

Glass Walls

Challenge assumptions.



by Dana C. Ackley

CARL IS A HIGH-POTENTIAL leader. He is smart, good looking, and has a cheerful personality that draws people to him. He is well regarded at work. Some think *he has it all together*.

I know better. I've spent 40 years working with highly successful people. I hear about their successes, and about where they get stuck. And they *all get stuck at some point*. What gets in their way? Paradoxically, it's often the one thing that's made them so successful.

Here's how it works: Behaviors that help you get what you want get repeated. With enough success and repetition, these behaviors become habits. When a behavior becomes habitual, it falls out of your awareness. You do it *automatically*, without thinking whether you should or not. You *assume* it is the right thing to do. For example, you might assume that in order to become successful, you need to work hard.

Assumptions bring order out of chaos, enabling you to narrow the countless choices available to you every time you act, without forcing you to examine each possibility every time. They bring predictability and efficiency. Questioning assumptions every time you make a choice about how to act would defeat their purpose.

But as circumstances change, the assumptions you hold may no longer be valid. Yet, your outdated assumptions continue to guide your behavior—off course, functionally barring you from getting where you want to go. Unseen yet powerful, they have literally become *glass walls*.

Carl's Glass Walls

Although he seemed to have everything going for him, Carl was actually struggling. He *worked overtime to succeed*, but felt that he *wasn't measuring up*.

In our work together, we discovered two glass walls:

First, Carl assumed that the solution to any problem was to work harder. Over a series of promotions, he had accumulated increasing responsibilities that exceeded what any one person could do. His drive to work hard

blinded him to the need to develop his staff. Once he identified his assumption, he could see that to handle his current demands he needed to develop the talent that reported to him. Carl asked a promising direct to take over some of his duties. And it paid off! The man stepped up to the plate with enthusiasm and effectiveness, delighted with the trust that Carl placed in him.

Second, Carl assumed his cheerfulness would win the day. Since cheerfulness had brought him so much success, he worried when he wasn't cheerful. When he was upset with underperformers, for example, he tried to deny his feelings. This strategy created problems. When a direct report was underperforming, Carl needed to notice his feelings of displeasure so that he could take appropriate developmental action, hopefully while the situation was still salvageable. When lost in his cheerfulness, Carl let poor performance go too long. His job also required him to deal with tough personalities. Sometimes



his cheerfulness diffused the situation; at other times, Carl needed to be tough himself. Showing resolve, perhaps with a splash of annoyance, would be more useful. But Carl hated to feel annoyed, since feeling annoyed created a sense of failure. Breaking through this glass wall involved *learning to recognize that annoyance—even anger—could promote needed outcomes*, such as not letting a bully intimidate him or others.

What about you? What are your glass walls? You can let them *control your behavior*, or you can *take control*, changing assumptions that were once valid, but no longer serve you well. Identifying assumptions that create glass walls isn't easy (they're invisible—outside awareness); nor is it for the faint of heart.

Talking with an executive coach or other trusted advisor is one approach. Your organization might provide leadership skill development (including an executive coach) to enable you to learn about your glass walls. Once you learn about them, you are empowered to make a choice about how to handle them. Then you can begin building

skills that you didn't need when you relied on old strengths—like hard work and cheerfulness—alone. Breaking down your glass walls gives you access to more of your performance potential.

Try Self-Coaching

If you don't have a coach, try this:

First, ask yourself some questions: *What do I admire most in others? Who are my heroes? When have I been proudest of myself?* The answers will tell you something about your espoused beliefs and values. These are the thoughts you have that you would like to believe guide your behavior. ("I'm a no-nonsense guy. I tell it like it is. You always know where you stand with me.")

Next, consider your behavior over the past week. Take a hard look at discrepancies between your stated beliefs and your behavior. For example, maybe you value courage, but avoid necessary conflict. Maybe you compliment someone you should be taking to task.

Note the times that you don't behave in alignment with your stated values.

These times signal the presence of hidden assumptions (glass walls) that are channeling your behavior in unintended directions, blocking you from reaching the results you're seeking. These *hidden assumptions*, not your *stated values*, are guiding your behavior. (Maybe you really think that people aren't strong enough to take what you have to say. Ask yourself what might be making you believe that. Or you may worry that someone might not like you if you told them what you think, and believe *being liked at all times is crucial to success*.)

Ask what might be compelling you to act as you do when a behavior conflicts with your espoused values. This question can bring your *hidden assumptions* to light. These are your glass walls.

Give yourself permission to be imperfect. Taking a close look at yourself isn't easy. Accepting your imperfections will free you up to work on them.

Your past success doesn't guarantee your future success. As you progress, you will confront new situations that require changed responses. The hardest part of change is identifying limiting assumptions, or glass walls. Once you achieve that, learning new skills and responses becomes much more manageable. As you do so, you'll break through to a brighter future, perhaps with a key to the executive wash room. LE

Dana C. Ackley, Ph.D., is CEO of EQ Leader, an executive coaching and leader development firm, and author of EQ Leader and BreakGlassWall Programs. Email dana.ackley@eqleader.net, or visit <http://www.eqleader.net>.

ACTION: Challenge your assumptions.