

CHAPTER 11

Belief Engineering

Man is a credulous animal and must believe something... In the absence of good grounds for belief, he will be satisfied with bad ones.

—BERTRAND RUSSELL

Cease to cherish opinions. —ZEN SAYING

From an Eastern point of view, all beliefs are opinions based on the best perceptions we can make right now, given our upbringing and conditioning. Understanding this helps us be more open and flexible and able to allow our beliefs to naturally evolve based on new learning experiences.

Self-help author Catherine Pulsifer declares, “What we believe becomes who we are.”⁶⁷ And, who we are changes as we grow. Since beliefs have such a major impact on everything we say and do – including every decision we make – we need to be aware of what we believe. This is not so easy, but it’s important to be careful about the beliefs that we identify with and rely on to make decisions. Every belief is a choice itself – one that we are making now or had made long ago.

Many of our beliefs are such deeply ingrained assumptions that we take them for granted as being reality and are hardly aware of them. Ironically, their very invisibility has the effect of making these beliefs even more influential on a subconscious level.

We seldom take time to reconsider our most basic assumptions. Nevertheless, for the sake of making better decisions, we need to take conscious ownership of the beliefs, because they determine the kinds of choices we will make.

Carol Dweck, a psychologist researching workplace dynamics at Stanford University, writes: “We usually assume that skills, motivation, and drive are the most important determinants of success. Now we know that belief and mindset are often at the heart of that drive.”⁶⁸ We leverage our beliefs – especially self-confidence, which is a belief in our own resourcefulness – whenever we make a visionary decision. Such personal empowerment, however, often runs counter to heavy cultural conditioning, including by dogmatic religions that have imposed forms of magical thinking and fearful biases onto human consciousness for 2,500 years. Even if you are not religiously trained, this has had an influence on cultures across the world, affecting the governance of every man, woman, and child.

In the normal course of events, we operate on the basis of assumptions that make sense and will work for us. To use a simple example, if I don’t believe I can walk across the street, my body will act out the mind’s belief: it will stiffen and I will not be able to move my legs freely. If I unknowingly take a placebo believing that it is going to make me feel better, it is likely to work. Not just our bodies, but also our character is affected by what we believe about who we are and what we are supposed to be doing. As Dr. Dweck put it, “Beliefs matter, beliefs can be changed, and when they are, so too is personality.”⁶⁹ And beyond the personal level, human beliefs have a profound impact on our species and planet.

Believing Your Intuition

Nobody has explained the conflict between blind acceptance of beliefs and trusting one’s intuition better than the Buddha, which I learned during my first Buddhist meditation retreat. The Buddhist nun, Ayya Khema, told us a revealing story. During the period of his life when he was a wandering teacher, the Buddha arrived at the village of the Kalama tribe to give a talk to the villagers who had assembled. At one point, an elder politely asked him, “Excuse

me, sir, but we are confused. Every few weeks, another teacher passes through our village. And all too often tells us something that contradicts what a previous teacher said. Then we truly don't know what to believe. Do you have any advice for us about how to resolve the confusion?"

The Buddha replied, "Your confusion is understandable and my advice is this: Don't put your faith in teachers. Don't put your faith in scriptures or tradition. Don't put your faith in authorities. Don't even believe what I'm telling you right now – unless it rings true for you in your heart."

There are many brilliant Buddha stories, just as there are marvelous stories about Jesus. (The Buddha's teaching period lasted 35 years, so even though he lived about 600 years earlier than Jesus, there are many more stories.) Hearing this one struck me like a ton of bricks. At the age of 30, this was the first time I had ever been taught that my spiritual life had anything to do with trusting my own judgment rather than obedience, the adoption of creeds, and a self-denying humility.

In my strict Catholic upbringing, I had always been told what to think and believe, as well as how to behave and what *not* to do. I had even learned that God, who was watching every move I made, even counted some *feelings* as sinful (like anger toward one's parents, for instance). To top it off, we were taught – as fundamentalists of all religions are – that to doubt the teachings given by our church or temple is to be tempted by the devil, and all such traitorous thoughts needed to be summarily dismissed.

The lesson of the Kalamas contradicted everything I had ever been taught on this score. The Buddha's injunction to trust my intuition was not only unique, but it had that powerful ring of truth. It was a startling new teaching for me, but it seemed like mature advice compared to blindly holding onto whatever I had been taught as a child. This lesson inspired me to learn as much as I could about intuition and how to better to trust my own. It also gave rise to a process of examining and reevaluating old beliefs that influence my ability to clearly perceive reality.

Trusting one's subjective judgment brings up the general question of truth and whether it is possible to be objective. Physicist Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, a ground-breaking

discovery in the realm of quantum physics, provides some profound insight. It proved how the subatomic activity of particles and waves is altered by the act of observing them. Because of the *observer effect*, nothing can be perceived or accurately measured in a fixed or absolute way.

