

# Breaking Mental Barriers

Susan Salzbrenner

Apr 19, 2018

**How do we break down self-imposed barriers? How do our own limiting beliefs affect coaching performance? Founder of Fit Across Cultures & cultural intelligence expert, Susan Salzbrenner examines just how you can navigate around your own invisible rope.**

I recently read a short story about how elephants are trained that I would like to share:

“As my friend was passing the elephants, he suddenly stopped, confused by the fact that these huge creatures were being held by only a small rope tied to their front leg. No chains, no cages. It was obvious that the elephants could, at any time, break away from the ropes they were tied to but for some reason, they did not. My friend saw a trainer nearby and asked why these beautiful, magnificent animals just stood there and made no attempt to get away.

“Well,” he said, “when they are very young and much smaller we use the same size of rope to tie them and, at that age, it’s enough to hold them. As they grow up, they are conditioned to believe they cannot break away. They believe the rope can still hold them, so they never try to break free.” My friend was amazed. These animals could at any time break free from their bonds but because they believed they couldn’t, they were stuck right where they were.”

How many of us are tied by an invisible rope that limits our belief in what we are able to accomplish? As a coach, how many times have you worked with players that limited themselves mentally in what they are able to accomplish.

## **What are mental barriers?**

Very simply put, a mental barrier is a limiting belief or assumption that we have about ourselves in regards to our ability, potential, self-worth, etc. It keeps us from doing something or acting on something, as for example asking for a promotion, public speaking, financial investing, losing weight, etc.

Mental barriers are incorrect or unhealthy thought patterns that limit us in reaching our full potential.

## **A few examples of unhealthy thought patterns:**

- Denial of ability (“I could never get up in front of the whole team and take the lead.”)
- A perceived lack of social support (“Nobody believes in my ability to become a professional athlete. I might as well put that idea back in the drawer”)
- A lack of knowledge (“What do I have to offer? I know so little about this subject. Why don’t they ask someone else?”)
- A dysfunctional attitude towards the situation (“Oh coach seems too busy to ask him this question. I’ll try to figure it out myself.”)

## Three types of mental barriers

As you work with athletes of different ages, there are many situations where we are exposed to their self-limiting thought patterns. However, it's not just the barriers in their head but also your view as a coach about the world that surrounds you and the people in it that can affect performance. Overall, we can differentiate between three types of mental barriers:

### 1. Beliefs about myself

Mental barriers about yourself can stop you in your tracks, whether it is your career, a relationship you deeply care about, or a personal goal and development opportunity. Many times when we feel stuck, we are stuck because of a limiting self-belief and not because of external circumstances.

We, as human beings, compare ourselves at every occasion we get. Athletes are particularly used to getting judged and evaluated. But this means that they are quick to spin stories in their head that become subjective reality. Go ahead, I dare you to fact-check some of the assumptions your players have about themselves and then compare them with your viewpoint.

Any of these sounds familiar?

- "I would never be able to compete at that level. I am just not that good."
- "I guess I am not that smart. I really think I should just focus on working out and not on tactics."
- "I am just too small; I'll never be able to keep up with the others."
- "When will they find out that I don't really belong here?" (also coined Impostor-Syndrome)

### 2. Beliefs about others

When we lack information about a situation or a person, we are proven guilty as charged to fill the missing information with assumptions. Interestingly enough, this "filling-in phenomenon" exists in our vision as well. Because our eyes have physiological blind spots, information has to be filled to build a complete picture.

In the absence of information in a situation, e.g. having asked a player for feedback and not hearing back, we fill-in with assumptions based on experiences, hearsay, and advice. All of these are based on our belief system and are deeply rooted in our culture.

#### A few examples of limiting beliefs about others:

- "I don't want to pass him the ball. He's just not confident enough to handle this situation."
- "I couldn't possibly ask him to be my mentor. He has no interest in such things."
- "He is so quiet and shy. What a loner. I don't want him on my team."
- "She always smiles, so friendly. She wouldn't be a great leader. She doesn't seem to be someone that can make tough decisions."
- "She is way out of my league. I would never ask her out." (to give a social example)

### 3. Beliefs about the world around you

We are born and raised with certain cultural values that are shared through our parents, our peers, school, the city and country we live in, and the media we consume. In a world that is more inter-connected than ever, we are now experiencing (some almost daily) the clash of perspectives and values. If we don't open up to the possibility of different ways and approaches to a solution or a goal, we are limiting our potential for innovation, creativity, and finding alternative answers to global questions like climate change. The mental barriers we have about "how things should be done" and "what is normal" limit our thinking process and how we respect and value a differing opinion. These unconscious barriers of generalised unhealthy thought patterns about the world or groups of people around us have tremendous opportunity costs.

#### A few examples of mental barriers about the world:

- "Oh these millennials. Always on their phone, not ready to roll up their sleeves and do the work. They just want to live the high life."
- "Of course we want a more diverse coaching staff. We simply can't find qualified minorities to do the job."
- "I never trust club management. They are only out to make stakeholders happy. They have no interest in me as a player."

#### Breaking down mental barriers

I want to leave you with three things to ask yourself every time you notice one of those limiting beliefs about yourself, others and the world around you to creep into your thought process. If you notice your players having self-limited thought patterns, call them out and coach them through the process.

1. **What am I afraid of?** Mental barriers about yourself are often a good excuse to not push forward or step out of your comfort zone.
2. **Who told me that?** Many of our assumptions about ourselves and others are based on second-hand stories, one-off events, or media coverage, and less grounded in the daily grind or repeated interactions with the people that we assume something about.
3. **Why is different a bad thing?** We favour people that agree with us, share the same background or opinions and attitudes about life. Working on our own limiting beliefs also includes believing in the positive intention of others. No one is out to harm us or attack us personally. It's a coping mechanism when the world we live in doesn't fit our mental models. Help each other break our mental barriers. Many young players can develop into strong, capable leaders with unique abilities, when we release them from the pressure to conform and build up realistic thought patterns about their skills. Let's not be the elephant that is tied down by an invisible rope anymore. Let's stride with pride and empower each other.