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# The Cognitive Behavioral Leadership Model

An Overview of the SOMC Approach  
for Improving Leadership Skills

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## Introduction

This white paper introduces a new, practical perspective on leadership: the Southern Ohio Medical Center (SOMC) Cognitive Behavioral Leadership (CBL) model. Developed and implemented in a community hospital in a challenging rural environment, this model is based on the emerging research from cognitive science laboratories around the world as well as behavioral economics and the evidence-based cognitive therapies, which have proven so effective in enabling people with all sorts of unpleasant feelings, disruptive behaviors, and mistaken beliefs to change the way they think, behave, and, consequently, the way they feel. While most leaders do not suffer from mental disorders and this model does not aim to provide “leader therapy,” most sophisticated leaders will immediately recognize the utility of using the results of this paper to lead others more effectively and to reduce the stress in their professional and personal lives (Figure 1).

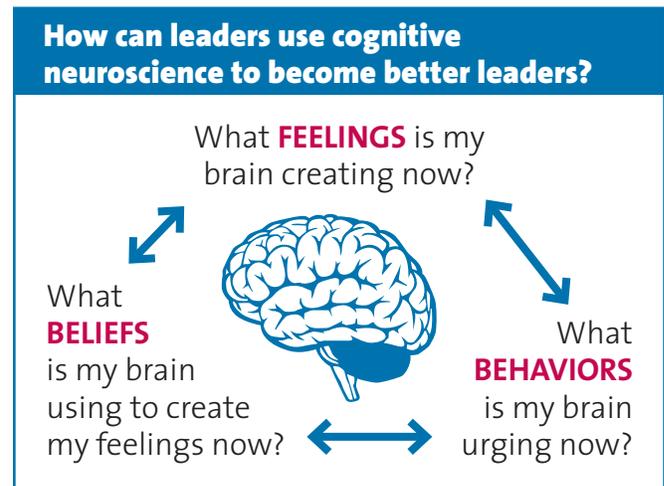
In the sections that follow, I will provide a basic overview of the CBL model that was designed and implemented at SOMC, and I will demonstrate its effectiveness in enabling thoughtful leaders to deal more effectively with those daily challenges that leave so many of them feeling anxious, depressed, and burned out. By including this model in your leadership toolbox and using it to better manage your feelings and behaviors, you will see a big difference in your professional life. Most leaders who have used these methods report that their personal lives improve as well. While the SOMC CBL model offers a helpful perspective and some effective mental strategies based on how the human brain works, applying this model is not easy. It demands a high level of emotional intelligence, considerable willpower, and the self-discipline to do what needs to be done despite how you feel. Bullies (i.e., emotionally immature people and those who are chronically angry and proud of it) will automatically reject this model. Those who persist in blaming others for how they feel and behave will come up with all kinds of reasons for why, “this won’t work for me.” When you hear leaders use that hackneyed phrase, what they really mean is, “I am not willing to do what it will take to make this work.” But, the best leaders will see the value of this model

right away and will start changing what they believe, how they behave, and how they feel. As a result, they will become more effective leaders.

To assist you in understanding and applying the SOMC CBL Model, this white paper will include a series of practical steps you might take to use this model to improve your skills as a leader. In addition, each step is accompanied by a suggested checklist that will assist you in completing that step.

## Describe Your Leadership Problem

When leaders are questioned directly, they will readily admit that they have problems every day, but they are not eager to discuss them. Many leaders, particularly new leaders, mistakenly believe they should be able to solve all of their problems and, therefore, not have any. Most leaders are particularly hesitant to admit their mistakes and leadership failures. To make matters even worse, many leaders believe that even asking for help is a sign of weakness.



**Figure 1 The SOMC Cognitive Behavioral Leadership Model**

The truth is that making mistakes is what leaders do best. The only way you can avoid making mistakes is to do nothing, and this is the worst kind of leadership failure. You cannot avoid problems, nor can you solve all of them. But you can learn from them. Your first step in learning from a problem is to define it clearly.

- **Describe the problem in one simple sentence.** Forcing yourself to use the fewest words possible will help you focus on the essential elements of the problem instead of veering into unhelpful speculation and explanation.
- **Consult detached colleagues.** When you are upset, you usually cannot see the problem as clearly as those who are emotionally detached. Therefore, seek colleagues that are detached from the problem; they can help you figure out how to define the real problem. What you believe is the problem when you are overwrought often turns out not to be the real problem at all.

Here is an example of one of my recurring leadership problems. We naturally fall into wasteful ruts in our lives and work, and we are inclined to mindlessly plod along in them. I will work through this SOMC Leadership Case Study (LCS) entitled, “Stuck in a Rut,” throughout this paper to demonstrate how leaders can use the Cognitive Behavioral Leadership (CBL) model to lead more effectively and decrease the stress in their professional lives.

## Describe the Ideal Leadership Solution

More often, leaders know exactly what the solution is, but they are reluctant to face it. They realize that the solution to every problem usually involves the leader doing something the leader does not feel like doing. And leaders’ brains are programmed the same way that every other human brain is programmed: We really do not want to do what we do not feel like doing.

The sooner you identify the solution, face up to what you need to do and then do it; the quicker you can learn from the problem and make the necessary changes will decrease the odds the same problem will recur in the future. Use your uncomfortable dread to motivate yourself to stretch and grow as a leader instead of cowering in fear that you will fail.

