

# Importance of Self-Esteem

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## Meaning of Self-Esteem

Self-esteem can be defined as one's overall sense of self-competence and self-worth. Self-competence is a generalized sense of one's own efficacy or ability to deal effectively with life's challenges and to attain challenging goals. Self-worth or self-respect is essentially accepting oneself unconditionally and having the feeling that one is worthy of living and attaining happiness; you feel like you matter. In the words of Nathaniel Branden, widely regarded as the leading authority on self-esteem, self-esteem is "the disposition to experience oneself as competent to cope with the basic challenges of life and as worthy of happiness."<sup>1</sup>

## Self-Esteem and Psychological Well-Being

Self-esteem plays a crucial role in psychological well-being. Individuals who are high in self-esteem tend to be at less risk for depression (Crandall, 1973) and hopelessness (Abramson, Metalsky, and Alloy, 1989).<sup>2</sup> Self-esteem is a better predictor of satisfaction with one's life than any objective characteristic of individuals, such as income or age (Diener, 1984).<sup>3</sup> High self-esteem has been implicated in good mental health (Baumeister, 1991; Bednar et al., 1989; Taylor & Brown, 1988).<sup>4</sup>

Most people who seek psychotherapy do so because of general feelings of low self-esteem. In surveys of normal populations, low self-esteem has been linked to depression (Bachman, 1970; Kaplan & Pokorny, 1969; Luck & Heiss, 1972; Rosenberg, 1965), anxiety (Heatherton & Ambady, 1993), irritability (Rosenberg, 1985) as well as low life satisfaction (Campbell, 1981).<sup>5</sup> Relative to high self-esteem people, low self-esteem people tend to be more anxious, depressed, jealous, and lonely (Cutrona, 1982; Goswick & Jones, 1981; Kanfer & Zeiss, 1983; Leary, 1983; Lewinsohn, Mischel,

Chaplin, & Barton, 1980; Taylor & Brown, 1988; White, 1981).<sup>6</sup>

## 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 intrinsically motivated and optimistic (Bandura & Cervone, 1983; Burger, 1992; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Harackiewicz & Larson, 1986; Harter & Jackson, 1992; Vallerand, 1983),<sup>7</sup> creative (Domino, 1971; Mackinnon, 1962),<sup>8</sup> more apt to work harder in response to significant negative feedback (Brockner & Elkind, 1985),<sup>9</sup> more likely to be productive in quality circles (Brockner & Hess, 1986),<sup>10</sup> and less negatively affected by chronic stressors such as role ambiguity and conflict (Mossholder, Bedeian & Armenakis, 1981).<sup>11</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>12</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>13</sup> In another study involving more than 300 top-level executives from 15 global companies, self-confidence was one of the competencies that distinguished superior performers from average performers (Hay/McBer).<sup>14</sup>

Based on data that I collected over a six-month 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>15</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).<sup>16</sup>

Research shows a positive relationship between self-esteem and leadership.<sup>17</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. 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>18</sup>

Research shows that, relative to high self-esteem people, low self-esteem people set lower expectations for their performance in a variety of situations (Campbell & Fairey, 1985; Coopersmith, 1967),<sup>19</sup> and these lower expectations lead to reduced effort (Diggory, Klein, & Cohen, 1964; Wattenberg and Clifford, 1964).<sup>20</sup> People with low self-esteem generally underestimate their capabilities and subsequently establish less challenging or mediocre goals for themselves. (Heatheron & Ambady, 1993).<sup>21</sup>

The root cause of most of the interpersonal problems at the workplace is low self-esteem of employees.<sup>22</sup> 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>23</sup>

Research also shows that average employees work at only about two-thirds of their capacity.<sup>24</sup> Hence, it is imperative for management to create a nurturing work environment – a more humane, caring and fulfilling work environment – that helps to bring out the best in all employees by empowering them from within i.e. enhancing their self-esteem.

### **How Self-Esteem Contributes to Peak Performance at Work**

1. High self-esteem triggers enthusiasm and optimism. Individuals with high self-esteem generally undertake more challenging goals and expect to perform better than do individuals with low self-esteem (Bandura, 1989; Brockner, 1979; McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981).<sup>25</sup> High self-esteem motivates people to pursue their goals and to persevere in the face of obstacles (Brockner, 1979; Perez, 1973; Schalton, 1968; Shrauger & Sorman, 1977).<sup>26</sup>
2. Research shows a positive correlation between creativity and self-esteem (Domino, 1971; MacKinnon, 1962).<sup>27</sup>
3. Self-esteem enhances the establishment of good interpersonal relations. People with high self-esteem are less critical of others than are people with low self-esteem.<sup>28</sup> In the words of Nathaniel Branden, "The higher your self-esteem, the more disposed you are to form nourishing rather than toxic relationships."<sup>29</sup>
4. Research shows a positive relationship between self-esteem and leadership (Andrews, 1984; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Kaplan, 1986; Mowday, 1979; Zaleznik, 1977).<sup>30</sup>

“Good human relations and appropriate and loving behaviour stem from persons of self-worth.”

