Improving Performance by Leading Fearlessly™
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In today's organizations, factors that lead to success and promotion are increasingly subtle, particularly at middle management levels and above. And factors that derail leaders are intangible and highly nuanced. Successful leaders respond to most situations and circumstances effectively. They understand themselves in depth, recognize when they respond ineffectively, and know how to shift their response to one that reflects high performance.

The key to Leading Fearlessly™ and improving performance in yourself and others is to fully understand the role of irrational fears and faulty beliefs that cause you to stumble, and then to catch yourself when you begin to react carelessly to situations.

The following types of behaviors best reflect high performance:

- Decisive, action-oriented
- Confident, optimistic
- Focused, clear-thinking
- Collaborative, deep listening
- Compassionate, thoughtful

Unfortunately, not everyone always responds to challenges in "high performance" mode. Examples of ineffective reactions look like this:

- **Confusion:** a normally intelligent person suddenly becomes uncertain about a decision or action and responds like a "deer in the headlights."
- **Perfectionism:** the person is driven by impossibly high standards, expecting to hit the mark every time. He/she rigidly controls the outcome or procrastinates until the last minute before throwing it all together.
- **Defensiveness:** the person assumes responsibility for protecting one from personal attacks, or takes things that others say, personally.
- **Resistance:** the person avoids the control of others, and responds with either passivity or aggression to avoid the control of others.
- **Discouragement:** the person is overwhelmed by the idea of achieving a goal; he/she becomes pessimistic, feels hopeless, and lacks energy or motivation.

Unconscious fears. People recognize these types of reactions when they occur. These ineffective behaviors are driven by internal irrational and unconscious fears that cluster in three areas associated with our most fundamental needs: acceptance, importance, and security.

- **Personal rejection:** The thought is that "people will not like me, accept me, or include me."
- **Role insignificance:** One thinks that "others in authority will not look to me, value me, or allow me to play an important role".

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- **Irreparable hurt:** The thought is that "the situation will shift dramatically, and people important to me, or I, myself, will be damaged emotionally, financially, or physically in a way that cannot be repaired."

What we *believe* in any given situation determines how we will *behave* in that situation. Faulty beliefs are fed by irrational fears about what we must do to *protect* ourselves.

When faulty beliefs kick in, practice responding with a healthy counter belief. This act will help minimize the number of times you react thoughtlessly and maximize your high performance behaviors. Like removing a virus from your computer, recognizing your faulty beliefs and practicing replacing them with healthy beliefs will remove impediments and improve performance.

Steps to improving performance. This process will help you improve performance:

- **Identify catalyst situations.** Become aware of events which prompt a negative reaction (confusion, defensiveness, resistance, perfectionism, or discouragement). You will typically recognize a past pattern that serves as a sign that a reaction might reoccur.
- **Be on the alert for your "early warning" signs.** The quicker you recognize a reaction in progress, the easier it is to circumvent. Your body usually provides a signal that the fears have become agitated, often with emotional symptoms of anxiety, feeling tense, flushed, agitated, and confused, or possibly physical symptoms such as tightness in the neck, stomach, or shoulders.
- **Ask yourself this question:** "What in this situation is causing me to sense my irrational fear (e.g., rejection, insignificance, or hurt)?" Asking this introduces a rational, conscious question into an irrational, unconscious fear reaction. It is sometimes difficult to recognize who or what is causing the fear to become agitated. It helps to consider, "who is the *audience* here?" In other words, who am I most afraid of disappointing or getting hurt by? By simply posing the question, the fear usually lessens or disappears and your normal, high-performing response mode takes over.
- **Gain perspective of the situation.** Ask the follow-up question, "How big a deal is this?" or "What's the worst that could happen here?" or "Will this still be important five years from now?" These types of question help lessen the effect of your faulty beliefs by providing perspective on the situation.
- **Reinforce your healthy beliefs.** Remind yourself what you truly believe as a rational adult in a given situation. Speak your new, healthy beliefs to yourself to counterbalance the compounded impact of reacting out of your faulty, habitual beliefs.

This approach is not built on stuffing feelings, stifling your reactions, or speaking affirmations in the hope of developing new behaviors. Instead, it is based on the powerful combination of recognizing when your unconscious, irrational fears are aroused, and then choosing to respond with high-performance behaviors based on healthy beliefs. When you do this, you respond to situations in the most effective way possible, as a fearless leader.