CHAPTER 1

When the Keys to Past Success Get in Your Way

How Mindsets Become Mindtraps

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Once upon a time, there was a child who lived by the sea. He spent time sitting on a rock, drawing circles in the sand with a stick. Each day, the tide would cover the circles, and each day, the child would draw the same circles.

"Hello, my friend!" the child hears one day.

The child looks around, but no one else is there.

"Down here!" the voice says.

The child sees an oyster clinging to a rock.

"Are you an oyster like me?" the oyster asks.

"Can't you see I'm a human?"

"You don't feel like a human," the oyster says. "All humans are gifted beyond measure. They can move mountains and travel the sea. They can dream and make the impossible possible. Do you ever dream of what lies beyond these shores?"

The child has never thought about it.

"Then your gift is locked inside your shell, just like my pearl."

Humans can make the impossible possible? The thought makes the child's heart sing. "How do I unlock my human gift?" the child asks the oyster.

"I don't know," the oyster says. "I'm not human."

They are both silent for a moment. A fisherman walks by. Here is a human who's traveled to other shores, the child thinks. Perhaps he can help.

"Do you know how I can unlock my human gift?" the child asks the fisherman after greeting him.

"Look for the path of roses," the fisherman says.

The child has heard of that path of roses. People in the village talk about it sometimes. "How do I find it?"

"That's for you to figure out," the fisherman says. "But you won't find it if you stay here."

Although the idea of leaving his village scares him a little, the child decides to go look for the path of roses and unlock his human gift. So he says his goodbyes and walks away from his village with a heart full of hope but also trepidation about the journey ahead.

Before reaching the forest, the child comes across a horse in a meadow. The horse is walking around in a circle, sniffing the grass, which is dry and patchy. The horse's ribs are showing through its dull coat, which is taut as a drum.

"Are you okay?" the child asks.

"I'm hungry," says the horse. "I don't know what's happened to my grass. It used to be green and thick, and I was happy here. But now it's all dried up, and I cannot find enough to eat."

Looking a bit further out, the child sees a green meadow. "Why don't you move to that meadow over there?"

For the first time, the horse looks up. "I had not seen that meadow before! The grass indeed looks thick and green over there," the horse says. "But I cannot go."

"Why not?" the child asks.

"Because of the electric fence!" the horse says. "It will hurt me if I try to go over there."

"What fence?" the child asks, perplexed. "I don't see any fence."

"I grew up in this meadow and I know it's here," the horse says. "The farmer put it up when I was little to keep the cows out, so they wouldn't walk to my meadow and eat all my grass. That's how I was able to grow big and strong. But every time I walked too close to the edge, it gave me a big jolt. I can still feel it, so I'm not going anywhere."

How strange, the child thinks. The horse is locked inside an invisible prison. As he walks away, the child then wonders: Is he, too, trapped within invisible fences?

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How do the beliefs and outlook that get shaped in our brain over time become obstacles that stand in our way? In other words, how do mindsets turn into mindtraps? And why is it so difficult to see them in ourselves? This chapter will explain the following:

- How mindtraps get created
- How we can tell that a mindtrap is standing in our way
- Why we don't see ourselves as clearly as we think

The Birth of a Mindtrap

From an early age, Harry, the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, strove to be perfect. At school, teachers saw mistakes as weaknesses to be eradicated rather than opportunities to learn. At home, Harry's mother expected him to excel in everything he did, pushing him to fulfill the limitless potential she saw in him. Harry concluded that striving for perfect grades and number-one

rankings would lead to elite universities. Elite universities would in turn pave the way to prestigious employers, where a perfect performance would be the ticket to a high-flying career. In short, striving for perfection was the road to success.

This perfectionist mindset served Harry well. It motivated him to excel, and excel he did. By age 30, he'd made partner at a top strategy consulting firm. From his perspective, everything was going swimmingly. Then he went through a 360 assessment. Although he scored very well on many dimensions, his team's engagement ranked lower than the firm's average. Harry was shocked. How could that be? He didn't know what to do with that feedback, so he ignored it. A few years later, after he'd become a senior executive in another company, another assessment again revealed that his team was not as motivated as the rest of the company. Again, Harry met the feedback with disbelief. The company was doing significantly better than a few years earlier, which suggested he was doing everything right. And if the problem was not with him, then it had to be with his team.