- **State the obvious solution in the fewest words possible.** If you are honest with yourself, the solution will usually be obvious. Your initial uncertainty is typically a result of facing up to what you know you need to do.
- **Ask for help.** If you really do not know the solution to your problem, ask one of your colleagues. You know from your own experience that you can see the solutions to others’ problems much easier than you can see the solutions to your own.

Here is an example solution to the problem I described above in the LCS: *We will learn how to recognize when we are in a rut, how to get out of it—and how to stay out of it—then we will.*

## Describe Exactly What Happened

Well, what happened is usually embarrassing. Leaders do not enjoy feeling embarrassed and sharing their mortification publicly. And truth be told, speaking openly about one’s leadership mistakes would be a career-limiting error in many organizational leadership cultures. If the executives in a company have deluded themselves that they do not make mistakes, no one else had better make any either. Everyone knows this is nonsense, but sadly, nonsense often rules at the office.

Write down a simple description about what happened. Stick to the facts. Save how you felt, what you thought, and how you behaved for later. It’s important to get this part of the Leadership Case Study (LCS) right. Share your version with the other participants in the event to make sure that you have not already begun “spinning” reality to diminish your discomfort and your responsibility for what happened. Brains are very good at doing that.

- **Relate the facts of the case in as few words as possible.** Those who are hoping to learn from your experience want to know what happened, but they do not have time to read or listen to a transcript.

Here is an example of how I described what happened in the LCS, “*Stuck in a Rut:*” *I worked with two colleagues to arrange for five members of the SOMC Leadership Coaching Group to attend a two-day workshop on leadership strengths in New York. This was the best conference we could find, and it appeared to support our desired outcome to better understand ourselves and our fellow leaders. As the workshop began, my misgivings grew. The first speaker was an unpleasant fellow whom I suspected would rub my colleagues the wrong way. Moreover, the sessions were too basic; this delayed our efforts to find a way to integrate more robust leadership development into the SOMC culture. When I checked with my colleagues at lunch, they confirmed my suspicions that I had made a serious leadership mistake. We decided to suffer through the afternoon before deciding about whether to attend the second day. At the end of the first day, the decision was unanimous. We would leave the conference and find a place to work on this material in a more productive way in our hotel. We succeeded to a remarkable degree. While everyone who had attended previous similar conferences agreed that this was the most challenging and exhausting business trip they had ever taken, it was also the most productive. Afterwards, we concluded we had worked together to transform my leadership failure into a powerful learning opportunity.*

## Accept That You Are the Problem

The brain works overtime to convince its human that she is a lot better than she really is. Leaders are easily seduced by their brains’ efforts to convince them that they are special. After all, doesn’t being selected as a leader mean that the leader is better than everyone else?

No. Based on our traits and behaviors, we leaders are distributed on a bell curve just like everyone else. A few of us are exceptional, and a few of us are truly awful. Most of us are more-or-less average. But this is not a cause for alarm. A group of average people working together as an effective team can achieve great outcomes. However, you will never achieve greatness as a leader by blaming others when things go wrong.

- **Change what you believe.** The best leaders realize it is not their circumstances but their reactions to those circumstances that determines whether they succeed or fail.
- **Take responsibility for how you feel.** Contrary to the common claim, other people cannot make you feel one way or another. Only your brain can do that.
- **Take the blame.** The leader is always to blame. When others do not behave as they should, it’s because the leader did not select the right people for the team, did not clarify his expectations, or did not hold people accountable for meeting those expectations. If you do not accept responsibility for the problem, you cannot solve it. So, it’s always the leader’s fault.

## Embrace the Cognitive Behavioral Leadership Model

The Cognitive Behavioral Leadership (CBL) model goes against the grain. This model demands humility, reflection, and self-discipline. It does not permit leaders to throw temper tantrums and blame others. CBL requires a level of emotional intelligence that many leaders have not mastered. And with so many immature and angry leaders rising to exalted positions of authority where they abuse their power by bullying others, mindless leaders naturally conclude that this is the way leaders are supposed to behave.

A mountain of evidence now supports the conclusion that people are more engaged and productive when they work in the positive and respectful environments created by servant leaders. Servant leaders always embrace the principles of CBL whether they realize it or not. Emotionally intelligent leaders instinctively realize that an emotionally chaotic workplace undermines teamwork and stifles innovation.

- **What is the CBL model?** The CBL model is both simple and complex. It is as simple as adding items to your grocery list and checking them off. It is as complex as the human brain, and the human brain is the most complex thing we know of in the universe. CBL only requires

leaders to ask and answer a few questions. The questions are simple. Finding the answers and changing what you believe and how you behave is much harder. Here are some questions that comprise the foundation of the CBL model:

- **What happened?** Take a few minutes to write down what occurred. Stick to the facts and keep your emotions and editorial comments out of it.
- **How did I feel?** Your feelings are easy to recognize if you reflect on the situation promptly, and if you are willing to accept your feelings nonjudgmentally.
- **What did I do?** Your strong feelings compelled you to behave in certain ways. If you reacted impulsively based on your emotions, you may have made some leadership mistakes. You almost certainly didn't behave as well as you might have had you waited until you calmed down.
- **What beliefs caused me to feel and behave this way?** Answering this question is much harder. This is because our beliefs are mostly unconscious. Based on our experience and training, our brains naturally adopt a variety of beliefs and then use them to create our feelings, which then compel us to behave in predictable ways. Most leaders figure out what they believe by asking themselves what they must have believed to have felt and behaved in the way that they did. When they identify their underlying beliefs, leaders quickly realize their beliefs are often misguided, mistaken, destructive, and just plain wrong. This powerful insight is the engine that drives change, strengthens emotional maturity, and ultimately, fosters leadership growth.
- **What might I have done differently?** With the aid of dispassionate hindsight, you will usually conclude that there are some things you would have done differently.

