

Chapter 11
Understanding Cognitions

from
Public Speaking: An Idea Focus
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General Education Objectives: This chapter helps you to:

1. understand the interrelationship between beliefs, values and attitudes.

Specific Testable Objectives: As a result of studying this chapter, you should be able to:

1. relate values, beliefs and attitudes in terms of abstraction
2. structure values, beliefs and attitudes in the model of reasoning
3. define and provide examples of belief-only statements
4. define and provide examples of three areas of beliefs.
5. distinguish among values, attitudes, and beliefs.

“Nobody outside of a baby carriage or a judge’s chamber believes in an unprejudiced point of view. -- Lillian Hellman

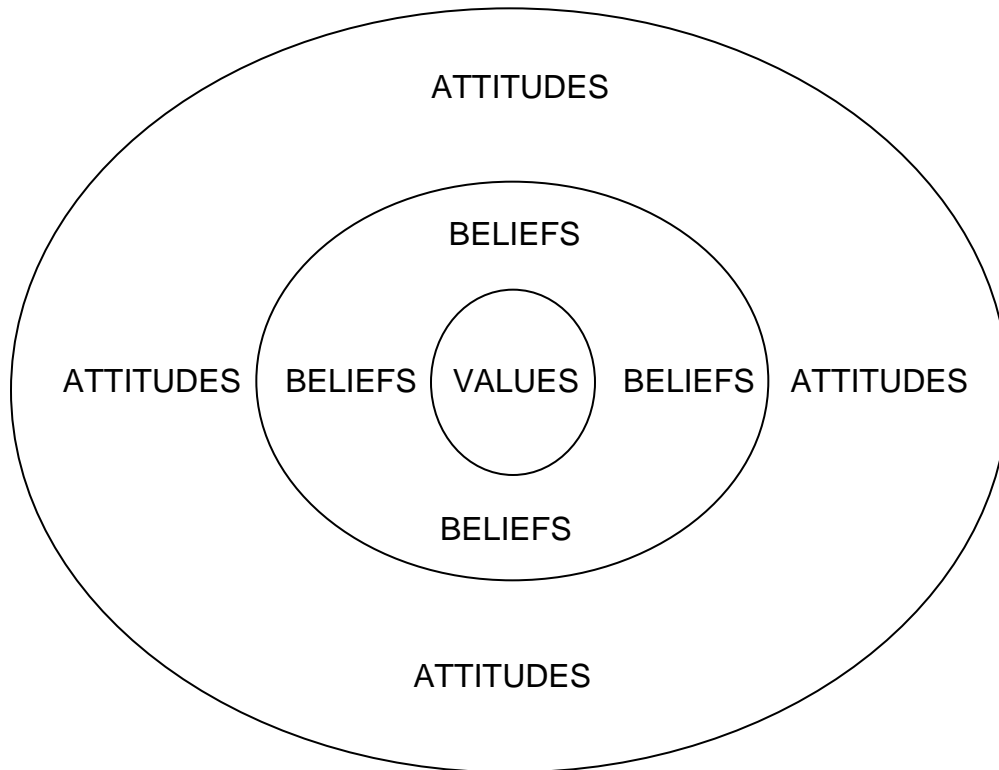
As developed in Chapter one, the ideal state is for people to behave appropriately in all situations because they believe that is how they should behave. It is sometimes necessary for people to be taught appropriate ways to behave and it is sometimes necessary for people to be persuaded to believe appropriately. It is in this context that we turn to a rudimentary study of how we think, i.e. our cognitive processes. This study helps us better understand why we differ from one another in what we think is correct behavior in a particular situation. Armed with this understanding, we can better understand the ethical means of effecting change in behavior, that of changing the person’s mind.

Our belief system, or cognitions, seems to be organized in a way reflecting the abstraction ladder discussed in Chapter 2. In the case of cognitions, our most abstract convictions, termed values, are at the core or center of the system (see Figure 13-1) as opposed to the top of a ladder. Values are abstract tenets about life that are formed early in childhood. They, in turn, function as the most basic *bridges* that support all other cognitions reflecting the deductive process discussed in Chapter 3. Figure 13-2 reflects one slice of these cognitions compressed to reflect a Model of Reasoning.

