



The impact and importance of beliefs in coaching

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Beliefs have an impact on our attitude, feelings, perceptions and behaviour. In this module, Jan Brause examines the factors that can limit our beliefs and shows how performance can be improved by changing inner beliefs.

Where do beliefs come from and how are they formed?

Beliefs are ideas or generalisations that we make about the world, based on our reference experiences. They are part of our programming: the things that we have accepted from our significant others, education system, culture and general events in our lives. Beliefs are judgements and evaluations that we make about ourselves and others, and they determine our motivation, feelings and actions. They also determine our success in life.

The reticular activating system in the brain acts as a filter for information coming in, and it does this in a way that is consistent with our beliefs and goals. If you

hold the belief, based on a particular experience, that you are hopeless at presentations and that's just how you are, then your filters will be set for all the things that can go wrong with your presentations – and you will inevitably deliver one that is less than adequate. This then continues to be a limiting belief, born out of your reference experiences, until the cycle is broken.

Changing beliefs is the initiator for behaviour change and improved performance. The good news for coaches and clients is that there are some simple and effective ways to do this. We shall come back to this later. First, let's take a further look at the impact beliefs have on our lives.

Key learning points

- ◆ Beliefs have an impact on our attitude, feelings, perceptions and behaviour.
- ◆ Performance can be improved by changing inner beliefs.
- ◆ Coaches need to consider the impact of their own beliefs on their coaching performance and to remain non-judgemental.
- ◆ Clients may not be aware of their limiting or false beliefs, and sensitive challenging of these beliefs is vital to progress.
- ◆ Internal dialogue (self-talk) is a key factor that can limit our beliefs or help us to progress.
- ◆ All coaches will find themselves working with beliefs at some point in the coaching process.

The voice in the head

Have you ever caught yourself having a conversation in your head? Not only do we voice our limiting and false beliefs, but we also often have a voice that is destructive in the language it uses inside our head. As a coach you can help clients to deal with this too.

We have already discussed how it is possible, when working with the client, to identify and challenge limiting or false beliefs. It is also possible to help the client work on their own internal dialogue when you are not there to challenge it.

A key part of any coaching relationship is helping the client to become self-sufficient. Without this, the coach becomes a permanent crutch on which the client leans.

Imagine for a moment that you are going to give a presentation. A faulty perception of how this might turn out would result in an internal dialogue that goes something like this:

I might not start it off properly. ... What if I fluff my words? ... What if the words come out all wrong and I lose the flow? ... I always get nervous. ... What if I forget the key message and make a fool of myself? ... The audience might not like me. ... They might not be interested in what I have to say. ... I'm not as good as the other presenters. ... I'll never be able to present easily. I'm not expert enough in my topic. ...

You will recognise the labelling, generalisations and negative language, and all the possibilities that are being closed off, simply by what you are saying to yourself.

It seems bizarre, but we do this sort of thing all the time in a whole range of different circumstances. Whilst we can't always change the external situation, we can change our internal response to it. Imagine now that you are going to

give the same presentation. Instead of sitting there creating a negative representation inside your head, imagine what it would be like if it went something like this:

I have a good introduction and I know the content well. ... I am clear about the structure and flow of my presentation. ... I am feeling really calm. ... The key message is clear and I will deliver it in a timely fashion. ... The audience like me and are interested in what I have to say. ... I am as good as all the other presenters and can deliver the content easily. ... I know my topic well. ...

Encouraging clients to recognise their negative internal dialogue and helping them to replace it with a positive internal dialogue is a great way of helping them to help themselves.

In his book *Learned Optimism*,⁴ Dr Martin Seligman says that 'changing the destructive things you say to yourself when you experience the setbacks that life deals all of us is the central skill of optimism'.

Past performance versus future potential

It is easy to see how our past experiences influence our beliefs about our own performance. I

have my own personal example of this to give.

As a child in school I struggled with maths and developed the limiting belief that I was bad at numbers. This was reinforced through my feelings about anything to do with maths. My behaviour served to reinforce my beliefs; I avoided any kind of work where I would have to add up in my head, and consequently failed to create opportunities to improve my own performance. Eventually, I came across people who were willing to challenge my thinking. Guess what? My feelings and behaviours changed. I do my own monthly accounting now, so how can I really be bad at numbers?

This is an example of how past performance doesn't have to – and, indeed, should not – be an indicator of future potential.

As a coach, your role is to help the client recognise that this is the case for them too. Using the listening and questioning techniques already described will help you to do this.

In my view, the impact and importance of beliefs in coaching cannot be overstated. Anyone who wants to help others improve their performance and potential will need to develop and hone their skills for working in this challenging and dynamic area.

References

- 1 Richard Carson, *Taming your Gremlin*, Quill, 1987.
- 2 Ian McDermott and Wendy Jago, *The NLP Coach*, Piatkus, 2001.
- 3 Ian Whitworth, Henry Kimsey-House and Phil Sandahl, *Co-active Coaching*, Davies-Black Publishing, 1998.
- 4 Martin EP Seligman, *Learned Optimism*, Pocket Books, 1998.

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The impact of beliefs on personal performance

There is a wonderful story I came across a couple of years ago about an Australian farmer called Cliff Young. Cliff entered the long-distance Melbourne to Sydney race at the age of 61. What was special about this was that Cliff had no previous training, and yet he managed to beat the athletic opposition by one-and-a-half days. It seems to me that this story highlights the impact of beliefs on attitudes, feelings, perceptions, behaviour and – ultimately – performance. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 1. Cliff had no preconceived ideas about the conventions of running and his beliefs influenced how he perceived the situation. He did in fact ‘shuffle’ all the way round, which is now noted as one of the most effective ways to run long distance.

