

A step-by-step approach to personal leadership development

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Traditional leadership development models and executive education courses have applied the same exclusive, expert-based thinking that underpins programmes like the powerhouse of the MBA to personal and transformational programmes designed to grow effective leadership and business acumen. Now described as 'episodic, exclusive, and expensive' (Moldoveanu and Narayandas, 2019) and increasingly out of sync with the needs of organisations operating in a complex and changeable world, today's leaders require holistic leadership development that understands the systemic nature of leadership while putting personal transformation at the core of the journey.

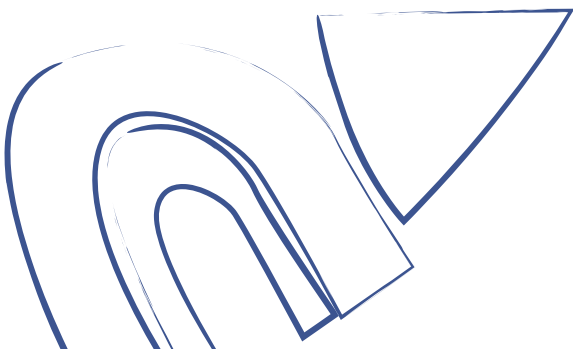


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May this paper touch and empower many more lives and may we all continue to take Key Steps to be the difference that makes the difference.

Abstract

Leadership development holds value for both the organisation and the individual. By facilitating self-awareness, personal growth, and accountability, companies ensure their own long-term success through nurturing attuned leaders who are capable of helping the business and its employees to achieve their goals and strategy. However, many organisations regard learning as a narrow, functional intervention, rather than a multifaceted journey that must focus as much on individual leaders' internal beliefs and thought patterns, as it does on their practical skill sets.

Renowned management theorist Chris Argyris (2008: 7) wrote that, 'The nuts and bolts of management – whether of high-powered consultants or service representatives, senior managers or factory technicians – increasingly consists

of guiding and integrating the autonomous but interconnected work of highly skilled people'. Since the 2020 global pandemic, this core function of leadership has become even more complex as matters of personal well-being and self-actualisation have taken centre stage. This shift is now demanding more from leaders than the management of operational practices. Today, holistic leaders understand that self-awareness and self-development are critical components of their role and that new approaches to leadership development are essential for unlocking the skills and capabilities required by modern-day organisations. The KE³YS framework offers a relevant step-by-step approach to leadership development that recognises personal transformation lies at the heart of becoming an effective leader.

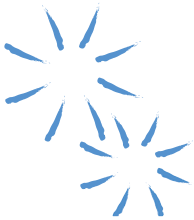
Introduction

A 2015 research report by Gallup (Adkins, 2015) showed that 'about one in 10 people possess high talent to manage. Though many people have some of the necessary traits, few have the unique combination of talent needed to help a team achieve the kind of excellence that significantly improves a company's performance'.

Therefore, few of us are born with the requisite traits and characteristics required of a good manager or leader.

In reality, effective leaders become great by interrogating how they lead; developing strong interpersonal relationships; being a role model for positive behaviour; using praise and other reinforcement mechanisms; operating from a place of self-awareness; and demonstrating confidence in their abilities (McKinsey & Company, 2021). Not only can these abilities be learnt, but they can also be developed within potential leaders and refined among those already in the C-suite by using customised leadership development coaching interventions, such as action learning.

Action learning theory dates back to the work of Argyris and Donald Schön in the 1970s and endeavours to solve real-world challenges faced by either the organisation or the individual, rather than relying on academic answers and models designed to explain the changes impacting the modern world (Leonard and Lang, 2010). Subsequently, Argyris proposed the concept of *double-loop learning*, which looks beyond following operating norms to solve problems (i.e., single-loop learning). Instead, the learner is challenged to question the assumptions, values, and beliefs underpinning possible action strategies (Martins et al., 2017).



