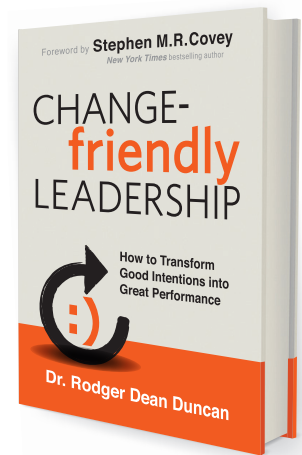


# Section TWO

## BONUS•POINTS



## Don't Believe Everything You Think

By Dr. Rodger Dean Duncan

On a drive along California's central coast I noticed an interesting bumper sticker on the vehicle in front of me: "Don't believe everything you think."

Unlike most bumper stickers, this one caused me to ponder the layers of meaning and even to challenge – well, to challenge my own thinking.

Everything we do is a product of our thinking. Every single act is rooted in a thought. Our thoughts may be subtle or even unconscious, but they nevertheless are at the root of our behavior.

This process can be called our path to action.

Here's how it works. Let's say you're with a group of people and they laugh at you. Based on that observation, you instantly tell yourself a story. It goes something like "They're mocking me. They're ridiculing me. They're belittling my ideas." That story then spawns a feeling, which could range from hurt to anger. You then act on that feeling. Maybe you defend yourself, or go silent, or even get up and leave.

Here's another scenario. You're with a group of people and they laugh at you. Based on that observation, you instantly tell yourself a story. It goes something like "It's really fun to be with friends. That's why we decided to hold this Super Bowl party. They're not laughing at me out of ridicule, but out of friendship and camaraderie." That story then spawns feelings that could range from amusement to outright joy. You then act on that feeling. Maybe you join in the laughter, maybe you poke fun at the other guy. You enjoy the moment.

Do you see the difference? In both instances, peo-

ple laughed at you. But your path to action produced vastly different behaviors, and the critical variable was the story you told yourself. The difference was your thinking.

Some people apparently believe our emotions—our feelings—are imposed on us, that we have no control. Have you ever said something like "He makes me so mad!"? The reality, tough though it may be to swallow, is that nobody can *make* us be mad, or glad, or sad, or anything else. We *choose* our feelings based on the stories we tell ourselves. Then our feelings lead to actions that produce results. If we don't like our results we can challenge our own thinking, because what we *think* is what launches us on our path to action that produces our results.

At first blush, this idea may come across as a touchy-feely mind game. It's not. The ability to improve our results by challenging our own thinking is one of the most powerful skills we can develop. It



can unlock our true potential by freeing us from the constraints of the victim, villain, and helpless stories we often tell ourselves.

Let's see how this can work. First let's look at three thinking patterns that stifle us.

With a victim story we portray ourselves as the innocent bystander. This woe-is-me tale often depicts us as being penalized for one of our virtues: "I was the only one in the meeting with the courage to speak up, and then I got criticized for being too blunt" or "Why did they have to put that guy on my team? Now we'll never meet the deadline."

With a villain story we often use a broad brush to criticize another person or even a group of people: "If the guys from headquarters really understood our business they wouldn't give us a stupid procedure like that."

Then there's the helpless story in which we portray ourselves as powerless: "My teenager is going through one of those phases. I guess I'll just have to endure the silent treatment until she decides to be friendly again."

When we tell ourselves such stories we are true believers. We're certain the stories are accurate. In fact, we become so vested in their accuracy that we often resist anyone's attempt to challenge the stories. Why? Because a primary purpose of such stories is to take us off the hook of responsibility. If we can believe ourselves to be victimized, we're absolved of responsibility. If we honestly believe someone else is a villain (a boss, a co-worker, a spouse), we can focus on his or her foibles instead of our own. And with a helpless story we are, well, helpless. Some of us are even pretty good at telling ourselves hybrids – with elements of victim, villain, and helpless stories all rolled into one.

How do we escape this downward spiral?

First, we must honestly acknowledge that maybe—just maybe—we are telling ourselves such self-justifying stories.



*“Some people apparently believe our emotions—our feelings—are imposed on us, that we have no control.”*

Second, we can honestly ask ourselves three powerful questions that are keys to broader thinking and wider potential.

## Abandoning the Victim Story

When you concede there's at least a chance you might be telling a victim story, ask yourself: "Am I failing to acknowledge my role in this problem?" If one of your direct reports is not performing up to standard, have you missed chances to coach and correct? Were you so preoccupied with "other things" that you allowed a chronic problem to become acute?

The irony of telling a victim story is that we sometimes seem to revel in our misery. We claim to dislike our predicament, yet we may unconsciously embrace the victim role because it absolves us of responsibility. Asking the liberating question—"Am I failing to acknowledge my role in this problem?"—turns us from a victim into an actor. It opens our thinking to all sorts of possibilities.

## Abandoning the Villain Story

If you find yourself regarding someone else as the heavy, you can turn that person from a villain into a human by asking the humanizing question: "Why would a reasonable, rational, and decent person do that?" If you catch yourself thinking "He's not reasonable, he's *not* rational, and he's *not* decent" you're probably still stuck in the victim mode. Just stop and take a deep breath. Why would a senior manager instruct your group to follow procedures that you believe make no sense? Could it possibly be because he has information to which you are not privy? Could it be because he has experience and insights that—at least for him—make the procedures seem absolutely necessary? Sure, the senior manager could be wrong. And so could you.

Asking yourself the humanizing question—"Why would a reasonable, rational, and decent person do that?"—at least influences you to suspend judgment long enough to consider some open dialogue.

## Abandoning the Helpless Story

Finally, when you catch yourself telling a helpless story, turn yourself from powerless to able by asking the simple question "What can I do right now to move myself closer to what I really want?"

Of course you must be clear about what you really want. Let's say you're talking with a direct report about a gap between the performance that's expected

and the performance he's delivering. If what you really want is to impose your will, to remind him that his job security is at your mercy, you'll get a certain result – probably ranging from covert or overt resistance to malicious compliance.

If, on the other hand, what you really want is a relationship of mutual purpose and respect, you should behave in ways that help produce that result: Make it safe to have an honest and open dialogue. Listen carefully to your colleague's concerns. Point out the interdependencies of team assignments. Help your colleague connect the dots between his own performance and the success of everyone on the team, including himself.

The notion of challenging your own stories is not about letting someone else off the hook for bad behavior or poor performance. Challenging your own stories is simply a critical step to help ensure that you have not become part of the problem.

Early warning signs that you may be part of the problem are:

- Being stuck in anger, self-justification, and blame.
- Persistently telling yourself the same story.
- Persistently telling others the same story.
- Resisting others' attempts to challenge your story.

Acknowledge the possibility of your own role in a problem situation. You may not have started the problem, but your action—or lack of action—may be contributing to the perpetuation of the problem.

Consider the probability that there are many plausible interpretations of what you observe. In other words, there are many different stories available to you.

Don't believe everything you think.

PS: There are a number of excellent sources on the mind games we play with ourselves. One of the best—from which I've borrowed some of the ideas here—is the “Master My Stories” material from our friends at VitalSmarts, authors of the bestselling book *Crucial Conversations*.