This example – and there are many others to be found – serves to reinforce the notion that we think and behave in a way that is consistent with our beliefs. It necessarily follows that if we change our beliefs, then we can achieve the best performance. That is what peak performers do all over the world.

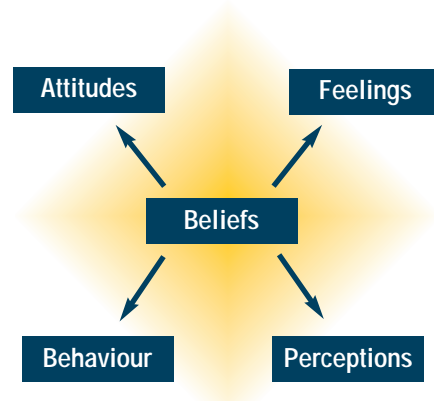


Fig. 1: The impact of beliefs

The impact of beliefs on coach and client

In coaching situations, it is important to recognise that the coach brings with them their own beliefs. One of the key qualities of an effective coach is remaining non-judgemental. This means suspending any beliefs and preconceived ideas that may interfere with the coaching process. If you are operating as a coach, it is worth taking some time to reflect on your own personal beliefs as these will affect your ability to listen without judgement. Richard Carson, in *Taming your Gremlin*,¹ uses the metaphor of an internal saboteur who will point out all your areas of weakness as a way of describing this. Remember that both the coach and

the client are susceptible to the saboteur; that is why many excellent coaches have their own coaches to support them with their own professional development.

Clients also bring their own set of beliefs, assumptions and preconceived ideas to the coaching situation. Often it is their limiting beliefs that stop them from achieving their objectives. Here, the role of the coach is to help them move from their ‘stuck state’. Ian McDermott and Wendy Jago describe in *The NLP Coach*² how they like to start the coaching process by finding out what their client’s beliefs are about success and failure. They cite their reasons as being, firstly, that without a clear idea in observable terms of what success would be for the client, there is no way of measuring what has been achieved. Secondly, they suggest that

what we believe about something has an effect on how we go about achieving it, without our necessarily being aware of that.

For example, if you get feedback one day after delivering a presentation that it was not up to the mark, you may tell yourself that you are ‘useless at presentations’ and feel very badly about yourself and your performance, believing that presentations are just not for you. Alternatively, you might tell yourself, ‘It’s just the view of one person,’ and feel that you ‘did OK’ but there might be one or two areas where you can improve. You might make a note to develop these areas, feeling confident that next time your presentation will be much

better. The coaching process helps individuals to notice which of the beliefs they hold are helpful and which are limiting.

Challenging limiting or false beliefs

The first step in challenging a client’s limiting or false beliefs is to listen to them. Whitworth *et al.* describe the following three levels of listening in their book *Co-active Coaching*:³

- Level 1 – we hear the words of the other person, but the focus is on what it means to us.
- Level 2 – the attention is focused on the other person.
- Level 3 – global listening that picks up emotion, body language and the environment.

If we look into this description, we can see that level 1 listening would be a matter of imposing our own beliefs as a coach on what the client is saying. As coaches, it is only by operating at levels 2 and 3 that we can help clients to access their limiting and false beliefs.

Those limiting or false beliefs are expressed in lots of different ways. Here are a few:

- **Labelling** – stating situations as facts such as ‘I am clumsy’, rather than as ‘That’s a clumsy thing to do.’
- **Generalisations** – such as ‘This always happens to me.’
- **Focusing on negatives** – a tendency to use negative rather than positive statements, such as ‘Don’t drop it’ rather than ‘Hold on to it tightly.’
- **Closing off possibilities** – using phrases like ‘I can’t’ and ‘I would never be able to.’ This is a sign of what is sometimes called a ‘victim mentality’. It is the role of the coach to help the client recognise and change this approach.

In my experience, once you have picked up on a limiting or false belief as a coach, you can challenge it by moving on to the second step of effective and specific questioning.

Here are some of the questions that I have found helpful:

- What stops you?
- What rules that could be challenged are you using?
- What would happen if you did?
- What would happen if you didn’t?
- According to whom/Who says so?

- How would you deal with it if you were a man (or a woman, or a child, or a customer, or an MD)?
 - What would you do if your life/job depended on the satisfactory resolution of this problem?
 - What would the best manager in your company do?
 - What would you try now if you knew you couldn’t fail?
 - What would you do now if you were already the person you know you have the potential to become?
 - I know you can’t, but what would it be like if you could?
- Answering these questions helps the client to start to recognise that, rather than having no choice (being a victim), they do in fact have options – and that there are possibilities for change.

Here is a typical scenario.

Client: *I can’t deliver presentations; it’s just the way I am and it’s too late to change now.*

Coach: *What stops you?*

Client: *I will get embarrassed and fluff my words, and my voice will shake. I will make a mess of it.*

Coach: *OK, so you could do the presentation. It’s just that you might feel embarrassed and you’re concerned about messing it up?*

Client: *Yes, I suppose so.*

Coach: *How would you feel about presenting if you knew you wouldn’t make a mess of it?*

Client: *That I could do it, I suppose.*

As soon as the client recognises that there is a degree of choice, their limiting belief is affected in some way. That opens the door to exploring more helpful beliefs.