In some psychological way, similar to the argument chains illustrated in Chapter 3, we justify our specific beliefs by our more general beliefs, and those

are justified (often only when we are pressed to do so) by yet more general ones, and so on until we reach our values. Values are generally so deep in the system, that if someone is forced to justify the beliefs that a value directly supports, she or he is likely to say, "Well isn't that obvious?" because the beliefs being questioned are, in the mind of the person, **Truths**.

Figure 13-1
Representation of Our Belief Systems



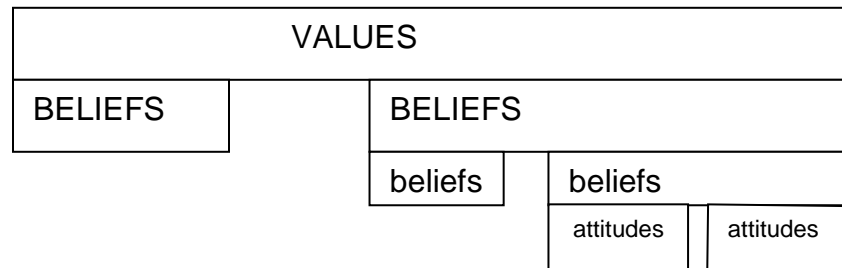
A large number of beliefs are, to the person, a logically extension of each value. We believe from decades of research that individuals seek to maintain a psychological harmony among cognitions and strive to prevent change that would produce disharmony. A change in one cognition typically requires the person to make some realignment in other beliefs in the chain to restore a sense of reasonableness. Since values are the basis for many beliefs, if person does change a value, it usually results in a drastic change in how that person both views the world and conducts him or herself. As a result, values seldom change. In that sense, values are said to be strong: as the number of specific cognitions supported by a value increases, the stronger the value, and the more it is resistant to change.

Major life tragedies as well as intense duress as in brainwashing can change a value and thus drastically change a person, referred to as a "snapping

experience,” because of the sudden and dramatic shifts in life styles. The effects of these tragic events, such as a hurricane or earthquakes, and other stress producers are beyond the scope of this text. Understanding values, however, does help us to understand the general-specific nature of cognitions and the concept of strength of cognitions.

Figure 13-2

Belief System (Compressed) in a Model of Reasoning



Our main focus on cognitions, thus, deals with the relatively more specific ones: beliefs and attitudes. Given the person has freedom to act at will, these cognitions evoke behavior in relevant situations. These specific beliefs and attitudes are predispositions to respond in preferential ways. These cognitions become the bases for individuals opting to behave. As leaders in a free society, we need to help shape these cognitions so that individuals choose to act responsibly.

For this reason, beliefs and attitudes must be a focus of public communication in a democratic system. By understanding the information in this chapter you can be a better, more ethical, leader in the future.

The Study of Beliefs and Attitudes

Beliefs, like values, are functions of our mental makeup and as such, obviously, can not be seen. Our inability to see beliefs directly complicates their study. Fortunately, our purpose does not require that I explain all of this process. My purpose is to give you a beginning point that I believe will prove helpful and still be fundamentally correct.

Two approaches exist to compensate for our inability to see beliefs. The first is to infer them from behavior. While the skilled observer can be accurate using this approach, it is often too time consuming and/or after-the-fact to be practical, such as in predicting how people will vote in elections. After they vote, the prediction is meaningless.

The second approach is to rely on what people say they believe, i.e., their statements of beliefs. Belief statements, unlike value statements, are generally easy to evoke from others. Most people are quick to express their beliefs and attitudes on most matters.

Belief statements, when truthfully expressed, reflect cognitions. Of course, the “when truthfully expressed” in the previous sentence is a major restriction on using belief statements to help us understand others: People not only sometimes lie to us, they also lie to themselves for all kinds of psychological reasons. Still, belief statements form the basis of the modern communication and marketing world. They also provide a means for you to gain a fundamental view of the cognitive system.

