

# Do People Really Change?

*A process to help individuals become better leaders through behavioral change*

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## EVOLUTION NOT REVOLUTION

It was early Monday morning when we received a phone call at our office in Winston-Salem, North Carolina from a major corporate leader in Zurich. His dilemma was familiar. There was a senior engineering manager who was a top performer in terms of meeting deadlines, bringing in revenue, and completing projects under budget. However, according to this vice president, his style was such that he “leaves dead bodies.” He meant that junior engineers refused to work for him (often leaving the company), his arrogance had turned off customers, and his style of speech with his administrative assistants had resulted in three leaving in just one year. Could he be salvaged and coached to change the bad behaviors while maintaining the good ones?

As with the hundreds of executives we have coached at our firm over the past 30 years, there are no easy answers nor are there any magic bullets to behavioral change. We do not purport to have statistical evidence of behavioral change, but we have seen

three results of attempts to change behavior:

1. *No behavioral change.* This often occurs when an individual makes a verbal commitment to behavior change but no real actions occur.
2. *Short-term behavioral change.* An example of this is when a manager talks to an employee who agrees to be on-time to meetings. For the next two weeks, he is on time, and then he falls back into the same old habits.
3. *Sustained behavioral change.* The new behavior becomes a habit and an individual changes certain behaviors while still building on strengths and remaining authentic as a leader.

Recent research on the brain has opened up new ways to understand sustained behavioral change. It has also helped business organizations to

understand why “soft skill” training and coaching often do not work. According to neurological researchers many leadership and behavioral training programs do not work because they target the neo-cortex rather than the limbic brain.<sup>i</sup> The neo-cortex is where we learn facts and figures, remember basic concepts, and process analytical and technical concepts. The limbic part of the brain is the part that governs feelings, impulses, and drives (in other words, those behaviors that often get us in trouble at work).

Much leadership training deals with concepts to learn. We cognitively agree with the principles and even decide we want to implement certain behaviors in our work world, but we are agreeing intellectually or in principle, using our neo-cortex. What we need to do is to not just agree intellectually, but let the behavior become a habit—in other words, to become *who we are* in the workplace or at home. In order to make the behavior part of who we are, we must use a different part of the brain – the limbic system. The limbic system learns differently than the neo-cortex. The limbic brain learns through motivation, extended practice, and feedback.<sup>ii</sup> We call this concept “Train the Brain.”

## TRAIN THE BRAIN

Engaging the limbic system (or Training the Brain) requires four distinctive steps:

- **Assessment**
- **Motivation**
- **Practice**
- **Feedback**

In the first step – *Assessment* – you determine which behavior you want to change or add to your leadership skills and style. Perhaps you have been told you are not a good listener. You may have gained this information from your annual performance evaluation, a 360° assessment, or your partner at home. In your opinion, it is a legitimate area for improvement and the assessment (whether self discovered or given as feedback from others) is an area for concern and improvement.

In the second step – *Motivation* – you must be motivated to want to change the behavior or add the behavior to your leadership style. This is key to making the change stick. In our work with various companies, we see individuals commit to change, but they have little motivation to make it happen. Either there is no reward for the behavior, or there are no consequences if the behavior does not take place. Some of the real changes we have seen in leaders occur when they are motivated to want to make behavioral changes, either because of wanting to move into a new position or sometimes as a threat to their on-going employment.

