

Overcoming Your Stereotypes

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Pattern recognition is a highly developed skill in human beings. It is one of the characteristics that facilitates our development and helps us make sense of the world around us. However, like all strengths it can also have a *downside*. When people are 'judged' based upon patterns or assumptions, it becomes a 'stereotype.' Stereotypes are a belief in a fixed or general pattern that is applied to a general class of people delineated by a common characteristic.

Using patterns can help us navigate in a complex world more easily. However, when we stereotype the people around us, that belief can reduce people to cardboard cutouts, and limit the potential for collaboration and innovation. Stereotypes limit the level of trust that is necessary to effectively work with and influence others in any meaningful way.

In much the same way we stereotype others, each of us has a long history of forming opinions, beliefs and attitudes about ourselves, which have been shaped and reinforced over a lifetime. However, applying these stereotypes to ourselves doesn't allow for reflection or examination of what we think or routinely do. Thus, we continue to act in accordance with the stereotypical beliefs that can be self-censoring and a self-limiting. The author of the "Little Prince" Antoine de Saint-Exupery, said, "*It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.*"

Making our essential 'self' visible, first to ourselves, and then to others, requires challenging our own internal stereotypes. It takes courage and insight to see ourselves as we are, at home, work or in the community, and even greater courage to accept and be at ease with what you find. The Taoist have a philosophy called the *Uncarved Block*; it holds that each of us is perfectly suited to be who we are. And by eliminating the unnecessary bits, you will uncover the strength and beauty of your core being.

We live and work in interdependent communities. Our ability to be successful depends on our ability to eliminate the noise, and to develop a keen sense of awareness of 'self' and to manage our 'self' and our relationships in ways that are situationally appropriate.

- **Develop an Awareness of Your "Self"** – Observe how your stereotypical assumptions influence your actions and the impact they have on those around you. In developing this awareness, you create the opportunity for new ways of seeing and behaving. Remember, "*Beliefs are not facts.*"
- **Take Action** – The most valuable thing you can do is to find a way to say the things that you haven't said, first to yourself, then to others. We exist only in the context of our relationships with others, we only have a "self" to express when someone is there to reflect it or receive it. Take the opportunity to change your beliefs and patterns of behavior, and in doing so, you will profoundly influence your relationship with *yourself* and *others*.

It is a given that *challenging* and *changing* your attitudes and behaviors is the most difficult of thing of all, but as Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "*I find the great thing in this world is not so much where we stand as in what direction we are moving.*"