The result is a leader with greater levels of self-awareness and self-confidence, capable of exercising the leadership skills required today. Related capabilities include increasingly honed interpersonal skills, more confident decision-making, greater accountability and adaptability, and an ability to understand and interact with colleagues from diverse backgrounds and generations.

Leadership development becomes a holistic and sustainable journey in which transformation is truly enabled, when individuals start challenging their default and long-standing beliefs and perceptions. As much as leaders fine-tune their professional skills and strategic approach to work, they also actively focus on honing and staying true to their personal values, while keeping their mindsets sharp and in sync with the changing world around them.

Holistic leaders invest in themselves and their inner world as enthusiastically as they do in their external world. Holistic leaders do not only lead from 9 to 5, they 'take a whole-personal approach to leadership' (Neale, 2020), which permeates all spheres of their lives.

The changing face of leadership

Times of challenge, change, and uncertainty ask more of our leaders and, in some cases, require that they reframe their approach. The COVID-19 pandemic is a case in point – people were propelled into remote work and had to cope with intense online meeting schedules. The hierarchy of management was challenged and interactions became more intentional. Moreover, a *greater appreciation for wellness and the individual experience emerged* (Mukherjee and Krish, 2021).

Where leaders and the companies they represent failed to transition rapidly and honestly to this new human-focused reality, organisations were struck by the effects of the so-called great resignation (Ellerbeck, 2022). *A radical shift in the needs and wants emerged within the global workplace*, causing dissatisfied, exploited, and unsatisfied workers and managers alike to down tools in their numbers *in search of personal fulfilment and work-life balance* (Ellerbeck, 2022; Mukherjee and Krish, 2021).

Inescapably, the situation called for a different approach to leadership, which is as comfortable in the role of talent development, empathy, and the creation of psychologically safe working environments (Global Leadership Network, 2022) as it is in rolling out new innovations, strategies, and technologies.

To support organisational cultures capable of encouraging growth, learning, productivity, and innovation, *leaders must operate from a place of confidence and consciousness* (Wallace, 2020). To sustain leaders on their personal journeys, while also guiding them to build psychologically robust teams, mentor and coach, and create listening cultures (Wallace, 2020), *leaders need to look inwards and identify their own limiting beliefs.*

By reframing subconscious blockages that adversely influence their behaviour and responses, leaders are better able to 'set the stage' (Van Lieshout, 2021) for their own continued development and, in turn, that of their teams and organisations.

The destructive impact of limiting beliefs

In 2019, a Gartner survey highlighted the emergence of a worrying crisis: a lack of confidence among leaders. At a time when organisations 'require distinct leadership traits to restore and revive stressed and flailing supply chains, product lines, even entire industries' (Brownlee, 2020), just over half of leaders surveyed expressed a lack of confidence in their abilities and were unsure whether they were well-equipped to effectively lead their companies into the future (Gartner, 2019).

In many cases, even those who possessed the required skills to do their jobs effectively, and were capable and successful, were hamstrung by debilitating and limiting beliefs, which knocked their confidence and made them feel like imposters (Gartner, 2019).

Five types of imposter syndrome are distinguished (see Figure 1), an affliction that was first named and explored in a 1978 paper by Dr Pauline Clance and Dr Suzanne Imes. This emotional state is associated with influencing beliefs that hinder personal development, such as nagging self-doubt, anxiety, fear of being 'found out', a need for validation from those in authority, and a tendency to attribute personal success to luck (Owens, 2021).



Figure 1: The five types of imposter syndrome
Source: Adapted from Young (2011)

Whether you have already invested in self-development, coaching or therapy and realised that limiting beliefs are around every corner, or have just started the journey of identifying these potholes, the KE³YS framework is an effective tool for identification, understanding, and achieving deep and lasting change.

The KE³YS framework

The KE³YS framework (refer to Figure 2) is one of the most effective ways of embedding the tenets of sustainable leadership development. The model is powerful yet simple and easy to remember, making it ideal for coaching practitioners and facilitators as well as for individuals embarking on a development journey. The *step-by-step approach* is deliberate, with each phase in the process building on the insights gained previously. This does not, however, equate to a linear process. The framework works best when a *cyclical approach* is assumed. During the two *mid-step reflection points*, individuals are challenged as to their readiness to move forward in the process and, when necessary, directed to an early step to focus again on more deeply or *fully internalising* and addressing the early steps in the framework.

