



BELIEF BRIEF

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For more information, read *SHIFT to Professional Paradises: 5 Steps to Less Stress, More Energy and Remarkable Results at Work*

Professional Paradise and Professional Prison have to do with your state of mind – they are outcomes of your internal world more than your external world. So what makes one person see the sky as partly cloudy and another see it as partly sunny? How can one team member perceive that a coworker has a strong work ethic, while her teammate views the same coworker as lazy? Why does one employee think the request for a meeting from the boss is dire, yet another is simply curious?

Why do different people see the exact same event, situation or interaction differently?

Now that's a complex question with a complex answer. Personality, individual preferences and mood are certainly key factors. But I think **the single most important factor in how we view the world is our belief system.**

According to researcher Rogene Buchholz, "Beliefs define the world for an individual and constitute an information system to which a person looks for answers." Beliefs are the foundation not only of our inner world, but also of our actions and reactions in the external world.

Here's a key concept to digest:

YOUR MINDSET → YOUR ACTIONS → YOUR OUTCOMES

Now we're going to expand that principle. When you experience some kind of event or situation (internal or external), that experience either creates a new belief, or confirms or contradicts an existing belief. (The more your experiences confirm your beliefs, the stronger your convictions become about that belief. Conversely, the more your experiences contradict your existing belief, the more likely you are to modify it.) For example, if one of your direct reports misses a deadline on a critical analysis, it might confirm your belief that employees are not responsible. On the other hand, if all your direct reports consistently deliver on their commitments, you would likely start to change your belief about employees being irresponsible.

Your beliefs determine your state of mind, and your state of mind directs your actions, which in turn drive outcomes. Now here is where it gets interesting! Your outcomes are, in effect, events or situations that either create a new belief, or confirm or contradict your existing beliefs. It's an ongoing cycle.





BELIEFS → MINDSET → ACTIONS → OUTCOMES/EVENT/SITUATION→

In the earlier example, the missed deadline confirms your belief and makes you aggravated (your mindset). Your frustration drives you to set strict new rules for getting reports completed on time (your action), which makes your direct reports resentful (the outcome). Despite the new guidelines, your disengaged employees still do not consistently meet deadlines, further reinforcing your belief that employees aren't responsible and the cycle continues!

Our *work* beliefs drive our mindset, actions and outcomes on the job. We all come to work with beliefs that act as a lens through which we see, experience and interpret every event, situation, interaction and circumstance. They are the "why" behind our thoughts and feelings at work.

For example, consider punctuality and its importance (or lack thereof). Margaret's work belief is "Good workers arrive on time or early," while Rudy's work belief is "As long as I do eight hours and get my work done, it doesn't matter what time I get to work." In each case, the belief determines the mindset (be on time vs. okay to be late), which drives the actions (get to work on time/early vs. get to work whenever). If the rules of this particular workplace dictate that either action is fine, then both Margaret and Rudy will likely have positive outcomes, such as being productive and feeling good about their work ethic. These WOWs contribute to a Paradise state of being. This, in turn, reinforces each person's notion that his work belief is correct. See how it plays out?

As you can see from this example, differing work beliefs are the genesis of many problems and conflicts in the workplace. Problems arise when our work beliefs are not in sync with the organization's values and when we have to work with others who we perceive don't have the same work beliefs. If Rudy's tardiness affects Margaret's workload, then they need to create a positive solution that will work for both of them. If Margaret is annoyed but her productivity isn't affected, then she should let it go and *SHIFT* from POW to WOW.

Sometimes, we feel like we're doing more work or better work than our coworkers, and we start to resent them. This "they-don't-pull-their-weight" idea eventually becomes a work belief, and over time, we expect to be disappointed with others' contributions. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Feel familiar?

I hope you're starting to understand why your work beliefs are so important. Do you see how they can have a huge impact on your definition of Professional Paradise, Prison and Parole? That's why it's crucial that you identify your work beliefs, assess their value and consciously choose to change or keep them.



LIGHT UP YOUR WORKFORCE!

