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Self-Limiting Beliefs and the SHIFT Model

A practical coaching framework to helping people examine beliefs and move towards their goals

How beliefs shape our choices

A self-limiting belief can quietly narrow what a person sees as possible. Someone may decide not to apply for a role, avoid a conversation, or spend so long preparing that they never begin. They may describe the decision as sensible or inevitable, without noticing the belief behind it.

Statements such as '*I am not leadership material', 'I am too old to learn this'* or *'If I ask for help, people will think I cannot do the job'* can sound like settled facts. Yet they are interpretations: conclusions a person has drawn about themselves, other people or the world. Those conclusions may have developed through experience, feedback or repeated messages. They can influence behaviour even when the person has not examined them closely.

A belief is not automatically limiting because it sounds negative. It may reflect a real constraint, a particular experience or a reasonable assessment of risk. A coach should not assume that a difficulty is simply a matter of mindset. The useful question is whether the belief is helping the person make a considered choice, or closing down options they would otherwise want to explore.

Recognising a limiting belief

Beliefs often appear in language that is fixed, predictive or tied to identity: *'I always…', 'I could never…', 'People like me don't…'.* A person may also use a metaphor that conveys how the belief feels: being trapped, carrying a weight or standing at a wall. These are clues to explore, not proof that a belief is present.

A coach can listen for a mismatch between a person's goal and the actions they feel able to take. Someone may want to lead a project but repeatedly say they are not ready. Another may want to contribute in meetings yet believe that speaking up will damage their reputation. The coach's role is to remain curious and check what the person means, rather than label or diagnose them.

Why a quick challenge can be unhelpful

When someone says, *'I'm not good enough to apply'*, a reassuring response such as *'Of course you are'* may be kindly meant. But it can leave the person feeling that their concern has not been heard. Directly arguing with the belief can have a similar effect: the person may defend it more firmly or withdraw from the conversation.

The coach does not need to prove the belief wrong or replace it with a positive statement. The aim is to help the person look at the belief with enough space to decide whether it is accurate, useful and still relevant. The SHIFT model offers a simple structure for that conversation.

The SHIFT model

SHIFT stands for Spot the belief, Hold it without judgement, Investigate the belief, Find a more useful perspective and Turn it into action. The stages provide a guide, rather than a script. A coach may move between them as the conversation develops.

Spot the belief

Notice language or metaphors that may point to a belief restricting the person's choices. Listen for fixed or predictive statements and for a gap between what the person wants and what they believe they can do.

Check your understanding before going further. For example: 'When you say you are not ready, what does "ready" mean to you?' This keeps the conversation grounded in the person's meaning rather than the coach's interpretation.

Hold it without judgement

Resist the urge to agree, disagree, reassure or solve the problem immediately. Ask permission to explore the belief and reflect it back in the person's own words. Notice how they respond when they hear it expressed clearly.

Holding the belief without judgement does not mean treating it as a fact. It means giving the person room to examine it without having to defend it against the coach.

Investigate the belief

Use open questions to help the person consider how the belief formed and what supports it now. The focus is on the belief itself, not on what is wrong with the person. Questions might include:

- *How do you know that this is true for you?*
- *When does this belief seem strongest, and are there times when it is less true?*
- *What experiences have led you to see it this way?*
- *What might someone who knows your work well notice?*

There is no set question that changes a belief. A question that feels useful to one person may feel challenging or irrelevant to another. Listen carefully, ask permission where appropriate and allow time for the person to think.

Find a more useful perspective

If the person begins to see the belief differently, invite them to find words for that perspective. It need not be a confident affirmation. It should feel credible to them and allow more choice. 'I still get nervous, but I can communicate well when I know my material' may be more useful than 'I am a brilliant presenter' if the latter does not feel true.

Reflect the person's new wording back and check how it lands. They may accept it, amend it or decide it does not fit. The coach should not supply a replacement belief or treat any change in wording as proof that the issue has been resolved.

Turn it into action

When a more useful perspective feels possible to the person, connect it with the goal they want to achieve. Ask what the new view might make possible, what they would like to do next or what small step would help them test it.