Belief (Only) Statements

Beliefs, when expressed, make an assertion about reality, whether the assertion is true or not. “The sky is blue (or yellow);” “Mothers love (hate) their children;” and, “The second amendment grants (doesn’t grant) the right to all citizens to bear arms” are all examples of belief statements. Beliefs statements vary along a continuum between something accepted as absolutely true to those believed to be absolutely false (see figure 11-3). “The sky is blue;” “Most mothers love their children;” and “The second amendment may grant the right to individual citizens to bear arms” are equally expressions of beliefs that place the views on the left side of the continuum.

Figure 11-3
The Basic Belief Continuum

Absolutely true Probably true Possibly true Possibly not true etc

Attitude Statements

Attitudes add an evaluative component to beliefs. Attitudes don’t simply say that something exists; they say that the existence is good or bad, relatively so. In adding the evaluation, the statements still make an assertion about reality. So, all attitudes are beliefs, while not all beliefs are attitudes.

The examples in the section above are all beliefs, but none, in written form, express an evaluation. “I love blue skies;” “It’s good for mothers to love their children;” and “Generally, citizens should have the right to bear arms” all contain an evaluation, and, as such, are beliefs that reflect attitudes. In these examples, the evaluations are all positive. They would be attitude statements if they were expressed negatively: I dislike blue skies; Mothers should not love their children so much; citizens shouldn’t have the right to bear arms. These are equally attitudes.

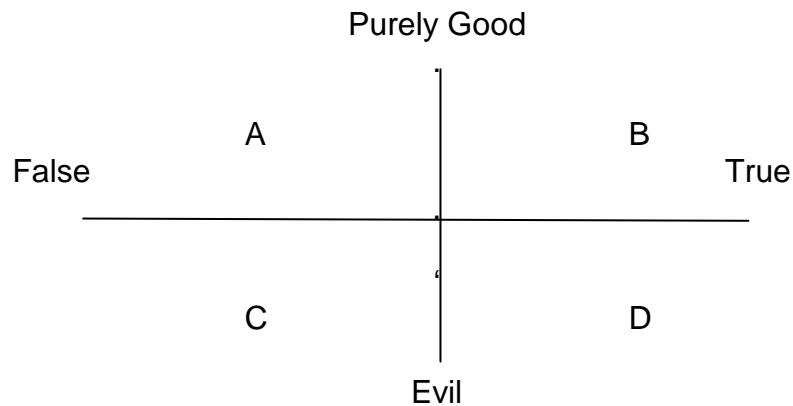
In face-to-face discussions, evaluations are predominantly expressed with the body and in the voice. In those interactions, you will need to expand beyond this discussion. Our focus will be on verbal expression as in the world of surveys and feedback forms. Still this exclusive focus on the verbal dimensions will help you in establishing a baseline for times where you have the nonverbal as well as the verbal messages to help you understand the thinking of others.

Differentiating Belief (only) Statements from Attitude Statements

Beliefs and attitudes work together in our cognitive system and are typically consistent with each other. For these reasons, if you confuse the two, it generally will not provide you with a problem. However, what seems consistent to another may not seem reasonable to us. For that reason, when mistaking a belief for an attitude does cause a problem, it can be a major problem.

For example, a person might say, "These reality shows are nothing but fakes." If we trigger on "fakes" as a bad thing and view the statement as an attitude, we may be incorrect. The person could love the creativity in the production of this fakery. Figure 11-4 plots beliefs and attitudes on two independent continuums. Beliefs, as in figure 11-4, run from absolutely true to absolutely false. Attitudes, shown along the vertical axes, go from purely good to evil. That two axes yield four parts that are labeled, for simplicity, A, B, C, and D.

Figure 11-4
Grid of Possible Viewpoints on a Topic



For the statement, "Reality shows are fakes," a person in A would believe that reality shows are authentic and enjoys them, in part, for that reason. People in B believe the shows are fakes but appreciate them, perhaps, for their creativity. Individuals falling in the C area dislike the shows, in part, because they think them to be real or life-like. The D folks dislike the shows, in part, because they think them to be phony.