Extrapolating from this scientific proof of a lack of fixedness in the physical world, we can conclude that nothing – including what we believe – can ever ultimately be proven. This radical idea may seem absurd or even frightening at first (even though he could not refute it, even Einstein had a lot of trouble accepting it), but it's also liberating if looked at from the point of view of intuitive intelligence and creativity.

Now, let's not misunderstand – beliefs are important. Even if they exist within the context of one's limited capacity for knowing, useful *operating assumptions* are necessary to get anything done. Rather than depending upon unchanging articles of faith, however, we can rely upon intuition and *choose* what we believe according to what makes sense to us. In the context of VDM, this is a synergy between what passes the test of logic plausible and what feels right in our gut. In the creative process, intuition is more powerful than convictions – quite the opposite of what we are taught as children by moralistic authorities. In this respect, the VDM paradigm is an exciting call for personal freedom. As biologist Bruce Lipton put it, "I was exhilarated by the new realization that I could change the character of my life by changing my beliefs. I was instantly energized because I realized that there was a science-based path that would take me from my job as a perennial 'victim' to my new position as 'co-creator' of my destiny."⁷⁰

How We Adopt Beliefs

Making observations and forming beliefs is a human being's adaptive response to living in a complex world. A child's mind starts forming opinions about everything that happens almost from birth. This world would be overwhelming if beliefs were not formed to help us make sense of what to expect, how to feel safe, etc. When we are totally dependent, we instinctively trust that our parents

know everything and will take care of us. And we automatically adopt the beliefs and traits of primary caretakers and teachers.

This is the social price of belonging to a family or tribe. As we age, it's easiest to hold onto the beliefs that we were taught when we were too young to know any better. However, if we want to make better decisions for ourselves, we need to be willing to reconsider what we think is true and grow beyond the limitations imposed on us by beliefs that we adopted when we were infants.

Our legal system stipulates that ignorance of the law is no excuse. In a parallel way, ignorance of what you believe is no excuse for the way your life turns out. Therefore, it is incumbent upon mature, self-determining adults to become conscious of and reevaluate the beliefs that were formed in childhood and how we continue to adopt them even now. Of course, it is your right to retain beliefs that were adopted by you at any age, especially if you consciously make the choice to do so. But adults cannot get away with blaming bad decisions on what they were told by parents, teachers, ministers, or bosses just because it is more convenient to do so.

It is imperative to get to know yourself and take full ownership of what you believe as soon as possible. The meaning of your life depends on it.

The Value of Beliefs

Beliefs are important from a practical point of view, even if they are not sacred like dogma-centric religions make them. A debate has raged since St. Paul, in the earliest days of the Christian movement, extolled “faith” as the key to salvation rather than “good works.” Paul was referring to “faith” in the belief that Jesus rose from the dead and trusting that he would redeem his followers. What he originally meant by “works” was the strict observance of Jewish law and the traditional rituals. In fact, St. Paul advocated letting go of the requirement for several Jewish rites (like circumcision) to facilitate his zealous efforts to convert Gentiles.

After the Council of Nicaea (325 CE), “faith” came to mean believing in and adhering to the newly assembled Bible and the Nicene Creed – a codification of beliefs that formed the dogmatic

basis of an organized Christian Church. The process of choosing which books to include in the Bible and the Nicene Creed – the first required “credo” for “believers” – was organized and sponsored by Constantine, the first Roman emperor to endorse Christianity. “Works” eventually came to mean charity and helping others, but in terms of winning the heavenly reward, faith has continued to reign supreme according to Church teachings.

The idea that we are saved on the basis of what we believe and profess to believe – rather than on how we behave or whether we do good things for other people (which even pagans do) – was central to Christianity when it was formed 1,700 years ago, and this position has maintained currency in belief-centric Western religions ever since. According to this point of view, in order to be “saved” from eternal torture, you need to pledge allegiance to stone-age scriptures and orthodox beliefs that are derived from them. Trusting oneself is a sin of pride and must not be allowed lest it lead to “heresy.” Such independence was vigorously discouraged throughout the ages – under the penalty of ostracism or “excommunication,” if not torture and gruesome execution.

Believing something with all your might – and even converting others to accept your articles of faith – does not make what you believe any truer. Taking refuge in orthodox beliefs might make one feel better or more secure, but those beliefs will not contribute to personal fulfillment. Faith is not a magical shortcut.

It is my studied opinion that we are not “saved” by believing. In terms of fulfilling your destiny – your purpose in living – useful beliefs are important in order to make the right moves at the right time, but the believing itself is not what does the trick. Despite promises of eternal life, rigid convictions that can’t stand to be doubted – and a meek acceptance of the suffering they may entail – are not pathways to freedom.

The word “confidence” in Latin means believing in oneself. This is the faith that really helps you to evolve. It encourages you to experiment and take risks that grow you. A belief worth maintaining is one that both makes sense for *you* and actually works for *you*, by supporting your freely chosen value system.