Harry hadn't yet realized that his relentless pursuit of perfection in himself and others meant that he often viewed others as obstacles, rather than partners. His mindset and behavior hampered human relationships and, by extension, effective teamwork and collaboration. A belief that had served him so well had become a limitation on his path to become a better leader. His mindset had become a mindtrap.

Many of the beliefs, mindsets, or perspectives that our brains concoct are meant to serve us well. In fact, this is precisely why they take shape in the first place. Initially, these beliefs earn us approval, love, admiration, or acceptance. Who doesn't want all that? These instinctive pulls are almost impossible to resist, particularly at a young age, and they influence our behavior and our choices. Children instinctively strive for their parents' love and protection because it is vital for their survival and proper physical, psychological, and emotional development.

As we grow up, we typically want to feel that we belong to a group of like-minded friends or allies, who provide protection, collaboration, and understanding. Many teenagers desperately want to conform to whichever "tribe" they choose. In high school, my client Tanisha, a senior executive, badly felt the need to belong and make friends with popular girls and have fun. Yet earning that acceptance and becoming part of that group was incompatible with being a good student, which wasn't considered cool. But Tanisha wanted and needed to excel at school. To square that circle, she learned to show only part of herself: to her teachers and parents, she was the smart and successful student; and to her friends, she carefully hid her good grades and drive to learn so she could be the cool, friendly, and funny girl who, like them, felt that school was "lame," and good students, hopeless nerds. Only when she graduated top of her class did her friends discover that she'd been one of these "nerds" all along.

This instinctive need to belong extends far beyond family, friends, and colleagues. Our often-unconscious quest to fit in results in our absorbing collective beliefs and world views, such as social, cultural, national, or religious norms. Like the air we breathe, these norms are all around us, and they rule many aspects of our lives, from gender or family roles to work behavior. Whether we want it or not, they shape us by influencing our view of how we are supposed to behave or what it means to be a good friend, neighbor, parent, colleague, or leader.

Star athletes like Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps and NBA player Kevin Love, for example, have said how social values about men in general, and male athletes in particular, have influenced their behavior. "For the longest time, I thought asking for help was a sign of weakness because that's kind of what society teaches us," Phelps says. "That's especially true from an athlete's perspective. If we ask for help, then we're not this big macho athlete that people can look up to."[1] Love echoed the same sentiment. "Growing up, you figure out really quickly how a boy is supposed to act." he said. "You learn what it takes to 'be a man.'

It's like a playbook: *Be strong. Don't talk about your feelings. Get through it on your own*. So for 29 years of my life, I followed that playbook."[2] These collective norms determine how many leaders view their role and how they should behave. They also influence how we define success or failure, or even happiness.

So, on the one hand, these mindsets we adopt are useful. They bring us love, recognition, a sense of belonging or the drive to succeed, among many other things. On the other hand, they can also bind us. The problem arises when our mind behaves like the horse in the fable at the beginning of this chapter. We, too, can get stuck, bound by invisible fences of our own making that prevent us from moving forward. This is when a mindset becomes a mindtrap.

Why does it happen? How can something that initially helps us become an obstacle? Whether suddenly or slowly, in big or small ways, everything and everyone changes—ourselves, others, and our environment. We become older; we change jobs; a new colleague joins our team; a pandemic spreads across the world; someone becomes sick or dies; children are born, grow up, and make their own lives. Yet the mental constructions that live largely in our unconscious do not always adjust. We keep thinking and behaving in the same way, or we cannot let go of old emotions. This is how mindsets that have outlived their purpose become mindtraps. What once served you no longer does. "I'm good at this" or "This is how I've always done it" turns into "It no longer works."

Patrick, a senior executive in the insurance industry, was a math whiz who had built a successful career on his technical expertise, which propelled him from promotion to promotion. He spent his free time solving math problems and approached most challenges as equations to be solved. He was now being considered to head one of the group's subsidiaries, which involved interacting with the board of directors and the media. The CEO of the group was hesitating, however, wondering whether Patrick had the emotional intelligence that the new position

required. Although he was impeccably charming and polite, he was also distant, keeping all interactions with his colleagues and his team strictly about work and carefully avoiding any whiff of conversation that might veer toward the personal. He managed his team as a group of variables to be organized in the right order to play their part and saw no need to communicate any sense of direction or purpose. In short, the technical competence that had underpinned his success and gave him a sense of pride and identity was no longer enough. Why? Because to succeed in his prospective role, emotional intelligence was far more important than technical skills.