Many factors go into our belief system about work. It's interesting to note that even the word *work* is full of extremes. Check any dictionary, and the meaning "employment or a vocation" is typically the first definition. But keep looking, and you'll find references to "toil," "effort" and "success." You know you're in trouble when the basic definition can lead to differing beliefs.

The other inputs that play a role in establishing our work beliefs are:

- ❑ Gender;
- ❑ Cultural background;
- ❑ Age or generation;
- ❑ Upbringing; and
- ❑ Personal work experiences.

We already know that gender is a compelling factor in communication style, relationships, our concept of success, our approach to problem solving, how we define our roles in life, and our notion of work/life balance...just to name a few! Is there anyone who *doesn't* think that gender is a compelling factor in the development of our work beliefs? I didn't think so. Enough said.

Another key element in our work belief system is our ethnicity and the culture in which we grew up. Multi-generational Americans have been ingrained with the concept of the American Dream: work hard and long and you can achieve what you want in life. Perhaps that's why Americans work more hours than their counterparts in virtually every other post-industrialized nation. Americans are all about getting down to business; socializing is done after hours or after the deal is done and the agreement signed. In other cultures, however, establishing trust and building relationships are prerequisites to doing business. People from Asian cultures can be offended by Americans' get-down-to-business perspective. According to Communicaid, a cross-cultural training organization, making decisions is often a slow and thoughtful process in Indian business culture, and disagreement is rarely expressed in a direct manner. Another cultural training organization, Kwintessential, points out that in Middle Eastern countries; more value is placed on one's word than on written agreements.

As the world continues to shrink, we will undoubtedly find ourselves working more often with coworkers, suppliers and customers from other cultures and regions of the world. Cultural beliefs and customs, some of which are centuries old, have an enormous impact on work beliefs.

Our age and the generation to which we belong also play a huge role in our work beliefs. Let's take a look at some generalizations about the three primary generations currently in the workforce and their views of work. Remember, these are



generalizations – each individual's specific work beliefs will differ from others in his or her generation. Don't get hung up on titles or the birth years of each generation. (The "experts" differ on some of these issues.) Just focus on major themes and how they might affect the quality of your and your coworkers' experiences.

Generation Y workers (born after 1980) see value in working faster and better than others to get ahead. They believe their leaders should care about their development and get involved (like their parents did). Creative challenges are viewed as positive. Gen Y people want to be important and have an impact, *right now*. They saw their Baby Boomer parents burn out, so they demand flexibility and work/life balance. They don't mind change. In fact, they thrive on it – just think of video games. Gen Y employees expect lots of feedback and recognition because this is the generation that received trophies as kids for simply being on the team and participating.

Generation X employees (born 1960 – 1980) value diversity, balance, flexibility and fun. As latchkey kids, they learned how to get the job done on their own. They want to be judged by their output, not the hours worked. Direct communication is key for this generation – just say what's on your mind and don't pussyfoot around. These employees' parents were laid off. As a result, they don't always trust their employers, although they do often trust their direct supervisors.

Baby Boomers (born 1943 – 1960) are loyal workers who enjoy interacting with others on teams. They are known to work many hours and coined the phrase, "Thank God it's Monday!" They do, after all, like to learn at work. They learned to be survivors during layoffs and downsizing. Since their parents were from the Veteran generation, they have learned that authority figures have earned the right to be the boss.

A workplace with Gen Y, Gen X and Baby Boomer employees is a perfect breeding ground for diverse work beliefs and therefore conflicting ideas about how and what should be done on any given day. Do you see how a Baby Boomer's Paradise could be a Gen Y's Prison? How one person's WOW is another person's POW?

Most of us have been preparing for a lifetime of work since we started to walk and talk. As toddlers, we read books about firemen, nurses, teachers, business people and ballerinas. We learned about a variety of careers through bright pictures and interesting stories. "What are you going to be when you grow up?" is a question we likely heard many times when we were kids. As a result, most people begin forming certain beliefs about work at a young age.

The messages we received about work continued throughout our school and college years. Our parents and teachers unwittingly planted ideas – some negative, some positive – about work and career throughout these formative years. An exhausted



mother or father who comes home from work day after day complaining about the job, the company, the boss or the coworkers leaves a lasting negative impression on a child.

