

Where do limiting beliefs come from?

Using NLP in coaching, I often find that the greatest barriers to a client's success are in their own head.

The term 'limiting belief' refers to a belief that limits a person's perception of their world in a way that blocks important outcomes and possibilities.

For example, if a person believes, 'I am not very clever', that will impact their behaviour in many situations. They may avoid speaking up in meetings, consult other people before making decisions, feel intimidated by people who appear intelligent and even shy away from opportunities for promotion. This is obviously a limiting belief.

What may be less obvious is all beliefs are limiting.

We create our own limiting beliefs as part of our natural process of making sense of the world. Beliefs begin as a decision about the way the world works or our own place in it.

Inevitably, many of these decisions are made in our accurately labelled 'formative years'.

We also continue to acquire beliefs as we progress through life. It's called learning from experience.

Suppose you buy a second-hand car from the dealer up the road from you. I'm going to imagine it's a Ford Focus (with apologies to all concerned).

To begin with you like the car but then it starts to develop faults and more faults. It ends up costing you more in repairs than you paid to begin with.

What do you learn from this experience?

Here are few possibilities:

- Never buy another car from that dealer
- Never buy another second-hand car
- Never buy another Ford Focus
- Never buy another Ford
- Never buy another American car
- Never buy another car – switch to a bike instead
- Never trust anything mechanical (Or as a friend of mine says, 'If it's got tyres or testicles it's trouble')

Or do you take a different view?

- Never buy another car without investigating it thoroughly
- Consult your petrol-head brother before you buy again
- Always get your car on a lease arrangement
- Get a job that provides a company car

Or perhaps...

- I was just unlucky. These things happen occasionally.

Or even...

- I was just unlucky. I'm always unlucky. (Ouch!)

So, which one becomes your new view of the world in the light of this experience? Oddly enough, it depends on your existing view of the world.

For example, if you already believe that most second-hand car dealers are not to be trusted, this experience will simply reinforce that point of view.

If you believe there is no difference between one car and another of the same model, you may end up boycotting that particular model or marque. It depends on the extent to which you generalise – which is a metaprogramme preference.

Notice that the first list of possible decisions revolve around a perception of, 'you can't trust a _____.'. These kinds of 'learning insights' are all expressions of a passive point of view. In NLP terms they're 'at effect' rather than 'at cause'.

If a person is 'at cause' they will make decisions that reflect their own part in the experience. If I'd done this differently, I'd have got a different result – hence the decision may be about adopting a different process for choosing a second-hand car or bringing in someone more knowledgeable.

The final two possible decisions I listed avoid making any generalisation and reduce the incident to a one-off. The first, the 'shit happens' perspective assumes that it will probably never happen again.

The second, by contrast, is particularly powerful because it is an identity-level statement. This may be a one-off in relation to a second-hand car, but this decision focuses on the self and makes sense of this incident as part of a long history of other occasions when they have been unlucky. Can you see how this kind of belief becomes self-perpetuating? If you believe you're unlucky, you'll notice every tiny incident that could be an example of your bad luck. Without that belief you'd probably not even notice them.

Beliefs breed beliefs. So it's not surprising that for many people, the turning point in a coaching programme is the point at which they're able to leave behind some old, limiting beliefs and go forward with a different point of view.

It also explains why new ideas that appeal to you can sometimes be hard to bring to life. We sometimes see this on the NLP Practitioner programme. If someone has long-held beliefs that they are unlucky or stupid or undeserving, those beliefs will be challenged by learning NLP techniques that offer the opportunity to move forward and gain greater choice in life.

Sometimes the way this is rationalised is along the lines of, 'I can see it works for other people, it just doesn't work for me' or 'It will only work for me if I put in lots of effort and struggle really hard'.

I'm always on the lookout for this kind of thing so we can avoid it taking hold and make sure everyone forms a constructive and useful point of view about what they are learning.

Ultimately, we have choice about we believe to be true. Especially when we use NLP!

Dianne Lowther
Master Trainer of NLP

Dianne Lowther is a Master Trainer of NLP and Principal of Brilliant Minds. She is the UK's leading strategist on engaging the profitable brainpower of your IT professionals.

Brilliant Minds
Suite 440, 99 Warwick Street
Leamington Spa, CV32 4RB
01926 425244
www.brilliantminds.co.uk