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Five Denials of the Human Brain

Generations of human experience have taught us that the five principles discussed in this post are proven keys to success, happiness, and leadership effectiveness. Yet, most of us not only forget, but also flagrantly violate them in our daily interactions with people. We are quick to criticise others when they fail to follow the principles. Yet, when we ourselves are faced with situations that need their application, the brain conveniently goes into denial, and most of us default to the exact opposite and therefore negative behaviors. I describe the principles briefly below, invite you to reflect on the question posed at the end of each, and share a simple approach to train the brain on how to avoid the five denials.

PRINCIPLE 1: Respect must be earned, it cannot be commanded

Recently, an Asian politician traveling in his car reached a tollbooth. When asked to pay the toll, the driver informed the attendant that his boss was a Member of Parliament (MP) and was therefore entitled to pass without paying tolls. Aware of the rules, the attendant agreed but demanded to see the politician's ID before letting the car pass. Enraged by the audacity of a "mere toll booth attendant" demanding his ID, the MP stepped out of the car wielding a gun and threatened the attendant. Later when the CCTV footage of the gun-wielding MP was flashed all over national television, he made this statement in his defense, "I am a MP and therefore deserve to be respected."

Contrast the above with a scene I witnessed almost 20 years ago when I was an entry level professional at an international financial services company. A retired former CEO of the company was visiting the office, and

was making his way to each desk to greet employees. I noticed that as he approached each department, everyone stood up to welcome him. No one sat down until he had left the area even though he repeatedly told people to sit down and continue working. When I asked later why this was the case, I learned that when he was CEO, he took personal interest in each employee's career, made it a point to remember their names, and "was there" for his people whenever they needed him. One co-worker summed it up nicely by saying, "Standing up to greet him is our small way to salute him for the respect he gave us while he was the boss."

Question 1:

Do you earn the respect of your people through your values based behavior, or do you attempt to command it because of your position?



"...a conflict rarely means that for one party to win, the other must lose. Yet, we forget this basic principle when we find ourselves in a conflict situation. Despite what history has told us time and time again, instead of trying to negotiate win-win agreements, we act as adversaries and try to finish off our opponents."

PRINCIPLE 2: There are hardly any zero sum games in life

Whether we like it or not, conflict is a big (and necessary) part of our professional and personal lives. The fact that constructive conflict leads to innovation and overall progress is well known – it is conflict that challenges humans to come up with solutions to pressing problems of society. Equally well known is the fact that in life there are hardly any zero sum games. In other words, a conflict rarely means that for one party to win, the other must lose. Yet, we forget this basic principle when we find ourselves in a conflict situation. Despite what history has told us time and time again, instead of trying to negotiate win-win agreements, we act as adversaries and try to finish off our opponents.

After years of hopeless and bloody conflict over the Israeli occupation of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, when President Sadat of Egypt sat down with Prime Minister Begin of Israel to negotiate in 1978, they were able to find a solution that worked equally well for both parties. Key to their success was the fact that they agreed to act as partners (rather than adversaries) to find a win-win solution. The original problem was: Who keeps the Sinai Peninsula. Once they openly shared their needs and interests – why each country wanted the peninsula – it was clear that Egypt wanted the peninsula back from Israeli occupation because of

sovereignty considerations, and Israel wanted to keep it because of security concerns. Discussions also revealed that they both wanted peace in the region. After they agreed to sit on the same side of the table to find a win-win solution, the re-framed problem became: How can we work together to meet Egypt's need for sovereignty while also addressing Israel's security concerns? Eventually, Israel agreed to hand the peninsula back to Egypt on the assurance that it would become a de-militarised zone ultimately monitored by the United Nations.

This, and countless other examples in business, political and personal life show that most conflict can be resolved in a way that fully meets the needs of both parties. Collaborating with the adversary, however, is a prerequisite for such an outcome. Unfortunately, as well known as this fact is, most conflict remains unresolved because people see zero sums games in conflict even while there are so few of them. In a majority of situations, a win-win outcome is possible.

Question 2:

When in a conflict situation, do you always try to beat your opponents or do you invite them to collaborate on a win-win outcome?

“Contrary to conventional wisdom, forgiveness requires huge inner strength. Those who see it as a sign of weakness are the ones that are weak, not the forgiver.”



PRINCIPLE 3: Happiness and misery are both creations of one’s own mind

From very humble beginnings, John rose to become a very successful trader at a leading investment bank. At a relatively young age, he became Managing Director and head of the equities trading floor of the firm. By any yardstick, he was extremely wealthy and successful. His family and friends were suitably proud of him. However, when he compared himself with a few other more successful traders on the street, he began to feel inadequate. Even though he had already stashed away several millions in investments and bought the best of cars and houses, he felt miserable about the fact that a few others had more than he did. His need to prove himself finally motivated him to initiate trading positions well beyond his limits. Blinded by his ability to read the markets correctly, he was convinced that he would be able to reverse his large positions profitably long before anyone would find out about the limit violations. Unfortunately for him, the markets moved against him and he ended up losing a massive amount of money for his firm. He is now facing criminal charges.