Recently, I conducted a mini-survey, asking people about their work beliefs. One woman who responded – let's call her Sheila (not her real name) – learned from an early age that work stinks. The message in her house was "you work because you have to," and dinner table conversations frequently revolved around her father's desire to retire and "live the good life." Her father died mere months after retiring from his 30-year position as a manager in the retail industry. Her mother still blames her father's employer for "working the life out of him." Even though he passed away several years ago, these subconscious beliefs drive Sheila's thoughts and actions every day, forming the "mind cuffs" that keep her in Professional Prison. Even when she has a good day, she attributes it to dumb luck and discounts whatever pleasure she finds in her job. This is another example of how our beliefs create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

On the other hand, Pete (also not his real name) learned as a child that work is enjoyable and something to look forward to. His father entertained him and his siblings with stories of the interesting people and exciting places he experienced while on the road as a traveling salesman in the food industry. Pete looks for possibility and abundance, and he expects to live the good life at work. When he has the occasional bad day, he sees it as an anomaly and looks forward to starting out with a clean slate the next morning.

"You can be anything you want to be when you grow up" is a promise we may have heard growing up and perhaps have said to our children. We all want to believe in endless possibilities and limitless opportunities when it comes to our career choices, but this belief often leads to disappointment when career doors close or never existed to begin with. Some careers simply require certain innate talents or strengths in order to be successful.

The final piece in our work belief puzzle is our own work history. As we enter the workforce and begin to have our own positive and negative work experiences, our work beliefs evolve. In many cases, these beliefs are more powerful than the ones we learned growing up because the experiences they're based on likely impacted our emotions, our status, maybe even our wallets. Just the other day, I heard someone say, "You don't get to pick your job. You just need to get one and stick with it." *POW!* Obviously this person has some negative beliefs about choices and flexibility.

My sons both held jobs in their teens, and my husband and I consistently reminded them to be on time, to deliver an excellent product or service, and to be polite and respectful. However, they quickly learned on the job that some people don't deliver on these promises and that everyone isn't always treated the same way. Which message





do you think is more likely to stick with them – the one Mom and Dad told them about or the one they experienced firsthand?

Here's another response I received from my mini-survey about work beliefs: "Treat others with respect! My mother raised me as a single parent. We didn't have a lot of money, and she needed to work. I remember seeing her become physically ill before going to work. There was no love loss between her and her supervisor. She really dreaded going to work and seeing him. As a child, seeing this really got to me. I didn't know much about work, other than it obviously wasn't pleasant. When I started working and then became a supervisor, I promised myself that I would create a work environment where everyone showed respect for one another. I'd share my childhood experiences with my team and let them know my expectations for myself and for them. Several employees over the years have remarked that what I said changed their view about their work life." This is a profound example of how work beliefs affect not only our career choices and work experiences, but also the experiences of those we work with.

All of these different factors and influences – gender, cultural background, age, upbringing and personal experiences – come together to create a work belief system that is the foundation of our work life. In my 25-plus years in the working world, I've seen a number of work beliefs play out. Over time, I noticed patterns and common characteristics, and I broadly grouped these patterns into six core work beliefs. If you're observant, you'll be able to find coworkers, family members and friends who fit into each category.

Belief #1: *Other people are messed up.* Individuals with this belief system feel like a victim of their jobs, and they bring their "baggage" to work every day. They blame others for their aggravations and complain a lot because misery loves company. Listen for them as you sit and wait for a meeting to start. They'll be talking about incompetent people in other departments, wacko customers and bosses who just don't get it. Finger pointing runs rampant: "It's *those* messed up people who are making my life miserable."

Belief #2: *Things could always be worse.* "My boss is a pain, but it could be worse...I could have crummy coworkers or a really bad commute." For some, this line of thinking helps to put things in perspective and to make them feel better. They convince themselves to put up with problems and annoyances by imagining worst case scenarios. They aren't at the bottom of the work-belief chain, but they still see the glass as half empty...or maybe even broken. They're just glad they haven't stepped in the broken glass.