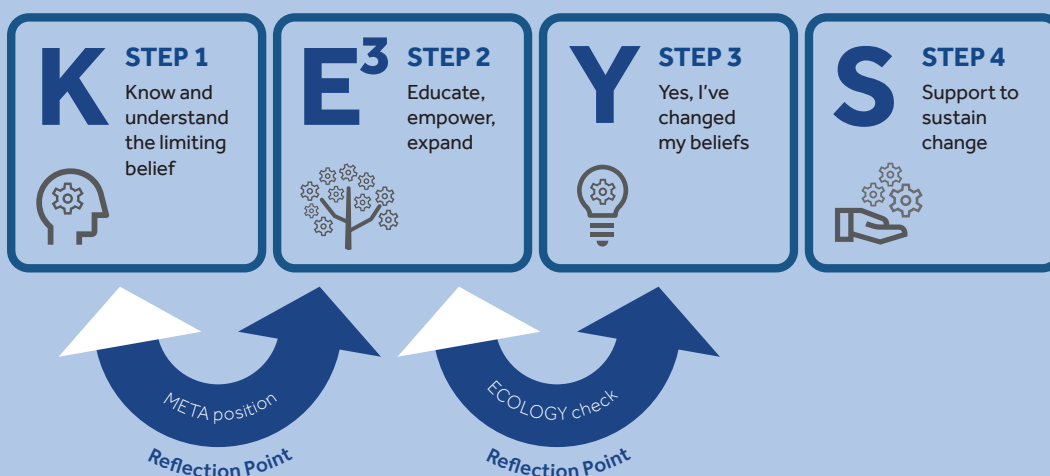


Figure 2: The KE³YS framework
Source: Adapted from King Gabrielides (2018: p186)

The various stages of the KE³YS framework are best explained using an example grounded in reality. Therefore, the case study below is dissected across each of the framework's steps and stages.

Recently, the author was working with a newly appointed financial director of a large global bank. During a coaching session, the individual was able to identify a limiting belief. It started with the following comment: 'I feel that if I show that I'm overwhelmed or voice that a week has been hectic, then my managers will think they've chosen the wrong person when appointing me in this role.' The client was concerned that any indication that she needed to build slack into her day, or take a breather, would be interpreted as an inability to cope.

When broken down and interrogated, the limiting belief that emerged showed that any attempt to hold true to her boundaries might be misinterpreted as weakness. This belief pervaded all her leadership actions, even something as small as ensuring that she kept meetings strictly to 25-minutes and ensured she had a five-minute breather before the start of the next meeting. Exiting early was a red flag for the client, as she thought it had the potential to become an area for criticism, even though the super seniors in the bank all logged off at the 25-minute mark.

'They never let one call bleed into another,' our executive realised over the course of the session. 'And I never think for a minute that they're not committed or capable.'

Once this thought pattern was laid out and dissected, the executive noticed that the limiting belief permeated more than just the workplace, it had tendrils throughout her life. Once she had caught it, named it, and understood the triggers, she was able to turn her attention to appreciating how this limiting belief was negatively impacting her.

A deep dive into the KE³YS framework



Step 1: 'K' – Know and understand the limiting belief

Catching the limiting belief and taking time to know it and understand it is the foundation of the KE³YS framework. Without it, moving into the educating, empowering, and expanding aspects of the process cannot begin in earnest. There are ever-present clues that help point us in the direction of our limiting beliefs, such as intense emotional responses like being hurt or angered by a comment or a joke. Once you have identified the reaction, it is important to dig deeper into the underlying assumptions and hidden phrases, such as 'I can't...!', 'I'm too much of...!', 'I'm not...!', and 'I must be perfect to be successful'. These assumptions can limit personal development and career aspirations.

