

THE SUBTLE WAY YOUR CHILDHOOD AFFECTS HOW YOU LEAD

by Glenn Williams



We all enter adulthood with thought processes and behaviours learned and adopted from childhood. This is true of every person, whether in a leadership role or not. Children learn and absorb lessons about life through overt teaching by people in their world – parents, grandparents, teachers, peers – and through more subtle ways by observing how others “do” life and interact with each other and the world. These subtle lessons often reveal themselves in adulthood when we find ourselves expressing behaviours and thought patterns that have roots in our childhood and adolescent experiences.

How we are raised, for better or worse, shapes who we are, how we think, and ultimately how we lead.

How we handle conflict, for example, was more than likely shaped by how we experienced conflict growing up, rather than what was explicitly taught. If our families were conflict avoidant, passive aggressive, or outright confrontational, this will shape how we approach conflict in the relationships in our personal lives and in the workplace. The same can be said for personal ethics. Perhaps you were taught to win at all costs, that the end justifies the means. Or maybe you were raised to consider how your actions impact those around you. The ingrained lessons about conflict, money, relationships, and ethics learnt in childhood turn into our personal scripts as adults, and these scripts influence how we make decisions. The key question is not whether our scripts are “good” or “bad”, but whether they are helpful.

Are your mental scripts helping or hindering your decision-making?

While we have no control over how we were raised or what we were taught, we do have the power to reframe our patterns of thinking. By reframing the negative or challenging experiences that can hinder personal, professional, and organizational growth, we are empowered to create a new narrative, one that we do choose, and one that is more aligned with who we want to be and how we want to lead. Carol Dweck addresses this well in her book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*.² She explores the difference between a *fixed* mindset and a *growth* mindset.

Here are three strategies that can help you reframe your experiences to create mental scripts that will enable you to be more effective in making decisions around your personal, professional, and business goals.

1. Identify limiting beliefs and dysfunctional patterns of thinking

We don't know what we don't know. It's not uncommon that we can be blind to our own patterns of

thinking and believing¹ as we live them out mostly on autopilot each day. Our thoughts direct our actions. Taking the time to stop and reflect on why we behave or think in certain ways is extremely powerful as it takes us off autopilot and puts us manually in charge of where we are going. As you go through a process of identifying patterns that are hindering your leadership effectiveness and growth, remember, we are all affected by our early experiences, and the patterns you've developed are neither good nor bad – they simply are. The question is, are they helping or hindering?

2. Reframe the negative

It is rare for anyone to go through life without experiencing disappointment, failure, and the pain of mistakes at some point in their personal and professional lives. We are all affected and changed by moments or seasons of especially challenging times and lessons learnt the hard way. Instead of shying away from painful experiences, they can be the catalyst for profound learning. Reframing difficult experiences as learning opportunities enables us to have insight into our strengths, values, needs and purpose and can remove previously unseen lenses that cloud our judgement and decision-making abilities.

3. Challenge assumptions and fears that are holding you back

Often, we spend a lot of energy avoiding our fears rather than examining them. Our fears and assumptions about the world are undoubtedly rooted in very real experiences and have good cause for why we believe the way we do. However, have you ever stopped to look at why those fears are present in your life? And what purpose they are serving you? Fears that develop in our early years often no longer serve a positive purpose in our adult professional lives. It's worth looking at what we are afraid of, and why, and if these fears are getting in the way of effective leadership, decision-making, and performance. It might be a little confronting, however creating a new personal script is something an experienced coach or mentor will be able to help with.

What's the bottom line?

Our experiences shape who we are, what we think and how we behave. Examining our mental scripts – the beliefs, assumptions and thought patterns developed in childhood and adolescence – can be a catalyst for positive change. Do your patterns of thinking and behaving help or hinder your growth? You have the power to write a new narrative.

References

- ¹ Shaw, B. R. (2014) *Leadership Blindspots: How Successful Leaders Identify and Overcome the Weaknesses That Matter*. Jossey-Bass, US.²Dweck, C.S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Random House.