

What the human mind can conceive and believe,
it can accomplish.

—David Sarnoff

Inner Leadership:

Mental Strategies for Nonprofit Staff Members

Next time you face a challenge, use these ideas to gain the edge you need.

BY CHRISTOPHER P. NECK & ROBERT F. ASHCRAFT

Jennifer, a manager of Above & Beyond of America (a nonprofit organization specializing in empowering children and young adults with the skills to succeed in life) was having lunch with a volunteer member of her staff, Mary Smith. While waiting for their salads to arrive, Jennifer said, “Mary, I just read a fascinating magazine article. It argued that golfers who imagined making putts before a tournament made more shots than golfers who didn’t mentally rehearse their putts.”

“Yes, I know what you mean. I just read something similar. A newspaper account suggested that marathon runners who talked positively to themselves performed better than those who didn’t. I wonder,” said Mary, “if these techniques would help me as a staff member of a nonprofit organization.”

Nonprofit staff (paid employees and nonpaid volunteers) have a plethora of information available to enhance their effectiveness. However, they often overlook one excellent strategy—self-management of their mental processes. A leading psychologist has written, “One of the most significant findings in psychology in the last 20 years is that individuals can choose the way they think.”¹

ARE YOU AN OPPORTUNITY THINKER?

An example of mental self-management is opportunity vs. obstacle thinking. Opportunity thinkers envision constructive ways to manage challenging situations.

Obstacle thinkers focus on reasons to give up and retreat from problems.

Suppose, for example, that a nonprofit manager assigns two interns to a challenging fundraising project. One intern views the assignment as a chance to showcase her abilities and gain future job recommendations. The other intern perceives the situation as a chance to fail right in view of senior members of the nonprofit. Research shows that the opportunity-thinking intern will try harder and accomplish more than the obstacle-thinking intern.²

Nonprofit World • Volume 18, Number 3 May/June 2000 • Published by the Society for Nonprofit Organizations • 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, WI 53719 • (608) 274-9777 • www.danenet.org/snpo

So the question arises, “How can you become an opportunity thinker?” There are three strategies:

1 Challenge Destructive Beliefs

Life problems stem from dysfunctional beliefs activated by troubling situations. There are 10 categories³ of destructive beliefs:

1. All-or-nothing thinking. You see things as either black or white. If you don’t achieve perfection, you believe you have failed.

2. Over-generalization. You generalize one failure or negative result as an endless pattern.

3. Mental filter. You dwell upon a single negative detail, thus distorting all other aspects of your perception of reality.

4. Disqualifying the positive. Even if something positive happens, you mentally disqualify it from having any importance.

5. Jumping to conclusions. You draw negative conclusions about situations despite a lack of concrete evidence to support these conclusions.

6. Magnifying and minimizing. You exaggerate the importance of negative factors and minimize positive factors related to your situation.

7. Emotional reasoning. You interpret reality based on the negative emotions you experience.

8. Should statements. You use statements to yourself such as *should*, *shouldn’t*, *ought*, and *must* to coerce yourself into taking action.

9. Labeling and mislabeling. You describe yourself, others, or events with negative labels, such as “I’m a failure” or “He’s a cheat.”

10. Personalization. You blame yourself for negative outcomes for which you’re not responsible.

It’s important to confront these dysfunctional beliefs and replace them with rational thoughts. Say that a nonprofit employee is asked to switch from a manual to a computer system of generating reports. He might think, “I’m going to lose my job. There’s no way I can learn to use something so complex.”

This is an example of all-or-nothing thinking. The employee could replace such thoughts with constructive ones, such as “I’ve learned new things before. I can do it again.” This new belief will help him gain confidence and effectiveness.

