



Exploring the Reservoirs of Drivers and Blockers (Conscious and Unconscious): Worldviews and Emotions

*...our souls may be consumed by shadows, but that doesn't mean we
have to behave as monsters.
Emm Cole, in the 'The Short Life of Sparrow'*

4.1 WORLDVIEWS

A worldview is “a person or group’s conscious beliefs and conceptions of the world” (O’Brien, 2013, p. 310). People view the world differently based on their own perspectives as well as the focus they put on different entities, problems and rules as individuals and in groups. Schlitz, Vieten, & Miller (2010, p. 19) believe that it “combines beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, values and ideas to form a comprehensive model of reality... encompass[ing] formulations and interpretations of past, present and future”. Worldviews impact the way one perceives and analyzes events, the way one views issues and how one finds solutions to the same. In other words, these influence all facets of the way people comprehend and engage with reality (O’Brien, 2013). As such, worldviews can impact a person’s adaptations to change. They shape the space in which people function, influencing their responses as per their “beliefs and assumptions”.

This is also synthesized and expanded in the work of Carole Dweck (2006) on mindsets, that is, people’s beliefs—conscious as well as unconscious—that they carry about themselves. People with a “fixed mindset” believe that their character, intelligence and ability are fixed, immutable

attributes which cannot be altered. They see inherent intelligence as a predictor of success and challenges as “tests” of their intelligence (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Heyman & Dweck, 1998; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). On the other hand, people with a “growth mindset” see failure as an opportunity to learn rather than a sign of low intelligence. They actively seek input that can translate into learning and action (Blackwell et al., 2007; Heyman & Dweck, 1998; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). These insights are particularly important for business and education.

We contend that worldviews can act as drivers as well as blockers in an individual’s change efforts. When resisting change, a person’s worldviews might be providing a distorted view of reality compared to what they really wish to change. Becoming embedded and subliminal with time, these fixed views can act as blockers. Healthy worldviews, on the other hand, can act as drivers, in helping individuals understand the implications of change, especially when the change is positive and leads to benefits. An example is of individuals whose worldview is an “open approach towards life”, who are lively and receptive to others and different perspectives. These individuals tend to be open to change, approachable, receptive of others’ points of view and acknowledge their own shortcomings. By contrast, a worldview that is “closed and defensive” might act as a blocker. These individuals are less open to criticism, react defensively and tend to be resistant to change.

The notion of worldviews as blockers shares similarities with the concept of “Ontological¹ Constraints” introduced by Erhard, Jensen, & Granger (2011). Erhard et al. (2011) differentiate these constraints into two types: Ontological Perceptual Constraints and Ontological Functional Constraints. Ontological Perceptual Constraints stem from someone’s web of unevaluated views, notions, beliefs, predispositions, prejudices, socio-cultural influences and “assumptions” taken as “truths” about oneself and the world around oneself. These constraints restrict and influence the person’s perceptions of their situations. As such, if someone continues with these constraints (especially during change), then they have to manage the misrepresentation of the situation at hand (Erhard et al., 2011).

¹Ontology refers to our assumptions on the nature of reality and what we think reality is, whether it exists, what its components are and their interdependency.

An example of an Ontological Perceptual Constraint as a blocker we witnessed in one of our executive course participants is that of Steve,² a director in an oil company whose development objective was to be more inclusive with his peers. Steve came from a cultural background where seniority is highly valued, and questioning of authority is unaccepted, resulting in limited communication among managers and sub-ordinates as well as peers. Steve was not open to listening to people who wouldn't communicate in his communication style. Furthermore, he habitually "*used to think ahead and form a view faster than his peers*", as a result of which he spent most of his energy "*defending his view rather than understanding others' point of view*". Steve held a belief that his peers were "*missing the point*", or "maybe" they do not understand what is required to deal with the situation at hand. Steve's "assumption" of "*my way is the optimum way*" acted as a constraint, giving him a distorted picture, influencing his perceptions and behaviors and making his peers less accepting of him.

With regard to "Ontological Functional Constraints", the behavior that results from these can be referred to as a "knee-jerk reaction" (Erhard et al., 2011). Psychologists also call this the "automatic stimulus/responsive behavior", where some stimuli may produce an unavoidable response, which is the automatic way of being and acting. Neuroscientists call many of the Ontological Functional Constraints as "amygdala hijacks"³ (Erhard et al., 2011). When stimulated in a change resistance situation, one's Ontological Constraints and worldview can direct one's being, behavior and actions. These constraints restrict and influence the person's "opportunity set" for their being, behaviors and actions. Therefore, the optimal way of being and appropriate actions are usually not available to individuals (Erhard et al., 2011).