If we follow the emotion in the case study example, the following underlying beliefs become evident:

1. Needing a breather is a sign of weakness or that I am not coping or up for the job.
2. If someone else believes I am not coping, then it is true.
3. If someone believes I can do this job, then I can (this assumes that whatever someone believes about us is accurate).
4. What others think of me can hurt me emotionally (within this false assumption lies the power to inflict emotional pain, even though we cannot know what is in another's mind).
5. We can know another's mind and read how they view us.

Once these core limiting beliefs have been uncovered, the first step to displacing them is to identify the 'mistaken certainty' in the cluster of beliefs that make up the larger, dominant belief. Once unearthed, it is critical not to turn these beliefs into the 'boogeymen' by labelling them as 'negative' or 'wrong', but rather to honour their positive intent.

This can only be achieved by moving past the surface thoughts and actively searching for hidden assumptions. For example, in the case of the financial director, she wanted to succeed at her job. Here, a skilled coach can guide the individual through the process of reframing this belief by drawing the core of the belief into the light. This is not always a quick or easy process and can require revisiting the process to unearth additional layers. It is important that a thorough assessment of the limiting beliefs is achieved, before moving on to the Reflection point: meta position and then step 2.

As I wrote in my PhD thesis: 'Identifying a core belief is like solving a mystery of the illusions of the mind. This task can be a daunting and challenging but gets easier with practise and the guidance of a skilled facilitator, coach or psychologist.'
(King Gabrielides, 2018: 182)

Reflection Point: META Position

Vietnamese monk and author Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-2022) understood the interconnectedness of systems and the essence of the human experience. In his poem *Interbeing*, Nhat Hanh wrote, "'To be' is to inter-be - we cannot just be by ourselves alone. We have to inter-be with every other thing' (Nhat Hanh, 2009). Nhat Hanh's writings offer a window into ways of seeing the interconnectedness of the whole and the importance of understanding our place in the world. Self-development is no different. Truly sustainable and holistic leadership development must be considered in the context of the META position.

In the field of Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP), the META position refers to "a dissociated position not involved with the content of the event or the person" (NLP World, 2021). *It involves stepping out of yourself and trying to view things from another's perspective.* This process can be initiated by a skilled facilitator simply by asking the client to raise any questions that might occur to a stranger looking into the room or to consider any aspect of the belief identified in the 'K' step that an external party might want to explore in more depth. Just this gentle nudge often unlocks more insights that might even motivate the client to step back into step 1 and peel of more layers for examination before moving forward in the process.



'E³' – Educate, empower, expand

In step 2, the client and facilitator go in search of evidence to completely disprove or cast doubt on the limiting belief identified in step 1. The facilitator helps to challenge the limiting belief by educating it, empowering it, or expanding the client's perspective, while honouring the reason why the belief emerged in the first place, and carefully honouring and managing the client's innate resistance to change that might emerge. Educating is a reflective and often backward-looking technique. Empowerment is a more forward-looking response, while expanding embraces additional viewpoints, knowledge, and insights.

When the author first envisaged this framework, step 2 focused on just two Es: educate and empower. Over time, presenting the KE³YS framework as part of various group leadership programmes and incorporating input from executive coaching clients and practitioners alike, layers of depth have been added to the framework. The addition of the third E – expand – to step 2 is a case in point.

The three Es work together to gather and collate the 'evidence' that our subconscious mind needs to consciously shift perspective and reinterpret events.

Throughout history, there are countless examples of people who did not buy into the notion that invisible barriers exist that cannot be scaled. One such example is Roger Bannister smashing the physical and psychological four-minute barrier in the mile on 6 May 1954 (Taylor, 2018). Another is the American high jumper Richard Fosbury's break with tradition to invent the innovative backward jumping style, which today bears his name, the Fosbury Flop (Goldenberg et al., 2010).

These achievements show that the belief that people can do something is empowering and can support eventual success. Conversely, if individuals believe they cannot break through the barrier, then chances are they will not. In fact, they might not even try.