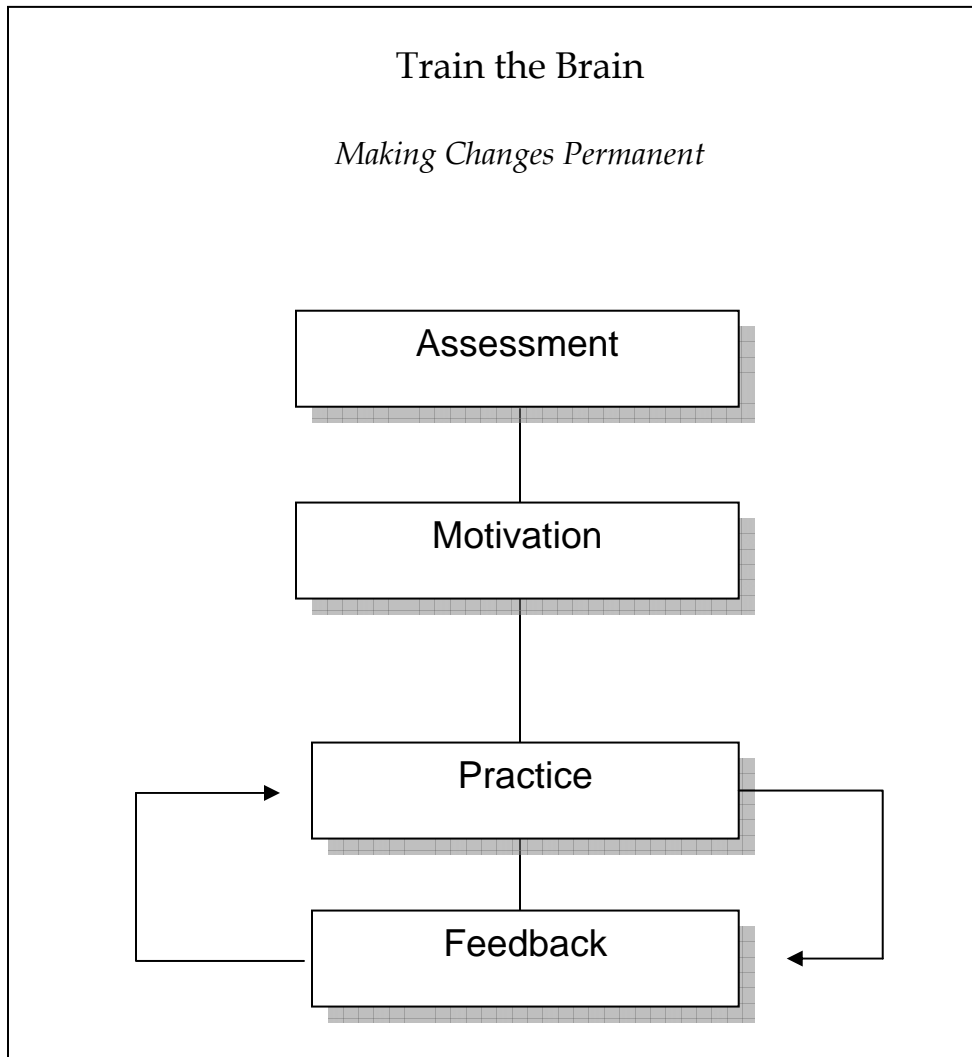


Figure 1 Train-the-Brain model - applying how the brain's limbic system learns behaviors

For some years, we at The Hayes Group have worked with our colleague, Dr. Thad Green, with a concept called The Belief System™.iii The Belief System basically says that when it comes to motivation, what a person believes is often more important than what really is. Its basic premise is that people must believe three basic concepts in order to be motivated and achieve

excellent performance. First, they must believe they can make the change (Can I do it?) - Belief 1. Secondly, they must believe there will be an outcome (consequence) if they make the change (Will I get it?) - Belief 2. Thirdly, the outcome must be something they want (Do I want it?) - Belief 3. Another way to describe the concepts is by three simple words: Belief 1- Confidence,

Belief 2- Trust, and Belief 3 - Satisfaction. There is much more to the Belief System than this simple explanation, but the basics can help apply the concept to behavioral change.

So how does this tie to implementing new behaviors? For example, if in your assessment you determine you want to be a better listener, the next question is how motivated are you to become a better listener? Here you can apply the three beliefs: I believe I can become a better listener (Belief 1) (i.e. I have the skills and know what to do). I believe I will get a positive outcome if I am a better listener, (I believe that if I am a better listener my boss will notice and will give me the reward of a promotion) (Belief 2). Being a better leader will help achieve a new promotion and that is something I want (Belief 3). Therefore I want to be a better listener (or fill in any other behavior you want to improve).

