

Becoming a Powerful Leader: Overcoming Challenges

In this lesson, you will:

- Examine how to recognize and address cognitive limitations within yourself and others
 - Assess your relationship with your boss and how it can be improved
 - Evaluate your biases and assumptions to enhance your workplace relationships
-

Table of Contents

Overcoming Challenges

1. Watch: Cognitive Limitations
2. Read: Identifying Assumptions
3. Tool: Recognizing Cognitive Limitations
4. Activity: Identifying Cognitive Limitations
5. Watch: Managing Your Relationship with Your Boss
6. Activity: Managing Your Boss
7. Read: Recognizing the Challenges Facing Your Boss
8. Tool: Best Practices for Overcoming Challenges
9. Final Assessment
10. Lesson Wrap-up

Watch: Cognitive Limitations

As the amount of information we receive on a daily basis continues to reach exceedingly high levels, our brains are processing a lot of information at a rapid pace. For this reason, we commonly rely on heuristics as shortcuts to aid in our decision making. It is important to recognize these shortcuts and the impact they have on our thoughts and actions. Consider this form of unconscious bias specific to managers when you interact with your staff.

Transcript

As a leader, we're exposed to so many data points in a given day. Actually, more data points than our brains can actually process. So what we tend to do is rely on some shortcuts in our decision making just to make sense of all the data points coming at us. And these shortcuts have generally worked well for us in the past, but you want to be aware of them because they can really get in the way of your decisions.

The first one is one we all know and have probably experienced, a stereotype, a generalization of a group of people of which a person is a member. Please pay attention to the stereotypes you may hold. Test your biases with a trusted person because these are not accurate and you never want something like that generalization to impact your

impression of a particular employee.

A second one is called selective perception. And selective perception is when you actually see one salient data point of an employee, and you use that salient point to really create a lasting impression of them. For example, you could have an outstanding sales manager who meets his or her sales goals, brings in so much revenue to your business. But they are a terrible team player. You may not even see the team player aspect of their performance. All you see is that they make their numbers. And it shapes and shades your entire perception of them.

First impression error is, we just tend to do that early on, very quickly upon meeting someone. And believe it or not, we tend to be attracted to people who remind us of ourselves. So you want to pay attention to that as well. When are you drawing conclusions that may not be accurate and when do you do it initially upon meeting someone?

And the last thing I want to mention is this phenomenon called self-fulfilling prophecy. I don't know if you've ever had an employee who you thought was going to be a superstar and you paid all your time and attention on developing them and guess what? They did really well. They became a superstar. Alternatively, have you ever had an employee who you weren't quite sure was going to make it and you didn't invest time and energy in developing them and they didn't make it. Self-fulfilling prophecy is when you have a belief about an outcome and you have a say in making that outcome happen, whether you realize it or not. It happens all of the time as leaders and managers.

We have such a strong impact on our decisions on others. We aren't

even aware of that impact many times. So, be aware of these shortcuts when you take in our decision making. And the best way to overcome it is to find a trusted friend or colleague that you can bounce your ideas off of. I often suggest appointing someone to be your devil's advocate. Someone who will actually push you to defend and test your ideas. And finally ask your employees what they need from you. Learn as much as you can about them, what they're like and I'll bet you'll find most of your employees are probably have more similar than different. But their differences are really what enable them to contribute in meaningful ways to your team.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Read: Identifying Assumptions

Managers filter a vast amount of information

Recognize how filters influence your perception

Evaluate the accuracy of your assumptions

As managers, we take in so much information that it becomes difficult to remember it all. Think about it. You may supervise 20-40 employees or even more. How can you possibly remember your observations about the performance of each person? How can you collect enough data points to draw accurate and fair conclusions? It's tricky to do so, especially because we filter all the information we receive through our own perceptual screens. We use these screens to make sense of the data we observe, based on our age, gender, ethnic origin, and cultural upbringing, and so forth. So, as managers, we tend to rely on shortcuts in our decision making, or rules of thumb, that have typically worked well for us in the past.

These shortcuts can be based on our knowledge or understanding of a group of which an employee is a member (such as age or gender). They can also be based on the most important or crucial parts of the

employee's performance that we observe. The problem, though, is that these shortcuts are not always accurate and, as a result, can lead us to make the wrong decisions as a manager, especially when it comes to understanding what motivates employees.

