Increasing Organizational Performance through Interference Awareness by Cheryl Scanlan

Have you ever experienced a moment where you couldn't think clearly to get to a decision or to speak intelligibly on a subject or perhaps to represent yourself accurately in a potentially threatening environment? You might be experiencing what I call "Interference." This article is intended to help the leader become more aware of interference thinking that impedes their ability to lead courageously, decisively and compassionately.    
**What is Interference?**  
  
  
When experiencing interference, the leader is having an internal monologue over things such as how best to lead the team, over issues of responsibility, even over simple things like how to stay present during a meeting. They are distracted by self-talk and inner messages that keep them from trusting the truth and their wisdom.   
*"All too often, our self-talk is filled with frustration ("How can I possibly get this done?"); disgust ("I can't wait to get through this!"); pessimism ("Nothing works out!"); and apathy ("Whatever!"). Think of the self-talk of the perfectionist: Nothing is ever good enough and any falling short of (lofty) goals is failure. Some of the most damaging self-talk I've heard is from perfectionists: "I'm such an idiot!" and "I can't do anything right!"* [Brett Steenberger, Self-Leadership and Success Forbes](http://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?f=0012_76V_u9yVULhl-WvEU9DHeEDlt4cQC1XfgUjWkDhnUByqAgCR4SFZz9zA7jyTe2d8i6JjIQPm58HeskZtJtLxz4QagDkoLzgAoLrwBB54o6KQNY6r3MFgsijUgD134Ur8BiKNmaMEw2vv_sIo9PfWsvlR06A_tIpHHQKyi1JjFg1x7jz9y2OBzp975nsGjuLsH7nPlg7Gekkyfp27I_S0RM2wvmyX9gKHUzKM0B5ri8Ucr3Ngr8L0PTIchPsNNRMqAzpf52_LRDVT0tEcuAeTb3aSSpwtzu&c=hiCWwWCuinlQoY3bJ8HSJ0igzVvZ3pOTz3R7HHp2d9Pcv1WMz9l5LA==&ch=YmUMMYFBATZ5WUubPJa5hg_Gk1Tf3ucEc41VTzXuzyRHMFyXA6MAtA==)   
These inner messages can be so deep and subtle that instead of saying "I feel negative" the leader acts in negative ways.   
This is not to say that all interference is disruptive. There are times when you will have an inner nudge that tells you something is not right or you need to pay attention, make a change or an adjustment. That's fine. The trouble starts when interference begins to taunt you, accuse you or act like a drill sergeant  
**How does a leader address Interference?**  
  
Interference Awareness is understanding how interference of thoughts, ideas, beliefs or attitudes conflict with your leadership and the untethered execution of best practices. It shows up as insecurity, bully talk, inner critic committees, reactions to childhood trauma or prior disappointment. Like the double bind, without confronting interference, a situation has no resolution and little or no successful outcome.  
Most leaders who are experiencing interference don't have the awareness they need to address it. They think the behavior is a part of their natural ability or they write it off as just the way they do things. They may also consider it a part of an ingrained disposition, in which they are partially right.   
  
