

**Source:** Heslin, P.A., & Klehe, U.C. (2006). Self-efficacy. In S. G. Rogelberg (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Industrial/Organizational Psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 705-708). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

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## SELF-EFFICACY

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Albert Bandura defined self-efficacy as a person's belief in his or her capability to successfully perform a particular task. Together with the goals that people set, self-efficacy is one of the most powerful motivational predictors of how well a person will perform at almost any endeavour. A person's self-efficacy is a strong determinant of their effort, persistence, strategizing, as well as their subsequent training and job performance. Besides being highly predictive, self-efficacy can also be developed in order to harness its performance enhancing benefits. After outlining the nature of self-efficacy and how it leads to performance and other work-related outcomes, the measurement and sources of self-efficacy will be discussed. We conclude by briefly considering whether it is possible to have too much self-efficacy.

### Nature of Self-Efficacy

Because self-efficacy pertains to specific tasks, people may simultaneously have high self-efficacy for some tasks and low self-efficacy for others. For example, a manager may have high self-efficacy for the technical aspects of his or her role, such as management accounting, but low self-efficacy for other aspects, such as dealing with employees' performance problems.

As self-efficacy is more specific and circumscribed than self-confidence (i.e. a general personality trait that relates to how confidently people feel and act in most situations), or self-esteem (i.e. the extent to which a person likes themselves), it is generally also more readily developed than self-confidence or self-esteem. Self-efficacy is also a much stronger predictor of how effectively people will perform a given task than either their self-confidence or their self-esteem.

## HOW SELF-EFFICACY AFFECTS PERFORMANCE AND WELL-BEING

A high degree of self-efficacy leads people to work hard and persist in the face of setbacks, as illustrated by many great innovators and politicians who were undeterred by repeated obstacles, ridicule, and minimal encouragement. Thomas Edison, believing he could eventually succeed, reputedly tested at least 3,000 different unsuccessful prototypes before eventually developing the first incandescent light bulb. Abraham Lincoln also exhibited high self-efficacy in response to the numerous and repeated public rebukes and failures he experienced before his eventual political triumphs. Research has found that self-efficacy is important for sustaining the considerable effort required to master skills involved in, for instance, public speaking, losing weight, and becoming an effective manager.

When learning complex tasks, high self-efficacy causes people to strive to improve their assumptions and strategies, rather than look for excuses such as not being interested in the task. High self-efficacy improves employees' capacity to collect relevant information, make sound decisions, and then take appropriate action, particularly when they are under time pressure. Such capabilities are invaluable in jobs that involve, for instance, dealing with irate customers when working in a call centre or overcoming complex technical challenges in minimal time. In contrast, low self-efficacy can lead to erratic analytic thinking that undermines the quality of problem solving – a key competency in an increasingly knowledge-based society.

In a dynamic work context, where ongoing learning and performance improvement is needed, high self-efficacy helps individuals to react less defensively when they receive negative feedback. In areas where their self-efficacy is low, people often see a negative outcome as confirming the incompetence they perceive in themselves. This can set up a vicious cycle, whereby ambiguous results are considered as evidence of perceived inability, further lowering an individual's self-efficacy, effort, and subsequent performance. When people have low self-efficacy, they also tend to blame either the situation or another person when things go wrong. Denial of any responsibility for poor performance inhibits the chance that an individual will learn how to perform more effectively in the future.

People are inclined to become anxious or depressed when they perceive themselves as unable to manage aversive events or gain what they value highly. Thus, self-efficacy is also related to the experience of stress and occupational burnout. Specifically, low self-efficacy can readily lead to a sense of helplessness and hopelessness about one's capability to learn how to cope more effectively with the challenges and demands of one's work. When this occurs, low self-efficacy can be distressing and depressing, thereby preventing even highly talented individuals from performing effectively.

### MEASUREMENT OF SELF-EFFICACY

Because self-efficacy is task-specific, there is no single standardized measure of self-efficacy. Rather, measures need to be developed that gauge an individual's self-assessed capacity to either (a) achieve a certain outcome on a particular task (*outcome self-efficacy*), or (b) engage in the processes likely to lead to a certain, desired outcome (*process self-efficacy*). For instance, an outcome self-efficacy scale in the domain of job search may include items such as "I believe that I can get a new job within four weeks", and "I believe I can get a new job with a starting salary of at least \$65,000," with response anchors ranging from "not at all confident" to "extremely confident." Alternatively, a process self-efficacy scale for job search would focus on items such as "I believe I can network effectively to at least 6 people during the next 4 weeks" or "I believe that I can send out 15 résumés during the next four weeks," with response anchors similar to the outcome self-efficacy scale. The key point here is that measures of self-efficacy are most informative, predictive, and useful for addressing areas where self-efficacy is lacking or when they are highly focussed on specific behaviors, tasks, or objectives.