When trying to understand the perspectives of your employees and lead them in the most effective ways possible, pay attention to these cognitive shortcuts or limitations. Try and see if you are leaning toward one or more shortcuts. Be willing to check the accuracy of your conclusions or decisions. Often it can be useful to check your assumptions with a trusted third party or, better yet, the employee him or herself. If you do so, you will gain a greater understanding of how to understand others and motivate them in powerful ways. You will also become a more thoughtful and careful decision maker. Widening your perspectives and recognizing that your viewpoints can be shaped by these limitations is an essential ingredient to becoming a high-level leader with increasing responsibilities.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Tool: Recognizing Cognitive Limitations

Use the [Recognizing Cognitive Limitations](#) job aid to examine your perspective and decision making.

Our own cognitive limitations influence how we understand people and make decisions. Recognizing these limitations can aid you in overcoming many challenges that leaders face. Your interpersonal relationships, communications, and interpretation of workplace behavior and events can all be impacted by these subliminal factors.

Use the **Recognizing Cognitive Limitations** job aid to help you identify heuristics you may employ subconsciously.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Activity: Identifying Cognitive Limitations

As we examine how heuristics shape our perceptions, it is important to evaluate how we interpret the data we receive. In this activity, you will review three different scenarios where leaders encountered cognitive limitations.

Instructions:

1. Review the leadership encounter for each tabbed scenario below.
2. Use the [Recognizing Cognitive Limitations](#) job aid to help you identify the shortcuts used by each leader described.
3. After you have identified the shortcuts used, select the image on each tab to reveal the answer and compare your response.
4. Select another scenario tab and repeat the steps above until you have reviewed each of the three scenarios.

Scenario 1: James

Scenario 2: Anne

[Scenario 3: Laurette](#)

After contemplating your response, click the icon below to identify the cognitive limitation outlined in this scenario.



James is exhibiting a self-fulfilling prophecy, as his expectations have impacted his interactions with both Eve and Stefan (through what he does and does not do). To avoid this, James could invest time in developing each of his staff members equally.

After contemplating your response, click the icon below to identify the cognitive limitation outlined in this scenario.



Anne is experiencing selective perception, selecting information that supports her individual viewpoint of Pedro while discounting information from others that contradicts her viewpoint. This could impact relationships across her team and damage trust and her credibility as a leader. It could also hinder outcomes with staff—including Pedro—if everyone does not work together. This will likely impact customer satisfaction and overall business outcomes over time, as well.

After contemplating your response, click the icon below to identify the cognitive limitation outlined in this scenario.



Laurette is experiencing the escalation of commitment as she strives to ensure her mail blitz is a success despite the time and investment not yielding the returns she had anticipated. Implementing quality measures in this case (such as reporting to measure progress and anticipate future outcomes) as well as feedback systems (from peers and superiors) would be beneficial in preventing this from happening again. To prevent this from happening to you, you could create a plan of action prior to implementation of an idea that would allow you to assess and act based on outcomes.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Watch: Managing Your Relationship with Your Boss

In addition to managing your team, it's equally important to manage the relationship you have with your boss. Senior leaders want their leaders to take initiative in communicating and developing this relationship. As you lead your team, help solve problems by presenting solutions before an issue becomes large. Professor Walsh explains more.

Transcript

I speak with a lot of top leaders and they've offered me some pieces of advice that I'd like to pass on to you. The first is, they want you to take initiative in your work relationship. They really appreciate it. They're busy people with a lot of responsibilities. So what they said to me was, "I would love it if my managers approached me to determine how should we communicate by what venue and how often?" Take some initiative in ironing that out or figuring that out with your boss.

The second thing they said is that they're there to help you solve problems but they like small problems versus large ones. They don't want to hear about something when it's too late or too out of control. Now a lot of young managers may say to themselves, wow that would be a sign of incompetence or weakness if I approached my boss with a concern that I have. That's just not true. They're there to help you and provide advice and counsel. But what they would like you to do is to

actually approach them with a concern you have as well as your ideas for solving that concern or problem. So come up with some solutions in mind, and don't put it all on them to solve.

Finally, the third thing they said to me was, "we love it when our managers do their jobs well, meet their goals, and are dependable and responsible and develop trust." By doing that, you gain credibility to push your boss a little bit, to take chances, to try out new ideas, even to gain responsibilities in other areas of the operation. So, keep that in mind. You gain credibility when you do your job well.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Activity: Managing Your Boss

How can you begin the process of managing your relationship with your boss? Start by examining how often you assess key factors that impact your relationship using the survey below. Determine how prevalent each statement is for you as you rate the frequency for each element described.

Instructions:

1. Read each of the 10 statements in the survey below.
2. Rate each statement (on a 1-10 scale, where 1 = never, 5 = sometimes and 10 = always) on the degree to which you consistently perform each function described.
3. Scroll down through the survey to ensure you review and rate all 10 statements.
4. Select the arrows in the lower right corner of your screen to advance through each of the 3 pages of this survey.
5. Review the scores for each question and make note of your total score (out of 100). This scoring is not a grade but rather an indicator that you may use to assess your professional relationship with your boss.

