

A close-up photograph of a man with a beard and mustache, looking directly at the camera. He is holding a safety razor to his face, with the head of the razor positioned over his right eye. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. The text 'Fresh' is written in a large, bold, yellow serif font across the top of his forehead. Below it, the word 'THINKING' is written in a large, bold, white sans-serif font, partially overlapping his forehead and the top of his head.

Fresh THINKING

Cognitive Distortions in Leadership
Nick Wright & Richard Marshall

Introduction

We have a particular interest in psychological dimensions of leadership, learning and behaviour in organisations and have, therefore, decided to frame this short paper in psychological terms, recognising this is one way of approaching leadership, coaching and organisation development (OD) consultancy rather than the single definitive way.

We will offer a framework based on insights derived from cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). Our interest in CBT lies in its focus on helping to correct ‘cognitive distortions’, that is, ways of thinking about things that limit and impact on what a person notices, pays attention to, believes, feels and acts upon.

Cognitive distortions

Cognitive distortions are more likely, or likely to be stronger, when a person is feeling stressed, anxious or depressed.

Picture the leader of an organisation facing significant challenges in the current, turbulent economic climate. Profits are diminishing, she believes she needs to make financial cutbacks and her first instinct is to reduce staff levels because salary costs are one of the organisation’s largest overheads. She feels under pressure from the board to make a decision but doesn’t know what the right thing is to do without damaging productivity or staff morale at this critical time. She lays awake at night feeling worried and, stressed, and calls you in the morning to discuss the situation. What do you say?

Sense of perspective

As a coaching or consultancy strategy, we believe it can be valuable to help leaders explore possible self-limiting distortions as a means of developing their thinking capabilities and discovering new possibilities. The implicit question the coach brings is, 'What's really going on here?' then, through skilful practice, they enable the leader to discover fresh answers.

In this paper, we will look at nine common cognitive distortions and suggest approaches the coach can use to test or address them with leaders. If leaders feel that the coach is empathetic, supportive and on-side rather than offering critical comment from the side-lines, this will increase the likelihood of clear thinking and openness to constructive challenge.

1. Polarised thinking

The leader thinking in black and white extremes will polarise options or see only one way forward. 'We need to do either X or Y'. 'Our only option is to do X.' This kind of either/or mental process can leave the leader feeling trapped between two uncomfortable solutions.

In the example we shared above, the leader may conclude that since staff costs are the largest single overhead, that's obviously where financial savings should be made. It is, however, a logic that could be open to challenge. For instance, what would be the negative impacts of reducing staff at this time; are some posts more critical than others; could recruitment be frozen for a period; where else could cost reductions be made; could the organisation's resources be used differently to increase income etc.

The role of the coach is to help the leader explore the grey areas that are being excluded in their thinking. One way to do this would be to help the leader examine actual evidence for and against the conclusion they have drawn; for example, what is the organisation's actual financial situation; where are the areas of most significant underperformance and what is causing it; who is driving for budget cuts and based on what assumptions; what are the alternatives to budget cuts etc.

2. Predicting the future

The leader thinking in fortune-telling mode is likely to speak about the future in definitive terms, as if he or she is absolutely certain of the outcome of certain events or courses of action. The role of the coach is to help the leader explore alternative future scenarios. One way to do this would be to help the leader recognise their prediction as one possible outcome and to explore possible alternative outcomes; for example, what examples can the leader think of from the past where predictions have proved inaccurate and why did a different outcome occur in that situation; what could they do to test their prediction in this scenario; what could they do to influence a different and desired outcome etc.

3. Predicting the worst possible outcome

The leader thinking in catastrophising mode is convinced that the worst possible outcome will happen. This may be anticipating disaster for their organisation if they doesn't make the necessary financial cutbacks. The role of the consultant is to help the leader explore possible alternative scenarios, assess the scope and scale of the impacts if what they fear does happen and brainstorm possible risk management strategies.

For example, Sally is the Sales Manager of an organisation that is thinking of merging Sales and Marketing. Her fear is that she, along with all her managers, will lose their jobs and be replaced in a streamlined structure dominated by Marketing. The consultant could ask her to consider, on a scale of 1-100, what is the likelihood that what she fears will happen; what would be the impacts if it did happen (e.g. on whom, in what ways, for how long); if it can't be prevented, what could she do in advance to limit its negative impacts.

4. Reading other people's minds

The leader operating in mind-reading mode is likely to feel sure that they know what other people are thinking and feeling. In Sally's case, she may be making assumptions about what the CEO wants; what her fellow leaders believe the right way forward is; what shareholders or other stakeholders (e.g. staff council or trade union) will expect of her in these circumstances; how staff will respond to whatever course of action she decides to take.

The role of coach is to help Sally test her assumptions about what other stakeholders are thinking, feeling and expecting in order to build a more realistic and evidence-based outlook. The coach could invite her to consider, for example: what has the CEO actually said he wants her to do; is what she has heard the definitive view of the leadership team or just of certain members of it; what did they intend her to hear or do as a result of what they said (e.g. was it sounding out an idea, making a suggestion, issuing an instruction); what ideas do other members of the leadership team or other stakeholders have for resolving the current dilemma; what course of action would other stakeholders advise or prefer; how would other stakeholders want her to engage with them in this scenario; what does she need to do (e.g. ask) to find out what others are actually thinking, feeling and expecting?

5. Inappropriate personal responsibility

The leader in over-personalising mode is likely to feel responsible for things or to resolve things that really lie outside of his or her control.