### SOURCES OF SELF-EFFICACY

There are three key sources of self-efficacy. The most powerful determinant of self-efficacy is *enactive self-mastery*, followed by *role-modelling*, and then *verbal persuasion*.

Enactive self-mastery is achieved when people experience success at performing at least portions of a task. It serves to convince them that they have what it takes to achieve increasingly difficult accomplishments of a similar kind. Self-mastery is best achieved through progressive mastery, which is attained by breaking down difficult tasks into small steps that are relatively easy, in order to ensure a high level of initial success. Individuals should then be given progressively more difficult tasks in which constructive feedback is provided and accomplishments celebrated before increasingly challenging tasks are

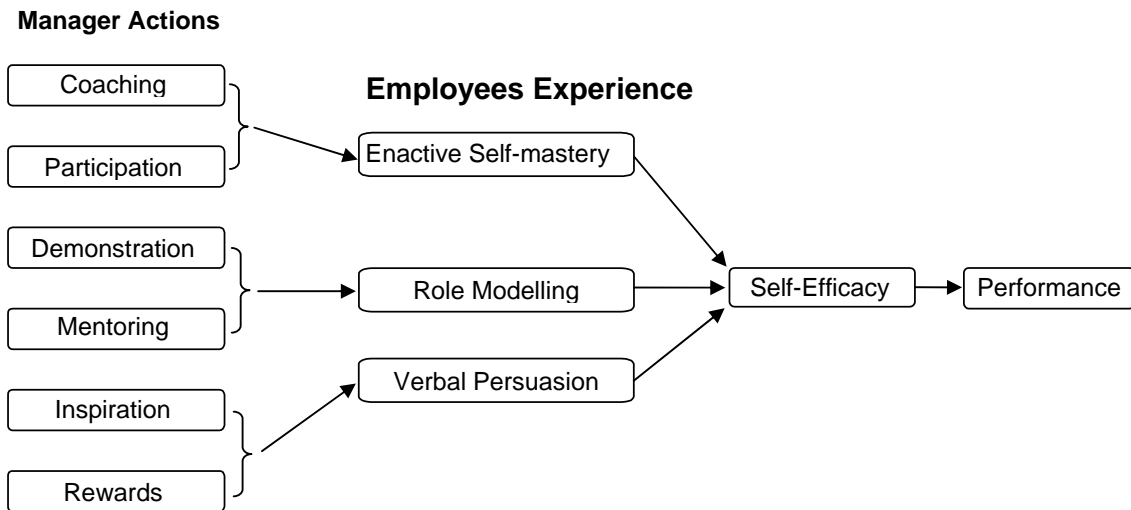
attempted. Building self-efficacy through enactive self-mastery essentially entails structuring situations that bring rewarding successes and avoid the experience of repeated failure. An example of enactive self-mastery is when people learning to pilot an aircraft are given many hours to develop their skill and confidence at the separate component skills, before they ever attempt to combine them by actually flying solo. Initial flying lessons are designed so that trainee pilots are challenged, but also experience efficacy-building successes during each session. For individuals to develop self-efficacy through enactive self-mastery, managers similarly need to provide challenges whereby individuals regularly encounter and celebrate successes as they develop their proficiency at their work tasks.

Role-modelling occurs when people observe others perform a task that they are attempting to learn or visualize themselves performing successfully. Role-modelling can provide people with ideas about how they could perform certain tasks and inspire their confidence that they can act in a similarly successful manner.

Effective role models approach challenging activities as an opportunity to learn and develop their knowledge, skills and effectiveness, rather than as a test of how talented they are. They respond to setbacks by exploring what can be done differently in the future. In short, good role models demonstrate the development of skill, persistence and learning, rather than the defensiveness and blaming that cause mistakes to recur and subsequent performance to decline.

Models are most effective at raising self-efficacy when they are personally liked and are seen as having attributes (e.g. age, gender, and ethnicity) similar to those of the individuals who observe them. One implication is that managers should think carefully before assigning mentors, especially without the input of those being mentored. Individuals may learn and become more confident from observing both the successes and failures of others, as long as they feel confident that they can avoid repeating the errors they observe.