- **What beliefs do I need to modify to change how I will feel and behave in the future?** This is where the emotionally intelligent leader strikes gold. When you realize you can choose what to believe and that you can reprogram your brain with these more accurate beliefs, it is a life-changing moment. Every leader who achieves this will wonder why it took so long to figure this out. And that leader will wonder why every leader in the world would not want to embrace this powerful CBL model.
- **When I change what I believe and how I behave, how will I feel?** Your feelings will be the last thing to change, but this will be a welcome change when it occurs. You will feel less stressed and frustrated. You will enjoy your work and your life more. And you will decrease your risk of professional burnout.

## Identify Your Destructive Feelings

Every leader's brain is skilled at creating compelling feelings and in convincing the leader that those feelings are normal, justified, and the result of external circumstances. Most leaders take their feelings and these assumptions for granted and then do what they feel like doing without pausing to consider their feelings may be leading them astray.

Identifying your destructive feelings, while reminding yourself that only your brain can create them, is the place you want to start on your journey to become a more emotionally intelligent leader. You should start here because your destructive feelings, particularly unpleasant ones, are easy to recognize. When you begin pulling at the string of your feelings, you will eventually find the beliefs that triggered them and the behaviors that were urged by those feelings.

- **When you realize you are emotionally aroused, write your feelings down immediately.** If you put it off, you will tend to forget how you felt. Other feelings generated by your brain will take their place, and your opportunity to learn from them may be permanently lost.
- **Don't judge your feelings.** Just write them down. This is sometimes challenging since you may feel embarrassed or ashamed about how you felt. Write those feelings down too.
- **Use technology.** Dictate a voice memo or type a few words into your smart phone. This will allow you to return to these feelings from any device in the future. Pen and paper will work, but they are more time consuming and harder to retain and organize.

Here are some examples of the destructive feelings I experienced and recorded in the “Struck in a Rut” Leadership Case Study (LCS). *I felt embarrassed when I realized I was still in the same old passive learning rut. I felt remorseful that I had subjected my colleagues to such inept conference speakers. I felt ashamed that I had invested organizational resources for so little return on investment. I felt disappointed after having expended so much time and energy in business travel. I felt disgusted that, with all my years of experience, I had evidently learned so little. I felt guilty that I had not thought through this decision better.*

## Describe the Feelings You Wish You Had Felt

Leaders usually find it uncomfortable to question their destructive feelings during a leadership challenge. We over-value our feelings, even when those feelings are toxic and counterproductive. It requires some open-mindedness and mental effort to consider how we wish we had felt in that circumstance instead. It demands that we acknowledge that our previous feelings, while seeming legitimate at the time, might not have been the feelings that a more mature leader's brain would have created in a similar situation.

Old Destructive Behaviors	New Constructive Behaviors
I chose to feel <b>embarrassed</b> when I realized I was still in the same old passive learning rut	I will choose to feel <b>proud</b> when I realize that I have created a better learning model.
I chose to feel <b>remorse</b> that I had subjected my colleagues to such an insufferable braggart.	I will choose to feel <b>pleased</b> that each presenter is an accepted part of the SOMC Leadership Team.
I chose to feel <b>ashamed</b> that I had invested resources for so little return on investment.	I will choose to feel <b>gratified</b> that our new leadership learning model is a better way (ABW).
I chose to feel <b>disappointed</b> after having invested so much time and energy in travel.	I will choose to feel <b>delighted</b> when our travel is less arduous.

**Figure 2 Replacing Destructive Feelings with Constructive Feelings**

If you force yourself to reflect on how you might have felt had you reacted differently, you can easily see how different beliefs and behaviors might have triggered more enabling leadership feelings. This realization will help you begin the process of examining your underlying beliefs and behaviors, which is the method leaders use to learn from their leadership mistakes (Figure 2).

- **Identify the opposite feeling from the destructive feeling you experienced.** If you felt insecure, you probably would have preferred to feel confident. If you felt embarrassed, you would surely have rather felt proud instead. If you felt angry, feeling calm would have been better.
- **Consult with a skilled mentor.** You have undoubtedly come across fellow leaders who lead successfully without becoming upset by their daily leadership challenges. These are the leaders you want to learn from. They have learned how to manage their feelings by changing their perspectives and their behaviors.
- **Do not attempt to change your feelings directly.** For all practical purposes, you can only change your feelings indirectly by changing what you believe and how you behave. Be patient. Changed feelings will follow.

Here are some examples of the constructive feelings I hope to experience in the future when I find myself in similar circumstances to those I described in the “Struck in a Rut” Leadership Case Study (LCS) above. I recognized that I could only experience these constructive feelings by changing my beliefs and behaviors. If I do, then I will feel differently next time. *Instead of feeling embarrassed that I have fallen into the same old rut, I will feel proud when I realize I have created an improved leadership learning model. Instead of feeling remorse that I subjected my colleagues to poor seminar instructors, I will feel pleased that I have arranged for more engaged conference speakers. Instead of feeling ashamed that I have invested organizational resources for so little return on investment, I will feel gratified I have found a better way to train fellow leaders. Instead of feeling disappointed that I have required arduous business travel, I will feel delighted when I have arranged for business travel that is both less demanding and more productive. Instead of feeling disgusted that I have learned so little, I will feel accomplished that I have finally reprogrammed my brain and become a slightly better leader. Instead of feeling guilty that I had not thought my decision through better, I will feel satisfied when I realize I have engaged in the critical thinking that is required for successful leadership.*

## Identify Your Old Destructive Behaviors

Most of us feel completely justified in behaving the way we do. This is because the human brain is in the business of creating feelings based on the beliefs our brains have embraced. The feelings our brains generate urge us to behave in ways that are consistent with those beliefs. This means that our brains are naturally inclined to vigorously defend the behaviors that result. Moreover, admitting that one’s behavior may not have been the best is never easy for any leader to accept.