As top executive coach Marshall Goldsmith puts it: *what got you here won't get you there*. In fact, he has listed what he calls the "20 bad habits of leaders"—behaviors that often contributed to their success but are getting in the way of their becoming better leaders. These include traits like the need to show people how smart we are, not listening, blaming everyone but ourselves, the need to win at all costs and in all situations, or exalting our faults as virtues.[3] Together with Sally Helgesen, he's also identified 12 habits that more often stand in women's way, such as a reluctance to claim one's own achievements and overvaluing expertise.[4]

Cul de Sac

How can we tell when a mindset has become a mindtrap? There are many symptoms. Sometimes we clearly feel locked or stuck in our own lives. We realize we've reached a dead-end and that something must change, but we don't always know how to move forward. When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, Andrew, the CEO of an industrial company, understood that what he'd always thought was good leadership was no longer appropriate. The situation was unprecedented, and for the first time, he didn't know what to do. He could see that the company's employees

were under a lot of strain, worrying about their jobs, their loved ones, and the future in general, and struggling with lockdowns. How was he supposed to fix this? How could he help his teams? He knew that he could no longer behave the way he had so far—speaking more than he listened, coming up with solutions to fix all problems, and telling people what to do—because for the first time, he didn't know what to say and what to do. But he also had no idea what the alternative was. Like Andrew, we sometimes clearly see that we're stuck. Perhaps we feel our career is not progressing the way we'd like, for example, or our relationships feel stale. Have you ever felt you've hit a wall, but you're not sure why or how to move forward?

Bill George, the former CEO of Medtronic, remembers the moment he realized a mindset had become a mindtrap. From the time he was nine years old, his father told him he wanted Bill to become a CEO of a large company and be the leader he'd never been. This drove a young Bill to run—and lose—seven times for student council in high school and college. When he was around people who he felt were important, he would try hard to impress them. While working at Honeywell, he was one of two candidates to become the next CEO. He changed the way he behaved, careful to say the right thing at the right time. He also changed the way he dressed, wearing cufflinks, which he didn't typically wear, at board meetings just to impress board members. Then one day, driving in his car, he looked into the rearview mirror, and what he saw was a deeply unhappy man. He had contorted himself so much to fit who he thought he had to be to fulfill his ambition that he had lost touch with who he truly was. His mindset had become a mindtrap standing in his way. He had received several offers to become the CEO of Medtronic, a company whose purpose and culture he felt aligned with. But he'd turned them all down because he felt the company was too small. Once he realized he was trapped in a mindset that no longer served him, Bill decided to accept the Medtronic offer, and immediately he felt that he'd come home.

In many instances, however, we are not aware that a mindtrap is keeping us back. For example, the same situation keeps happening again and again, but we put the blame on someone else's shoulders. Remember perfectionist Harry, the CEO of the Fortune 500 company, and his teams' engagement feedback. Or we fail to see that our body acts as the canary in the coal mine, signaling a mindtrap at work. At a time when my first marriage broke down but I felt I could not leave, for instance, I became severely ill. Yet it took me a while to see the connection. Similarly, every time one of my clients faced a difficult decision, he suffered some sort of accident and injured himself.

Mindtraps may also crop up as arrogance or, alternatively, as imposter syndrome. Can you think of people who come across as full of themselves? People who rarely miss an opportunity to remind everyone that they've graduated from a top university, for example. People who never ask for anyone's opinion and, whenever it is offered anyway, won't listen. When encountering setbacks or delays, they are quick to become frustrated with their team and to blame others. Yet, this façade often hides deep insecurity and can easily crumble.