Verbal persuasion builds self-efficacy when respected managers encourage and praise individuals for their competence and ability to improve their effectiveness. Positive self-talk can also raise self-efficacy. Regardless of its source, verbal persuasion is most likely to increase self-efficacy when it is perceived as credible and emphasises how success results from devoting sufficient effort to mastering acquirable skills, rather than depending upon inherent talent. Efficacy-raising feedback highlights how consistent efforts have enabled substantial improvements, as well as the progress made, rather than involving peer comparisons or making reference to



**Figure 1** Managerial Actions That Improve Employees' Performance by Building Their Self-Efficacy

Source: Adapted from Heslin (1999)

how far individuals have to go until their ultimate objective is achieved. Effective verbal persuasion is reinforced with corresponding actions. For example, telling individuals that they are capable but not assigning them any challenging tasks tends to erode both employees' self-efficacy and a manager's credibility. In contrast, having individuals draw up a progress chart before complimenting them on their genuine progress, where applicable, is a potent way of raising employees' sense of what they can achieve.

### UNDERMINING SELF-EFFICACY

These approaches contrast with the subtle though common messages that individuals have low ability, which serves to erode their self-efficacy. Such signals include: consistently being assigned unchallenging tasks; receiving praise for mediocre performance; being treated indifferently for faulty performance; or being offered unsolicited help. Faultfinding and personal criticisms are particularly destructive because these actions undermine motivation to explore and experiment, whereby individuals discover what they are actually able to achieve. Although encouraging messages can raise self-efficacy, attempts at building self-efficacy through verbal persuasion may easily degenerate into empty sermons unless they are soon supported by efficacy-affirming experiences (i.e. enactive self-mastery).

Figure 1 illustrates the types of managerial initiatives that build employees' self-efficacy. Table 1 provides a self-assessment of how frequently efficacy building behaviors are engaged in.

### TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?

Extremely high self-efficacy can lead to excessive risk-taking, hubris, and dysfunctional persistence, though in most cases, the resultant failures people experience soon recalibrate their self-efficacy to a more realistic level. In general, the many benefits of high self-efficacy make it a worthwhile attribute to cultivate. This is best done through the simultaneous and systematic application of enactive self-mastery, role-modelling, and verbal persuasion.

— Peter A. Heslin and Ute-Christine Klehe

See the following page for the *Self-Assessment Exercise*.

**Table 1 Self Assessment: Building Your Employees'/Protégés' Self-Efficacy**

Rate how often you exhibit the following behaviors using the following scale:

- 1 - Rarely
- 2 - Occasionally
- 3 - About half the time
- 4 - Regularly
- 5 - Often

<i>Manager Actions</i>	<i>To what extent do you ...</i>	<i>Rating</i>
Coach	• Provide clear objectives for your employees to work towards?	
	• Break complex tasks down into components to enable them to experience success?	
	• Provide feedback about behaviors, rather than others' personal style?	
	• Deal with "silly" questions or suggestions by tactfully helping employees to explore their implications?	
Involve	• Enable your employees to establish or at least participate in the determination of their goals?	
	• Encourage participation in decision-making, where feasible?	
	• Actively engage employees in solving problems that they experience?	
	• Seek input before making changes that will affect your employees?	
Demonstrate	• Personally role-model struggling to overcome challenges?	
	• Walk the talk – do what you ask others to do?	
	• Express enthusiasm, persistence, and not taking yourself too seriously?	
Mentor	• Provide opportunities that may result in your employees having more expertise than yourself in certain areas?	
	• Express interest in the learning experiences of your employees?	
	• Make yourself available as a sounding board?	
Inspire	• Establish a clear and exciting vision that your employees are inspired to strive towards?	
	• Leave your employees feeling stronger and more capable after spending time with you?	
	• Have and demonstrate a genuine concern for the welfare of your employees?	
Reward	• Reward employees by making encouraging comments and publicly acknowledging their efforts and achievements?	
	• Provide each employee with rewards that they value?	
	• Make employees feel safe and supported when they have made mistakes?	
<b>TOTAL</b>		

Add up your 20 ratings to obtain a percentage estimate of how frequently you build the self-efficacy of your employees/protégés. How would your employees/protégés rate you on these questions? Why not re-evaluate yourself one month from now to gauge your improvement in taking actions that can raise the self-efficacy of your employees/protégés?

**NOTE:** This exercise is intended as a self-development activity illustrating efficacy-building behaviors rather than as a tool of assessing managers to make selection, performance appraisal, or promotion decisions.

**FURTHER READING**

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