Investing time and effort to shift limiting beliefs – often with the aid of a professional coach or psychologist – can have profound implications.

- 1. Educating** is the portion of the case study where the client needed to consider the times when she has left a meeting at the 25-minute mark and still felt on top of her role and a capable, committed contributor. It might be as simple as recalling instances where other seniors exited meetings at the 25-minute mark and she did not think any less of them. Unearthing these examples and logging them into evidence is useful in supporting the empowering efforts.
- 2. Empowering** is the element that could involve coaching clients to model the behaviour of someone they know who displays the sort of leadership they regard as being capable. The coach might employ neuro-linguistic programming techniques, such as reframing, anchoring, state management, and/or changing negative self-talk (Schneider, 2014), to help clients reinforce self-confidence and gradually build up evidence that their limiting belief is in fact mistaken or no longer valid.
- 3. Expanding** is a useful third technique that can be used to complement the work already done with the first two Es, or if educating and empowering alone were not sufficient to bring about the displacement of the limiting belief. Expanding is about asking clients to broaden their views of their challenges by, for example, reading academic articles or books on the issue under scrutiny. This might include biographies and insights from others who have overcome these limiting beliefs. In the case study of the financial director, she found it useful to study the behaviour of other successful executives. She discovered that they did not see downtime as a luxury, but rather a

necessity. This realisation assisted her to reframe 'taking a break' as critical to productivity rather than being a weakness.

Sometimes, one small shift in perspective can have a powerful domino effect that sets in motion a significant internal reprogramming. It can also inspire a longer process that requires frequent pauses, personal reflection moments, and incremental steps.

The human mind is eminently changeable and flip-flops between ideas and beliefs during a single day. A comment, criticism, or mistaken assumption about another's views might reactivate an old limiting belief. Therefore, unpacking the sub-levels of the core belief is crucial. The more vulnerable and committed clients are to the process, the more likely it is that they can unravel an entire chain of assumptions that merge to form a limiting belief.

Changing a core belief can be remarkably easy once you know what you are dealing with. It is the effort required to unlock the awareness that takes time, followed by the methodical process of helping the subconscious let go of the old assumptions and barriers, and replace the old viewpoint with a new and sustainable belief that supports long-term success. Without the evidence to support this mental shift, it is unhelpful to proceed to the second reflection point and, from there, to step 3.

It may be necessary to go through the cycle several times and apply the model in an iterative way, rather than regarding KE³YS as a linear process. The process may take time and constant revision before the limiting belief has been sufficiently displaced.

Reflection Point: ECOLOGY Check

Before moving to step 3 and embracing the displacement of the old limiting belief and replacing it with a new, more empowering belief, it is necessary for clients to again step out of themselves and undertake a reality check on whether or not this shift will be beneficial. This requires asking questions, such as:

- If I commit to this shift, what could the impact be on my life and career?
- What consequences do I foresee?
- What might happen if I choose not to adopt a new belief system?
- Will I receive pushback? If so, from where and from whom?

The ecology check should not just be focused on the area the clients believe to be the focus of their self-development. Changing a deeply held view is likely to have ripple effects across individuals' professional lives, personal lives, family, finances, well-being, and motivation. Therefore, any potential change must be thoroughly scrutinised to ensure the right fit as part of the individuals' value system, needs, and desires. Consequently, the ecology check:

is about seeing clients in the context of their various life systems and ensures that the change is in line with their value system and that it is what they want. In essence, it is about checking that the change and course of action that follows is a wise one, and beneficial for the client and the system to which they belong.

(King Gabrielides, 2018: 186)

Clients might even decide not to make a change, given the potential impact on their personal ecosystems. For others, this process can help to prepare clients for potentially negative feedback or difficulties, which enables them to stay the course. The ecology check is a vital sub-step that facilitates a logical progression to the next stage.



'Y' – Yes, I've changed my belief(s)

The next step is to actively change the identified limiting belief and replace it with something more positive and enabling. If sustainable change is the goal, then this cannot be achieved without shifting core beliefs.

