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**The Scout Mindset: Why Some  
People See Things Clearly and  
Others Don't**

Made by Blinkist



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Maybe these blinks will inspire you to dig deeper, or maybe they're enough to start you thinking and then on to something new. However you read blinks, we hope they help you become an even brighter you.

**What's in it for me? Learn how to think more like a scout and less like a soldier.**

Imagine that the world is a battlefield – and that on this battlefield there are two types of people: soldiers and scouts. The soldiers believe there is only one way of seeing the world – and that is their way. They're ready to attack anything or anyone that contradicts their worldview.

Then there are the scouts. The scouts have no interest in attacking. Their job is to check out the lie of the land, to create an accurate map of the battlefield, to establish the facts, regardless of whether those facts reinforce or contradict what they want to be true.

Here's the big reveal: we're the soldiers. And we're the scouts. We're both – but each of us tends to approach life either a bit more like a soldier or a bit more like a scout.

Clearly, these blinks favor one type of mindset over the other. So what's so bad about the soldier mindset? What's so bad about fighting for your beliefs and sticking up for your convictions? And what's so great about the scout mindset. Get ready to find out.

**A note to readers: this Blink was written especially for audio. If you're trying to decide whether to listen or to read, we highly recommend listening!**

In these blinks, you'll also learn

- why you should get good at being wrong;
- why Intel got out of the memory-chip business; and
- why superforecasters outperform CIA agents and university professors.



## What's so bad about the soldier mindset?

Let's get started by answering that question from earlier: What's so bad about the soldier mindset?

After all, being a staunch defender of your beliefs doesn't sound so terrible, right? When you put it like that, having a soldier mindset sort of sounds like a *good* thing.

To explain why it's not, here's a story. It's a famous one, a true one, and it does a particularly good job of demonstrating the damage that a soldier mindset can do. It's the story of the Dreyfus affair.

Our story begins in 1894, in France – specifically, inside the German embassy in France. In the German embassy, a cleaning person has found a torn-up memo in a wastebasket. Now, this cleaning person just so happens to be a

French spy, and that memo just so happens to contain information about French military matters. Someone has been selling French secrets to the Germans.

In short order, Albert Dreyfus, a French army officer, is accused of treason. The handwriting on the memo is similar to Dreyfus's. Dreyfus has also had access to the information revealed in the memo. And, what's more, Dreyfus just doesn't seem to be such a great guy – he's a gambler and, rumor has it, a womanizer.

Dreyfus pleads his innocence, but he's found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment on Devil's Island.

Now, you probably already know this, but Dreyfus was innocent. What's more, there was plenty of evidence pointing to his innocence. So why was he imprisoned? This is where the soldier mindset comes in. The people who investigated Dreyfus *wanted* to believe

that he was guilty. Why? Well, his guilt fit nicely into their worldview.

You see, Dreyfus was Jewish. The French military at that time was highly anti-Semitic. He was also apparently of dubious character. Remember: rumors of gambling and womanizing. So the investigators weren't looking at the evidence and asking whether it pointed to guilt or innocence. They were assuming guilt, and focusing on evidence that supported that assumption.

For instance, a second handwriting expert also analyzed the memo, and he said it hadn't been written by Dreyfus. But the investigators chose not to believe that. And when the investigators searched Dreyfus's home for further evidence, and found nothing, they didn't pause and reconsider. They concluded he must have disposed of it.

Even when a second man came under suspicion – a man whose handwriting

matched the memo's exactly – experts reasoned that he'd learned to copy Dreyfus's handwriting!

So, *why* isn't the soldier mindset such a great thing? Well, for one, it can result in an innocent person being wrongly accused and sent to prison!

But more generally, the main drawback of the soldier mindset is that it can blind us to the truth. If we're so busy seeing what we want to see and seeking evidence that backs up what we already believe, then we may never see what's really there or have our beliefs changed for the better. But if the soldier mindset is so obviously bad, why do people adopt it in the first place?