After you have completed each question, consider how you will continue to build and enhance this relationship based on the recommendations and findings provided by Professor Walsh.

After rating all 10 statements in the survey above and viewing your total score, click the icon below for more information on your scoring.



If you scored below a 30, it's time to get going. A score of 30–60 is a good starting point, but there are missed opportunities here to strengthen this important relationship. If you scored 60 or above, congratulations. You are being other-centered and using your skills to ensure you are an outstanding manager of yourself. By managing this important relationship well, you are on your way to building even more trust and credibility for yourself.

If all this is new to you, or perhaps you have a new boss, you can and should take the initiative to build this relationship. Start by asking your boss for a meeting where you can solicit his or her expectations and preferred way of communicating. Inquire, for example, about the types of issues or problems your boss would like to be informed about, as well as how and when. And then respect his or her time and energy. Follow up with any requests he or she may have and meet your deadlines. If you cannot meet a deadline, let your boss know as soon as possible so contingency plans can be made. It's even a good idea to offer that contingency when discussing possible solutions. While it's

difficult to admit to your boss you need help or advice, you will likely be relieved to find your boss more tolerant of your mistakes and questions than expected.

Remember, most bosses want to know when issues come up, especially before they grow into even bigger problems. Don't be afraid to ask for your boss's counsel or advice. And finally, always be honest. Few things are most disabling to a boss than having a subordinate whom he or she cannot trust. Dependability and trustworthiness are the cornerstones of strong and lasting work relationships. Building them also provides the currency that enables you to make changes and even offer suggestions and new ideas to your boss.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Read: Recognizing the Challenges Facing Your Boss

Manage your relationship with your boss

Identify the goals and pressures your boss faces

Communicate proactively

Being successful in your position not only requires you to create positive working relationships with those you supervise; you also need to manage upward. Your working relationship with your boss is just as important. While managing your boss may sound manipulative, insincere, or even self-serving, it is central to your ability to link your team with the rest of the organization and secure the necessary resources and support. It is a key part of your job.

It is important to remember that bosses are imperfect people, just like the rest of us. They have good days and bad days, as well as their own sets of stressors and challenges. As such, before meeting with your boss, it can be very helpful to answer the following:

What are your boss's organizational goals or objectives?

What are the pressures he or she experiences from his or her own boss or board?

How does your boss like to work and communicate?

How often does he or she like an update from you?

What are the best times of days and/or best days of the week to communicate with your boss?

When you present problems to your boss, does he or she also like you to have a solution in mind?

At what point before a deadline does your boss like to know a problem is at hand?

Without this information, you can't possibly work in the most efficient and effective ways possible.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Tool: Best Practices for Overcoming Challenges

Use the [Overcoming Challenges](#) job aid as a starting point in assessing your workplace interactions.

Now that you have assessed your cognitive limitations and evaluated your relationship with your boss, it is important that you continue to appraise your workplace assumptions and behavior.

1. When checking your assumptions, you can never go wrong by simply asking someone about the ways in which they prefer to make decisions and work. This is especially helpful when your employees come from different cultures or generations.
2. Keep good notes about the behaviors you observe with your staff. By doing so, you can check your own biases and assumptions. It is difficult to remember employee performance over time, much less last week, so being a detailed observer and record keeper can be helpful, as you double-check your own conclusions.
3. Ask a close, trusted colleague to challenge your interpretations of the behavior and communications of your staff and your boss. In other words, check the conclusions you are drawing from your observations and ask this colleague to question your assumptions.

Use the **Overcoming Challenges** job aid to guide you in your efforts.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Final Assessment

As you have seen in this lesson, recognizing influences and other factors that affect your decision making and behavior is essential to creating an environment where staff and management will collaborate effectively. Complete the following assessment to confirm your mastery of the key concepts presented.

Answer the following questions.

You must answer at least three questions correctly to achieve completion.

You may take this assessment up to three times to achieve a passing score.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Lesson Wrap-up

Some of the most common challenges you will face as a leader will relate to your relationships, both with those you lead and with your own boss. It is necessary to review your assumptions, identify cognitive limitations, and actively manage these relationships. Additionally, with your boss, you should take initiative to communicate and not rely solely on him or her to drive this connection.

In this lesson, you examined interpersonal relationships and the challenges leaders face. You also used tools and an assessment to evaluate your cognitive limitations and the relationship you have with your boss.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)