Seeking a shortcut when it comes to step 3 can undo all the progress made previously, so particular attention needs to be paid by facilitators and coaches to cement a significant shift in perspective. Failure to do so can derail the process.

One of the quickest ways to change beliefs is by supporting clients to adopt a different viewpoint. From a popular psychology perspective, *affirmations are often touted as an effective way to shift limiting beliefs, although experience shows that affirmations alone do not cement sustainable change* (King Gabrielides, 2018: 186). Beliefs have a way of cropping up during times of stress, so it is necessary to address all the components that make up a single belief by guiding a client to small epiphanies over time, as well as helping them to engrain an expanded worldview that puts the change into perspective.

When the client is within the paradigm of a false belief, it appears so completely true that they continue to believe in it, such as the person who believes the Earth is flat. All contrary perspectives and even certain evidence are discounted until there is a shift in perspective. This is one of the problems with affirmations. From the point of view of existing beliefs,

affirmations look like a lie and the clients will feel like liars or frauds trying to adopt new beliefs that go against their current paradigm (King Gabrielides, 2018). The support afforded by a trained professional in step 3 of the KE³YS framework should be continued into step 4, which should be regarded as an ongoing process required to sustain positive new beliefs, while ensuring that the client remains ever mindful of not falling back into the trap of limiting thinking.



The KE³YS journey does not end with the 'Y' when the individual commits to changing a limiting belief.

Any process of self-discovery and improvement is developed over time based on experience, practice, and reflection. Knowing something and being able to tweak entrenched behaviours and mental patterns, and then to embed those changes, require continuous support.

If recent years have taught us anything, it is that just when we believe we have made progress tackling our limiting beliefs, a new challenge or trigger might emerge that requires us to re-examine what we thought we knew. The long hours and lack of work-life balance that many experienced during the COVID-19 lockdowns are a case in point. Fuelled by fear, lack of job security, and global turmoil, many fell back into limiting beliefs that they had to work excessively hard to succeed and cranked up the hours. In the long term, this proved to be unsustainable, despite positive reactions to the initial spike in productivity businesses recorded in 2020. According to the International Labour Organization, output per hour worked in 2020 grew by 4.9%, 'more than double the long-term average annual rate of 2.4 per cent registered between 2005 and 2019. This is the fastest global growth in hourly productivity observed since data have been available. A similar trend is found across all major country income groups' (Kapsos, 2021). However, by early 2022, employee productivity had deteriorated to 3.8% below the pre-COVID-19 benchmark (International Labour Organization, 2022), shifting conversation to ways in which to create more human-centric solutions and work environments.

Therefore, while support is a crucial aspect of the KE³YS framework, it is effectively a process within a process; a journey that is alive, fluid, and ongoing. It can be equated to weeding the garden of your mind (Jones, 2012) through continuously pruning, planting, and tidying, while carefully putting support stakes in place that allow positive change to get the rain and sunlight needed to thrive.

This can be achieved through:

1. **Internal support** and intrinsic motivation, where the transformation is solely driven by personal commitment.
2. **External support**, such as professional and social support systems (Kwasnicka et al, 2016), as well as a committed facilitator or coach who could significantly accelerate transformation.
3. **Organisational support**, where organisations offer ongoing support and give space for individuals to self-reflect through mentorship initiatives and group and individual coaching. Moreover, it includes peer-to-peer learning, where colleagues and fellow leaders can support one another's learning journey (Steinberg and Watkins, 2021) – an important approach that companies are embracing more in the wake of COVID-19 (Willard, 2022).

