

Self-Belief

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Self-belief: Turning a vicious circle into a virtuous one

Positive psychology and cognitive behaviour therapies have influenced the development of a suite of tools to help people build enduring self-confidence and this article explains how they are of use.

Evidence suggests that many people have vulnerable self-confidence to some extent, even if they do not show it. Certainly our experience bears this out. When running personal and management development events we have been struck by the number of different individuals whose achievements and readiness to take on challenges are constrained by lack of confidence in their own social skills and professional capabilities. Not only this, but they sometimes do not know their own value and appear unable to appraise themselves realistically. This, in turn, has an adverse effect on their lives inside and outside work. Nevertheless, there is overwhelming evidence that our beliefs about our abilities to accomplish things are strongly influenced positively or negatively by our social and physical environment and experiences. Even more importantly we can influence our own belief systems by working to change ingrained ways of thinking about our capabilities.

Theoretical Background

Work by a number of leading psychologists has given us an insight into the roots of a positive outlook and triumphing over adversity.

One of the most eminent, Prof. Albert Bandura of Stanford University, has defined self-efficacy as "belief in one's capabilities to organise and execute the sources of action required to manage prospective situations." People's belief that they possess the necessary skills and resources comes from these sources:

1. Reflecting on successful past performances.
2. Observing this or sound modelling.
3. Social persuasion e.g. reassurance from others.

Many of us too easily get into enduring habits of thought that put a negative spin on our beliefs about what we have achieved and what we might achieve. The negative beliefs produce negative feelings and each reinforces the other in a vicious circle.

Martin Seligman, who launched 'positive psychology' in 1998, has shown that people's self-esteem and belief in their ability to achieve goals, depends on how they habitually explain both their successes and their failures to themselves – what he terms their 'explanatory style'.

Pessimists tend to attribute failures to an enduring lack of ability in themselves and successes to temporary circumstances, specific to the situation and to agents other than themselves. Optimists on the other hand attribute failure to external factors and successes to their own efforts and abilities. Both Seligman and Bandura believe that people can change the way that they interpret events that happen to them and their beliefs about what they can achieve, by self-reflection and internal dialogue.

Several other strands of research further our understanding in this area, including:

- Emotive and cognitive behaviour therapies, developed to treat clinical depression and anxiety, emphasise the importance of combating irrational negative thoughts that block achievement.
- Work on self-fulfilling prophecies by Prof. Dov Eden of the University of Michigan, shows that if a manager believes that his or her staff have high ability and conveys that belief to them, they will achieve more. The converse is also true. Therefore, individuals need signals to increase their belief in their capabilities and to lead them to raise their expectations of themselves.
- Prof. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has described optimal functioning or flow as 'the state of deep focus that occurs when people engage in challenging tasks that require intense concentration and commitment'. It occurs when a person's skill level is perfectly balanced to the challenge level of a task that has clear goals and provides immediate feedback. This, in turn, enhances confidence in their abilities.

Lack of self-belief may be the result of a single experience, ingrained negative thinking, or people behaving according to their expectation. Whatever the cause, people lacking self-confidence will be more reluctant to take on new challenges, less resilient to failure, and less motivated. Given the high cost that this involves, there is great scope to apply the techniques described to improve people's sense of what they are capable of and allow them to realise their potential.



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