



The Look & Sound *of* Leadership™ *Executive Coaching Tips*

SINCE 1990

SELF-LIMITING BELIEFS

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FEBRUARY 2017

We determine our place in the world by telling ourselves stories about the people around us—and about ourselves. Some stories we tell ourselves are empowering. Some are not. This month's coaching conversation is about the latter kind.

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Unpacking beliefs

“She just won't speak up,” Julie said. “I've been giving her the feedback, Tom. I promise you, I have. But she says things like, ‘I don't want to step over a line,’ or ‘I don't want to make a big deal of it,’ whatever the ‘it’ of the moment is.”

Julie was talking about Maiko.

Julie wanted Maiko to be her successor as chief compliance officer. But Maiko wasn't stepping up. At least not in the way Julie wanted.

I'd coached Julie four years earlier. She was thinking the time had come for me to coach Maiko. She'd just finished telling me a half-dozen ways Maiko was not stepping up.

She asked, “If you took a wild guess, what would you say is holding her back?”

I gave a little shrug, then said, “Self-limiting beliefs.”



She squinted, saying, “I think I know what that means, but how do you define it?”

I said, “Well, first I define ‘belief.’ I say a belief is just a story you choose to think is true. That’s all a belief is: something you think is true.”

“And Maiko is believing something that *isn’t* true?”

“Well, to her it’s true, but not to everyone on the planet. It’s not a truth-with-a-capital-T.”

“So what would a self-limiting belief sound like?”

“How about, ‘My work speaks for itself.’ Or ‘Nice girls don’t talk about themselves.’ Something like that. Those would be stories she’s made up that she thinks are true.”

“And they’re self-limiting because...” She searched for an explanation, then, exasperated, said, “because they’re self-limiting! Ahh! How would you explain this?”

Self-limiting versus self-empowering

“Well, we all make up stories, Julie. Some of the stories we believe about ourselves are empowering. And some aren’t.”

She nodded, picking up my thread. “So if I believe ‘nice girls don’t talk about themselves,’ then I might not talk about my work. And I might get passed over. My belief would make me smaller.”

“Yes. You literally limit who you are to conform to what you believe: a self-limiting belief.”

“So let’s say Maiko has self-limiting beliefs – ”

“—which everyone does —”

“OK. Is she aware of them? Does she know she has them?”

I shrugged. “Some people do. Maybe she does. I don’t know.”



“If she knows she has them, why wouldn’t she change?”

I laughed. “Because self-growth isn’t a light switch, Julie.”

“I suppose. Could coaching help her see her self-limiting beliefs?”

“It could, yes.”

“How would that work?”

“Funny, this just came up with a client the other day. The goal for his coaching is for him to become more visible. So he and I were talking about how he shows up in meetings. And in the middle of the conversation, as if he’s talking about the weather, he says, ‘I hate hearing myself talk.’ And he goes on as if it was nothing.

“But in my head it was like, Hey! Dude! Did you hear what you just said about yourself? You say want to be more visible, *and* you hate hearing yourself talk? Are you deaf to the competing priorities?”

“Is that what you said to him?”

I laughed. “No! But I did stop him and we did talk about his belief that he hates to hear himself talk.”

“Did he see the cause and effect?”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“Did he see that hating to hear himself talk is limiting him?”

“I’m not sure. But he did say that he sees a pattern of not getting what he wants. He feels certain he’s contributing to the outcome, but he isn’t yet sure how. So he’s on a path of discovery. He’s looking at his contributions so my bet is he’s going to bump up against his self-limiting beliefs pretty soon, if he hasn’t already.”



Discovering self-limiting patterns

She gave a smack of her lips and nodded her head. “I don’t think I knew the words ‘self-limiting belief,’ but I had an experience like that.”

I waited. After a minute of recalling, she went on.

“I used to have real trouble speaking up for myself. Especially to anyone in authority. I grew up flinching all the time. I saw it in myself and I didn’t like it. I remember in high school thinking I had to change it.”

“What’d you do?” I asked.

“I became this little bulldog detective. I asked myself why. A lot. So, let’s say something would happen with a teacher. I wouldn’t say anything but I’d be thinking, ‘She wouldn’t think that if she knew the truth.’ And later I’d ask myself why she didn’t know the truth. And of course the answer was because I didn’t speak up. Then I would ask myself why didn’t I speak up?”

“And what was the answer?” I asked.

“Usually something like ‘I don’t want anyone to be upset.’ Something like that. But then I’d ask myself why about *that*.”

“And what would *that* answer be?”

“Usually I was worried about whether people would like me. And then I’d ask myself why about *that*.”

“Wow. Really?”