4. Self-reflection, which we often don't commit to paper. More-often, we allow a swirl of ideas and thoughts to wander unaccompanied through our minds. For the individual, learnt skills like journaling can prove highly supportive as part of the support process – particularly for those in leadership positions (Adler, 2016). Even in a profession as delineated as the military, it is becoming increasingly accepted that self-reflection is an important element when it comes to developing effective leaders (Johnson, 2020). Beyond that, there is a growing body of research examining the correlation between leaders who are going through an emotional intelligence leadership journey who journal and those who do not (Adler, 2016; Densten and Gray, 2001; Inam, 2017; King Gabrielides, 2018). Individuals accelerate their personal development if they journal, which makes sense because 'self-awareness is the gateway to emotional intelligence' (Hubbard, 2021) and the more we journal, the more we increase our awareness and bring it into our consciousness.

While the likes of journaling are growing in popularity and application, the process of embedding new behaviours and attitudes takes a range of continuous interventions from visualisation and being mindful of internal auditory dialogue. In fact, all the senses should be focused on and aligned to the task of entrenching a new belief if reversion back to old ways and habits is to be avoided.

In his best-selling book, *Atomic Habits: An Easy and Proven Way to Build Good Habits and Break Bad Ones*, James Clear (2018: 44) notes:

*The more you repeat a behaviour, the more you reinforce the identity associated with that behaviour. In fact, the word identity was originally derived from the Latin words *essentitas*, which means being, and *identidem*, which means repeatedly. Your identity is literally your 'repeated beingness'.*

Therefore, the goal is to support, repeat, and reinforce the new belief so that it transforms the very identity and psyche of the individual.

Practical application insights

The KE³YS framework can be successfully used as an effective part of any emotional intelligence or leadership development programme, as well as serving as a stand-alone tool. Given the personal insights it unearths, it is however advisable for the framework to be applied by a facilitator who has a strong coaching and clinical background. We must also remember that a leadership development tool is only as good as the effort made by the individual to challenge their own assumptions. The facilitator's role is "to create and hold the space for the learner to embark on a journey of personal authenticity that is personally meaningful" (King Gabrielides, 2018).

For the facilitator, the trick is how best to help identify and understand the limiting belief. This highlights the importance of the 'K' step in creating the foundation for the framework as a whole.

For the individual, the KE³YS framework should form an automatic part of a bi-annual self-audit of goals, development areas, habits and beliefs. Looking back to the early days of Covid-19, it is clear that many individuals who felt they had already shifted limiting beliefs were dragged backwards by the fear and uncertainty unlocked by the pandemic. This shows how necessary and valuable it is to continually evaluate our belief systems in order to identify what is serving us and what is not, and to continually take steps to transform our lives.

Take stock of your beliefs

The author recommends users of the KE³YS framework undergo a biannual self-audit to see if new beliefs have been entrenched and remain so, particularly in the face of a crisis or dramatic shift in personal or professional circumstances. Taking the time to reflect acts as a warning light against reverting to old habits and enables individuals to assess the effectiveness of the new beliefs and programmes on their personal and professional development journey.

Conclusion

True leadership development can only be achieved when all aspects of the individual leader are enhanced. This requires focusing on the interplay between mind, body, and spirit, 'as well as their various life dimensions, such as financial, health, education, recreation, relationships and so on' (King Gabrielides, 2018: 189). Recognising that individuals must develop within a system, a truly holistic and multifaceted approach is required to entrench sustainable and supportive beliefs and attitudes.

Applying the KE³YS framework provides the space and structure individuals need to be vulnerable and open about their limiting beliefs. Moreover, the framework's systemic outlook encourages and develops an 'expanded perspective and worldview' that supports the embedding of new beliefs that will underpin future development and growth. This process 'can be enabled through action learning, reflective journaling, structured feedback and follow-up support' (King Gabrielides, 2018: 189), which must be seen as part of an ongoing process, rather than a once-off, quick-fix intervention.

At a time when more is being asked of leaders, personal development in core human areas, such as developing strong interpersonal relationships, role modelling, supporting, and developing others and operating mindfully and with confidence (McKinsey & Company, 2021), is becoming increasingly important for leaders and organisations alike. Addressing this personal and organisational need requires a holistic approach to leadership development that puts personal transformation at the core of the journey, while never losing sight of the systemic nature of leadership.



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