## Why do people adopt the soldier mindset?

The short answer to that question – why do people adopt a soldier mindset in the first place – is that it comes with benefits. A soldier mindset has benefits. Some of those benefits are social. Others are emotional. We'll get to the emotional ones in a moment. But, for now, let's start with what might be the biggest social benefit: *belonging*.

Imagine for a moment that you're part of a tight-knit religious community. Now imagine you lose your faith. In this community, losing your faith doesn't just mean losing your faith, at least not if you publicly announce that you're no longer a believer. It could mean losing your marriage, losing your family, your friends. It could mean losing your entire community.

In such a situation, you might think twice before abandoning your religion. You might even attack anyone who questions your religious convictions. You'd do this because you need to belong – you need to belong so badly that it outweighs your desire to pursue your truth. If belonging means believing, so be it.

Granted, this is an extreme example. But, to a lesser degree, it's true of any social group you're part of. If that group starts to think that what they think is true isn't what you think is true – well, then you may cease to belong to that group.

The point is: the soldier mindset is a way of maintaining community. If you defend your beliefs, if you always toe the community line, then you'll always belong.

Belonging is a big one – but it's not the only benefit that the soldier mindset has to offer. There are some important *emotional benefits*, too.

Let's say you apply for a new job – a job you want and that you think you'd like. And your application gets rejected. So what do you do? Do you admit that maybe, in truth, you weren't the best candidate. No way! You tell yourself that commuting would have been too tiring, that it wasn't such a great position anyway.

In other words, your soldier mindset provides you with *comfort*. It helps you disregard uncomfortable negative emotions by disregarding versions of reality that might *generate* uncomfortable negative emotions.

This kind of thing happens all the time – and it happens unconsciously. You don't necessarily *choose* to conform to your community in order to belong to it, just as you don't necessarily *choose* to disregard unpleasant versions of reality. It just happens. It happens because the alternative is painful or scary, and your

soldier mindset wants to protect you. The trouble begins when the alternative, though painful, though scary, also happens to be true – and when the truth is something that you aspire to uphold.

This is when the soldier mindset begins to hold you back. So, in such situations, how can you resist that soldierly urge and start acting a bit more like a scout?



## Why you should get good at being wrong.

No one likes to be wrong. You could even say that that's what the soldier mindset is all about: preventing you from having to face the uncomfortable feeling of having been, or of still being, wrong. If you refuse to back down on your beliefs; if you refuse to consider other versions of reality; if, in other words, you always insist that you're right – then you may never have to confront the possibility that you're wrong. Scouts go about things differently. *They* believe that the best way to be right – not just to feel right, or to believe that you're right, but to actually be in possession of an accurate picture of objective reality – is to get good at being wrong.

Now, being good at being wrong doesn't mean that being wrong is the goal. The goal is to be right: to be in possession of that accurate picture. But scouts, unlike

soldiers, regard being wrong as an important step on the path to being right.

To get a better idea of exactly how this works, let's look at the practices of a group of people who're especially good at getting things right: *superforecasters*.

Experts are always trying to predict future events, whether it's the outcome of the next presidential election, the likelihood of an economic downturn, or even just next week's weather. And, generally speaking, these experts aren't great at making such forecasts.

According to Philip Tetlock, a political scientist who researched the subject for two decades, the average expert is "roughly as accurate as a dart-throwing chimpanzee." But he also found that a small contingent are very good at making forecasts. He called them, appropriately enough, *superforecasters*. Using nothing more than Google's search engine, these

superforecasters made predictions that were 30 percent more accurate than the predictions of CIA analysts who had access to classified documents. They also made predictions that were as much as 70 percent more accurate than predictions made by teams of university professors.

So, what exactly made them so good? Their deep knowledge? Their vast experience? Their superior intellect. Well, no – none of these things. They were good at being wrong.