You will become a far better decision-maker if you trust yourself enough to review and upgrade your beliefs throughout your

lifetime. Committing yourself to learning what presumptions are most effective for you, voluntarily putting your faith in them until proven otherwise, and owning your own beliefs is a heroic and self-empowering act of personal responsibility.

A Special Category: Core Beliefs

You may think that you are aware of what you believe, but that is undoubtedly not the case. Some of your operating assumptions have very deep roots. From the day we are born, we do our best to make sense of the world by interpreting things and forming conclusions (i.e., beliefs) that are in alignment with needs for safety and nourishment. Because deep impressions were formed at a pre-conscious age, there is a category of beliefs below your awareness that resist becoming conscious and which can control you for a lifetime. These are referred to in some personal development circles as “core beliefs.”

The tendency to identify with core beliefs is strong because they are unconscious. They feel like a part of you, rather than just one way to look at the world. Our core beliefs are reconfirmed by selective evidence as we focus on events and feedback that seem to support them. We simultaneously ignore evidence that contradicts them. Eventually, the core beliefs are simply accepted as the way things are. As a result, they play a huge role in determining what is possible for us. Because they are invisible to the conscious mind, core beliefs have a negative impact on intuitive receptivity and decision-making without us even knowing it.

Here’s an example of a core belief from my own life. A conclusion that I formed at a very young age was that I needed to be perfect in order to be loveable. This was based on coming to the false conclusion – based on my experience – that love is something that must be earned. This situation created pressure and anxiety, and made me work hard to win a few crumbs of intimacy. I carried this self-limiting assumption and expectation into all my relationships – always trying to be as “perfect” as I could be in hopes of achieving a little bit of love. I only became aware of the pattern and realized how it was holding me back around the age of 29.

Make the effort to become conscious of your core beliefs as soon

as you can. It doesn't matter what experience or teachings gave rise to them. Becoming aware of unconsciously held core beliefs liberates us from being at the mercy of blind spots. The good news is that, whatever your old beliefs are, they can be upgraded to a level of usefulness that will truly help you get what your heart desires.

Upgrading Your Operating Assumptions

It behooves us to make it a habit to question and test *everything* we believe and ascertain whether our beliefs are helping or hindering us. Doubt is not evil, except from a self-righteous, fundamentalist point of view. Doubt has a necessary role to play. We need to delete or upgrade beliefs (like apps on a smartphone) that are no longer up-to-date, realistic, or helpful. We can even try out new beliefs. Consciously trying on new operating assumptions, like a new set of clothes, is what I refer to as "belief engineering."

One of the considerations of belief engineering is practical: How well will a particular belief support a proactive mindset and better decision-making? Use both intuition and logic to figure this out. Even though it may involve some work, consciously reevaluating what makes sense to you and what needs more study is the philosophical requirement for self-actualization, maturity, and wisdom.

Your beliefs control your feelings and choices, so you need to consciously *choose* your own beliefs if you want to direct your own life. No matter what anyone else says – including powerful religious or political establishments that scare people into conforming to their orthodoxy (and their mind control) – you can summon the Warrior archetype to defend your personal boundaries by helping you let go of beliefs that hinder your success and happiness – no matter what anyone else might think. This *especially* includes the belief that we will be damned if we question or dare to doubt our indoctrination. I am reminded of a wonderful saying common to twelve-step support groups: "What you think of me is none of my business."

How to Upgrade Beliefs

Let's take an example of an entrenched belief: "I never follow through on anything, and I am unable to finish what I start!" Carrying such a belief almost guarantees that you will never finish anything in a timely manner. *The subconscious mind is always working to prove itself right, no matter what beliefs it consciously or unconsciously holds.* Thankfully, there is a simple technique for "flipping" a self-defeating belief. First, restate it and convert it to something like this: "I am a capable person, and if I keep working at this step-by-step, I *will* finish this project!" Now, this is a realistic idea that your brain can accept. If you repeat this revised assumption to yourself when the self-defeating belief kicks in, you will begin to approach tasks and projects with more confidence and less stress.

People holding a belief that they are incapable of finishing things were not born with such a thought in their mind. At some point, without realizing it, they formed an explanation in their mind – perhaps according to a relatively innocent but critical remark that a parent made – and accepted it as being true. Then, of course, the powerful subconscious is going to make them live up to it!

Fortunately, recent brain science has disproved the notion that "you can't teach an old dog new tricks." Early neuroscientists believed that the brain was the body's one organ that could not regenerate itself. After a certain age, it was thought, brain cells could only be destroyed. But, with the help of new brain scanning technologies, scientists have now established that the brain has an amazing "plasticity" and remains adaptable for our entire lives. So, no matter how old you are, you can grow new neurons and train your brain for the rest of your life. Discovery and learning need never end. You are not stuck with what you know now.

Belief engineering entails becoming more consciously aware of what you tell yourself, and changing that internal dialog for the sake of better decisions and better results. Once you realize and fully accept that your beliefs and actions are your responsibility, you know that it is okay to change your beliefs. You are an adult. Take responsibility now. *After all, either way – actively or passively – you choose your own beliefs!*