My client Blake, however, suffered from imposter syndrome. When I met him, he was a successful entrepreneur who'd left his corporate job several years earlier to start a company that offered bespoke workspace solutions. He was full of innovative ideas but struggled to convince his business partner. For the first few years, their partnership had worked well. Then came a time to innovate and for the business to take more risks. Because his partner didn't share the same vision for the business and didn't want to take risks, Blake's ideas never went forward, which confused staff members and produced mediocre results, all of which left Blake frustrated and unhappy. Yet he systematically deferred to his partner's opinion.

Blake was convinced that becoming a successful leader required graduating from a top university, being hyper-analytical, and showing no emotion. This was the direct and

indirect message he'd absorbed from a young age. Throughout his childhood, his father had hammered into him how important academic results and prestigious degrees were. Unaware of how much his family's opinion had influenced him, he then noticed only the evidence that supported that view. Famous business leaders who were his role models fit that profile. So did many of his former colleagues. Unsurprisingly, by the time I met him, he was convinced that this was not an opinion, but an absolute truth. The problem was that Blake was none of these things: he'd been a mediocre student, and his strengths were vision, creativity, and human relationships, rather than analytics. Because he didn't fit the profile of a stereotypical leader, Blake feared he would never succeed by himself. So he'd partnered with a hyper-analytical, much older and confident graduate from a prestigious university who fit his idea of a successful leader, but was no longer the partner he needed. Unaware of the mindtrap that sabotaged his self-confidence, he couldn't see that he stood in his own way.

Other common symptoms of mindtraps include burnout, unhappiness, or even depression. This is what Tanisha, the senior executive who as a teenager hid that she was a good student to make friends with the cool crowd, experienced later in life. She kept showing only the part of herself that she thought others wanted to see. Regardless of the time of day, she always wore makeup, and her hair was impeccably styled. She perfectly fit in at work, always behaving as was expected, never making waves. There was one sizable problem, however: by the time I met Tanisha, she was profoundly unhappy at work. Her boss did not respect her. She was also unable to express values that were important to her. After George Floyd died at the hand of the police in Minneapolis, she wanted to organize conversations at work. But when her boss told her this was out of the question, Tanisha relented because she felt she might lose her job if she insisted. Yet she was angry and dispirited. She no longer wanted to hide part of who she was, but she didn't know how to show her whole self without blowing up her entire life.

I've experienced these mindtrap symptoms several times—and still do sometimes! After the company I co-created in the metal recycling industry made headway on the technical front, we had to secure regulatory approvals to develop the business further. For months, I spent enormous energy lobbying countless people from industry and government bodies. This wasn't what I enjoyed doing, but it had to be done. Worse, I made little progress. And the more resistance I met, the harder I pushed. Until one evening, I met a friend for dinner, and he pointed out how worn out I looked and sounded. "Why do you keep banging your head against the wall?" he asked, after I explained what I'd been doing. "You need to find a way around it!" Then, I broke down. Until that conversation, I hadn't seen that this was exactly what I'd been doing. Just like during my teenage years, when I trained as a competitive show jumper, I kept getting back on the horse every time I fell. The way I was raised, persistence and commitment were essential qualities. But without realizing, I had equated exploring any other path with giving up and failure, which felt unacceptable to me. Once my friend helped me see that mindtrap, I was able to change tack. Instead of pushing for approvals that might take a long time to come, if they came at all, we instead partnered with clients who were already certified, which removed the need to get the approvals altogether.

So whether we know we're stuck but can't see what stands in our way, or we don't even see that we're stuck at all, why are we often so blind to our own mindtraps?

For one overarching reason: we don't know ourselves as much as we think we do.

How Well Do You Know Yourself?

Do you know yourself? If or when someone asks you this question, what do you say? Most of us are highly confident we do. We know what we like and don't like. We're confident we

know how we'd react to specific situations. We feel we have a good grasp of our major strengths and weaknesses—both personality traits and skills.

The problem is, we don't see ourselves as well as we think we do. In fact, organizational psychologist Tasha Eurich points out that, although 95% of people she surveyed said they were either somewhat or very self-aware, we often are deluded.[5] In reality, we all have blind spots about who we really are and how others see us. One of my clients, for example, firmly believed she was terrible at math, even though she'd graduated from a top university known for its demanding math curriculum. Conversely, have you ever had a colleague or a boss who was convinced that they were excellent at their jobs, even though they weren't as good as they thought? My guess is you have.