In the case of reality shows, a misunderstanding of a person's attitude may produce a wasted, and even uncomfortable, evening watching the shows together. In issues of public policy, the misunderstanding can be most serious.

Distinguishing between belief statements and attitudes statements is often a challenging activity. As we talk, we combined the two in ways that are perfectly naturally in our language. Statements that are worded as if they are simply describing reality are said in ways that actually express an evaluation. Students also often have difficulty recognizing evaluations because, in language-arts classes, they are taught to differentiate between "fact" and "opinion." The difference between beliefs and attitudes is a different analysis; and, it is a more useful one to learn, as difficult as it may be.

Of course, if a person believes that a real-world relationship exists, he or she probably sees that as a fact. For hundreds of years, most Europeans believed that the world was flat. That was a widely held belief; they would have called it a fact. You may have been taught to label unfounded statements as opinion. This is a distinction that isn't helpful to us in understanding cognitions. It is better to consider all beliefs as opinions and determine how strongly they are held and whether they have an evaluation dimension. If they contain an evaluation, they are most likely to predict behavior.

Inset 11-1

SELF-INSTRUCTION BLOCK DIFFERENTIATING BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES

In the following examples determine if (1) the statement is a belief containing no evaluation, (2) an attitude or (3) a statement of both a belief without an evaluation and an attitudinal expression.

1. Many recent scientific inventions are a result of research carried on in the information-technology industry.
A: 1. This statement probably could be supported with examples and even statistics, but even if it isn't true, the statement reflects what someone believes. Do recognize that it involves a judgment, just not a judgment of good or bad.
2. I really like classical music.
A: 2. A functionally equivalent statement might be "Classical music is good;" or "I enjoy listening to classical music." It reflects an evaluation.
3. American Idol was number one in the ratings again this week and I really enjoyed watching it.
A: 3. The first part was a belief and the second an attitude. Would the answer have changed if the first part had said, "American Ideal is very popular?" Hopefully, you see that this is as a functional equivalent statement. How about if in the last part the person had said, "it is very entertaining?"
4. Louis "Sachmo" Armstrong, jazz's most famous cornet player, died in 1971.
A: 1. The speaker probably admired Armstrong and there is no easy way to verify that Armstrong is jazz's most famous cornet player, but the speaker doesn't say he admired Armstrong etc. If Armstrong wer a famous drummer, it would have been incorrect, but still it would express what someone could believe.

5. People who want to avoid identify theft should be careful with their credit cards.
A, 2. It's complex; the short version is "It's wise (good) to be careful with credit cards to avoid identify theft."
"Should" statements translate easily into "It is good to" statements.
6. Mrs. Bingham is much too intelligent to work at a job that demands so little creative thinking.
A: 3. It is the person's belief that Mrs. Bingham is intelligent and that the job is very routine. It is easy for us to project that intelligence is good and routine is bad; but that may not be the person's view. We do know that the person thinks that it would be better for Mrs. Bingham if she had another job.

By being able to judge correctly when a person is expressing an attitude, not just a belief, will help you to better understand the person and to be able to work with the individual more effectively and efficiently. Of course, the evaluative component is most likely expressed with the voice: consider the statement, "That's a shortcut if I've ever seen one." This statement has the characteristic of a belief. Simply considering the words, it makes a statement about the relative efficiency of a course of action. However, it's most likely that the speaker made it obvious in her voice that she was positively impressed with the shortcut; or just the opposite. In that case, you know it is an attitude.

Areas of Beliefs

The Reality Area

All of our examples above dealt with what we in communication might term, "topics" or "issues," because they would fall within the subject material of a speech. From a different perspective, they might be said to comprise a reality area within our belief system because they could reflect a person's thinking about reality, independent of the speaker or other aspects of a speech situation. In each case, the topic is broad and could be divided into subcategories and would be so divided in developing a speech on any of those topics.

Our beliefs about reality involve many different subjects. These subjects are generally interconnected through some higher-order abstraction, but they are distinguishable as categories, each involving subcategories. The reality area of our cognitions is complex. However, it is only one of the areas. At least two more become relevant in any speaking situation and they are also well developed.