2 Change Your Self-Talk.

You can also enhance your effectiveness by revising your self-dialogue. In *Talking to Yourself*, Pamela Butler notes that “you engage with yourself in an ever-constant dialogue.... Your behavior, your feelings, your sense of self-esteem, and even your level of stress are influenced by your inner speech.”⁴ Research reveals that you can improve your performance of both mental and physical activities by learning to manage this inner dialogue.⁵ In terms of the earlier example, the employee might have said to himself in the past, “Gosh, I’ll have to exert all this extra effort to learn the new computer system, and I probably won’t get compensated extra for it.” Now he might change his self-talk to, “Once I put in the extra time to become computer literate, my job will be easier, more fun, and more effective, because I won’t have to spend all my time retyping reports.” After he consciously uses such self-talk for awhile, it will become internalized.

3 Manage Your Mental Images.

Before you perform a task, it helps to imagine yourself successfully completing it. Much research in sports psychology, counseling education, clinical psychology, and management suggests that such symbolic experience of results enhances performance.⁶

Returning to our earlier example, the employee could picture himself successfully using a computer to generate reports and enjoying his work even more than before the change. Such positive images tend to be self-fulfilling, just as negative ones are. Thus, if the employee sees himself as threatened by the change, the resulting lack of confidence could lead to the very failure he imagined.

ARE YOU AN INNER LEADER?

You can use the three strategies described above to become an inner leader.⁷ Inner leaders are those who maintain constructive, self-confident

thought patterns. (See Figure 1.) Inner leadership enhances people’s performance and reduces their resistance to change. Since the best nonprofits are the ones that are most responsive to change, you can increase your organization’s effectiveness by introducing all employees to this approach. There are five steps to becoming an inner leader:

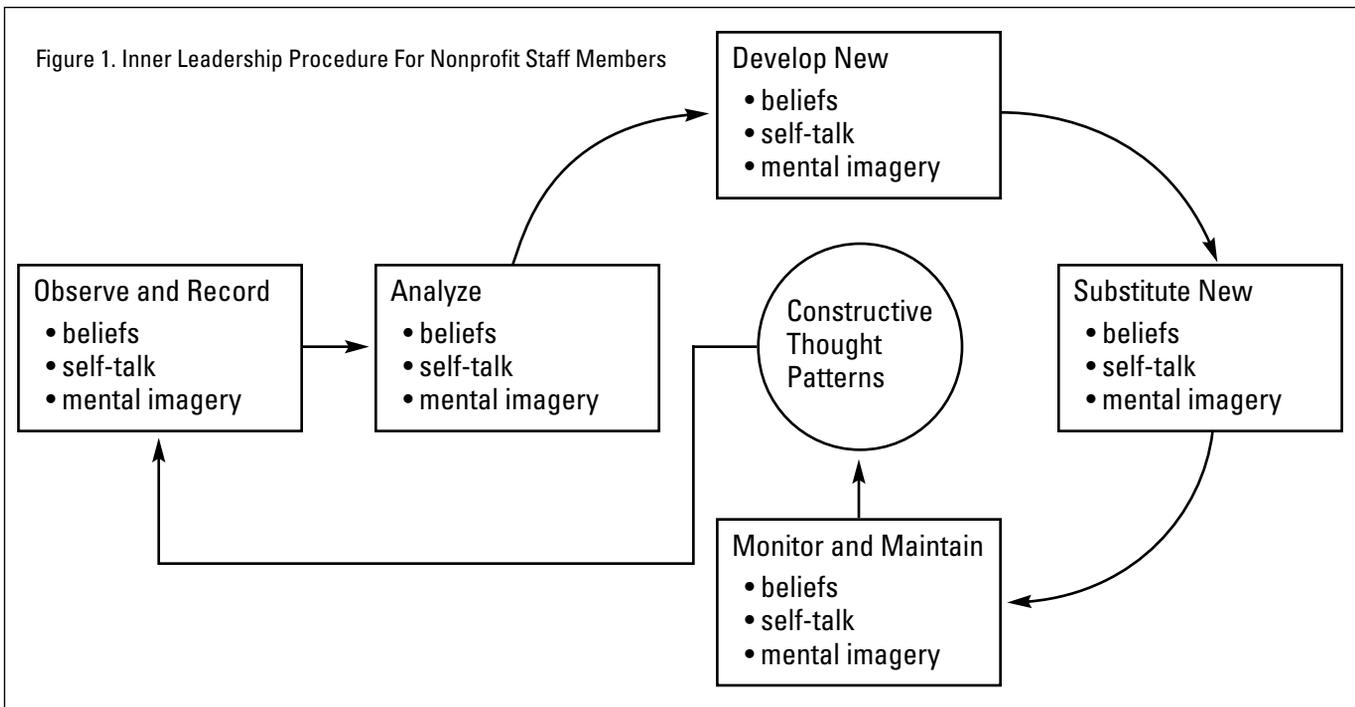
Step 1: Observe and record your beliefs, assumptions, self-talk, and mental imagery patterns.

