

PERSONAL MYTHS

BELIEFS THAT MIGHT BE
HOLDING YOU BACK



THE SNEAKY SEVEN
OF DISCOURAGEMENT AND DEFEAT

In my article in the previous issue of Business Woman I mentioned how attached we humans are to what we believe. I also said I'd write a follow-up specially looking into beliefs and how they can hold us back.

This part is designed to bump your thinking up out of the *tactical*, and into the *strategic*. When I talk about limiting beliefs, I don't mean things like the glass ceiling, or working mothers' double burden. While these are relevant, what I am more concerned with are beliefs in disguise: attitudes and mind-sets about ourselves and our careers – which we assume are perfectly natural reactions to what we observe in the outside world. We tend to think these beliefs are careful, logical assessments of objective facts. And this is precisely the fallacy: we overlook that we have created those beliefs ourselves.

So how can you tell if you work by limiting beliefs or myths? Simply ask yourself: Do the unconscious assumptions that inform my actions energize and inspire me, and make me welcome every new day with a smile? If your answer is “Yes”, congratulations: your beliefs are your energizers, your drivers. Don't change a thing! But if this is not how you feel about your life or work, have a look at the list below, and you'll probably identify a few that you have allowed to confuse your common sense, and which have effectively started working *against* you, instead of *for* you.

In 13 years as a full-time coach, I have often witnessed that it was not the how-to part of management and leadership that was at the core of my cli-

ent's issues, but the limiting beliefs and attitudes they held. When you are stuck in a mind-set, it is hard to take action, to move forward, and to get things done. On the other hand, if you get your self-sabotaging beliefs out of your way, you'll really have a better life! Small disclaimer here: this requires some work... and some beliefs in disguise can be pretty tough to identify in oneself. On the other hand, we absolutely *can* identify some of our sabotaging mind-sets – and, what is even more important – defuse a few, once we have ideas about what might be driving them. For it's not like we *have* beliefs or *hold* mind-sets; it's much more like those beliefs and mind-sets are *having/holding* us. They run the show while allowing us to delude ourselves that our rational selves are calling the shots. In this and the next article, I will be looking specifically into those “Sneaky Seven”:

1. I must succeed, no matter what.
2. I don't know what to do.
3. Things are not going fast enough.
4. I am not getting what I want.
5. I am not worthy to succeed.
6. I'll be hurt or rejected if I take action.
7. It's someone else's fault.

But before I turn to the individual beliefs, let me make a few observations.

Beliefs can be described as pretty arbitrary ways to connect a few

dots of knowledge and experience.

They are not downright irrational, just generalisations that we use as shortcuts: many were useful for guiding our actions, or for understanding what was going on around us at some point in the past. And then, for the most part, we stopped questioning and inquiring into them. Generalisations are great energy savers, but mistaking shortcuts for “sacred truths” allows them to turn into myths. Also, many are quite dated – and relate to times where we were much less experienced than we are today.

I'd like to showcase just a few beliefs by way of illustration, as well as give you some hints as to possible ways out. Some of them definitely have a strong gender bias – but most work equally well for men to prevent them from taking this crucial next step in their personal (and professional; these things tend to go together) development.

A word on language: while mind-sets and beliefs are perfectly good descriptions, I really like the term *myths* because it sounds less rational. And how we name things is important: just think of the associations that your brain creates with an expression like “post-traumatic stress” – and compare that to what you associate with “post-traumatic growth”! Both are equally valid observable phenomena, but obviously look for different types of behaviour. What is interesting is that depending on what you look for, you tend to “see” different things – even in the very same people. So back to myths:

A “mythos” in the literal sense is a sacred story concerning the origins of the world and how the world

and the creatures in it came to have their present form. The active beings in myths are generally (half-) gods and heroes. In popular use, a myth denotes something that is widely believed, yet false. This usage arose from labelling the religious stories and beliefs of other cultures as being incorrect, (another fine example of belief systems at work: beliefs are so much easier to detect in others...!) but has since spread to cover non-religious beliefs. You'd perhaps expect mythology in studying home remedies, weather, or history, but not in seemingly fact-driven areas like business or (self-) management. Yet in the absence of awareness of their personal myths, people are prone to render decisions within an environment of fiction, legend, and pseudo-professionalism.

What is more, they are more prone to getting stuck in double-binds: those famous Catch 22 – “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” types of situations. Feeling there is no acceptable course of action as a result of double binds can contribute to lower self-esteem, feelings of resentment toward colleagues or business partners, or even apathy. Therefore, training yourself to perceive and evaluate myths will give you a real edge for debunking double-binds that someone conveniently places in your lap.