The third step – *Practice* - is actually doing the behavior. Here is where your manager and an executive coach are helpful. In order to be effective, the practice must be specific and measurable. You could just say “I am practicing being a better listener,” but the practice needs to include steps such as “I will not interrupt when others are speaking,” or “I will use silence more effectively by pausing two seconds before answering questions,” or “I will actively take

notes when someone is speaking to me (and put down my Blackberry).” The practice needs to be both specific and on-going.

The fourth step - *Feedback* - is needed to reinforce the practice (or changed behavior). The feedback can come from a trusted colleague, a boss, a friend, or a spouse. The idea is to ensure that the behavior is constantly happening. Let’s use the listening example. If I am practicing not interrupting when others are talking (a by-product of listening), I will let my feedback person know this is the behavior I am attempting to learn. When he sees me interrupting he gives me feedback that I interrupted again in the meeting or perhaps that I didn’t interrupt during a recent conversation.

The *Practice – Feedback* part of Train-the-Brain must be a continuous loop. I practice the new behavior – I get immediate feedback (both positive and negative). The loop continues until the new behavior becomes a habit. Some researchers believe this pattern (practice-feedback) must occur 20 to 30 times before it becomes etched into my brain. Practice – Feedback, Practice – Feedback, Practice – Feedback, Practice – Feedback, Practice – Feedback, Practice – Feedback, etc.

## TEACHING AN OLD DOG NEW TRICKS

Keep in mind that the limbic brain is a much slower learner than the neo-cortex. This means to learn new habits takes much more practice and repetition. Research has shown that you really can “teach an old dog new tricks.” As a matter of fact, neurological research has shown that human brains can create new neural tissue and connections throughout adulthood.<sup>iv</sup> One way to create these new connections is through the habit-forming practice-feedback loop.

In order to apply this behavioral change concept we often ask participants to identify three specific changes they want to make as part of their 360° feedback, one-on-one coaching, or their self-assessment. We have found that if individuals take away 8 or 12 or 24 changes they won’t be made. But three is doable. Then we ask each person to put these changes into the Train-the-Brain model discussed above. Here is how it works.

### APPLICATION

Working with your manager and executive coach, identify three areas you want to improve in order to become a more effective leader. List them below. (You may want complete a 360 assessment to help identify these behaviors).

#### Behavior Improvement #1

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#### Behavior Improvement #2

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#### Behavior Improvement #3

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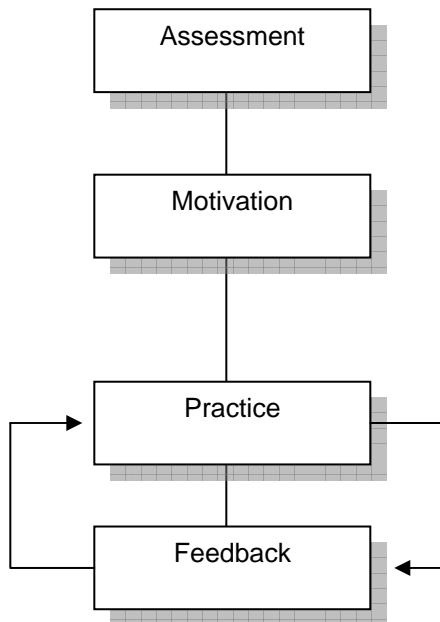
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For each Behavior Improvement listed above, think about your motivation for making the change, your specific practices, and how you will implement the feedback loop (who can help you make the change?). Use the next pages to complete your action plan.

# Behavior Improvement #1



## Assessment

I want to make the following personal change.