The first step in learning to lead more effectively is to ask yourself whether you might behave in a more constructive way if you had the chance to react to the same circumstances again. Your reflection about the difference between how

you behaved and how you might have behaved will usually make it clear that there were better leadership responses you might have employed. This gap will help you identify the instinctive responses that repeatedly get you into trouble.

- **Describe exactly how you behaved.** Do not allow yourself to be distracted by why you behaved that way at this point, just write down exactly what you did.
- **List all your behaviors.** Be sure to include internal behaviors (e.g., ruminating) as well as external behaviors (e.g., shouting, arguing, venting).

In the Leadership Case Study (LCS) “Stuck in a Rut,” I identified several of my old, destructive behaviors: *I recommended that my colleagues and I attend another national conference, even though we had often returned from such conferences dissatisfied with our learning experience. I recommended that we schedule our working trips—and our personal lives—around sponsor and airline schedules, while we all complained about the intrusions of these inconveniences in our lives. I recommended that we leave worthless sessions, thus admitting that many of those sessions added little value despite their excessive cost. I maintained that our working trips, while costly, added real value overall. While this was true, my choosing to settle for the status quo eliminated the opportunity to find a better way to learn.*

## Describe Your Future Constructive Behaviors

Admitting that we should have behaved better can be embarrassing. In particular, leaders, especially insecure ones, believe they must be perfect to lead others effectively. For these folks, admitting a mistake is the same as admitting they have failed as a leader, and they will be strongly inclined to defend what they did instead of exploring what they might have done better.

Since leaders almost never behave perfectly, every leadership challenge presents an opportunity to learn and to improve. Once you manage to get over yourself and your defensive brain, reflecting on how you might have responded more effectively becomes an enjoyable, satisfying exercise. This is particularly true if you engage in these mental experiments with a group of trusted colleagues. This way, your opportunities for novel ideas are multiplied, and everyone can learn from your previous imperfect responses. Remember this eternal leadership truth: you cannot reasonably expect improved results unless you change what you believe and how you behave despite how you feel (Figure 3).

Old Destructive Behaviors	New Constructive Behaviors
I recommended that our leaders attend national conferences as a group.	I will recommend that, when appropriate, our leaders attend SOMC Leadership Retreats instead.
I recommended that we schedule our working trips around vendors' schedules	I will recommend that we schedule our SOMC Leadership Retreats around our schedules
I recommended that we attend national conferences at vendor-selected venues.	I will recommend that we select our own venues when that is appropriate.
I recommended that we travel according to the airlines' inconvenient schedules.	I will recommend that we drive, four to a car, to make travel more convenient and productive.

**Figure 3 Replacing Destructive Behaviors with Constructive Behaviors**

- **Revisit the destructive behaviors you identified earlier.** Include your mental behaviors as well. Do not forget to mention your rumination if you ruminated. Also, do not assume that everything you did was destructive. For example, you might have taken time to calm yourself before reacting. Taken altogether, your leadership behaviors likely included both destructive and constructive actions. Don't sell yourself too short.
- **Beside each destructive behavior, describe what might have been a more constructive response.** Once you have created some emotional distance from the event, you will be able to see better alternatives easily. Your colleagues can help you with this as well.

In the Leadership Case Study (LCS), "Stuck in a Rut," I identified several more constructive ways I might have behaved in that situation. *Instead of recommending that we attend another expensive national conference of dubious value, I concluded that, in the future, I would recommend that our leaders attend an SOMC Leadership Retreat, if that is appropriate. Instead of arranging our business trips around vendor's schedules, I decided that the next time I would recommend that we arrange our learning around our own schedules. Instead of arranging our travel to accommodate the airlines' schedules, I concluded that we could drive to make our business travel more convenient and productive.*

From these examples, you can see that coming up with more constructive leadership responses is not that hard.

## Identify Your Old Destructive Beliefs

This step is usually the most challenging for leaders. There are many reasons for this. First, leaders are never fully aware of the beliefs that their brains have embraced. Much of what we believe is unconscious. Second, few leaders clearly understand that their unrecognized beliefs are what their brains use to create their feelings. All humans are evolutionarily wired to feel and then act without thinking very much about it. Third, leaders are at war with their brains, which have minds of their own. "Why did I just do that?" is not a question most leaders normally ask themselves. Like most other humans, leaders usually let their instincts call the shots in their lives. And leaders' instincts often lead them astray.

If you do not invest the time and energy to figure out what you believe and how those beliefs are generating your destructive leadership behaviors, you will keep behaving the way you do now, and you will continue to get the same results that you are getting now.