However, one can consciously step in and intervene in these situations (like knee-jerk reactions or amygdala hijacks), which is called a "free won't" by the neuroscientists (Jeffrey & Gladding, 2011). For example, when a thought comes to us insisting that we perform some action, we have the power to say no. This power to veto or negate is the power of free will. Jeffrey Schwartz and Sharon Begley (2002) in *The Mind and the*

²An example from our research (see Sect. 10.1, Example 3).

³Daniel Goleman (1996) introduced the term "amygdala hijack" in his book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. He builds the construct of "amygdala hijacks" on the work of LeDoux (1992) on emotions and the amygdala.

Brain (see pp. 290–322) summarize that “free will” as “free won’t”. The whole idea is to have more conscious thought, an increased awareness, so as to not adhere to one’s worldview or be more accommodative of other worldviews. In the business world, amygdala hijacks are not a rare occurrence and can cause serious damage to people’s reputation and standing, for example, Meg Whitman’s⁴ shoving incident (Stone, 2010) and Steve Ballmer’s⁵ chair-throwing episode (Benjamin, 2014).

As an example, take Andrew,⁶ a senior executive in a consumer goods company, with whom we worked. Andrew was a victim of amygdala hijacks triggered by his worldview. Andrew’s development objective was to “*maintain self-control particularly in conflict situations*”. Andrew had a habit of “*communicating aggressively with peers whenever there was a disagreement*”. His aggressive behavior stemmed from his fear of “*losing control*” and not being listened to. Andrew also held a belief that if he did not respond the way he did, it would reflect “*compromise*”, which according to him displayed “*weakness and lack of leadership*”. This belief acted as a blocker—a constraint, restricting his ability to manage his aggressive emotional reaction in conflict situations.

4.2 EMOTIONS

Emotions are described as “an organized and highly structured reaction to an event that is relevant to the needs, goals or survival of an organism” (Watson & Clark, 1994a, p. 89). Once stimulated, emotions entail a tendency to react in a specific manner, “action tendency”. Smith & Kirby (2000, p. 90) define emotions as “a sophisticated well-being monitor and guidance system that serves both attention-regulatory and motivational functions”. Emotions are not just linked to subjective experiences but expressions that signal an individual’s condition to other people (Leary, Koch, & Hechenbleikner, 2001).

Some scholars (e.g. Feldman Barrett, 2004; Frijda, 2000) use the terms emotions and feelings interchangeably, although we note others (e.g. Antonacopoulou & Gabriel, 2001; Solomon, 2003) differentiate between the two. For example, Solomon (2003) argues that feelings have a physi-

⁴ Former CEO of eBay.

⁵ Former CEO of Microsoft.

⁶ An example from our research (see Sect. 10.1, Example 4).

ological element and tend to be less complex than emotions which are strongly rooted in cognition. In the same vein, Parrott (2002, p. 342) believes emotions encompass a broad repertoire of psychological tendencies, such as “appraisal, readiness to think and act in certain ways, physiological changes, and social signals and dispositions, as well as feelings”. In this book, we will be using emotions and feelings interchangeably.

4.2.1 *Emotions in Our Lives*

Gilbert & Choden (2013) claim that emotions direct people’s lives by guiding their motives. The authors explain this through the example of an individual who wishes to be a world-renowned musician. This individual will put his energy into practicing more often. They will feel positive emotions when they do well in practice and may experience negativity when they don’t; they will experience positive emotions when they get accepted to perform in a concert and frustration when they don’t. Emotions fluctuate in keeping with the status of someone’s motives and objectives. A person’s motives, however, operate on a long-term basis, whereas their emotions tend to be short lived (Gilbert & Choden, 2013).

Emotions play a critical role in the working of the mind and brain in dealing with issues, especially when one is faced with the uncertainties of circumstances (Smollan, 2009), that is, during change. The sense of control that one gets from logically assessing different elements involved in certain situations (i.e. during change) is restricted. As a result of this, one might not even carry out or finish a task. An attribute of change resistance is that the information provided by emotions and the intrinsic world prevails over information that comes from the conscious or from the external world (Bachkirova, 2011).

In psychoanalytical theory, emotions and emotionality are considered to be under the umbrella of “affect” (English & English, 1958, p. 15; Rycroft, 1995, p. 4/46), and though we might be consciously aware of them as they become apparent, what stimulates the “affective impulse” is the mind, the dynamics of which are inaccessible to an individual.