The leader in the first example above might be blaming herself for the organisation's financial predicament as a whole, rather than taking appropriate responsibility for those aspects which do lie within her sphere of influence and allowing others to take responsibility for their parts. On the other hand, leaders may sometimes assume an inappropriate level of responsibility for the organisation's success in the past and fail to notice the contribution of others.

The role of the coach is to help the leader distinguish his or her responsibility and contribution from that of other people or events.

It could be worth using a technique such as mind-mapping to identify key stakeholders (people who have an interest in or influence over the organisation's future) including the leader, then mark their respective responsibilities using a tool like RACI (responsible, accountable, to be consulted, to be informed). Alternatively, they could draw a chart mapping key organisational activities or outcomes against the three Spheres of Influence (things I can control, things I can't control but can influence, things I can't control or influence).

Another useful tool can be to draw two overlapping circles. In one circle, list 'my responsibilities', in the other 'your responsibilities' and where the circles overlap, list 'our shared responsibilities'.

6. Trying to do everything perfectly

The leader thinking in perfectionist mode is likely to believe that things aren't worth doing unless all aspects are done perfectly. They are likely to put themselves and others under considerable pressure and may spend disproportionate amounts of time and effort on minor details. They are likely to be thinking in absolute terms such as 'should', 'ought' or 'must'. They may get locked into searching for the perfect or ideal solution to the organisation's predicament rather than exploring more pragmatic alternatives.

The role of the coach is to help the leader explore his or her assumptions about what is really needed and what a good-enough solution would look like, where 'good enough = good and enough'. One way to do this would be to invite the leader to write down the key things they believe need to happen then help them to distinguish between those aspects that are essential and those which are really a matter of personal preference. The latter areas could be open to discussion, negotiation or creative input from others.

Another way to do this would be to explore potential solutions using Pareto's Principle (80-20 rule).

For example, which 20% of the solution needs to be done perfectly and which 80% could be handled more pragmatically; which 20% of stakeholders are critical to win on side and which 80% are likely to support it anyway; which 20% of potential solutions are real winners and which 80% are nevertheless workable; which 20% of the preferred solution is non-negotiable and which 80% is open to discussion; which 20% needs to be applied immediately and which 80% could be applied later; to which critical 20% of aspects of the change must they commit themselves directly and which 80% could be left or delegated to others etc.

7. Making rash generalisations

The leader who thinks in generalising mode is likely to draw principles or conclusions from limited experience.

Simon is a young HR manager dealing with a particularly difficult negotiation of staff benefits. He tends to use words like ‘nobody’, ‘everything’, ‘never’ and ‘always’, extrapolating to new situations rather than considering the conditions that led to a particular incident or experience.

He is likely to get stuck and create barriers to genuine collaboration. For example, he could be thinking that there’s no point inviting trade union input on options for the way forward because he once had a bad experience with a trade union representative. ‘He never listened, he was only interested in his own agenda, therefore there’s no point in talking with reps.’

The role of the coach is to help the leader test their assumptions.

For example, the coach could invite Simon to consider: how many trade union representatives have you had direct dealings with; has this been an experience you’ve had consistently with trade union reps; have others reported having the same experience with the same trade union rep; can you think of situations where involving trade unions has proved beneficial; have you given the trade union rep feedback on his behaviour and suggestions on what could improve your relationship; have you invited feedback from the trade union rep on your own communication style and what could improve your relationship; is there a different trade union rep you could talk to etc.

8. Focusing on negatives

The leader who focuses exclusively on negatives notices only the things that go wrong and sees the proverbial glass as half empty. They are unlikely to notice or appreciate the positives; the things that have been achieved against difficult odds; the causes for affirmation and celebration. Over time, they may suffer from stress, anxiety or depression or leave others feeling dispirited. Simon may focus so intently on the apparently rigid view of the trade union that he fails to notice signs of trade union support for a shared solution; the hard work and commitment of staff; the flexible resources and competencies at its disposal; its strong brand in a competitive marketplace etc.

The role of the coach is to help the leader gain a more balanced view by helping them to develop awareness of positive dimensions to the situation. Techniques to achieve this could include inviting Simon to write down three positive things that have happened in the organisation as a result of trade union involvement; asking what positive things about this organisation a leader from a competitor organisation might covet if they visited; asking him to consider what competitive advantage his organisation has in the marketplace.

9. Minimising coping resources

The leader who underestimates his or her own coping resources is likely to feel overwhelmed by circumstances and experience changes as threatening rather than positively challenging. They forget what they have done in the past to survive and grow through difficulties and they lack confidence that they can cope with the future.

The role of the coach is to help the leader grow in awareness of their internal and external coping resources and to draw on them to move forward with renewed confidence and strength.

A way to do this could be to invite them to talk about, for instance, particularly difficult challenges they have faced in the past and what helped them to get through (e.g. personal resolve, supportive relationships); to think back to a challenge where they felt they didn't cope well and to notice that they actually survived; to imagine coping well in this situation and to describe what they would be doing, thinking and feeling; to consider what they would advise a friend or colleague facing similar challenges; to consider who they can draw on for support; to decide what actions to take now to work through this challenge positively.

Psychological paradigm

We hope these scenarios stimulate ideas and provide a basic conceptual framework for coaches and consultants interested in working with leaders using a psychological paradigm. Our aim is to illustrate the relationship between a leader's thinking, his or her practice, the impacts on the organisation as a whole and the valuable role a leader-as-peer, coach or consultant can play.

The coach is interested to help the leader to resolve an immediate challenge but also to grow in his or her ability to resolve fresh challenges in the future. We refer to this as leadership capacity building and, in our own practice, achieve this through a combination of consultancy/business partnership, facilitated action learning and executive coaching.

Authors

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