- **Write down the contributing beliefs you recognize.** Some of your destructive beliefs will be obvious if you spend a little time reflecting on them. For example, most leaders mistakenly believe that, “I expect people to see what needs to be done and do it without my having to tell them.” You may believe that, but that leadership belief is badly flawed. That belief, if not replaced with a more accurate belief such as, “I have no right to feel frustrated when others fail to read my mind,” will create unceasing frustration in your professional life.
- **Ask yourself, “What belief would explain how I felt and behaved?”** This question will help you identify beliefs that you would not otherwise recognize. What you discover will surprise and embarrass you—and it will prime your brain to learn and remember something important. We all learn much more effectively—for good and ill—when we are emotionally aroused.

In “Stuck in a Rut,” I identified several destructive, mistaken beliefs that clearly contributed to my leadership failure. Here is one of them. *I chose to believe that listening to a lecture from an expert is the best way to learn.* If I had not believed that, I would not have recommended this learning model. When I examined this widely held belief objectively, I immediately realized this belief is not based on evidence. Research has repeatedly confirmed that action-based learning is much more effective than passively listening to a lecture. Perhaps we all hold onto this misguided belief because passive listening is so much easier.

## Draft Your New Constructive Beliefs

Examining one’s beliefs, challenging them, and then replacing them with more accurate attitudes is hard work. It demands time and a significant amount of mental energy. The human brain prefers easy over hard, the status quo over change, and superstition over science. That leaders do not line up to do this difficult—and sometimes threatening—brain work is not surprising.

Old Destructive Behaviors	New Constructive Behaviors
I chose to believe that <b>listening to a lecture from an expert is the easiest and best way to learn.</b>	I will choose to believe that <b>listening to a lecture may be easier, but it is not the best way to learn.</b>
I chose to believe that <b>attending a conference is the best way to find the experts I require.</b>	I will choose to believe that <b>the experts I need may be just down the hall at SOMC.</b>
I chose to believe that <b>stressful travel to and from a conference adds no value, but is necessary.</b>	I will choose to believe that <b>business travel can be less stressful and more productive at the same time.</b>
I chose to believe that <b>most presentations at conferences are disappointing; we could do better ourselves.</b>	I will choose to believe that <b>we can and will give better leadership presentations ourselves.</b>

**Figure 4 Replacing Destructive Beliefs with Constructive Beliefs**

There is simply no other way to make a permanent change in your flawed leadership behaviors. Unless you replace your destructive beliefs with more constructive attitudes, the next time you find yourself in a similarly challenging leadership situation, your brain will undermine your best intentions to behave differently, and you will find yourself repeating the same old mistakes (Figure 4).

- **Carefully examine the destructive beliefs you have discovered.** Ask yourself whether those beliefs are accurate and whether they are the best guides for how a leader in this circumstance should behave. You will likely be able to describe a more accurate, more constructive belief. Be sure to document this better option in your leadership journal—right beside the destructive version you intend to replace it with.
- **Reinforce the new belief you intend to program into your brain.** Brains do not give up easily. You will find it helpful to post your new beliefs on the wall in your office or, as a throwback to your childhood, to write each of the new beliefs 25 times. When it comes to replacing beliefs, you must beat your brain into submission.

In “Stuck in a Rut,” I managed to replace several destructive beliefs with more constructive beliefs by creating a presentation and giving that presentation many times. I am further reinforcing my new learning by writing this blog series. *Instead of choosing to believe that listening to a*

*lecture from an expert is the most effective way to learn, I have chosen to believe that listening to a lecture may be easier, but it is not the best way to learn. Instead of choosing to believe that attending a conference is the best way to find the experts I need, I have chosen to believe that the experts I need may be just down the hall.*

## Recognize and Manage Your Emotional Arousal

The human brain generates thousands of emotions of varying intensity every day. While our brains allow us to reflect—and to modify to some extent—what we think and feel, most leaders just accept the feelings their brains have triggered and act on them without recognizing or second-guessing their emotional arousal. When a leader's brain creates any strong emotion, it generates an explanation for doing so. Intriguingly, the leader's brain almost never takes credit for the feeling it has invented. Instead, the leader's brain blames something or someone else. Because most leaders accept this mistaken attribution without question, aroused leaders do not even realize what their brains have done to them. This is not surprising. After all, questioning one's brain is tiring, and the guilty brain is not eager to cooperate.

Your feelings drive your behavior. The less you know about which feelings are calling the shots at any given moment, the less control you have over how you behave. You have probably already discovered that impulsive behavior usually gets leaders into trouble. Building the emotional intelligence that will permit you to recognize your arousal and do what needs to be done despite your brain's goading will set you apart. Most people accept their feelings and their brains' explanations for them without question, and they leave the driving to the urges their minds have unleashed. This is why people need leaders—to manage the feelings they are unwilling to manage themselves.

□ **Monitor your breathing and pulse.** These neurological signals are among the first signs that your reptilian brain networks are preparing to override your prefrontal cortex, that is, the part of our brain that sets us apart from other living organisms.

- **Recognize your erupting feelings.** Anger is the most common intruder. Fear and hurt are also frequent visitors to the leader's mind. Resist your natural tendency to deny or minimize your feelings. It is true that all destructive feelings exist on a continuum; anger ranges from mild annoyance to murderous rage. But no matter their intensity, destructive feelings are still destructive and must be contained quickly.
- **Restrain your urges.** This is easier said than done, but the best leaders achieve restraint. If you feel the urge to speak impulsively, speak deliberately or not at all. If you feel the need to opine, keep your opinions to yourself. If you feel the urge to decide on the spot, sleep on it instead. Recognizing your urges is necessary but insufficient. You must learn to automatically resist them as well.