The Relationship Area

We must also be aware that audience members have beliefs about the speaker. Attitudes about speaker have traditionally been considered under the heading of source credibility or speaker image (see Chapters 12 and 17). Speaker image, the attitudes that listeners have of the speaker, are within the cognitive area termed relational (or social) because the attitudes therein concern people with whom we have some relationship no matter how trivial that relationship might be.

Others' beliefs and attitudes toward us as a speaker affect how they listen to us and how much influence we have in the short run. Of course, their relationships with their fellow listeners have similar impacts as we discuss in Chapters 14 and 15. Obviously, the network of beliefs in this area of cognitions is complicated, but by understanding their general nature and structure, you can improve your ability to communicate, and as needed, find the best time and audience situation to share your ideas.

The Goal Area

The third area of our cognitive system that is of key importance to the public speaker I call, "goal." Again, the beliefs in this area vary in terms of their abstraction. They speak to what we hope will and will not happen in all aspects of our life. They involve long-range to immediate goals. They include our beliefs about what we want to accomplish as a member of a group as well as what we may want to accomplish as an individual. These beliefs speak to what we want in life generally and what we want in any particular situation. They speak to our perceived abilities to make things happen as well as our self-doubts. Traditionally, our focus in this cognitive area has been on motivation (see Chapter 13) and, more recently, our interest in this area has emphasized self-esteem and relevance of issue, termed salience.

Cognitions and Affects

The beliefs, in the case of all three of the areas of cognitions discussed above, are associated with affects, i.e. by thinking any of them we feel emotions and energy release from emotional arousal. These affects are perhaps most obvious in the goal area of cognitions when the person sees, or is forced to see, implications of the beliefs on intended behavior.

Since the goal of ethical communication is to help others to form intentions to behave in a way to promote an enlightened self-interest, we need to recognize the negative as well as the positive nature of emotions on these behavioral intentions. Affect states often inhibit a person from behaving as she or he would prefer. As a public speaker, you will be limited in what you can and even should do to help the person deal with these affects. Still, by being aware of them and even, at times, discussing these inhibitors you may assist audience members to behave as they prefer.

Please study Inset 11-2 (at the chapter's end) at this time.

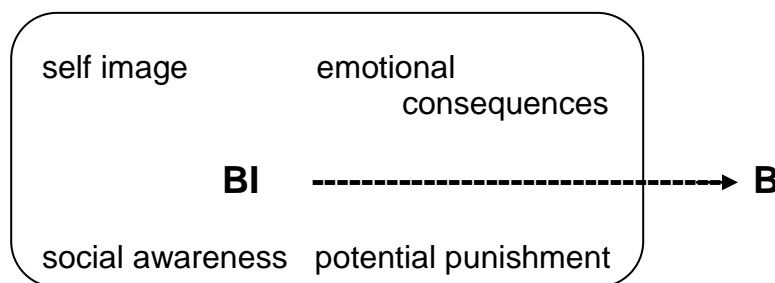
Behavioral Intent and Behavior

Often, we may be able, simply by informing audiences, to establish a sufficient base in their reality areas to enable them to act in their own and our self interest. In that case, our duty is only to give a quality informative speech and they will supply, from their goal area, the motivation to create an intention to act at the appropriate time.

However, if the needed cognitions are not sufficiently developed, we will want to link the audience's existing goals to the intended course of action. This linkage, of course, may need to involve several steps in the reasoning process. Ultimate success may require a campaign. At some point, with some initial success, you may be able to give that informative speech to explain the steps in the process that needs to be followed. When successful, the members of the audience will develop the desired behavioral intentions.

When the time comes for these individuals to act, the energy supplied by the affects associated with the cognitions within the goal areas may help them to act forcefully. However, we need to accept that people often do not act as they would prefer. There seem to be filtering cognitions that deter behavior; we (I with E. Sam Cox) call these behavioral-intent encapsulators (BIE's). BIE's seem to surround behavior intentions preventing action. (See Figure 11-5)

Figure 11-5
Encapsulators of Behavioral Intent



Internal BIE's are of three types depending on the nature of the potential punish. One is self image; does this action fit who I am? Can I manage to do this; is it in my capability? Another reflects social awareness: what will others think of me if I do this? Is this something that others might do? The third involves emotional consequences: How will I feel after doing this? How much energy will it demand? Will I regret it?