BTW On the next pages, I chose the career example because this is a magazine for women in business – and not because I am an ardent believer in *always-more, bigger-better*, or that all women have to have great careers at any cost. If you happen to be working on less worldly goals, you might find those myths (or their “ugly cousins”) at work wherever you look.

1. AMBITION

“I must succeed, no matter what”

If you *must* succeed, then you can’t fail. That is, it’s not in any way OK if you fail. Or worse: YOU are not OK if you fail. Ambition is a tricky one because obviously, it has a positive side: the tunnel vision it creates tends to drive you and put you into action. That can be extremely effective. But in being highly driven, you block other things out, become insensitive to other people, and miss out on other important things that aren’t success-related. You always feel right and justified in what you do. In your work life, this can make you prone to falling into unethical practices where the ends justify the means. We all have seen people behave like this, and reap seemingly great rewards from it; but ultimately these tactics break down or backfire – both in the business sphere and in people’s private lives.

Ambition doesn’t like competition; which is why ambitious managers can be a hazard for the companies they work for: unwittingly, they condone or encourage “suck-ups”: that is people who present favourable information to them and give positive reinforcement – no matter what the price of blinding the organisation to much-needed outside feedback in the long run. Ambition also has an ugly cousin: “I must be right, no matter what”. They are related through the family tree of perfectionism, as are a few others we will meet in a moment...

A good way to handle ambition is to think of your business or your career as a game. Yes, you want to win, be successful, or make more money.

But you can do so in a less driven way that is about playfulness, options, engagement, about building relationships and making a difference. When you do this, the success and money will most likely follow. This leaves you with the feeling of true accomplishment and growth, where you celebrate your wins and can include others in that celebration. Also highly recommended as a compensation strategy: try becoming ambitious for other people – especially where it’s safe. So maybe not a younger/cheaper (male) colleague – but how about mentoring someone in another department or another company?

Sometimes, the “root causes” of ambition lie on a much deeper level – such as wanting to be like, or different from, or better than, an important family member; sometimes, these issues are even multigenerational – as in you having to have the career or life that your parents or grandparents couldn’t have for some reason. But even there, what is causing the trouble are still the *beliefs* that we associate with those indicators.

2. CONFUSION

“I don’t know what to do”

Confusion is very common when you start out on any project or innovation. The more you learn, the more complicated it gets; there are so many components and moving parts, and it’s hard to know what to do first. Many people get stuck in confusion when they start climbing the career ladder, and feel that they’ll never get beyond it. The first impulse is to try harder, the final impulse might be to just give up. Confusion seems to be innocent,

but it's not, because it arises out of thinking you should know more than you do. This can make you overly rely on statistics and forecasts (both firmly rooted in the past, not the future – an easily overlooked fact...), as if they were the magic wand to circumnavigate the obvious fact that we will never have all the information (see box Information Overload). We can never find out if an alternative course of action (the decision we didn't take, or no decision at all) would indeed have produced better effects. In a world filled with circular causality, our intuitive thinking that likes simple cause-effect relationships can easily fool us, if left unchecked.

To combat confusion, be humble. When you are confused, you are out

of focus. Refuse the impulse to take in more information – what you need is taking stuff out! Changing perspective can often be a helpful first step: look at your situation from your most important stakeholders' position: your clients, your boss, a relevant co-worker – and also a positive, encouraging family member. Can their (assumed) priorities guide your thinking into what is really important now? What looks like a million things to do rarely is – once you're back on top of things. So once you've calmed yourself down, start with one item on your new list. Admit what you don't know and let it be OK that you don't know. Of course you need to develop and learn from others and discover what works. Absolutely do try and catch yourself whenever you are “squirrel-

ling around” – don't give up so easily on getting back in the driver's seat.

Sometimes, the best you can do is work with an attitude of “failing better” this time round. This is not at all the same as “shrugging off”! Read some good books about some major fallacies of our thinking (e.g. David Rock's “Brain at Work”, Daniel Kahneman's “Thinking, Fast and Slow”), so you have some fallback strategies, and can put some self-created problems into perspective. Only then, make your lists and plans, get advice from others who have figured out how to make something work and can give you specific directions. A good guide might be a mentor or a boss who wants you to succeed; there are many of those out

INFORMATION OVERLOAD – THE NATURAL ENEMY OF FOCUS

In this day and age, we are exposed to so much information that it is getting tricky to distinguish the noise from the signal. Steve Jobs eloquently observed what every seasoned decision maker knows: “People think focus means saying yes to the thing you've got to focus on. But that's not what it means at all. It means saying no to the hundred other good ideas that there are. You have to pick carefully.”