According to Fineman (1993a, p. 3), psychoanalytical and psychodynamic theories are predicated on an approach developed by Sigmund Freud to study emotions as surfacing from the *unconscious* and *hidden* domain of personal anxieties, dilemmas, uncertainties and desires. This is

where we are “unaware of some of our most basic motivations and feelings; they are repressed, pushed from consciousness, because of the anxiety, guilt or shame arising from the events with which they are associated” (Fineman, 1993b, p. 24). This is also similar to mental control, which looks into how people shift from seeking or avoiding thoughts to the suppression or realization of them (Wegner, 1994).

The psychodynamic approaches to studying organizational dynamics highlight a repertoire of emotions which surface when people begin dealing with constructs of identity, power, conflict and, particularly for the purpose of our research, change (Carr, 1999, 2001). Carr (2001) believes that the mechanisms involved in the individual-organization association are innate, mainly unconscious, closely linked to the construction of identity and possess an emotional aspect. He further suggests that change dislocates identity, resulting in anxiety and stress. The psychoanalytical lens with regard to change is also believed to provide valuable knowledge into individuals’ emotional reactions as they are involved in “denial, avoidance and resistance” (French, 2001, p. 485). Antonacopoulou & Gabriel (2001) believe that the psychoanalytical research has concentrated more on uncertainty and unreasonableness. They maintain that individuals try to resolve contradictory emotions during times of change.

4.2.2 *Emotions and Change*

Emotions are also seen as an important element of the unconscious, which is merely delineated as feelings, emotions and thoughts that lie beyond one’s conscious awareness (Matlin, 1995). With regard to change resistance, unconscious processes are seen as defense mechanisms that surface automatically as a reaction to *feelings* of psychological threat and are endorsed by individuals to mitigate negative *emotions* (such as anxiety) (Andrews, Singh, & Bond, 1993), which act as blockers.

Negative emotions (anxiety, in particular, which is core to psychoanalytical theory) do not just result from external threats but may also be intrinsic (intrinsic resistance) to an individual (Bovey & Hede, 2001). This intrinsic resistance usually results by priming of prior events, fears or uncertainties that an individual has faced (Bovey & Hede, 2001). This resistance comes into force as a result of tension between the residents of

the subconscious⁷ (i.e. thoughts, feelings, emotions, etc.) and the new residents of conscious awareness (new thoughts, feelings, emotions and intentions to espouse or act) (de Board, 1978, 1983).

These subconscious influences can impact an individual's behaviors more than conscious influences (Carole & Tavis, 1996; van der Erve, 1990). The patterns in the subconscious are not existing feelings or views in that particular moment or time but rather have been formed with time through recurrences and reinforcements and preserved in memory (Altorfer, 1992). As such, people form numerous intrinsic defense mechanisms to guard themselves from negative emotions such as anxiety (de Board, 1978).

As an example from our research, think about Aaron,⁸ a business head, whose development objective is to increase his self and social awareness, in other words, emotional intelligence. Aaron confesses that he doesn't "*acknowledge his feelings before acting*" and doesn't "*pay attention to stakeholders' emotions*". The emotions that are driving Aaron's behavior and acting as a blocker in his objective of increasing his emotional intelligence include "*fear of becoming less business oriented*" if he pays attention to people's emotions and "*fear of being perceived as manipulative and a politician*".

Another example is Emma,⁹ a seasoned executive in the banking sector. Emma's development objective was to manage her time well and manage her boundaries. She described it this way: "*I want to manage my boundaries. I am open to everyone and everything. As a result, I can't manage my time*". Emma used to "*give in to all requests*" and would find it difficult to take tough but right business decisions if they affected people negatively. The emotions that were blocking her efforts to make the change included her intrinsic feelings of becoming "*unapproachable*" and being perceived as "*proud and arrogant*" if she changed.

⁷Like Freud, we use the terms "conscious" and "unconscious" interchangeably in our work. An interesting article on the use of these terms by Michael Miller (2010) of Harvard Health Publishing can be found at: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/unconscious-or-subconscious-20100801255>

We also recognize that there is debate about the terms in scholarship. For example, Malim & Birch (1998, p. 205) define subconscious as "one level below conscious awareness" and believed that unconscious is "a total lack of awareness" (Malim & Birch, 1998, p. 204).

⁸An example from our research (see Sect. 10.1, Example 5).

⁹An example from our research (see Sect. 10.1, Example 6).

Although emotions can have an adverse impact, making emotions the “scapegoat” for all negative perceptions of a person and separating these from the process of decision-making is not helpful. Agreeing with Guy (2005), “Emotions may sometimes be misleading; but to respond by trying to bleach out thought of their emotional colors is not bright at all”.