Step 2: Decide how functional and constructive those mental patterns are.

Step 3: Develop more constructive beliefs, self-verbalizations, and mental images to replace dysfunctional ones.

Step 4: Use the more functional thinking in actual situations.

Step 5: Continue monitoring and maintaining beliefs, self-verbalizations, and mental images over time. Reward yourself every time you use the new thoughts in challenging situations.



To show how you might apply this procedure, let's return to the case introduced at the beginning of this article:

Jennifer liked Mary's idea of applying, in a nonprofit setting, the mental strategies used by athletes. She knew that Mary had an important meeting the following week with a prospective donor, William Buck. Though wealthy, Mr. Buck had a reputation for not being too generous in terms of charitable contributions. Jennifer suggested that Mary use the techniques of self-talk and mental imagery to prepare for this meeting.

Mary began by observing the assumptions, self-talk, and mental images she was using. She wrote down her self-statements for the challenges she encountered the first day. With the insight she gained, she designed some mental strategies that seemed appropriate for her needs. During the next few days, Mary used constructive self-statements to strengthen her confidence. She repeated phrases to herself such as, "I shall succeed; I can communicate in a way to reduce Mr. Buck's unwillingness to give." She repeatedly imagined the meeting, visualizing herself reducing Mr. Buck's resistance to giving and bringing the meeting to a successful close.

Finally, the big day arrived. At first Mr. Buck seemed fidgety, but Mary took control. By asking questions, Mary discovered that Mr. Buck feared how his money would be used. After Mary assured him that his donations would be used for the stated purpose and that records would document this, Mr. Buck became more relaxed and provided Mary with a donation. After completing the meeting and shaking hands with Mr. Buck, Mary rushed to the nearest pay phone and called Jennifer to tell her the good news. "You know," she said, "this talking positively to myself and mentally imagining my success really works!" ■

Footnotes

¹See Seligman, p. 8.

²See Manz & Neck, Neck & Manz, and Seligman in "References."

³See Burns in "References."

⁴See page 1 of *Talking to Yourself: Learning the Language of Self-Support*, by Pamela Butler, 1981 (San Francisco: Harper and Row).

⁵For example, a sports psychology study examined 12 gymnasts competing for births on the 1976 U.S.A Olympic Team. Findings suggest that those who became members of the Olympic team practiced self-talk, while those who failed to make the team did not. Another study found that writers who didn't suffer from writer's block were more likely to practice positive self-talk.

⁶For instance, a study of aspiring counselors demonstrated that mental imagery can lead to successful performance on complex skills such as decision making and strategy formulation. In sports psychology, a meta-analysis of 60 studies shows that mentally practicing a task consistently improves performance on that task.

⁷The theoretical foundation for inner leadership resides in social learning theory, which argues that one's behavior can best be explained by interaction between mental, behavioral, and environmental determinants. Much research supports the impact of mental processes on performance, especially in difficult environmental settings such as an organization laying off much of the workforce. Studies show that inner leadership strategies improve the effectiveness of appraisal raters, educators, entrepreneurs, and internal auditors. Also, a recent training-based field study suggests that employees who participate in inner leadership training improve performance, self-confidence, and mood over those who don't receive the training (see Neck & Manz in "References").

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