, or, the strength of the feeling of certainty, that a person holds about a particular issue. To continue the metaphor from above, a belief becomes one of the three

categories depending on the quantity or strength of the references that are supporting it i.e. the strength of the legs under the table.

If we get a belief from someone who we really look up to, admire and respect then it can hold the strength of a conviction – I might hurt or even kill someone to defend this belief. On the other hand, an opinion has more shaky legs under the table, and it is likely that I could be swayed quite easily by being shown some minor new references.

Often people will hold onto beliefs because of the pain / pleasure principle. This principle holds that we will do anything to avoid pain and gain pleasure, and is worth thinking about in relation to the understanding of belief systems. In this model, our belief systems are acting as a type of guidance mechanism, keeping us moving away from pain and moving towards pleasure.

As an example, think of a person who has a belief that they are stupid. What is the benefit to this person of holding that belief?

- They cannot be ridiculed for doing something “stupid”
- They will not be given difficult tasks to do
- There will be no expectations of them
- Etc.

Basically, as long as the person believes himself to be stupid, then he can never be hurt for acting stupid. And if in this person's mind the pleasure of not being hurt outweighs the pain of a belief in stupidity, then that belief will be held.

Perhaps related to this concept is the idea of being empowered or dis-empowered by the beliefs we hold. When we hold a belief we can run it through a test by asking if the belief is empowering me or dis-empowering me? Is this belief truly causing me pain or pleasure? Once we begin the process of questioning beliefs in this way, we are opening ourselves to the possibility of change.

Napoleon Hill, in *Think and Grow Rich* says that “there are millions of people who believe themselves doomed to poverty and failure, because of some strange force over which they believe they have no control. They are the creators of their own misfortunes because of this negative belief, which is picked up by the subconscious mind, and translated into its physical equivalent”.

Surely then, it is worth the effort to examine those beliefs that we hold strongest, and, possibly more important, be aware when engaging with another person that they too hold their beliefs. When a belief is not empowering, or serving us, then is it a belief worth holding on to? If not, then it may be time to let that belief go and choose another one that does empower and serve.

It becomes clear that beliefs are something that can “cause” great success, great failure, or great damage. And yet, when analysed and investigated we can see that they are simply feelings of certainty about things that we have been exposed to in such a way as to have many references to prove them as valid.

But equally it becomes clear that we can change any belief that we hold, once we begin to question it:

- 1) Does this belief empower or dis-empower me?
- 2) Does this belief serve me in a positive way?
- 3) Why am I holding onto this belief? What are the references, or the legs under the table that support this belief?
- 4) Etc.

It should be noted that people holding onto convictions for long time periods will have very effective defence mechanisms in place, so it may be necessary to work with a professional coach to break down the beliefs and then design and adopt new more empowering ones. However, it is the very fact of questioning and observing beliefs that paves the way for their modification.

It is clear though, that this understanding of beliefs must be kept firmly in mind when working with another person to help them achieve their goals (or perhaps even when interacting with another person for any purpose?).

What might happen when a client holds a belief that is the opposite to that of the coach? Or what if an employee holds an opposite belief to that of a senior manager?

As an example, if a client consults with a goal of making 1 million euro over the next 12 months, and believes that this money will make him happy. During the first session the coach notices that he is not in the flow state he is usually in when working with clients. He may notice that he is being a little bit defensive etc. An intuitive and professional coach will immediately question himself as to why this is happening, and with an understanding of belief systems may well find that there is a belief conflict.

Lets say that after some quick self-analysis the coach happens to realise the he believes that money is the root of all evil, but never had a client before that was so focussed on money, and therefore never really had reason to think about this!

Without a firm understanding of the nature of belief systems, this is a relationship that cannot function to the highest level of efficiency. However, with an understanding of belief systems the professional coach will immediately question his own beliefs regarding money, and may arrive at some surprising insights. As a service professional, the coach will note that there is a conflict, and that it is his responsibility to deal with this.

In such a situation, the coach must decide within moments if he is in a position to best serve the client. In this he must be 100% honest with himself. If the answer is no, that he cannot offer the client the best service due to this belief conflict, then the only thing to do is to refer the client to someone who does not have this conflict. As in any business, this may seem like a difficult choice, but in human relations, it is the only correct choice to make.

If the relationship continues with the belief conflict in place, then everything the client expresses in relation to money will be judged against the coach's belief system. In fairness, this is a somewhat exaggerated example, but it is the principle that is

important here - in reality, we will meet people in all areas of life who differ in their beliefs to ourselves, but once we understand the nature of beliefs we are in a position to ask questions of ourselves, and to create choices as to how we want to proceed.

Equally important when working with people is knowing that their beliefs are driving everything that they do, and also what they aspire to. Even within people there will be conflicting beliefs, some unconscious, that the astute coach will be watchful for. Lets take the above example again but with the coach being money neutral. The client has tried and tried to generate wealth but has failed. As a part of the initial sessions, a coach who has an understanding of belief systems will seek out beliefs that the client holds (conscious and unconscious) that have a bearing on money, wealth and riches. In fact, this could be seen as a necessity due to the fact that the client may well consciously seek wealth, but unconsciously sabotage the efforts due to a belief that rich people are greedy or arrogant etc.

So in any human interaction, at home or at work, with peers, with superiors or staff, with customers or suppliers, it is worthwhile to be always aware at some level of the manner in which each of our belief systems engage in what we think, how we feel and ultimately how we behave.