

# FOSTERING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE WORKPLACE

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## Introduction

The work environment in many organizations is becoming increasingly dehumanized despite people being declared as “our greatest asset” and intellectual capital being regarded by leading authorities as an important factor in achieving competitive advantage in the twenty-first century. People are often treated as a means to an end. Many managers are “toxic” in their dealings with subordinates.<sup>1</sup> Managers often exhibit the “know-it-all” attitude and insist on things being done their way; are arrogant and insensitive to others; and take good work for granted.<sup>2</sup> There has also been little growth in employee empowerment.<sup>3</sup>

The human side of management has taken a backseat due to overemphasis on improving work processes, upgrading information technology and installing formal quality procedures. This inadequate attention to the human element is one of the major reasons for the failure of numerous organizational transformation efforts, including Reengineering and Total Quality Management. To ensure successful organizational transformation, the social system (the human side of enterprise), technical system (work processes and technology) and the management system (managerial practices and policies) have to be integrated into a functional whole.

Managers should take note that the ultimate creators of quality products and services are people, and not technology or formal quality procedures. People manage processes and make the systems work; processes don’t do work, people do. Research shows that 50% of employees don’t put more effort into their work than is necessary to maintain their jobs and 84% of employees said that they could perform significantly better if they wanted to.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that people must be empowered from within to produce quality work. In this regard, self-esteem is crucial towards improving individual work performance and organizational productivity. In the words of Sam Walton (founder of Wal-Mart), “Outstanding leaders go out of their way to boost the self-esteem of their personnel. If people believe in themselves, it’s amazing what they can accomplish.”<sup>5</sup>

## What Is Self-Esteem?

Most experts generally agree that self-esteem is the overall evaluation of oneself in either a positive or negative way. Joel Brockner defines self-esteem as “a trait referring to individuals degree of liking or disliking for themselves.”<sup>6</sup> To be more precise, self-esteem is one’s overall sense of self-competence and self-worth. Self-competence is basically having self-confidence and the conviction that one is capable of facing the basic challenges in life. Self-worth is accepting yourself unconditionally and having the feeling of being worthy of living and attaining happiness.

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## Importance of Fostering Self-Esteem in the Workplace

Research has validated that self-esteem is a key factor in enhancing work performance and improving employee behaviour. Employees with high self-esteem (relative to those with low self-esteem) are more self-directed, optimistic, creative, more apt to work harder in response to significant negative feedback, more productive in quality circles, more likely to form nourishing relationships, less defensive, more amenable to change, more decisive and less negatively affected by chronic stressors such as role ambiguity and conflict.<sup>7</sup> In the words of Warren Bennis, "... knowledge workers, in particular, can be creative and productive and happy only in an environment that nurtures self-esteem."<sup>8</sup>



The root cause of most of the interpersonal problems at the workplace is low self-esteem of employees. To form nourishing relationships with others, one must first love oneself. It is also an established fact that self-respect is the foundation of respect for others. People with high self-esteem are more cooperative, enthusiastic, considerate, assertive and respectful than people with low self-esteem. They also seldom view others with envy or apprehensions. In the words of Virginia Satir, "Good human relations and appropriate and loving behaviour stem from persons of self-worth."<sup>9</sup>

High self-esteem is one of the fundamental traits of high performance managers and leaders. Research by Ann Howard and Douglas Bray (1988) found that AT&T managers' level of self-esteem significantly predicted their degree of advancement 20 years later.<sup>10</sup> Based on data that I collected over a six-month

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period (October 1999 - April 2000) through a questionnaire involving 202 Malaysian managers from 35 organizations in both the public and private sectors, high self-esteem was perceived as the fourth most important competency of high-performance managers.<sup>11</sup> The top three most important competencies were achievement orientation, integrity, and problem solving and decision-making skills. The same study also revealed that high self-esteem was ranked as the eighth most admired attribute in superiors. The top three most admired attributes in superiors were honesty, competence and forward-looking (visionary).

