

# COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING

The way we think has a big effect on how we feel, and therefore on how well we lead.

If you think about something in a positive light, you will likely feel more positive about it. On the other hand, if you think about something from a negative viewpoint, regardless of whether that thought is backed by evidence, you will probably feel more negative.

Cognitive restructuring helps identify and challenge negative and irrational thoughts relating to you as a leader.

In this exercise, you will learn to replace automatic thoughts with more accurate and helpful ways of thinking that represent the reality of a situation.

## **Step 1: Identify automatic unhelpful thoughts**

The first step of cognitive restructuring is to identify unhelpful thoughts that are limiting your leadership in some way. Using the space below, write down the negative thoughts you are having.

Unhelpful thoughts that are limiting my leadership effectiveness:

What circumstances led to these thoughts?

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## Step 2: Evaluate automatic thoughts

You will now evaluate the accuracy of the thoughts described in step 1. This step involves gathering evidence for and against the accuracy of these thoughts so that you can assess whether they are realistic. Take some time to think about the following questions and write your responses in the space provided.

How do you feel when you have these thoughts?

What evidence do you have to support these thoughts?

You will now take a step back and gather evidence against these thoughts. It is not enough to identify unhelpful, negative thoughts; you must also challenge their accuracy.

When we have these kinds of unhelpful thoughts, it can be difficult to think of why they might not be true. However, by challenging these kinds of thoughts, you can explore the reality of any situation and learn not to assume that every thought you have is a fact.

Using the space below, take some time to think about and list as much factual evidence against these thoughts as possible. Remember, this step is about hard facts and not about how you feel - emotions are not evidence. To help you think more clearly about the evidence against these thoughts, a selection of prompts and questions can be found in Appendix A.

So, what evidence do you have to suggest these thoughts may not be true?

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Looking at the evidence above, to what extent are your thoughts based on emotions rather than on hard facts?

Use the scale below to indicate from 1 (my thoughts are entirely based on emotions) - 10 (my thoughts are based entirely on facts).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
(Based on emotions) (Based on facts)

Now that you have collected all the evidence, you can judge your thoughts more accurately and rationally.

On a scale of 1 (not accurate at all) - 10 (very accurate), how accurate would you say these thoughts are?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
(Not accurate at all) (Very accurate)

## Step 3: Substitute with fair, rational, and balanced thoughts

You will now think about the evidence gathered in the previous step and use this to create a more helpful, balanced, and accurate substitution for the thoughts detailed in Step 1.

For example, imagine you find yourself struggling with team culture, and yet all your colleagues seem to be nailing this. You might think, "I am not a great leader, my team culture is toxic and negative."

After weighing the evidence for and against this thought, you can create a more realistic and helpful substitution like, "Each team is different. And every team goes through cycles. I am learning to build the kind of team culture that I aspire to."

Considering the evidence, a more helpful and accurate thought would be:

How does this more balanced and realistic thought make you feel?

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## Step 4: Reflection Questions

- What was it like to complete this exercise?
- What did you find most rewarding about this exercise?
- What did you find most challenging about this exercise?
- In what ways has this exercise changed how you think about negative and automatic thoughts?
- What is the most valuable insight you have gained from this exercise?
- When you automatically believe negative thoughts, what is the cost to you emotionally?
- How does it feel to know that your automatic thoughts do not necessarily represent reality?

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## Appendix A: Questions and prompts to assess the evidence for and against automatic thoughts

- Is this thought based on facts or your feelings?
- Do you think this way out of habit?
- In what ways might this thought be an exaggeration of what is happening?
- It may help consider other people's perspectives. What would a friend say to you if he/she knew you were having these thoughts? What evidence might he/she point to that would suggest these thoughts were not accurate?
- What would you say to a friend or loved one who thought this way?
- How might other people interpret the situation? How might they think differently?
- Is it helpful in any way for you to think like this?
- Are you viewing the situation as black and white when, in reality, it is more complicated?
- Are these thoughts about something that you can control to some degree? If not, is there any point to thinking like this? If this is something you can control, what steps can you take to improve things?
- Even if this thought is accurate, what is the worst that could happen? Is this outcome that bad? How could you respond if the worst happened?