  
Interference can be ingrained however, there is a good chance it's based on a faulty concept or attitude that is usually a part of a cause and effect experience. Meaning, something happened that caused a leader to think or feel a certain way. If a leader experienced rejection early in his life or in his career, he may be left with the need to drive himself/herself extra hard to prove his worth or value to avoid more rejection.    
Or, if a leader needs to be the hero, she may have trouble delegating and releasing responsibility to her team because she thinks she's the one expected to accomplish the big wins. Take a moment to think about that. Imagine how heavy that would feel and how being a hero could weigh on her like an anchor.   
Interference Awareness may be a close cousin to the double bind theory. A double bind is an emotionally distressing dilemma in which an individual (or group) receives two or more conflicting messages, with one negating the other.   
This creates a situation in which a successful response to one message results in a failed response to the other (and vice versa), so that the person will automatically be wrong regardless of response. The double bind occurs when the person cannot confront the inherent dilemma, and therefore can neither resolve it nor opt out of the situation. (Double Bind Wikipedia)  
I describe a successful outcome as congruency between inner values and outer execution.   
**Interference Awareness Connection to EQ**  
It's easy to miss Interference because its subtle in nature and often occurs beneath the surface. In fact, on the surface, interference may look like success but underneath, it is crazy making for the leader and the team.   
As in Emotional Intelligence, it's important for the leader to have a level of self-awareness when it comes to Interference.   
Brandon Cooper, author of ***The Emotional Intelligence Bible*** describes self-awareness as the ability to recognize ones' feelings as they are being experienced and the consequences of those feelings.   
Interference Awareness is not only the ability to be self-aware when interference is happening. It's also the ability to understand where it's coming from, how it is disrupting progress and how to eliminate it.   
**Three Examples of Interference**  
**1. Driver Interference**  
When interference shows up as a driver, it pushes you to go at a non-stop pace day and night. You are on a treadmill that never shuts off and you must keep running so that things don't fall apart or to prove your worth. If you start to feel insecure or unworthy, you hit that faster button and drive harder, longer, faster. Some leaders fall to their deaths trying to please or satisfy the driver interference voice in their heads.   
A businessman who I knew to be an overwhelming success by any standard, drove himself by chasing more and more success. He came from a very poor family, his father abandoned the family and left them with nothing. His father married another woman and started a new family. As a boy, this man would watch his father with his new family from across the street.   
He developed the belief that if he could be as successful as his dad, then his dad would love him. The problem was his dad died never acknowledged this man as his son, yet he still drove himself  by incessantly seeking his approval. A friend of his came along and asked him when was he going to stop trying to prove himself to a dead man (his father)? With that question, something opened up for this man. He realized the irrationality of his actions and how he'd been taking time away from his family to accrue more money, prestige and accomplishments when he had more than enough. With this awareness, he completely changed the way he worked. He took back his power. The driver interference was no longer allowed to drive him to prove anything to himself or to a father who had passed on.   
Is that voice still there? Absolutely, but it no longer has authority.    
**2. Qualifier Interference**  
The message of interference as a qualifier tells you that you need to do things to qualify your existence. This can come out as people pleasing, inner and outer competition, the inability to acknowledge or celebrate others because if they are right then you must be wrong. The biggest danger of the qualifier interference is it makes you vulnerable to making decisions that are not in the best interest of your team or your company and it's never satisfied.   
One example comes from a CEO I worked with who had the reputation of knowing everything. Somewhere along the way, he had decided he was not 'qualified' for a job unless he was the smartest one on the job. The results were simultaneously complimentary to him and disastrous for the business. His key leaders constantly plagued him with questions for which he always had an answer, breeding lack of confidence within his team. He had not been able to figure out how to empower his team. When the qualifier interference was confronted, the CEO's eyes lit up! He came to understand that the need to be the "answer man" (such a subtle, subconscious position) he had created for himself, was stunting growth for the business.  
The more the qualifier interrupts you, the more you will give it permission to operate. The qualifier may cause you to compromise your values and to send mixed messages to your team. They won't believe in what you value because your actions show the opposite of your words.   
**3. Blocker Interference**  
The purpose of the blocker interference is to keep you from moving forward. It creates or allows an atmosphere of obstacles as a routine part of the work you do.   
I once worked with a manager who was so consumed by the blocker that she would sabotage the good progress her team made and slow them down to the point of failure at times. She blocked their good ideas, she blocked the things they did that created more successful outcomes, she created chaos in her division so that they were always problem solving instead of moving forward. Why? She felt more comfortable as a problem solver than a successful leader. When she gave a report to her leaders, she would tell them about the things going wrong in her division and how she was working to fix it. She limited her whole division because she was not aware how blocker interference impacted her team. She turned inward and listened to the blocker because her leadership was self-focused, instead of team focused. Again, imagine with me the inner state of that manager. Imagine how she blocked her own growth. It's an exhausting way to work and to live. In time, that manager lost her job because of the poor performance of her team and her division. To this day, she continues to struggle for success after 30 years in leadership.   
The more the blocker interference drives behavior, the more energy is spent on creating a protective environment around the leader which, as is the case with qualifier or driver, will begin to impede progress in the business.  
**Why does interference show up in the first place?**  
Interference shows up when you are experiencing a perceived vulnerability or a complex situation.   
"It's like having an old operating system for your computer...The operating system of our minds has a quirk when we are working in complexity, and that quirk set us on a course of action that is the exact opposite of what the situation really needs." ***Unlocking Leadership Mindtraps,*** Jennifer Garvey Berger  
Interference will tell you things like:

