

## **The Rationality of Beliefs**

As a coach, I regularly make use of cognitive psychology to help clients change thinking patterns that prevent the accurate assessment of business situations. The theory behind this approach is that feelings and behaviors are driven by the thoughts that people have about events, not the particular events themselves.

In the early 1960's, Albert Ellis, a pioneer in the cognitive method, devised a list of 10 "irrational ideas," or specific thoughts that cause problems in the way people perceive and respond to situations<sup>1</sup> (among them: "one should be thoroughly competent, adequate and achieving in all possible respects;" and, "it is terrible, horrible and catastrophic when things are not going the way one would like them to go").

Everyone operates with certain beliefs that are taken as fact and rarely, if ever, challenged. Sometimes these ideas can hinder productivity, or make it impossible to see new or creative options. Beliefs become "irrational" when they defy logic and objective analysis.

In my practice, irrational beliefs show up in a myriad of ways. There's the entrepreneur whose refusal to delegate is limiting company growth. Belief: "No one can do the job as well as I can." There's the business owner who settles for mediocre employee performance. Belief: "I can't afford good people." Then there are managers who fear confrontation ("If I ignore the situation, it might fix itself") or who micromanage ("I am 100% responsible for everything that people in my department do").

The Rationality of Beliefs Checklist is a tool that can help you test the validity of your personal ideas or even those of your organization at large. First, write down the thought to be challenged, and then answer "yes" or "no" to each of the 10 questions below. (If you would like an electronic copy of the Checklist that's formatted and fill-in ready, email [ForwardMotion@charter.net](mailto:ForwardMotion@charter.net).)

Finally, tally your score. The more yes's you have, the more rational your belief/assumption. No's indicate the degree to which holding on to that idea may be getting in the way of your success and/or increasing your level of stress.

*Questions to test the rationality of your belief or assumption ...*

1. Are you comfortable with the possibility that you may be wrong?
2. Is this belief/assumption based on an objective view of the facts and does it fit with other relevant facts that you know to be true?
3. Consider what would happen in the future as a consequence of this belief/assumption. How likely is it that this will actually happen?
4. Does believing this help protect your life and health?
5. Do you **never** deny, exaggerate, or avoid facts or events which may show this to be wrong?
6. Does this belief/assumption coincide with what you have been told by other people who are usually rational?
7. Does believing this help you achieve your short- and long-range goals?
8. When you hear or think of opposing views are you open-minded and really willing to consider that they may be true and you may be wrong?
9. Does believing this help you prevent useless conflict with other people?
10. Does believing this help you feel the way that you need and want to?

If your idea doesn't pass the Rationality check, the next step is to replace it with a new one that will further your objectives *and that you believe is true*. The last part is key to the process and to making lasting change. For example, a poor delegator might do this exercise and decide that no one else can match her skill at business development, *and* that routine administrative tasks can be executed with aplomb by someone else.

The Rationality of Beliefs Checklist can be also be employed to test assumptions you have about company strategy, your competitors, what's possible to achieve, and other situations that are governed by the status quo or ripe for a new approach.

<sup>1</sup> *The Psychology of Executive Coaching, Theory and Application*, by Bruce Peltier, Ph.D., MBA, © 2001 Taylor & Francis  
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