

## Self Knowledge and Business Success

As you can see from the animation and paper on the home page, a framework for understanding what happens *inside* of other people and *especially inside of us* is critical if one hopes to experience more than unnecessarily *limited effectiveness* in organizations. A simplified illustration may help to elucidate what this means. Imagine a swimmer in a timed two person race who reaches the finish line before his competitor. Unlike familiar matches, each swimmer in this competition carries an invisible five pound weight on each wrist and ankle. If neither swimmer had ever experienced swimming without the extra weights, or was unaware that they were even there (cf. tacit mental models), the competition and victory would likely be experienced by the swimmers as a *normal* measure of their performance level for that event. By virtue of the victory, the winner of this *invisible twenty pound race* would be in a position to compete with winners from other similar competitions. Based on training, skill, and knowledge, record times would be cut shorter and shorter for those events over time. Fans would cheer and be impressed that competitors exhibit such athletic prowess and even experience amazement that times could be cut so short. Finally the best of the best would be identified (i.e. those who moved from good to great) as the winners who search for ways to further enhance their performance continue to amaze fans with their ever decreasing times. If these top competitors had never experienced swimming freely they could never imagine what could be achieved without the burden of extra weights. Perhaps more importantly, they are not even aware that they are not swimming freely!

This example illustrates in simplified form what frequently happens in our personal and business lives on a daily bases. Although we may experience refinement of our ability to operate *effectively* in *our* world, our greater potential remains hidden from us. In some respects this is the human condition, but most of us live far more limited lives than we have to. Our mental models of ourselves and others limit us in at least two ways: 1. we define ourselves too narrowly and do not even entertain the idea that our level of self-knowledge is not objective or realistic but is shaped by our unique

experiences; and, 2. we actively maintain illusions about ourselves and others that require us to restrict if not distort information and respond with self-talk and behaviors that are consistent with what *we believe* about ourselves. In essence, we contribute to what we see and interpret what we see as validation of what we believe.

In many respects the uniqueness of our *family* unit and the trauma inherent in socialization determine how open we are to objective self-knowledge. This in turn influences our awareness of “others” as separate objects. Our culture influences the direction of our human struggle to reclaim our complete selves, but the options that are most appealing to us, and the risks we are willing to take, are ultimately a reflection of our relationship with ourselves. Even the way we respond to a truth is telling. In the words of David J. Lieberman, Ph.D., “*A truth that you acknowledge does not offend. Nor does a lie that you know to be false. Only a truth that you don’t want to recognize as such causes you pain*”

In essence, we are all like the weighted down swimmers to some degree, and required to expend unnecessary (and often depleting) energy to remain at the top of our game. As long as our competition is similarly encumbered we can still successfully compete in our particular *invisible twenty pound race*. But what if our competition ever discovers the weights and realizes that they don’t have to be there. The same feat could then be accomplished faster, easier and more comfortably. In these circumstances we could become painfully aware of the benefit that self-knowledge confers and the value it adds to successful outcomes.

What our mental models do not allow us to see is as important, if not more so, than what we allow ourselves to experience. It’s like having an invisible gate keeper that edits what is allowed in and, which in turn is interpreted based on our tacit mental models. These givens ultimately lead to behavior which is experienced by others based on their models of the world and their place in it. No wonder many of us are exhausted at the end of the day. All of this potentially accessible energy is unavailable for more satisfying creative endeavors because it is used to maintain our subjective self-image and preserve what we believe is possible within that framework. From the

**perspective of our experience, we are responding to reality in a realistic manner and can offer ample evidence of the many good decisions we have made within our constructed context designed to support our rarely challenged beliefs. The problem here is that many of us believe that what we have not discovered in ourselves does not exist, and nothing could be further from the truth.**

**We define who we are by our direct experience which is often based on the application of a very limited fraction of our true potential. Our mental models identify what is possible within their scope but simultaneously blind us from seeing what is possible beyond the psychological blinders developed much earlier in our lives. Our achievement is measured against what we believe about ourselves and our abilities. In other words, our mental models influence what we see, how we evaluate what we see, and based on these determine our performance. When our models are good enough to produce favorable results we persist in that direction. For the fortunate among us however this is not enough. These persons often experience a deep sense that something is missing from their lives.**

**A comparison between self-knowledge and a healthy immune system can offer some clarity. There is no psychological state that is not in some way mimicked by the immune system. In many cases, it is the health preserving immune system rather than the pathogens themselves that generate the most disruptive symptoms. It is the body's striving for health that makes us feel so bad when we experience the flu or a cold virus. Like a chronic illness, our limited access to our unrealized potential prevents full functional access to our multiple capabilities. These disowned parts of us that have the potential to enlarge our access to ourselves often generate symptoms (boredom, exhaustion, distraction, underperformance, etc.) similar to what our immune systems does at a physical level. Here it might be useful to ask ourselves the following question: Do these unwanted states represent a longing for the unrecognized and unacknowledged parts of ourselves that we no longer know?**

**The peculiarity exists that one can see in others only that which is in the self. The more fixed a person's behavior tends to be, the less differentiated are the**

responses they receive from others. Healthy, mature individuals live in a differentiated world where they are constantly offered opportunities to expand their perspective and to challenge their fixed social constructions regarding themselves and others. The freedom that others experience to be creative in our presence, and express fully who they perceive themselves to be, is in the aggregate a measure of our psychological health and maturity; plus, it's also very good for business.

Many of the webinars available in this section are presented by experts in the psychology of business and offer tools and perspectives on how to become more effective business leaders.