These people, these superforecasters, were able to change their minds little by little based on new information. Rather than sweeping their mistakes under the carpet or rewriting the narrative surrounding those mistakes, they would revisit them and then reevaluate how they made predictions. This helped them learn, which helped them make more accurate forecasts in the future. In short,

by getting good at being wrong, they got very good at being right.

And this is what it means to be good at being wrong. Scouts, like superforecasters, don't wage war against evidence that contradicts their current beliefs. They revise their opinions when they encounter such evidence, and they view their errors as opportunities: opportunities to learn, to adjust, and to maybe get things right the next time around.

### **A small digression:**

*Were you wondering what happened to Albert Dreyfus? Last we saw him, he was imprisoned on Devil's Island – an innocent man surrounded by people convinced of his guilt. Well, right around the time that he was sent to prison, a man named Colonel Georges Picquart was put in charge of French counterespionage. He, like everyone else, was unable to unearth more evidence*

*against Dreyfus – but, unlike everyone else, he let the evidence pointing to Dreyfus’s innocence guide him toward the truth.*

*You’ll remember that Dreyfus was imprisoned because of a torn-up memo discovered by a French spy working in the German embassy in Paris. Well, after Dreyfus was locked up, the memos continued to appear – and, you should remember this, too, a second person came under suspicion, a person whose handwriting matched that on the memos exactly. Picquart let this evidence guide him toward the correct conclusion: Dreyfus had been wrongly accused. Meanwhile, other investigators insisted that there were two spies, and that the second had learned to copy Dreyfus’s handwriting, which is pretty far fetched. In other words, Picquart acted like a scout. The other investigators acted like soldiers.*

*So where did Picquart's scoutish sensibility get him? The short answer is: in trouble. Being a good scout, Picquart of course tried to get Dreyfus released. For his efforts, he was sent on dangerous missions. He even served time in jail. But he persisted – and, in the end, he did succeed. It took ten years and multiple trials, but Dreyfus was finally released.*

*The moral is that being a scout can be hard, especially when you're surrounded by soldiers. But also that it is worth it, especially if things like justice and objective facts are important to you. Though it couldn't have been fun at the time, Picquart's decision to persevere and fight on Dreyfus's behalf ensured that Picquart ended up on the right side of history – and that an innocent man was exonerated.*



## Scouts seek to prove themselves wrong.

So scouts believe that being wrong is an important step on the path to being right. But that raises an important question: How can you get better at being wrong?

The first step is learning to *admit* when you're wrong. Admitting when you're wrong is a kind of exercise: it'll strengthen your ability to spot when you're wrong, which, as you know, will improve your ability to get things right. Some of the titans of history seemed to know this. Abraham Lincoln, for example, would even go out of his way to admit mistakes. Here's just one example: It's May of 1863 – the middle of the American Civil War – and General Ulysses S. Grant has captured Vicksburg from the Confederates. Lincoln wrote to congratulate Grant on his victory – and, in his letter, he made an admission. See, Lincoln had believed that Grant's plan

would fail. But rather than remaining silent on this point, he admitted his mistake, writing, “I now wish to make the personal acknowledgment that you were right and I was wrong.”

You should try to get in the habit of making similar personal acknowledgments. You don't necessarily have to admit it to others as Lincoln did – though that's certainly a sign of good character – but admitting it to yourself is an important first step in developing your scout mindset.

But scouts don't only admit their mistakes. They actively seek to prove themselves wrong. Remember: scouts are after the most accurate, objective picture of reality possible – which means taking the possibility that they're wrong as seriously as they possibility that someone else might be wrong. What does this look like in practice? Let's let a

science journalist, Dr. Bethany Brookshire, light the way.

