

EMPOWERMENT: How to Overcome Limiting Beliefs

By Phil Bilzon

At the start of 1954, the sporting world did not believe that a human being could run a mile in under four minutes. Such a feat was deemed impossible and beyond human endurance. However, on May 6 1954, the English athlete Roger Bannister became the first person to break the four-minute mile barrier. It was seen as an astonishing achievement in the face of what was a strongly held belief.

Bannister's record is an historical sporting moment, but what is not so widely known is that within the following twelve months, dozens of athletes went on to break the four-minute mile. Bannister had broken a belief in the limit of a human's ability to run at such a pace and, consequently, opened a floodgate. What was once felt to be impossible is, today, commonplace.

'The mind can assert anything and pretend it has proved it.'
DH Lawrence

How did Bannister do this? Research into the psychology of performance has pointed to a link between mind and body. Simply put, what you think and believe will affect the way you behave and perform, and how you will therefore shape and live your life. Bannister refused to work within the confines of the belief of the four-minute mile. His refusal to be constrained by this limiting belief helped him to find the wherewithal to break the record.

So what exactly are beliefs? Beliefs are a set of generalizations we make about others, life in general and ourselves. They are not facts, though we act as if they were fact. Beliefs form our version of reality based on what we feel and perceive about our experiences. There is never any hard evidence to support these feelings. However, we build the results of our experiences into beliefs that become a set of rules by which we conduct ourselves. For example: If I believe that life is not easy, I therefore believe that life is hard. If I believe that life is not free, I therefore believe that life is a prison.

'The thing happens that you really believe in; and the belief in a thing makes it happen.'
Frank Lloyd Wright

Once we have formed a belief, we will continue to live our lives by the rule of the belief. We continue to find 'evidence' to support the belief. A simple exercise in support of this is to set yourself the task of spotting as many red cars as possible. Having spent time counting red cars, try and remember how many other cars of different colours you saw. The chances are you won't remember how many green or blue cars there were. You know there were some, but your attention was drawn to spotting only red cars.

Likewise, how is it that you can hear your name being called in the midst of a crowded and noisy waiting room? Surrounded by so much chaos you still pick out your name because you were focussed on it.

The same 'blinkerredness' is true of our beliefs. We become very good at finding 'evidence' to support our beliefs. Why and how does this happen? It is because of what biological psychology has called the Reticular Activating System, or RAS.

The RAS is a cluster of brain cells that act like a radar system activated by our beliefs or goals. The RAS filters in information that is consistent with what we believe, and filters out anything that does not support our thoughts. Our findings are backed up by self-talk such as 'I knew that was going to happen,' 'That always happens to me.' And 'I'm no good at doing that sort of thing.'

Together, our RAS and self-talk form a comfort zone that represents the limits of our ability, based on our beliefs.

However, there is good news to be found in this limiting cycle. We can actually choose consciously to set ourselves new e ourselves with new, more empowering beliefs.

beliefs. There is a simple process by which we can examine our negative and limiting beliefs and then re-program ourselves. The following presents a simple model to change a self-limiting belief. As you work through the process, write down your findings.

1. State a belief you have that stops you performing at your best ('I can't cold call,' for instance)
2. Write down the self-talk that goes with this belief ('I am useless at this.')
3. Describe the comfort zone this places you in ('Cold calling fills me with fear so I don't include it in my list of skills.')
4. State the opposite of your limiting belief ('I can cold call and feel positive about doing so.')
5. Write down the new and positive self-talk that goes with this belief ('Cold calling is something I can do.')
6. Describe the new and expanded comfort zone this places you in.
7. What is it like having this new belief?
8. Describe how you are behaving when you have this new belief ('I see myself picking up the phone and confidently dialing the number ...')
9. As someone with this new found belief, take a walk and act as if you are living this new belief; become your new belief.

You can also support your new belief by writing down and repeatedly reciting a positive affirmation. An affirmation is a positive statement that says exactly what it is you CAN DO. For example: 'I am a great cold caller and cold call with confidence.'

Roger Bannister re-wrote the commonly held belief held about an athlete's physical, and mental, ability. It was his new belief, along with the appropriate training, that gave him the ability to become the first athlete to break the four-minute mile record.

Breaking out of a limiting belief is like opening a door to another world – a door and world you hadn't until hitherto realized was there.