Research shows a positive relationship between self-esteem and leadership.<sup>12</sup> Leaders typically have higher levels of self-esteem than nonleaders. Self-esteem plays a critical role in decision making, inspiring people and gaining others' trust. Leaders with high self-esteem are generally decisive, assertive, willing to make tough decisions, and exhibit high but realistic expectations of their followers which become self-fulfilling.<sup>13</sup> Simply put, how can one be a good leader if he distrusts his own mind and how can one bring out the best in others when he feels insecure in his interpersonal exchanges? Nathaniel Branden concludes as follows: "The higher the self-esteem of a leader, the more likely it is that he or she can inspire the best in others. A mind that does not trust itself cannot inspire greatness in the minds of colleagues and subordinates."<sup>14</sup>

BUILDING BLOCKS OF SELF-ESTEEM	DESCRIPTION	MANAGERIAL ACTIONS
<b>Selfhood</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognizing one's individuality</li> <li>• Self-acceptance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help subordinates realize their strengths and weaknesses</li> <li>• Help subordinates break free from false beliefs</li> <li>• Make subordinates feel special</li> <li>• Educate subordinates about self-acceptance</li> <li>• Treat each subordinate as an individual</li> <li>• Accept people as they are</li> </ul>
<b>Emotional Security</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling comfortable and safe</li> <li>• Knowing what is expected</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build a trusting relationship</li> <li>• Establish verifiable performance standards</li> <li>• Avoid ridiculing or intimidating subordinates</li> </ul>
<b>Affiliation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A sense of belonging</li> <li>• Respected and appreciated by others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote teamwork</li> <li>• Treat subordinates with respect and dignity</li> <li>• Treat subordinates fairly</li> <li>• Keep subordinates informed of organizational activities</li> </ul>
<b>Self-responsibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having a clear sense of direction</li> <li>• Proactive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empower subordinates</li> <li>• Help subordinates establish verifiable and realistic work goals</li> <li>• Assist subordinates in developing Action Plans to attain their goals</li> </ul>
<b>Self-competence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-confidence</li> <li>• Feeling that one is capable of facing basic challenges in life</li> <li>• Feeling of success and accomplishment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach subordinates about positive self-talk</li> <li>• Catch subordinates doing things right</li> <li>• Provide constructive performance feedback</li> <li>• Teach subordinates the basics of systematic decision making</li> <li>• Assign challenging tasks</li> <li>• Accept occasional errors</li> <li>• Base rewards on merit</li> </ul>

### FIVE BUILDING BLOCKS OF SELF-ESTEEM

Research also shows that average employees work at only about two-thirds of their capacity.<sup>15</sup> Hence, it is imperative for management to create a nurturing work environment: a more humane, caring and fulfilling work environment which helps to bring out the best in all employees by empowering them from within i.e. enhancing their self-esteem.

## Fostering Self-Esteem in the Workplace

To foster self-esteem in the workplace, managers should take note of the five major building blocks of self-esteem: *Selfhood*, *Emotional Security*, *Affiliation*, *Self-Responsibility* and *Self-Competence*.

*Selfhood* is essentially recognizing one's individuality. It encompasses accurate self-assessment, breaking free from false beliefs and accepting oneself unconditionally. *Emotional security* is feeling comfortable and safe, and knowing what is expected. *Affiliation* is a sense of belonging and being respected by others. *Self-responsibility* is having a clear sense of direction. *Self-competence* is having self-confidence and the feeling that one is capable of facing the basic challenges in life.



Managers can create a nurturing environment at work that assists subordinates in enhancing their own levels of self-esteem. The major strategies for doing so are as follows:

1. **Treat subordinates with respect and dignity.** Managers should address subordinates by name. Seek out the good in subordinates and let them know they are highly valued. Avoid sarcastic remarks or rebuking subordinates in public. Call attention to their mistakes in private. Demonstrate respect for differences of opinion; never punish subordinates who hold dissenting views on a particular issue.
2. **Show trust and confidence in your subordinates.** Acknowledge and praise subordinates, especially in front of others or during staff meetings, when they do a good job. To be effective, praise must be sincere, specific and immediate. Empower them with adequate decision-making responsibilities and authority which is commensurate to what they are accountable for. Remove barriers such as detailed policies and procedures which prevent subordinates from exercising judgement and creativity in performing their work. Provide them challenging tasks which stretch their abilities and project confidence in their capacity for attaining challenging goals. Avoid overdirecting and overreporting.
3. **Make them feel important.** Let subordinates know what their jobs are, why their jobs are important, how they fit into the organization's operations, and what results are expected. Listen attentively and sincerely consider subordinates' comments and suggestions for improving work performance. These managerial actions will make subordinates feel important besides promoting a sense of belonging.
4. **Promote subordinates' self-development.** Subordinates must be given adequate opportunities to realize their full potential through delegation of responsibility and authority, training, job rotation,

job enrichment and participation in the decision-making processes related to their work. Discuss career opportunities with subordinates.