“I would. I was determined! I think I believed that if I could get to a particular why, I’d know how to fix it.”

“What did you find out?”

“I had a self-limiting belief about deserving. I didn’t believe I deserved certain things. Pretty self-limiting, huh?”



“How’d you ever stop?” I asked. “Or maybe I should ask, *have* you stopped?”

She waved a hand and laughed. “Oh, I feel plenty deserving these days, thank you very much. But how did I stop?” She thought, then said, “I guess I wanted to break the pattern more than I wanted to keep the belief.”

Her words struck a loud, resonant chord with me but I stayed silent.

She spoke quietly. “I don’t know if Maiko has the same determination.”

I asked, “Does she want to be chief compliance officer?”

“I think so,” Julie said. “Why?”

“You wanted to break a pattern. That allowed you to push against your beliefs. Maybe, if Maiko wants the chief officer role badly enough, maybe she’ll be able to push against *her* beliefs.”

Julie shook her head. “I’m not sure she’s up to it. I’m not trying to torture her, Tom.”

Choosing beliefs

“You’re not doing anything *to* her. If she’s ready, she’ll do it. If not, she won’t. You’re not in the equation.”

“What? It’s not all about me? I’m crushed!” Then she cocked her head at me. “Is this all just some form of corporate therapy?”

I told her I thought not and gave her my spiel about ‘[Coaching Versus Therapy](#).’

Then I said, “I think the only way a self-limiting belief turns into a self-empowering belief is when you confront it. Get as conscious as you can about it, then decide if you really want to believe it or not.”

“Decide if you believe your belief? Sounds a bit meta.”

I smiled. “But if a belief is just a story you made up, you can decide if it’s worth believing.”



“I suppose,” she said, her mind clearly on a new thought. “I have a friend who’s six-four. She has all sorts of beliefs about her height. Some of them are really self-limiting. They make her feel self-conscious and bad about herself. But some of them are pretty empowering. When she’s in that mode, she’s unstoppable.”

“What do you make of that?” I asked.

She considered, then shrugged, “You get to decide what you believe. I guess it’s like my dad used to say – there’s nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so.”

“Your dad knew his *Hamlet*,” I said.

“Really? That’s from *Hamlet*? Who knew? Huh! But it makes sense, right?”

“Shakespeare was a smart guy.”

She spoke slowly, “Depending on how she feels about the story she made up, my friend can see her height as an advantage or a disadvantage. She can decide.”

When her eyes came back to me, I asked, “Can I tell you my story?”

She nodded permission.

“It’s about that idea of deciding,” I said as preface. “When I was little, I learned that speaking up could get me in trouble.”

“Maybe we shared a mom,” she quipped.

I went on. “Well, I didn’t like getting in trouble, so I made up a belief that said being polite was safe and being bold was dangerous. It actually helped me out a lot when I was little. But by the time I was a teenager that belief was hobbling me. It was like running a race dragging a ball and chain. But I couldn’t shake it off.”



“Like me with authority,” she offered.

“Yes, like that,” I agreed. “I remember times when I would be in the middle of an exchange and – I don’t want to make myself sound like a nut case here but – I’d hear the belief in my head saying, ‘Careful! Don’t speak up!’ And I’d hear my boldness countering, ‘Go ahead. Say it! The danger’s not real.’ And suddenly I’d have choice. Which voice did I want to believe? Having that choice freed me.”

“But wait, Tom. You were aware of the belief. Isn’t the whole point of a self-limiting belief that it’s invisible?”

“Maybe. That’s why goals are so important. When I don’t get what I want, I hope that motivates me to figure out how to do it better next time. So I’m going to be determined. Like you were. I’ll ask why. And I’ll listen for the stories I make up.”

“Do you think Maiko is able to be transparent about her self-limiting beliefs?”

I gave a little laugh. “Julie, people speak their beliefs all the time. Like that guy saying he hates hearing himself talk. We all say our beliefs out loud to each other all the time.”

“Like what?”

“People say things like, ‘I couldn’t possibly talk to him about that.’ Oh, really? Where is that written down? That’s just a belief, right? That’s just a story you made up. But we let things like that govern our lives.”

“We do, we do,” she said with a sigh. “Are there books about self-limiting beliefs?”

“The one I like best is *Leadership and Self-Deception*,” I told her.

We agreed that fighting to be free of self-limiting beliefs is a crucial step on the path to *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.



Want to confront your self-limiting beliefs?

Four actions to take are:

- Look for patterns of self-sabotage.
- Examine the pattern; ask yourself 'why' five times.
- Listen for the stories you tell yourself; "Truths" are usually only true for you.
- Exercise choice: do you want to believe your made-up story? You don't have to!

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