Like John, many of us feel happy or miserable by comparing ourselves to others. In this sense our sources of happiness and misery are both extrinsic, and we have little control over them. A better strategy is to have clarity of personal purpose and values, and to judge the extent of our happiness and success from an intrinsic perspective. How we feel is, and should be, entirely up to us. We don’t need others to decide how we feel. For example, when faced with immense grief, the human mind has the power to choose between self-pity/alcoholism or refocus attention on creating a positive future. Yet, we forego this choice and allow ourselves to go deeper into our misery. The fact is – no one has the power to make us feel bad, only we ourselves do. Conversely, we also have all the power we need to feel good. The question is not about what happens to us, but about how we chose to react.

Question 3: Who controls how you feel – you or other people and events around you?

PRINCIPLE 4: Forgiveness is not a sign of weakness

Throughout history, revenge and violent aggression have prolonged conflict instead of solving it. Yet, the human race refuses to learn from its own experience. When we are attacked or harmed by someone in any way, the natural human instinct is to seek revenge. Why? Because we feel hurt and violated by the unfair act of the attacker. In this situation, it only seems fair to teach the attacker a lesson, right? Wrong!

Imagine if Mahatma Gandhi had the same idea while fighting for India’s independence? His is one of the most powerful examples of leadership in recent history; yet, it is devoid of the use of any violent force or revenge. He fought the might of the British Empire with weapons of mass construction (not mass destruction) like simple truth, humility, non-violence, and forgiveness. The famous quote sums it all: “An eye for an eye will leave the whole world blind.”

Imagine if after serving 27 years of a wrongful prison sentence, Nelson Mandela had ordered revenge. What would South Africa look like today? Instead of using the force of revenge, he used the power of forgiveness to build the foundations of the Rainbow Nation.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, forgiveness requires huge inner strength. Those who see it as a sign of weakness are the ones that are weak, not the forgiver.

Question 4: When you are hurt or harmed by someone, what is your natural instinct? After initial anger and sadness, are you able to reorient yourself towards forgiveness?

PRINCIPLE 5: Humility and empathy form the bedrock of powerful leadership

Since moving back to Asia in 2010, I have been struck by the high power-distance culture in most Asian countries. Be it Malaysia, Singapore, India, Korea or Indonesia, Asians revere authority and never challenge it. A senior person (as defined by hierarchy or age) is neither questioned nor given feedback, even if he is wrong. In our programmes and seminars in Asia we often ask delegates why they don't speak up or provide feedback if they feel strongly about something. Repeatedly, we hear the same answer, "The Boss wants to hear none of it. We tried a few times, only to have our hands bitten off."

Conversely, we ask CEO's and other C Suite executives if they really know what motivates each of their direct reports. Many answer in the affirmative, but based only on their assumptions and not on any deep knowledge about the needs, hopes and aspirations of their subordinates. On being asked a simple question

"When was the last time you sat down with one of your subordinates to ask them," most of them are unable to answer.

In today's increasingly complex world, leaders need to be both humble and confident. They must be humble enough to understand that they cannot create a better future alone. At the same time, they must have confidence in their leadership ability to co-create it with others. Being humble as a leader means making it safe for people to speak up without retribution, and keeping an open mind to admit mistakes or change opinion. Having confidence in one's leadership ability is about practicing genuine curiosity and empathy in order to get to know what really makes people tick.

Question 5: Do you have humble-confidence? How can you develop it further?

So how can one avoid these traps? There are no magic pills, but the following three-step approach helps a lot in re-wiring the brain:

- I. Think about the principles, refine them, and make them a part of your personal belief system.**
- II. Practice using them. Practice, practice, practice!**
- III. Make it a habit to reflect on your behavior each time you violate one of the principles, and visualise doing it differently the next time.**



Over time, the principles will become second nature and the brain will stop denying them. This approach sounds simplistic but it is not. Science now confirms that the brain can change itself. By regularly reminding oneself of these principles, and by repeatedly visualising behavior in accordance with them, new neural pathways can be created in the brain. Current research in Neuroplasticity – the brain's amazing ability to learn new things and form new habits – is challenging the old notion that the brain's ability is fixed and hard to change. In fact it is just the opposite. Neural connections can be re-wired simply by visualisation and practice.

I have seen many people benefit from adopting the five principles, and have observed them getting better at applying them over time. Initially, it is difficult to go into collaboration mode when faced with a conflict. Over time, the brain trains itself to start looking for a win-win outcome right from the word go. Similarly, while it initially seems unimaginable to forgive someone who hurts you, once the brain is re-wired, forgiveness becomes a habit.

So go ahead and re-wire the brain. Because you can!