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## Motivation

I believe I can make this change and that its results will be beneficial to me because:

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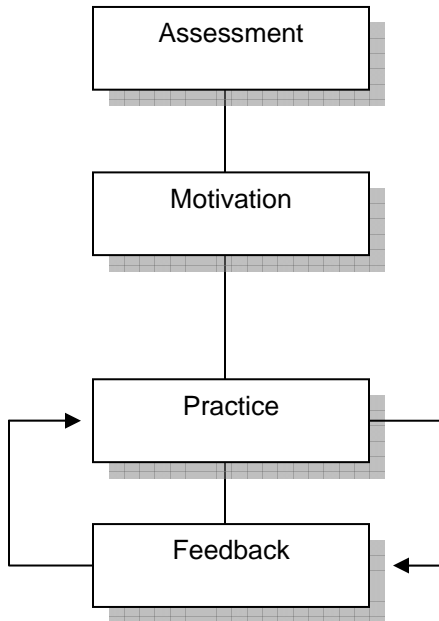
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## Behavior Improvement #1 (continued)



### Practice

Specifically this is what I plan to do differently on my job (at home, etc.) starting tomorrow:

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### Feedback

I will ensure I am getting appropriate feedback on this change by: (example: asking for peer feedback, meeting with my manager, etc.)

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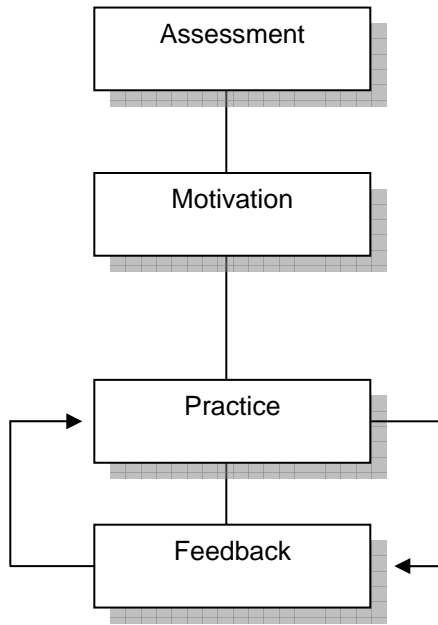
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## Behavior Improvement #2



### Assessment

I want to make the following personal change.

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### Motivation

I believe I can make this change and that its results will be beneficial to me because:

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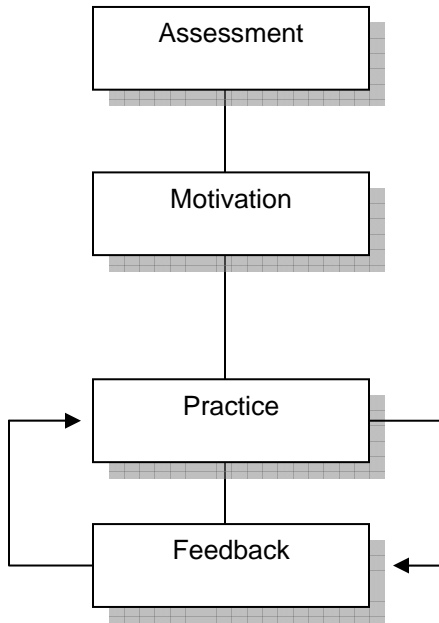
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## Humble Behavior Improvement #2 (continued)



### Practice

Specifically this is what I plan to do differently on my job (at home, etc.) starting tomorrow:

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### Feedback

I will ensure I am getting appropriate feedback on this change by: (example: asking for peer feedback, meeting with my manager, etc.)