Why don't we see ourselves as clearly as we think? For three main reasons: self-awareness is not always comfortable, we're blind to our unconscious, and change is not easy.

First, seeing ourselves clearly is not always pleasant or comfortable. Most of us have no problem admitting to our strengths, but it is less comfortable admitting what we could do better, especially in areas that we value. Even if we've been told about growth mindsets and learning from failure, many of us still consider these areas of potential growth as baked-in weaknesses or shortcomings, particularly if they don't fit our own ideals and values. For example, if like Harry, the perfectionist CEO, you've been conditioned to think that you should be perfect, it isn't easy to take on board any signal suggesting that you're not. It feels much more comfortable to ignore these signals or dismiss them as "it's not me, it's them." There is often a gap between how others perceive us and how we perceive ourselves: our brains make snap judgments and take useful, but often misleading, shortcuts. Yet we do the same with our own selves, too. It is therefore tempting to dismiss other people's perceptions about us as an error, even when they happen to see us more clearly than we do see ourselves.

Second, we're blind to our unconscious, and we grossly overestimate how much we control our own selves. Our minds are like icebergs, a small fraction of which is visible while the rest remains hidden under water. Many of our beliefs and perspectives, particularly those that we've held for a long time, have become so automatic and part of who we are that, like the submerged part of the iceberg, we don't see them. This means that most of our mindtraps live in our unconscious, away from the glaring spotlight of our own awareness. Not only are we unaware of their control over us and our actions, often we've also forgotten how they even formed in the first place. Take Bill George's story. Although he'd pushed his father away, he'd subliminally adopted his message that success meant being CEO of a large company. It took him years, and becoming utterly miserable, to become aware of it.

Do you remember what happened when you were a baby? I don't, either. Yet the way our brain develops during the first seven years of our life greatly influences the way we socialize, interact, and communicate with others later in life, including our ability to empathize.[6] During these early years, millions of neural connections are created, based in part on how our parents and caregivers respond to us. These connections create the foundation of our brain architecture.[7] But there are so many, and they formed so early in our lives, that it is difficult to trace why or how they took shape.

There is a third main reason we're blind to our mindtraps. Becoming aware of what keeps us back is the first step toward change, and change is not easy. First, we get used to behaving a certain way, and the more neural pathways get activated, the stronger they become. This makes old habits hard to change. When my client Bruce became a senior executive in a multinational corporation, for example, he realized he could and should no longer decide everything for everyone. His micromanagement demotivated his teams, and he genuinely wanted to step into a role that created space for others to flourish and grow.

Through conscious effort, he managed to change his attitude and behavior. Then a crisis hit: the company's supply chains were disrupted, which created significant production and distribution challenges. Without realizing it, he returned to his previous top-down management style. In a time of uncertainty and anxiety, his trusted old habits automatically reemerged and took over.

Also, our unconscious survival instinct can make change difficult. Unless the status quo becomes untenable and threatening, it feels safe. Change, however, carries potential but also means uncertainty, and uncertainty means risk. This explains why fear and anxiety often crop up in the face of change. So even if our mindtraps become obstacles, we can unconsciously find comfort in keeping things as they are.

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Our mindtraps, whatever they may be, are mindsets and beliefs that once served us well. As such, let's take a second to thank them. Yet they're now like guests who outlast their welcome, and they need to go. In this chapter we've identified how to recognize common symptoms of mindtraps, and why we've perhaps not seen that they'd become obstacles. But wait, if we don't know what our exact mindtraps are, how can we remove them to unlock ourselves and move forward? We first need to identify them and understand who has been hiding behind them.

SELF-REFLECTION

1. The birth of a mindtrap

- What mindset do you feel has helped you most so far? Is it still helpful?
- Is there an area in your life in which you feel you're repeatedly confronting the same situation?

(*Continued*)

2. Cul de sac

- Can you identify a situation when you either didn't know how to move forward or spent enormous energy taking action but made little or no progress?
- Do you sometimes feel you're playing a part instead of being your genuine self? When and why?

3. How well do you know yourself?

- Have the results of a 360 assessment or any other type of feedback ever surprised you? How?
- Can you identify your main strengths and areas that you need to improve?