## Create a Checklist for Managing Your Feelings

Feelings are so integrated into how leaders perceive themselves that they rarely see the need to manage them. These complacent leaders view their feelings as, "just the way I am." And because they have achieved a position of leadership, they are even more strongly positioned to view themselves as exceptional already. There is no need to fix what is not broken. Every human brain is a legend in its own mind.

Leaders shoulder two primary responsibilities—managing feelings and tasks. Obviously, you cannot successfully hold others accountable for completing their tasks unless you complete yours on time. Likewise, it is not possible for you to help others manage their feelings until you have learned to master your own. Managing your feelings is the foundation of emotional intelligence and is one of the essential skills every successful leader must master.

- **Recognize when you are emotionally aroused.** Your breathing and heart rate are reliable indicators.
- **Take your feelings seriously.** Your feelings, even when you do not recognize them, drive most of your leadership behaviors.

- ❑ **Don't take your feelings too seriously.** While powerful and compelling, your feelings will often mislead you.
- ❑ **Identify your feelings.** You cannot manage your feelings until you know what they are. They are usually complicated and mixed.
- ❑ **Remind yourself that your feelings are contagious.** The people you lead are looking to you to be the calm one in every emotional squall.
- ❑ **Document your feelings.** If you do not write them down, you will forget them and neglect to manage them.
- ❑ **Accept your feelings.** Your feelings are just what they are; face them and manage them first. Understanding and modifying them comes later.
- ❑ **Don't allow your feelings to call the shots by themselves.** The best leaders use both emotion and reason to motivate themselves and others.
- ❑ **Don't try to change your feelings directly.** It just will not work. Ordinarily, you can only change your feelings by changing the beliefs that triggered them.
- ❑ **Identify the beliefs behind your feelings.** This can be a real challenge, but the payoff is worth the effort.
- ❑ **Give your feelings time to change.** Arousal-driven impulsivity often gives way to regret after the leader has cooled off.
- ❑ **Ignore some of your feelings.** This is essential when something needs to be done but you do not feel like doing it.
- ❑ **Minimize disabling feelings by replacing their underlying beliefs.** Changing what you believe is required if you intend to permanently change how you feel and behave.
- ❑ **Leverage your feelings to motivate yourself and others.** Never let an emotional firestorm go to waste; harness that energy to find a better way and make the change stick.
- ❑ **Consult colleagues with excellent feelings-management skills.** Some leaders are just naturally more emotionally intelligent; learn from them.
- ❑ **Learn to predict your feelings.** If you predict how you are likely to react, you can manage your reactions more successfully.
- ❑ **Grow a thick emotional skin by embracing emotional detachment.** Leadership is a tough business; leader up.
- ❑ **Do not vent your unpleasant feelings.** Many leaders still believe this helps. It does not. It only makes things worse.
- ❑ **Minimize your rumination about your feelings.** If you are wired to ruminate, you probably cannot stop it altogether, but you can definitely decrease the time and energy you invest in this destructive mental activity.
- ❑ **Milk good feelings for all they are worth.** And they are worth a lot!
- ❑ **Do what needs to be done despite how you feel.** Leadership is about doing things that need to be done even when you don't feel like doing them—and persuading others to do the same.

## Create a Checklist for Changing Your Behavior

Changing one's instinctive behavioral patterns is difficult and requires persistent effort. Leaders are often unwilling to pay the price—particularly if they can get away with behaving in ways that feel natural to them. Moreover, many leaders keep longing for others to change and never recognize that they are the ones who need to change. Many leaders spend their professional lives feeling frustrated that people do not meet their expectations instead of recognizing that they cannot reasonably expect that until they have made their expectations clear.

If some of your patterns of leadership behavior are diminishing your effectiveness, you must own those behaviors and invest the time and energy to change them. Good intentions will not cut it. You will need a list of evidence-based strategies to follow.

If you wish to accomplish any goal, you must consistently follow a process that will produce the result you desire. This is especially true if you intend to achieve a lasting behavioral change. The following steps, which have been successfully used by leaders who have succeeded in changing their disabling leadership behaviors, can help you design your own successful behavioral change process.

- **Identify a recurring behavior you need to change.** For example, let's assume that you have decided you must stop crying at work.
- **List the reasons you need to change.** If you cannot make a compelling case to yourself that crying at work is widely viewed as weak and unprofessional, you are not likely to succeed.
- **Explain how you will motivate yourself to persist.** If you intend to succeed, you must prepare yourself for the long haul—that is, the rest of your life. You can learn to resist the urge to cry in the workplace, but the urge will persist.
- **Make a public commitment to change.** A public commitment to stop crying will not make your quest easier, but the social pressure will make it harder for you to not follow through on your commitment.
- **Consult with leaders who have successfully changed their flawed leadership behaviors.** You will need every helpful hint you can find. You can find plenty of leaders who have successfully stopped crying at work. Ask them how they did it. Some of their strategies will work for you as well.
- **List the barriers you must overcome.** It helps to be optimistic; denial, ignorance, and failure to plan are not helpful. Identify the circumstances at work in which you find it hard not to cry. You cannot avoid stressful circumstances entirely, but you can at least be prepared.
- **Describe the new behavior you will use to replace the destructive leadership behavior.** It is much easier to replace a bad habit with a good one than to just stop the bad habit. Taking a bathroom break or excusing yourself to make a phantom call might be better alternatives than dissolving into a puddle in an important meeting.
- **Ask your colleagues to hold you accountable.** Augment your willpower with a team that will not let you off the hook. A knowing look from a colleague in the moment may be enough to bolster your strength to maintain your emotional composure.
- **List helpful mental distractions to employ when your brain undermines your intent.** In the war with your brain, you must find ways to trick your brain into fighting with itself. For example, when you feel your emotions welling up, you might choose to begin writing about the parts of your brain that are creating these feelings.
- **Write down the destructive beliefs that cause your brain to urge bad leadership behavior.** If you have chosen to believe that, “crying publicly means that I care,” you will want to reconsider whether that belief is true.
- **Describe contrasting, constructive beliefs for each of your destructive beliefs.** You may choose to replace the above destructive belief with, “When I cry at work, it is evidence that I am not managing my feelings as a wise leader should.”
- **Write down your new (replacement) constructive beliefs daily for 30 days.**
- **Investing the time to write out the replacement beliefs supporting improved emotional control will help you reprogram your brain and increase your willpower.**
- **Post your new constructive beliefs at home and in your office.** You can increase your emotional intelligence by reminding yourself of your new beliefs and intentions several times during the day.
- **Measure and display your target behavioral results daily with a trend line for an extended period.** Just by recording the times you cry at work over time, you will likely notice a decreasing trend right away.
- **Anticipate failure and learn from it.** Your brain's flawed programming can never be entirely erased, but you can partially replace it with more mature instructions. Slipping back into your mental ruts will remind you how you have improved and provide an opportunity to grow further.