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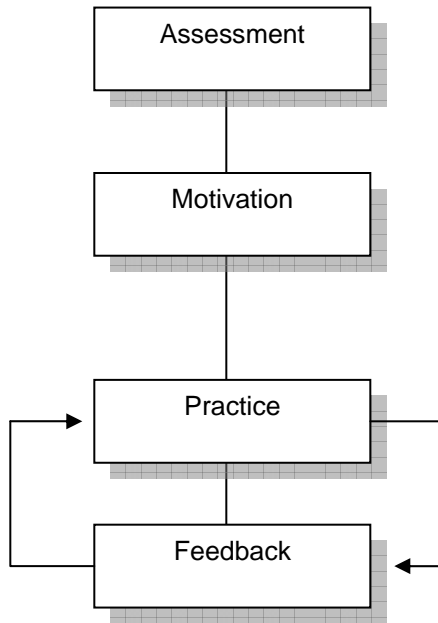
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## Behavior Improvement #3



### Assessment

I want to make the following personal change.

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### Motivation

I believe I can make this change and that its results will be beneficial to me because:

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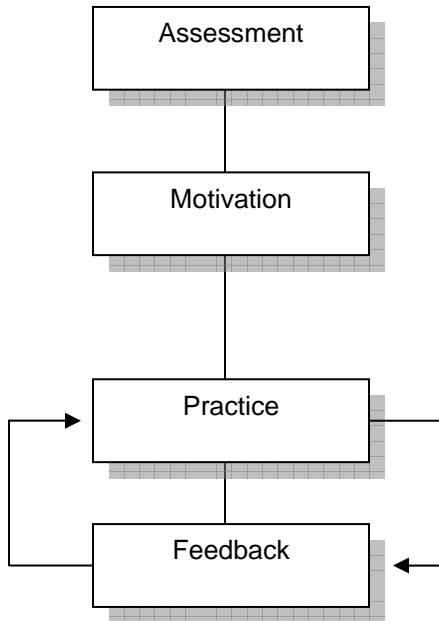
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## Behavior Improvement #3 (continued)



### Practice

Specifically this is what I plan to do differently on my job (at home, etc.) starting tomorrow:

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### Feedback

I will ensure I am getting appropriate feedback on this change by: (example: asking for peer feedback, meeting with my manager, etc.)

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## DISCIPLINE AND BEHAVIORAL CHANGE

Changing behavior is not easy to do. In our work with thousands of leaders around the world, we emphasize that individuals do not drastically change who they are as a person; that leaders should identify and build on their strengths; and that leaders should not create an image of who they are but need instead to be authentic, since authenticity is the core of great leadership. However, individuals can change their behaviors either by adding certain behaviors to their leadership style or modifying ingrained behaviors. We have seen leaders from middle management to CEO's apply the model used above with anywhere from minimal to great success. The degree of success often depended on the individual's ability to accurately self-access and then his or her discipline in implementing an on-going practice-feedback loop.

In our view, discipline is essential for great leadership. Discipline is often sheer will power. It is making up your mind to initiate the changes and then stick with them. The great news is that you are not alone. The Train-the-Brain model described above involves others as coaches, feedback partners, and friends. There is a part of behavioral change that requires sheer will power and self-confidence – but

there is also a part that requires support from others. Great leaders realize they cannot achieve success on their own and thus their interdependence on others. The great leader builds these relationships and then relies on them to complete the feedback loop for change. If one is truly attempting to become a better leader, he welcomes feedback, is approachable and open, and cherishes continual improvement. The concept of continual improvement is a key, because in our research and opinion, one never really “arrives” at great leadership – it is an on-going process, a continuing journey.

## BROADCASTING THE CHANGE

What often happens when one consciously changes his or her behaviors is that others may not immediately recognize the change. In our experience, individuals (especially superiors) constantly replay tapes in their minds of previous experiences. For example, how often have you had a performance evaluation where the same item or behavior was mentioned year after year and you have already changed that item or behavior? Often the behavior is mentioned again because your manager has a certain incident replaying in her mind even though it occurred six years ago! In order to erase previous tapes it is important that you point out your new

behaviors – but do it in a more subtle way. We call this broadcasting the change.

Broadcasting the change is consciously telling others about what changes you are making. It is being transparent (completely open to others) – letting others know what you are experiencing inside. Done well, broadcasting contributes to others seeing you do things “right” and it lets them know you are sincerely trying to be a humble leader.