For example, someone who once thought 'I cannot present' may decide, 'I get nervous, but I can explain my subject clearly.' They might then choose to present a short update before taking on a larger presentation. The action does not have to prove the old belief false. It gives the person a chance to learn from experience and make a more informed choice.

SHIFT in practice

Imagine a colleague says*, 'I can't apply for that role. I'm not ready.'* A coach might first check what 'not ready' means to them. With permission, they could explore what makes the belief feel true, and whether there have been occasions when the person handled similar responsibilities well.

The coach would not tell the person that they are ready. They might ask what would be a fairer way to describe the person's experience and development needs. If the person arrives at a perspective they can work with, the conversation can return to their goal: what they want from the role, what they still need to learn and what step they want to take.

This is not a formula. The person may decide that the role is not right for them, identify a genuine skill gap or choose to apply. **SHIFT** helps make that decision more considered by separating the goal, the evidence and the belief that may be shaping their choices.

A change in wording needs to be checked rather than treated as proof that the belief has changed. The person may be trying out a new perspective, or may simply be repeating what they think the coach wants to hear. Ask how the wording feels and whether it is something they can rely on when they face the situation again.

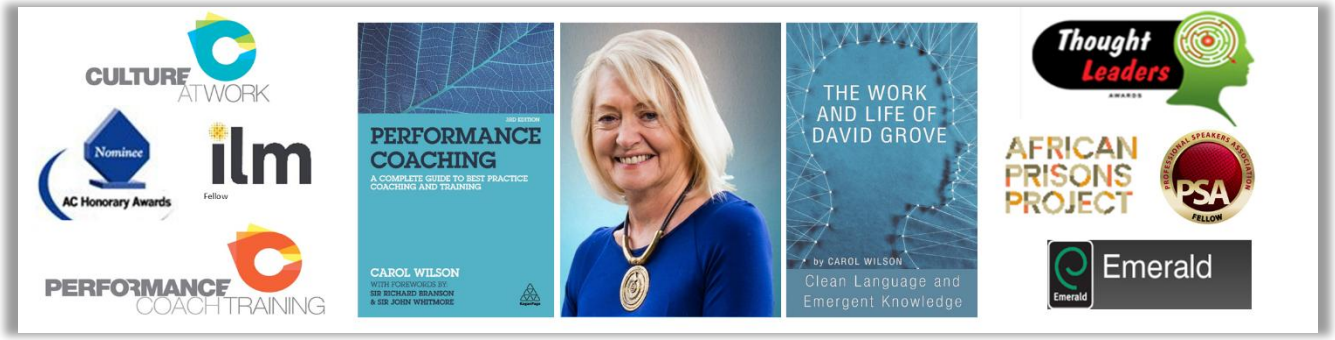
Using SHIFT flexibly

The person's goal matters here. A belief may offer a sense of safety even while it limits action. A goal that matters to the person can give them a reason to examine the belief, but the coach should not assume that the goal outweighs the protection the belief offers. Exploring what the person wants, and why, is part of the work.

Beliefs can take time to examine. A person may need to revisit the same idea in more than one conversation, and a coach should not push for a change simply to complete the model. If a new perspective does not emerge, stay curious or return to the person's goal and what matters to them.

SHIFT is most useful when it supports the person's own thinking. The coach listens for beliefs, checks assumptions, asks questions without imposing an answer and helps the person decide what they want to do. The outcome may be a changed belief, a clearer understanding of a real constraint or a practical next step. Each can help the person move forward with greater choice.

About the author



International speaker, writer and broadcaster Carol Wilson is Managing Director of Culture at Work and a Fellow of the Institute of Leadership & Management, the Professional Speaking Association and the Association for Coaching, where she is a member of the Global Advisory Panel. A cross-cultural expert, she designs and delivers programmes to facilitate change management and create coaching cultures for corporate and public sector organisations worldwide, and has won awards for coaching and writing. She is the author of *'Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training'*, now in its third edition and featuring Forewords by Sir Richard Branson and Sir John Whitmore, '*The Work and Life of David Grove: Clean Language and Emergent Knowledge*' and a novel called *'Carnations in Lisbon'.* She has contributed to six other business psychology books and published over 70 articles including a monthly column in Training Journal.

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