* It's your job to make sure the whole company succeeds.
* I need to perform to prove my worth.
* Other leaders have teams that work well together, but your team needs constant hand holding and you should be involved in every decision.
* You must look like you have the right answers even when you don't have a clue so that your team respects you and understands that you are the boss.
* You must pick up the slack for anyone running behind. After all, it's your team.
* Push hard for success. You must prove you are worth it.
* If you work hard, they will know that you are worth having this position.
* The leader before you did a great job and everyone loved her. Now, how do you beat that?
* Don't grow too fast, you might fail.
* Be careful about new ideas, what if they don't work?
* Your customers depend on you.
* You are accountable to the stakeholders.
* What are "they" saying about you?
* You should probably be at every meeting.
* Make sure you don't make a mistake, and if you do, find someone else to take the blame.
* I can't own my mistakes, that would make me look weak and unprepared.

In these cases, your stress level can be very high, you're on edge, you've moved into a high-level pass/fail complex performance state. If you are driven by performance, failure is inevitable. You will become laser focused on the possibility of failure and on who will take the blame. Or, you will work so hard to make sure no one on your team fails that you burn yourself out and you start taking on jobs and responsibilities that are not yours.   
Without realizing it, you dis-empower your team and your people will stop working. You put them in a double bind because you send them mixed messages.    
You are the gas and they are the engine. Let them be the engine.  
You can't serve in both positions effectively.  
**How might interference be showing up in your work?**  
Here's an example:   
I'm working with a leader who was recently promoted from a VP of Operations to the COO position. She is a competent leader with the skills and experience she needs to successfully lead the company. However, after stepping into the new role, she went from working an average of 12 hour days to 15 hour days. She was uncomfortable with it, not to mention tired and running at a pace that was not sustainable.   
During our conversation, she explored her reasoning for the increase in her hours when she had the support and expertise of a great team.   
I asked her this question, "how much of this work are you doing to make up for a lack of confidence and how much of it really needs to be done?" She quickly identified that about thirty-percent of what she was doing was to prove herself in this new role. Upon reflection, we established that she'd already proven herself. She was promoted to the new role because she was the right leader and fit for the position. As we talked, she realized that in this new position, she didn't need to have the right answers. She needed to put people in place who had the right answers and who could do the job. She recognized that there was a lot of emotional interference that,if left unchecked, would have worn her into the ground.   
**The way out:**  
Once you recognize that you are in the Interference trap, there is a way out.

* Reconnect to who you are. Your unique talents, skills and your role as the leader. What is your critical contribution?
* Reconnect to your values and what matters most to your company and your team.
* Challenge your assumptions of how you think things should go and ask the important question: What if we did it differently?
* Reconnect to your team. What is their critical contribution?
* Learn to trust your team and the people around you to get the job done. Trust their abilities more than you trust your ability. Ask the question,"what caused me to lose trust in my team and how can I reestablish it?

Too often, executives are going so fast and pushing so hard while focusing on the goal, that they are not aware when interference is being disruptive in their business or their lives. They find themselves in a double bind by creating a scenario where there's no true win because of the emotional, physical and professional cost of winning. 

The way out is to strengthen your Interference Awareness and to ask for help to sort it out when you need a perspective shift. In the long run, you will feel freer and more confident in your leadership role and empower your team to be more confident in their roles.

**In Summary:**  
Every change for a leader (even a good one) has the potential to be temporarily disruptive during the learning or adjustment phase, especially when we go into an expanded role. It's an opportune time for interference to show up and pull leaders off track. The key is being aware of what's happening so that you don't give it power or authority to direct actions or strategy.​