- **Reward yourself for any progress.** Changing bad leadership habits is hard. When you make it through some situation that would have previously reduced you to tears, give yourself a big high five afterwards. You deserve it.
- **Be patient with yourself and others.** Remember, it will take a long time to change your reputation; people will think of you as that leader who contaminated the workplace with your emotions long after you have stopped doing so.
- **Teach others how to change their bad leadership habits.** Helping other leaders change will help to solidify your own changed behavior.
- **Acknowledge the need to change.** You may already realize that your emotional immaturity is not a helpful leadership trait, but it takes a minimum level of emotional intelligence to admit the need to improve that many leaders do not possess. If you don't believe and admit that you need to improve, then you won't.
- **Keep a leadership journal.** It is unreasonable to expect that you will change your deeply ingrained beliefs overnight. There will be small victories and large failures on your reprogramming journey. Carefully making regular journal entries about what helped and what did not will be essential to achieving your goal.

## Create a Checklist for Modifying Your Beliefs

Leaders' brains begin embracing certain beliefs about leadership at an early age. Some strongly held beliefs are the result of experiences, including how they see other leaders behave. Some leadership instincts are genetically determined as part of the leader's temperament. However they are acquired, the beliefs are the reasons why leaders feel and behave the way they do. But all humans, including leaders, are often unaware of the beliefs that guide their lives. And they are particularly reluctant to question what they believe. Brains just believe. They do not like to analyze these beliefs.

There is no other way to successfully reprogram your brain. Changing your underlying leadership beliefs is hard, but you must find a way to replace your destructive beliefs with more effective, constructive beliefs if you want to more successfully lead others. You must persist in following a complicated and uncomfortable process to achieve this. The following list of strategies will assist you in creating your own checklist for reprogramming your brain.

- **Recognize the impact your beliefs have on your leadership behaviors.** If, for example, you pout, refuse to speak, and shun others when you are annoyed, you do so because you likely believe you are entitled to punish and bully others with your anger because you are special.
- **View conflict and emotional distress as opportunities to discover your underlying beliefs.** The way you manage your temper when things do not go your way will reveal both the progress that you have made and how much further you have to go.
- **Work backward from your feelings and behaviors to your beliefs.** That you felt angry and then pouted and refused to speak to those colleagues who irritated you is obvious. What you must figure out is what beliefs inclined you to choose to become angry and behave so foolishly.
- **Embrace the discomfort of unflinching self-analysis.** If you were not so defensive and insensitive, you would not have behaved this way. This means that squarely facing your own mistaken beliefs and their related behavioral shortcomings will be hard for you. Leader up, and do it anyway.
- **Identify your current beliefs.** It is essential that you specify and clarify the beliefs that contribute to your pattern of petulance and pouting. If you do not fully expose those misleading beliefs, you will not be able to root them out and, despite your good intentions, you will fall back into your old rut of being a petty tyrant when things don't go your way.

