



## “Live and Work On Purpose” Newsletter

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### Are You Stuck? Try a Different Ladder

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Are you stuck in life? Feeling like you're unable to move beyond your current place in your life, career, or way of thinking about a situation? In my work as a personal and executive coach, almost every individual with whom I've worked has felt stuck in some way. If you are stuck, there is good news! You are not alone. The even better news is it's possible – even highly likely – that you can become “unstuck” if you understand the source of the “stuckness” and utilize some proven human behavior theories. Let's explore.

Being stuck is a result of hitting barriers – things in our lives that cause us to get stuck - and there are two categories of barriers. External barriers are those which are outside of us. They are barriers in our environment such as finances, the economy, other people, etc. Internal barriers are those which are within us. They include barriers such as limiting thinking, negative thoughts, lack of certain skills, etc. In this article, let's explore the internal barriers. They seem to be the barriers that give us the greatest trouble in identifying and overcoming.

Once we understand how the brain contributes to these internal barriers, we uncover a **powerful way of becoming unstuck**. Please read on.

#### What Causes Me to Be Stuck?

To understand the phenomenon of being stuck, we need to understand a bit about how the brain works. Recent neuroscience research has taught us a lot about how the brain's way of functioning contributes to being stuck and becoming unstuck. Here is what we need to know: The brain is a mapping machine. It is constantly creating mental maps to make sense of the information we take in. As humans, our brains take in and contain such large volumes of information, the brain attempts to automate or “map” as much of the information as possible in order to free up our brain for other tasks. Consider, for example, a task that you do automatically every day. It is likely that you do not need to consciously think about that task. It happens automatically. Other new tasks or ways of thinking require more concentration. When our brain forges a new mental map for the new thinking, we experience an “aha” moment. Eventually, when you complete this new task often enough, it too becomes automatic.

Now that we understand how the brain attempts to create automatic maps to make our thinking more efficient, let's explore how this relates to being stuck. Because the brain automates much of our thinking and actions, we often – without realizing it – automatically take a path of thinking that is not appropriate for the reality of the situation or the world. For example, an acquaintance of mine has an automatic mental map that, when someone provides her with constructive feedback, she automatically thinks the individual has an axe to grind, is undermining her credibility and trying to destroy her career. For whatever reason, this is an automatic mental map for her. She then behaves and responds based on that belief which causes all kinds of negative outcomes for her and her business.



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Automatic mental maps are wonderful time and energy savers for the brain. But, as you can see, they also have the potential for taking our thinking down the wrong road in life, leaving us stuck.

### **Can I Change My Mental Maps?**

According to many researchers, it's difficult or impossible to change a mental map. Knowing that is actually a great thing! “What?” you may ask. “Being told it's impossible to change my mental maps is a good thing?” Yes, it is. Knowing we cannot change an automatic mental map is good to know because it will hopefully stop us from trying to change something that is impossible to change and point us to a better way.

The better way is “creating new maps”. The research tells us that the best way to overcome an old, limiting mental map is to create a new one in its place. We can't undo the Grand Canyon but we can create new ways for the water in the canyon to flow. This also applies to our thinking. We can't undo our old maps but we can consciously and intentionally create new maps that circumvent the old maps and create new and more effective ways of thinking about life.

### **How Do I Create New Mental Maps?**

I like to use visual pictures to illustrate a point. In this case, let's imagine two ladders propped against a wall. When you climb up one ladder, you find the ceiling at the top of the highest rung. When you climb the second ladder, you find an opening in the ceiling above that ladder which takes you where you want to go.

What often happens to us is that we climb the ladder of thinking (that contains our inaccurate or inappropriate mental maps) and when we get to the top of that ladder, we hit the ceiling...we're stuck. The problem is that we keep trying to climb that ladder even though we are not going to get past the ceiling at the top of the ladder. Instead, if we would climb down the ladder and try the other ladder of thinking (that may contain a more accurate and appropriate way of thinking about the challenge), we will eventually get to the opening at the top of the ladder and ascend into the next level. When we do this, we have become unstuck, we move forward, and we flourish.

Here are some steps that will help you climb down the ladder of limiting thinking and try a new ladder or mental map:

**Be aware of your thinking.** Recognize which ladder you are on. Practice metacognition. Metacognition is the act of thinking about your thinking. When you feel stuck, ask yourself “What is the bottom line for me right now?” “What is the problem?” “How have I been thinking about this issue?”

**Think about the thoughts that are creating the situation.** Start climbing down the wrong ladder. Ask yourself “How are my past experiences creating my current thinking?” “What implied rules or thinking has brought me here?” “What thoughts am I paying the most attention to?” “What pieces of important information might I be ignoring?”

**Evaluate your current thinking.** Get to the bottom of the wrong ladder. Ask yourself “Are my current thoughts accurate, realistic, and rational?” Or are they inaccurate, not based in reality, and irrational?” “What evidence exists to validate my current way of thinking?”



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**Evaluate the new ladder.** Start climbing the right ladder. Ask yourself “What are some different ways I could think about this issue?” “What alternative paths exist?” “What other perspectives exist?” “If I were a neutral person looking at the situation, what would I notice?”

### **Strengthen the New Maps**

Once you’ve identified some new ways of thinking about the situation, start thinking of experiments you could design to test out the new thinking. Have fun with the new thoughts. Above all, hold yourself accountable to sticking with the new thinking and not moving back toward the old, more comfortable and automatic thinking. It may take some time but eventually, your new mental maps will take hold and through the roof you go!

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