Knowledge of BIE's is often used by people to prevent change in our society. Some even extend them to a fourth category by imposing physical consequences on behavior. While the use of BIE's to produce or restrict behavior falls outside of the scope of what I am advocating, the ethical communicator can work to help others understand that these factors may operate in the specific situation that calls for action. We can help individuals to understand the BIE's and make them aware of how others might use the BIE's to prevent the preferred action. In some cases, we may want to inform someone

where she or he can obtain more assistance. Professionals in the communication field do help others to improve their self image, manage their emotions and deal with social pressure when applied by others. As these techniques improve individuals' ability to act for their own and the great good, our society is improved.

Summary

In this chapter we have discussed the interrelationship of three principle types of cognitions: values, beliefs and attitudes. The focus in public speaking is on beliefs and attitudes as they function in three cognitive areas: reality, relational, and goal. Within the goal area, a fourth type of cognition becomes most pertinent. The type is behavioral intent. Helping others to form appropriate behavioral intentions is the goal of public speaking. Although, once these intentions are formed the person may not act on them, understanding how they are formed and the reasons they aren't followed can make you a better communicator.

Inset 11-2

SELF-INSTRUCTION BLOCK ON THE INTEGRATION OF COGNITIONS WITH ABSTRACTION AND REASONING

This block requires knowledge of Chapters 2 and 3. If you haven't already been assigned those chapters, please wait to complete this block until you have mastered those chapters.

Example 1

- a. Studying is required to pass most courses.
 - b. A daily effort is required to do well in most college courses.
 - c. A daily effort is required for me to do well in this course.
 - d. This is a demanding course.
- Q: Which area of cognitions would contain three of these statements?
A: Reality
- Q: From which area is c?
A: The goal area.
- Q: What change (if any) is needed to put these in order of abstraction?
A: It close to correct, but c is more restrictive than d since it is applied to the person. Also, some demanding courses would not demand a daily effort. Correct order: a, b, d, c.
- Q. Items b, c and d could be used to form an argument. Which is the warrant, which the data and which the claim?
A: B as the most abstract is the warrant. D is the data and c is the claim.

Example 2

- e. Wise students want to do well.
 - f. Most students want to graduate.
 - g. I am a college student.
 - h. I want to do well.
 - i. I am a wise student.
- Q: Items g-i are in which cognitive area?

A: The goal area

Q: Which two items need to be switched for them to be in the correct order of abstraction?

A: E and f; f is the most abstract.

Q: Which three could be used to form an argument?

A: E, h and i.

Q: Which item goes with each part of the simple model?

A: E is the warrant; i is the data and h is the claim. Although the speaker is equally aware of both data and claim, the reasoning in the warrant is from wise to wanting to do well. Wanting to do well isn't said (and probably doesn't) make one wise.

Example 3

j. I like to please my friends.

k..My friends want me to do well in this course.

l. Judy is my friend.

m. Judy wants me to do well in this course.

Q. All of these items are from which cognitive area?

A. The relational area.

Q. What claim might be reached using the j as data and k. as a warrant?

A: I want to do well in this course.

Example 4

n. I will work daily in this course.

o. I want to do well in this course.

p. To do well in this course requires a daily effort.

Q. The first two of these statements reflect which cognitive area?

A. The goal area.

Q. Viewing these three statements as a simple argument, what are its three parts?

A: N is the claim; o is the data and p is the warrant.

Q: From the previous examples in this block, which letter would be backing for the data in the argument in this example?

A: Item k or in an extension of l "This is a college class" , . As in the final answer within Example 3, the data here is that argument's claim. In Example 2, i establishes the basis for wanting to do well in college classes (a secondary warrant) which is chained in application is this argument as the data.

Q: From the previous examples in this block, which letter would be the backing for the warrant?

A: D. It forms the basis for knowing that one will need to work daily to earn a good grade.

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