- **Accept your current beliefs--even if they are embarrassing.** Your first obligation as a leader is to own your beliefs, behaviors, and feelings and stop defending or blaming others for them. This belief that others are to blame for how you feel is one of the most pernicious leadership delusions. You, and you alone, are to blame for what you believe and how you feel and behave. It is more comfortable to blame others, but real leaders refuse to do that.
- **Write your flawed beliefs down.** This is where it starts to get real. After you have gone on the record with yourself and others, you are now accountable. Weak leaders say all kinds of reassuring things in private with no real intent to go on the record or actually follow through. With your destructive beliefs staring you in the face, you will be forced to hold yourself accountable and make some changes—or leave your leadership position—since your failure to change will destroy what little credibility you have left.
- **Make the case for and against what you believe.** Once you see your immature leadership beliefs in writing, it will be impossible to make a compelling case for holding onto them. The case against them will be just as obvious. This is the easiest step in the leader's brain reprogramming project.
- **Invite others to help you identify and challenge your beliefs.** You have grown so accustomed to becoming angry and venting your spleen in the workplace that you may have a hard time seeing what you are doing wrong or why you are doing it. Your colleagues will see right through your defensive blindness. They can help you face the reality that is still eluding you.
- **Work backward from more mature feelings and leadership behaviors to healthier underlying beliefs.** When you face your destructive beliefs honestly, more constructive options will be obvious for each of them. What must the leader who chooses to not become angry and talk behind others' backs in similar situations believe? What must a more mature leader who is unfailingly gracious, even to her enemies, believe?
- **Write down more evidenced-based, alternative beliefs.** Now you will start to see a way out of the impairing leadership rut you have created for yourself. The light will begin to dawn. If you choose to believe what healthier leaders believe in the situations that lead to your repeated leadership failures, you will begin to behave (and eventually feel) the way they do. It will become clear to you that those changes will change your leadership ability (and your life) for the better.
- **Admit you were wrong.** The best leaders admit their mistakes quickly and publicly. There are several reasons you will want to embrace this effective leadership strategy. First, you were wrong. Second, you will enhance your credibility as a leader by admitting it. Third, your public admission will make it harder for you to make the same mistake again. Fourth, you will model the kind of accountability you want to see in others. Finally, making mistakes is how you learn. Everyone makes mistakes every day. Great leaders admit theirs more readily and learn from them more quickly.
- **Make a public commitment to change.** Just saying you are sorry is not enough. You must make a sincere commitment to change and then follow through on your promises. Be sure to include the consequences you will suffer if you fail. "If I continue this emotional bullying behavior, I will not continue in my leadership role."
- **Study and learn with fellow leaders who are pursuing greater emotional intelligence.** The best leaders are always trying to get better. Join a group of leaders in your organization that is determined to push its members through the discomfort of their leadership failures to acquire more effective control of their feelings and behaviors.

- **Begin to change and persist despite how you feel.** If you are going to succeed in your quest to become a more emotionally intelligent leader, you must pursue this goal while feeling very uncomfortable. If, like most leaders on the wrong side of the leadership bell curve, you wait to change until you feel like it, you never will. The best such leaders can hope for is to be dragged along by their more motivated fellow leaders.
- **Wait for your feelings to change.** If you persist in following an arduous brain-reprogramming project like the one outlined in this practical checklist, you will eventually start to feel better. Be patient. Feeling better is just the icing on the cake.
- **Present leadership case studies.** Be open about what happened, how you felt, and what you did. Identify and examine your underlying beliefs. Reflect on and invite counsel about what you might have done differently.
- **Pay careful attention to those leaders with a high degree of emotional intelligence.** These are your colleagues who manage their emotions effectively; they remain thoughtful and positive when others have allowed their feelings to hijack their brains.

Thank you for accepting the challenge of leadership and for your commitment to continuously improve your leadership skills. Leadership looks easy until you try it; new leaders quickly discover that it is a lot harder than it looks. But you can—and must—improve. The CBL model can help you do that.

## Consult with Emotionally Intelligent Colleagues

Because of the Dunning-Kruger Effect, most deeply flawed leaders delude themselves that they are much better leaders than they really are. These are the leaders who disregard this touchy-feely leadership learning nonsense and instead explain that they do not have time for this. They have “real” work to do.

The best leaders are modest and humble. They recognize they still have a lot to learn about leadership. They find joy in their endless quest to improve instead of mistakenly reassuring themselves about how good they are. Those lifelong learners understand that they will learn best from the real leadership challenges in their everyday lives and from colleagues with the same passion for the pursuit of leadership excellence.

- **Join a group that is passionate about becoming better leaders.** If such a group does not already exist in your organization, create one. Do not expect large numbers of leaders to apply. Only the top ten percent of leaders will push themselves to learn and improve throughout their careers. But those who do are precious organizational treasures—they are the possessors of intellectual capital and will be eager to invest in your growth.



**Dr. Stewart** is the Vice President for Medical Affairs and Chief Medical Officer of Southern Ohio Medical Center and the Chairman and CEO of The SOMC Medical Care Foundation, Inc. A Past President of the Ohio Psychiatric Association, he is a Distinguished Lifetime Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association. Dr. Stewart is a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Ohio University College of Osteopathic Medicine, and he still practices psychiatry part-time. He is a former Chairman of the Partnership for Excellence and a former member of the Baldrige Board of Examiners.

### **Some SOMC Leaders' Comments about the CBL Leadership Model**

Successes in leadership are the goal; failures, which are often swept under the rug and hidden from our peers, are where the learning of leadership happens. The Cognitive Behavioral Leadership Model celebrates failures as important learning opportunities. CBL has been essential in my continued growth as a leader, challenging me to focus on my own feelings, thoughts and beliefs, which in turn allows me the opportunity to take ownership of any leadership problem.

**Sarah Porter, DO**

*Senior Medical Director  
Primary Care*

My work in Human Resources is to coach leaders on making behavior expectations clear and managing behavior when not meeting those expectations. In order to change our behavior in a way that we are able to successfully sustain, however, we have to change our brains. The SOMC CBL Model is a framework that facilitates leaders to “dig deeper” into the “why” behind their feelings and behavior, and the beliefs that are at the core. Only when we challenge our current and envision more productive or realistic beliefs can we start the tough road to making lasting improvement in our leadership behavior.

**Vicki Noel**

*VP of Human Resources and  
Organizational Development*

The SOMC CBL model has forced me to evaluate my feelings, which I often suppress, and acknowledge the way in which they impact my beliefs and behaviors.

While the soul-searching and reflection involved can be painful, the model is extremely simple to follow, and the end result is well worth the time and energy invested. I believe that I am better equipped to handle difficult situations in both my professional and personal life because of this model.

**Elizabeth Schmidt**

*Administrative Director  
Revenue Cycle & Treasury Services*