In 2018, Dr. Brookshire went on Twitter and made an observation. She tweeted that women usually reply to her emails with “Hi, Dr. Brookshire,” while men open with “Dear Bethany,” or “Dear Ms. Brookshire.” Some important information: Dr. Brookshire’s PhD is noted in her email signature, so anyone she writes to should know to address her as “Dr.” Her tweet blew up, getting over 2,000 likes. But then Dr. Brookshire did something that would make any scout proud: she decided to test her claim by checking her inbox. And, as it turned out, her impressions were wrong: 8 percent of men responded “Dear Dr.” while only 6 percent of women did the same. So she went back on Twitter and tweeted her mistake. This is scoutish behavior at its best: to Dr. Brookshire, the facts were more important than coming across as infallible.

The purpose of her tweet, of course, was to point out that there's a gender bias in science – that women took her qualifications seriously and men did not. Now, Dr. Brookshire's misperception doesn't mean that there isn't a gender bias in science – far from it. All it means is that, in this case, her perception was wrong, and she was committed enough to the truth to admit that.



## Some thought experiments for battling bias.

Everyone looks at the world through a particular lens. Dr. Brookshire, from the last blink, was on the lookout for evidence of gender bias in the sciences – so it's little wonder that gender bias is what she saw. The author, Julia Galef, had a similar experience. While conducting research for *The Scout Mindset*, she was, quite understandably, on the lookout for evidence that supported her thesis: that the scout mindset is superior to the soldier mindset.

During this research phase, she came across a paper claiming that having a soldier mindset leads to success. She immediately dismissed it as nonsense. She checked the paper's methodology, and, yes indeed, it was flawed. But then she had a thought: What if the paper had made the opposite argument? What if it'd said that the soldier mindset sets

people up for failure? She realized she'd probably have cited the research in her book.

This prompted her to check her citations and, sure enough, she found flawed methodologies there, too. Like a good scout, she excluded this research from her list of citations.

She realized that she hadn't applied what she calls a *selective skeptic test* – a thought experiment where you imagine that the evidence supports an opposing view and then ask yourself, Would I still find it believable?

There are several other thought experiments you can employ to keep your inherent biases in check.

Remember, though, for these to work, you really do have to put yourself in an imaginary world and see what your reaction would be.

Consider Intel. In 1985, Intel was a memory-chip company, and it was going through a bad time; its business was losing out to Japanese competitors. The founders thought about moving into another market, but that idea seemed alien. They then used a thought experiment called an *outsider test*. They considered what a completely new CEO – a total outsider – would do in their shoes. The answer was obvious: she'd get out of the memory-chip business. And so, Intel became a microprocessor company.

Another helpful thought experiment is called the *status quo bias test*. Rather than looking at things from the outside, as with the outsider test, this thought experiment asks you to look at an unfamiliar situation from the *inside*.

Imagine you have the chance to take a new well-paid job – but you'll have to move to a new city, far from your

friends, away from the good memories and stability of where you are now. Is it worth it? Your status-quo bias probably says no, it's definitely *not* worth it. But think again: What if you already had that job and were enjoying the perks of more money and better professional prospects? Would you give it up to be closer to your friends at home?

Maybe you would, maybe you wouldn't, but either way, the status quo bias test will help you make a decision that's not overly influenced by your bias for the known and familiar.

### **A quick recap:**

*We whizzed through a lot of semi-technical language, so here's a quick recap of the terms introduced in the last blink.*

*First, there's the selective skeptic test. Apply this test any time you're trying to assess a piece of evidence. To conduct*

*the test, just ask yourself whether you'd find the evidence believable if it supported an argument or hypothesis that goes against what you want to be true. That's it!*

*Second, there's the outsider test. All you've got to do here is imagine that you're a total outsider in any given situation, just like Intel did before it became a microprocessor company.*

*Third, we've got the status quo bias test. We tend to grow attached to the way things are. In short, we easily develop a bias for the status quo. To challenge this bias, just imagine that an alien situation – like moving to a new city and working a new job – is the status quo. By encouraging yourself to have a bias that favors the unfamiliar, you'll be able to fight your bias for the familiar.*

*All right – that's it: three thought experiments that can help you challenge your bias!*



## Tips for adopting a scout identity.

By now, you've probably figured out that having a scout mindset is hard. The soldiers of the world enjoy benefits that scouts have to be ready to give up. And it's not like admitting your mistakes and proving yourself wrong is fun – at least not all the time. So, in this blink, we'll be exploring a technique for making it *easier* to be a scout.