The success of the conscious is quite often sabotaged by powerful emotions that can lead to chaos in all major accomplishments (Bachkirova, 2011; Bovey & Hede, 2001). As such, the conscious separates, downplays, controls and takes different steps to guard itself from powerful emotions (as discussed earlier). Emotions might be viewed as resulting from external events and therefore, “the way to be happy is by fixing the world in place so that it does not go awry and upset me” (Claxton, 1994, p. 194).

Emotions, especially positive emotions, can also act as drivers, by managing, stimulating and helping people achieve what is needed. Emotions can enable an individual to solve significant issues when interacting with their surroundings (Leary et al., 2001). Emotions are reflected in events significant to individuals’ welfare, making them concentrate on concerns that necessitate their urgent attention. Certain emotions motivate individuals to embrace adaptive behaviors (Leary et al., 2001), for example, satisfaction, contentment, optimism and so on.

As positive emotions hint at benefits for the individual, while negative emotions act to the contrary, an individual might be inclined toward behavior that is beneficial (Leary et al., 2001). However, we note that the vast majority of research in this area shows otherwise—that people focus on negative emotions (e.g. Bovey & Hede, 2001; Carr, 2001; Frijda, 2000; Huy, 2002). The dichotomy resulting from this research demonstrates the value of exploring both drivers and blockers.

In Emma’s case (discussed earlier), the positive emotions of feeling proud for managing her time well and feeling confident from taking the right decisions (which she surfaced during her exploration exercise) could act as drivers, helping her to accomplish her developmental objective and making the necessary change she wants.

Emotions also form a critical basis of one’s intelligence (Goleman, 2004; Mayer & Salovey, 1997). In the current business world, many organizations are increasingly acknowledging the value and role of emotions and encouraging the development of emotional intelligence in employees (e.g. Palmer, Walls, Burgess, & Stough, 2000; Prati, Douglas, Ferris,

Ammeter, & Buckley, 2003; Scott-Ladd & Chan, 2004). The notion of emotional intelligence demonstrates a shift from simple resentment against emotions to acknowledging their significance. Yet this concept is predicated on the reasoning of the conscious (i.e. intelligence) and not the entire individual. It is centered on the benefits of emotions (Bachkirova, 2011).

Emotions offer distinct views and ways of looking at the world compared to what the conscious has access to. They form a communication channel between the conscious and unconscious (Bachkirova, 2011). Therefore, engaging with emotions is significant for engaging with the unconscious, which can help in overcoming resistance blocker behaviors and accomplishing change with positive drivers. There can also be a relationship between emotions and their somatic expression in the body. This has been seen, for example, in coaching and development work on leadership presence and communication undertaken by one of the authors with senior executives. A range of nonverbal and verbal exercises first expose significant performance gaps (such as an overly closed body, voice articulation problems or ineffective eye contact). Then a series of specific advice is given, and the person tries out direct changes in the movement (to be video viewed later). Beyond the communication coaching, as part of the leadership development debriefing, the person voices their positive emotional response to watching these changes, as well as the emotional concerns they would have if they made these changes to their ongoing presence. In this way, both drivers and blockers can be confirmed and confronted in their development plan.

Emotions form a communication channel between the conscious and unconscious. The success of the conscious is quite often sabotaged by powerful emotions that can lead to chaos and an inability to change. In other words, even if we make a conscious decision to change, we can still get swayed by emotions which can overpower us and can disrupt the entire change process. This is where emotions act as blockers. Emotions, however, act as drivers as well, by managing, stimulating and helping people achieve what is needed and desired. Emotions, however, also form a critical basis of one's intelligence and can enable an individual to solve significant issues when interacting with their surroundings.

As an example, we conclude this chapter with the case of Thomas,¹⁰ an executive, whose developmental objective was to grow his business unit by

¹⁰An example from our research (see Sect. 10.1, Example 33).

utilizing and encouraging “out of the box” thinking. He had previously resisted seeking out group engagement and involvement with innovation decisions, particularly excluding newer or more junior members. Now Thomas routinely conducts meetings with junior associates and managers in his unit to discuss ideas and do brain storming. Because of his friendly and understanding behavior, he tends to give constructive feedback to his juniors, who at times propose nothing new or “out of the box”, but rather general suggestions. Since he started this initiative, about a quarter of the company’s new products have come from their unit, which he sees as a “success” and validation of the initiative. For him, his emotional intelligence including empathizing and seeking out ideas or feedback acts as a driver, helping him accomplish his innovative objective while sustaining employee engagement.

We have seen a significant number of executives where their worldviews (how people perceive and hold beliefs) and/or their emotions are either significant drivers or blockers, and sometimes both. These are both substantial reservoirs and sources to be explored for leadership development change efforts.