Belief #3: *They call it work for a reason.* People in this category might say things like, "My job is okay. It's a job." Don't expect them to dance to work or smile all day – they're busy working. Their belief is that you get paid a decent wage for an honest day's work. "Don't expect me to act like I own the place because I don't." "I'll give my all for eight hours; then I'm off until tomorrow. Got it?" These individuals expect work to be unpleasant and tough, and they usually aren't disappointed. They're often right at the expense of being happy.

Belief #4: *Show up and good things will happen.* As Woody Allen says, "90 percent of life is just showing up." These people believe that time is on their side, that all they have to do is be present, do their best every day and reap the rewards. As long as they do their job, good things are bound to happen, because after all, a lot of other people don't even "show up." This is a reactive view which is dependent on other people, events and situations. It takes responsibility for success on the job out of the individual's hands and puts it in the hands of fate.

Belief #5: *I work to make a difference.* These people are happy to be doing something that matters. They may not like everything about their job, but that's okay because they are there to make things better for others. A teacher who expands a student's knowledge feels she is making a positive difference. A nurse who speeds up a patient's healing has impact. A business coach who helps a client increase sales says, "My job has value." These people want to make a difference, and they do – not necessarily because of the career or job they choose, but because of their outlook and perspective. They are actively involved in creating a work environment that has a positive impact on those around them, and hence, themselves.

Belief #6: *I live the good life at work.* These people are in control of their destiny. They take charge, work hard, wake up happy and make enough money to stop worrying about paychecks every week. They are in the driver's seat and are stepping on the gas. They cause the world to work for them because they are flexible and adaptive in their perspectives and action. These folks are the envy of others who wonder how they got so "lucky." They're not lucky; they've created their own Professional Paradise.

To be sure, this list is not all inclusive, and some people possess combinations of the beliefs. Where do you fit? Which one is closest to your work belief system? Identifying and recognizing your (often subconscious) work beliefs is directly connected to your ability to get to Professional Paradise because it gives you insight into which beliefs you might need to reframe in order to increase your job satisfaction.



Take a few minutes to think about what your work beliefs are. Are they positively impacting your day or holding you back? Do they keep you trapped in Professional Prison or do they help you on the journey to Professional Paradise?

Now that you've increased your understanding of your own work beliefs, it's equally important to enhance your awareness of your coworkers' beliefs and to acknowledge that they are more than likely quite different from yours. Pay attention in discussions and meetings to others' actions and reactions and consider how they might be based on an individualized set of beliefs. You can even ask your coworkers what beliefs they bring to work or start a discussion at a staff meeting. Teams function better and create more synergy when team members acknowledge and respect one another's unique point of view.

Let me intentionally repeat myself: Professional Paradise is *not* dependent on your company, job, boss or salary. It is, however, directly tied to your work beliefs, the drivers of your mindset and your actions. Your work beliefs are the bars that keep you locked in Prison or the blue skies and sunshine that provide the backdrop for your Paradise.

Meghan, a friend of mine, isn't sure she believes in living the good life at work. It sounds good, but she isn't sure if it will be worth the effort. She grew up with two working parents who worked to live. They went to work without complaining, but never talked about the joy in their jobs. This contributes to her sustained skepticism that Professional Paradise exists.

Let me now ask you the most important question of all: **Do *you* believe it's possible to create Professional Paradise and live the good life at work?**

The answer to that question is crucial because the *SHIFT* Strategies won't create change for you if you don't believe that Paradise is possible. You have to believe – like the audience in the movie *Peter Pan* must believe when Tinkerbell gets sick. There's a scene where the audience must clap their hands if they believe. Only then will Tinkerbell get better. The same thing applies to your work beliefs. You must truly believe that you can live the good life at work, or you'll never get to Professional Paradise. Why? Because **what you believe is what you receive!**

If you're already a believer, great! If not, that's okay too. There's nothing wrong with being skeptical. In fact, convinced skeptics often become the biggest believers. I challenge you to finish this book and then come back to this all important question. I'm willing to bet you'll be a believer.