It has to do with identity.

You're familiar with that golden rule of dinner party conversation, right – the one that forbids discussion of religion and politics? Have you ever thought about *why* those subjects aren't on the menu? The obvious answer is because they almost inevitably result in an argument. But why is that?

Well, it's because religious belief and political alliance often form a crucial part

of people's identities. So when you criticize someone's politics or religion, you're not just attacking what they think: you're attacking *who they are*.

So there's religion and there's politics – but anything at all can become part of your identity: the sports team you support, the food you eat, the music you listen to.

The trouble starts when your beliefs become part of your identity – when you take it as a personal affront that someone likes a different basketball team, or thinks your diet is silly, or doesn't agree that the Beatles are the best band of all time. When that happens, when you start to confuse what you believe with who you are, you stop being able to think clearly. You begin to collect only evidence that supports your view.

But there's a deceptively simple solution – you can develop a scout identity and

take pride in that. Having an identity pressures you to defend your beliefs. But if you believe in being a scout – in remaining open to new information and developing an accurate picture of the world – then you’ll always have beliefs worth defending, even if what you end up believing tomorrow isn’t what you believe today.

Now, developing a scout identity isn’t easy either – but think of it like this: you know that feeling after you’ve worked out or gone on a long run? Yes, you’re sore, and yes, you’re tired – but you’re also satisfied. You know that the long-term benefits will be worth the pain and exhaustion.

That’s how it’ll feel as you develop your scout identity. When you start recognizing your own mistakes or realize that someone you disagreed with is right after all, it’s going to hurt a little. But think of that like your sore muscles –

you're working toward perfecting your scout identity, one step at a time.

### **Final tips:**

Before I send you off to start applying your scout skills in the real world, I'd like to walk you through some coping strategies that can help you deal with the growing pains of becoming a scout. Let's get right into it.

First off: learn to *make a plan*. If someone with a soldier mindset loses their job, they might convince themselves that they were too good for that position anyway – that the job didn't deserve *them*. A scout, rather than attempting to rewrite reality, will have a plan for dealing with that reality. In this case, that plan would be to immediately start thinking about how to find a new job.

Another coping skill is to *look for a silver lining*. Maybe losing that job means you

no longer have to put up with your boss's angry outbursts or your coworker's constant chatter. Or, if you go on an unsuccessful date, it can become material for an entertaining anecdote to tell at parties.

And here's a final tip: try to avoid toxic discussions on Twitter and Facebook. Instead of doing that, connect with people who seem to share your scout mindset – writers, journalists, bloggers, or anyone else on social media. You never know what might happen. In fact, the author met someone in precisely this way – and, guess what? They're engaged!

Oh! And just one last thing about Albert Dreyfus. He was reinstated in the army. He died in Paris at the age of 75, 29 years to the day after his exoneration.



## Final summary

The key message in these blinks is this:

**Although your soldier mindset offers you social and emotional benefits, it also obfuscates the truth. By getting good at being wrong, checking your inherent biases, and avoiding self-deception, you can learn to become a proud scout.**

Actionable advice:

**Reach out to someone you've disagreed with in the past.**

Remember that disagreement you had last month, last year, or perhaps even last decade? Was it in real life or on social media? Maybe you've "updated" since then and your position has changed. Why not reach out to them and let them know exactly how.

**Got feedback?**

We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to [remember@blinkist.com](mailto:remember@blinkist.com) with *The Scout Mindset* as the subject line and share your thoughts!



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