5. **Help your subordinates succeed.** Provide your subordinates with all the support, authority, skills and information that they need to do a good job. Base recognition and rewards on merit, and not on seniority or favouritism. Always be firm and fair in dealing with subordinates. Their success at the workplace will boost their self-esteem.

6. **Establish specific and challenging performance goals.** Managers should establish verifiable and explicit performance goals which are agreed upon by subordinates. Attainment of challenging goals promotes a sense of achievement and pride which, consequently, enhances self-esteem. Make it clear to all subordinates that quality work is expected. Appropriate disciplinary action should be taken if subordinates fail to accomplish the desired work performance after being given ample guidance and opportunities to do so.



7. **Provide constructive performance feedback.** Subordinates should be told about how well they are performing and areas for improvement in nondemeaning ways. Performance feedback should be timely, specific, sincere and tactful in the case of negative feedback. Managers should help subordinates build on their strengths and overcome their weaknesses. Avoid labelling subordinates as being “stupid”, “lazy” or “incompetent”. Once applied frequently, a negative label is difficult to remove. Look for solutions to problems, not blaming people for them. Blaming others leads to erosion of self-esteem.

## Conclusion

Employees with high self-esteem are the foundation of a productive and healthy organization. To achieve and maintain the competitive edge, organizations of the 21st century will need to unleash the latent power of its workforce by generating self-esteem in the workplace. Towards this end, organizations need to adopt a transformational leadership style i.e. leadership that demonstrates high expectations of others and facilitates employees to actualize their potential. Take note that realistic expectations become self-fulfilling; **WHAT YOU EXPECT IS WHAT YOU GET!** Managers should unleash the latent power of their subordinates by promoting their self-esteem in the workplace. To do so effectively, managers should first take the necessary steps towards enhancing their own self-esteem!

## ENDNOTES

1. See J. Sterling Livingston, "Pygmalion in Management", *Harvard Business Review on Managing People* (Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), p. 70.
2. See Ranjit Singh Malhi, *Enhancing Managerial Performance: Empowering Yourself to Become a High Performance Manager* (Kuala Lumpur: TQM Consultants Sdn. Bhd., 2000), pp. 308-315.
3. See Chris Argyris, "Empowerment: The Emperor's New Clothes", *Harvard Business Review on Managing People* (Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), p. 103.
4. Cited in Dean R. Spitzer, *SuperMotivation* (New York: AMACOM, 1995), p. 3.
5. Cited in Jack Canfield and Jacqueline Miller, *Heart at Work: Stories and Strategies for Building Self-Esteem and Reawakening the Soul at Work* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), p. 183
6. Nathaniel Branden, "What Is Self-Esteem?" in *Student Self-Esteem: A Vital Element of School Success*, Vol. 1, ed. Garry R. Walz and Jeanne C. Bleur (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Counseling and Personnel Services, Inc., 1992) p. 18.
7. See Joel Brockner, *Self-Esteem at Work: Research, Theory and Practice* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1988), p. 2; Nathaniel Branden, *Self-Esteem at Work: How Confident People Make Powerful Companies* (San Francisco: Jossey -Bass, 1998), p. 27; and Christopher J. Mruk, *Self-Esteem: Research, Theory, and Practice* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 87-88.
8. Cited in Nathaniel Branden, *Self-Esteem at Work*, p. viii.
9. Virginia Satir, *The New Peoplemaking* (Mountain View, California: Science and Behavior Books, Inc., 1988), p. 33.
10. Cited in Edwin A. Locke, et. al., *The Essence of Leadership: The Four Keys to Leading Successfully* (New York: Lexington Books, 1988), p. 27.
11. See Ranjit Singh Malhi, *Enhancing Managerial Performance*, p. 20.
12. See Bernard M. Bass, *Bass and Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, and Managerial Applications* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), p. 154.
13. See R. Duane Ireland and Michael A. Hitt, "Self-Confidence and Decisiveness: Prerequisites for Effective Management in the 1990s", *Business Horizons*, January/February 1992, Vol. 35 Issue 1, p. 36.
14. Nathaniel Branden, "Self-Esteem in the Information Age", in Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith and Richard Beckhard (eds.), *The Organizations of the Future* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), p. 224.
15. Cited in Burt K. Scanlan, "Creating a Climate for Achievement", *Business Horizons*, Vol. 24, No. 2, March/April, 1981, p. 5.