For example, let’s suppose that you generally dominate conversations – frequently interrupting without listening to others. One of your Behavior Improvements is to stop doing this and become a better listener. In addition to forcing yourself to not interrupt and to suspend judgment, you may also say at the beginning of the meeting, “My natural tendency would be constantly interrupt, but I am trying to become a better listener, so in this meeting I will hold back until others have had a chance to share their thoughts.” Of course this must be the truth – what you are really feeling.

You can also ask for feedback from employees, peers and/or managers. “I’ve been trying to be a better listener. Can you help me when you don’t see me practicing this?” (This is the implementation of the Practice-Feedback loop discussed above). What often happens, as you continually broadcast your changes, is that others (often your manager) will begin to notice the change. Many times others will mentally think, as you are broadcasting your change, that you are really listening better or they may notice fewer interruptions in meetings.

After identifying your improvements and establishing your practice-feedback loop, consciously look for ways to broadcast the change.

## APPLICATION

For each Behavior Improvement you listed above, think of ways you can broadcast the change (not in a boisterous or bragging way – but in a way that subtly highlights the change you are making). List the way you intend to broadcast the change below.

BEHAVIOR IMPROVEMENT #1

I intend to broadcast the change for this behavior by:

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BEHAVIOR IMPROVEMENT #2

I intend to broadcast the change for this behavior by:

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BEHAVIOR IMPROVEMENT #3

I intend to broadcast the change for this behavior by:

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ACCOMPLISHMENT AS A  
MOTIVATOR

Leadership is a way of life. It is not just changing some behaviors to make one look like a better leader or employee or spouse. As you truly assess your leadership style and intentionally want to be a stronger leader, the first step may be identifying certain behaviors and getting coaching from your manager, colleague, or an outside coach. As you move into sustaining those

behaviors (through the Train-the-Brain model) and broadcasting the change, those identified behaviors become a habit – a natural way that you begin to operate as a leader. As these new behaviors become ingrained in your daily style, you may identify other behaviors that you want to add (they may be from manager feedback or even better from your personal self observation because of the heightened awareness after completing this behavioral change process). You will then begin

to institutionalize these newer behaviors into your lifestyle – and the cycle continues. At some point you may find yourself being seen as a truly great leader. You will remember, of course, that leading is a journey, not a destination.

One reason this cycle works is because of the importance of accomplishment as a motivator. As you implement changes and see the impact of the results, you become more motivated to be an even stronger leader. When you realize you can make certain behavioral changes (such as being a better listener) and that the change has benefits, you realize you can

accomplish change and become an even better leader.

*Dr. Michael Comer is a consulting partner with The Hayes Group International in Winston-Salem, NC. For over 25 years he has consulted with organizations such as Federal Express, International Paper, Alcoa, General Dynamics, US Department of Defense and over 70 other corporations. This article was condensed from the book (co-authored with Merwyn Hayes) – **Start with Humility: Lessons from America's Quiet CEOs on how to Build Trust and Inspire Followers** (available at [www.startwithhumility.com](http://www.startwithhumility.com) or [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)). He can be reached at [mike@thahayesgroupintl.com](mailto:mike@thahayesgroupintl.com)*

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<sup>i</sup> Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 102.

<sup>ii</sup> For more details on the brain research and to learn more about behavioral change from an emotional intelligence perspective read *Primal Leadership* by Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee , 102.

<sup>iii</sup> For more information on the Belief System see Thad Green and Merwyn Hayes, *The Belief System* (Winston-Salem: Beechwood Press, 1993). Other books describing the Belief System include Thad Green, *Motivation Management: Fueling Performance by Discovering What People Believe about Themselves and Their Organizations* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 2000); Thad Green, *Performance and Motivation Strategies for Today's Workforce* (Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 1992); and [Thad Green](#) and Raymond T. Butkus, *Motivation, Beliefs, and Organizational Transformation* (Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 1999).

<sup>iv</sup> Goleman, 103.