SELF-EFFICACY

Let's imagine you applied for the job of managing director of the new regional branch of a software company, although you have never been a managing director before. In the interview, the selectors will want to know that you are confident and sure that you can do it, or you probably won't get hired.

It's a brand new role for you, so how do you *know* you can do it? Unfortunately you can't know for sure, but you can make a pretty good estimate of your ability, based on a number of factors. You may have been a successful departmental manager in the past – so you have some idea of your managerial skills (mastery experience). It's likely that you have seen other people doing the job, and they did it well (vicarious experience). Perhaps your colleagues or your boss said that you should apply for the job, because you would be good at it (verbal persuasion). When you go to the interview, you will probably feel a little excited and ready to take on the job (positive emotional reaction).

If you live in a free, democratic country, you can do whatever you want throughout your life. But your choices about what you do – your education, your career, even your hobbies and social life - will be strongly influenced by whether you believe you can succeed or not at different tasks. If you think you can, then you might try very hard, and you give yourself a good chance of success. If you think you can't, then you will either put in a poor effort, which generally ensures a poor result, or you won't even attempt the task.

This belief in ability is called "self-efficacy."

Me, myself, and I

The concept of self-efficacy comes from Stanford University psychologist Albert Bandura. He says that self efficacy is "the belief in one's capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations." The four ways in which self-efficacy develops were given in the earlier example: mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and positive emotional reactions.

You could describe it as the confidence to cope in a particular situation. For example, one could have self-efficacy for using a computer. It is not concerned with the number of specific skills that you have (e.g. type, use a web browser, send email), but whether you can do what is needed in a given circumstance (e.g. use the computer to find information).

Self-efficacy determines people's choice of career: what they feel they are good at and what skills they feel they should develop. It will determine what jobs you apply for. You tend to be more interested in the things you feel you are good at.

People with low self-efficacy avoid difficult tasks, give up quickly, have few challenging goals, and focus too much on failure. They therefore cause problems for themselves by not thinking effectively, being slow to recover from failure, and are easily affected by stress and depression.

Occupational stress often occurs when task demands exceed the perceived ability to fulfil them. Those more susceptible to burnout tend to demonstrate a lower self-efficacy: clearly chances of exhaustion due to stressful work are much higher if people believe they are unlikely to complete it successfully.

In contrast, those with high self-efficacy see difficult tasks as challenges, set challenging goals and commit to those goals, and give a lot of effort. They tend to think strategically, believe failure is caused by insufficient effort, recover quickly after setbacks, and have lower stress.

Getting it up

A high level self-efficacy seems to be of great benefit in the workplace. So how can you improve it? A canny manager realises that self-efficacy can be both increased and decreased by the same experience.

Let's say you have employees you would like to be better presenters, so that they can benefit the sales team, and perhaps become better leaders in the long run. How could you do it?

Give your people tasks that are actually possible: asking them to do things in an unrealistic time frame or without the adequate tools or training is simply asking for trouble. This gives them the *mastery experience* they need. People need to experience some smaller successes first. There is no use putting them in front of a big crowd of difficult customers, because without a natural flair for it, they will probably fail, and the experience is likely to work in the opposite way, reducing efficacy instead of increasing it. "Throwing them in at the deep end" is not always the most effective way of teaching. Your employees would do better to start off presenting in a small staff meeting, or going to a training course.

Provide a good role model in your own behaviour. Encourage those on your team who are already good presenters to present to the staff. This provides *vicarious experience*, and suggests that if you and others can do it, then your other employees can learn. You can show that complex and challenging skills can be mastered, and even provide some tips yourself.

Give constructive feedback on performance, which your staff can learn from and then use to improve their work. Poor feedback is only going to produce poor performance. This the *verbal persuasion*, or encouragement, your budding presenter candidate needs. Good feedback is an art, but getting it right can really make or break your employees. Learn how to do it well.

Ensure your staff have good stress coping skills. Everyone gets nervous before giving a presentation. Those with high self-efficacy tend to use their arousal to energise themselves. Those with low self-efficacy tend to let it interfere with their performance. The effects of the *emotional reaction* differ depending on how they are interpreted.

Summary

Self-efficacy is not your ability itself, but your *belief* about your ability to cope in particular situations. It determines choice of study and career, personal goal-setting, reactions to stressors, and many other aspects of your life.

It is clear from both theory and research that positive self-efficacy has a powerful effect on work performance. To keep self-efficacy healthy, allow your employees to be successful, model the behaviours you want, provide quality feedback on performance, and ensure your people have good stress coping skills.

The motivation of your employees will be strongly affected by self-efficacy, and as you know, this affects your productivity and ultimately, profits. So keep it in mind.

Some related links (copy-paste into your browser):

Albert Bandura biography
http://www.des.emory.edu/mfp/bandurabio.html

Self-efficacy scale
http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~health/selfscal.htm

A summary of self concepts
http://wilderdom.com/self/

Next month, we will be discussing how people relate to organisations that employ them: the psychological contract.

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