Definitely something to think about! The more important your decisions, the more

mindful you should be about the noise-to-signal-ratio of your trusted sources of information – and have strategies in place to notice and reverse severe imbalances. Among other things, this means drastically limiting exposure to newspapers (apart from the downright “nonsense with headlines”, even quality papers often nudge us to believe in the overly trivial cause-and-effect relationships they present) and online chitchat. Today, we are much challenged to apply the ancient wisdom that keeping one's distance from an ignorant

person is equivalent to keeping company with a wise (wo)man. Human brains are expert machines for creating stories and meaning from fragmented data; therefore, the more important the decisions you take based on your brain's limited capacity to handle data, the more you'd better watch the quality of whatever you take in. Remember that less is more...

Ironically, people often want “more data to solve problems”. At the same time, they would probably agree that we never had more data

than we have now, yet we have less predictability than ever. More not very relevant data can blind us to noticing important underlying dynamics – and even the pink elephant in the room. If you've never come across the famous gorilla video in a management training, you may be surprised to learn that roomfuls of highly effective, well-educated managers were consistently missing a life-size gorilla – just because they were concentrating on the number of passes of one team of players. Mind-blowing.

there, and most of them aren't getting the press coverage they deserve! In my experience it is often precisely these people who can enable you to access a pretty amazing and boosting resource: a coach. It's typically bosses who believe in you who can help you find a coaching budget – and they often do, after they have reached the limits of what they can do for you by themselves.

In a real crisis, you have to rely on what you already know how to do – and may benefit most from working with a good coach to get you out of confusion (so you can access your resources again). When you are no longer in confusion, it doesn't mean you know everything, it means you know what you don't know and have clear pointers as to what you need to learn next in order to succeed eventually. Period.

BTW Confusion is another cousin of having to be right – or better still, downright perfect...

3. IMPATIENCE

“Things are not going fast enough”

Impatience is a lot like frustration (where you already know what to do but aren't getting the results yet) **but has a sharper edge**: Not only are you frustrated that things aren't working, you are perhaps a little angry that they aren't working. You may also think of your boss who will surely expect results by now. And this makes you do stupid things. You follow-up with someone with an impatient tone in your voice: “Why the hell can't you get back to me and do what we agreed?” When we're

impatient, we feel that people owe us something, or that they should respond faster and differently. It's not much fun to do business with impatient people. They are fighting against what is, courtesy of today's instant gratification culture (which is another thing each of us has to keep in check).

As I already mentioned, the female version of ambition, confusion and impatience often comes in the disguise of perfectionism – your impatience with your own efforts, and those of others, constantly drives you forward. Most people realize that perfectionism is the road to being overwhelmed. But they are often less aware that is also a false friend for your career: while perfectionism can indeed dramatically speed up somebody's first career moves (i.e. at expert level), it will then grind their careers to a screeching halt, and often also make these people miserable. This might sound like a harsh judgment, but think about it: perfectionists are immune to the message that, in an opaque world, perfection is an expensive delusion. If everything you do has to be perfect, you will overly rely on what has worked in the past, which makes you nervous around complexity, and risk-averse in your decisions. Plus you're prone to look for theory where theories can't help. If you are interested to learn more, I highly recommend “Black Swan” by erudite-statistician and writer Nicholas Nassim Taleb. This book is also available in Czech; BTW it's completely unrelated to the young ballet dancer's story of the same name.

To get past impatience you need to realize that you're not entitled.



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The world owes you nothing, and neither do your colleagues or potential clients. You need to find time to be still, to be calm, to meditate. I'm actually not joking. Impatience is a very agitated state of mind. You're not only impatient, you're impatient that you're impatient! Take walks in parks or forests and contemplate how long those trees took to grow. Rediscover an instrument you used to play; or listen to some renaissance music – not as a continuous “background noise” but one piece at the time, to prepare your mind for silence. After all, this is precisely what it was written for! Find some Josquin des Prez or Palestrina clips on YouTube and see for yourself. Cultivating patience is much more powerful than impatience. It's facing reality just as it is. It's worth noting that you can only truly focus if you have cultivated patience... /BW

I hope you have found these initial comments inspiring. In the next edition of BusinessWoman, you'll find some remarks on the remaining beliefs.