5. People with high self-esteem are likely to have an internal locus of control (Burger, 1992; Daubman, 1990; Schonbach, 1990).<sup>31</sup> Internal locus of control people or *Internals* believe that they largely determine their own outcomes. Research shows that *Internals* exert greater effort on the job and perform better.<sup>32</sup>

### Importance of Fostering Self-Esteem in Schools

Numerous studies show a positive correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement (Barker, 1979; Brookover, Thomas & Patterson, 1964; Burns, 1979; Campbell, 1967; Caplin, 1966; Irwin, 1967; Lawrence, 1981; Mortimore, et al., 1988; Piers & Harris, 1964; Purkey, 1970; Williams, 1973).<sup>33</sup> However, correlation does not imply causality. There is considerable disagreement as to which comes first – high self-esteem or academic achievement. It does appear that the relationship between self-esteem and academic performance is bidirectional i.e. self-esteem and academic achievement go hand in hand.

Several studies show that self-esteem influences academic performance (Haarer, 1964; Jones & Grieneekz, 1970; Lamy, 1965; Morse, 1963; Smith, 1969; Wattenberg & Clifford, 1964). Research has shown that self-esteem is a better predictor of academic success than measured intelligence (Morse, 1963; Smith, 1969; Wattenberg & Clifford, 1964).<sup>34</sup> Research aside, common sense dictates that a student who has self-doubt and lacks self-acceptance is unlikely to attain academic excellence. How can a student establish challenging goals if he or she lacks a sense of self-competence or self-efficacy? How can a student concentrate fully on studies if he or she lacks self-approval?

Research shows that academic achievement influences the level of self-esteem. Successful academic performance enhances self-esteem (Bills, 1959; Carlton and Moore, 1966; Diller, 1954; Robinson, Kehle, & Jenson, 1986).<sup>35</sup> Similarly, poor academic performance tends to erode students' level of self-esteem (Centi, 1965; Gibby & Gibby 1967).<sup>36</sup>

### How Self-Esteem Contributes to Academic Achievement

1. Research shows that feeling worthless can be depressing (Battle, 1990; Bhatti, 1992; Hokanson, Rubert, Welker, Hollander, & Hedeem, 1989).<sup>37</sup> Depression generally inhibits performance.
2. Fear of failure can lead students to hold back whereas those with high self-esteem may be more willing to take up the challenge.
3. Students who perceive themselves as being incompetent i.e. they lack the ability to attain academic success will not exert the necessary effort to do so.

### Self-Esteem and Productive Behaviour of Youth

Research shows that youth with higher levels of self-esteem engage in fewer negative health behaviours and express less intention to do so in the future (Dielman et al., 1984; Petersen-Martin & Cottrell, 1987).<sup>38</sup> Positive self-esteem decreased the likelihood for youth to engage in alcohol and drug use (Miller, 1988).<sup>39</sup> Similarly, other studies show an inverse relationship between self-esteem and alcohol, tobacco, other drug use, and future intention to use (Bonaguro & Bonaguro, 1987; Emery, et al., 1993; Young, et al., 1989).<sup>40</sup> It should be noted that individuals with low self-esteem appear to be more susceptible to influence than those with high self-esteem (Brockner, 1983; Cohen, 1959; Janis & Field, 1959).<sup>41</sup>

Research shows a correlation between delinquent behaviour of youth and low self-esteem (Johnson, 1977; Kaplan, 1975; Kelley, 1978).<sup>42</sup> Low self-esteem becomes a tremendous source of anger and hostility which frequently results in violence (Kaplan, 1975). Many youths commit violence to compensate for their feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem (Davis, 1993; Toch, 1969).<sup>43</sup> Today, many kids join gangs because of the need to belong. To reduce gang membership, we must focus on enhancing the self-esteem of youth so that they do not seek out and need the gang to meet their basic human needs (Sahagan, 1991).<sup>44</sup>

## End Notes

1. Nathaniel Branden, *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem* (New York: Bantam, 1994), 27.
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3. Ibid.
4. Cited in Mark R. Leary and Deborah L. Downs, “Interpersonal Functions of the Self-Esteem Motive: The Self-Esteem System as a Sociometer” in *Efficacy, Agency, and Self-Esteem*, ed. Michael H. Kernis (New York: Plenum Press, 1995), 124.
5. See Morris Rosenberg, “Self-Concept From Middle Childhood Through Adolescence” in *Psychological Perspectives on the Self: Vol. 3*, eds. Jerry Suls and Anthony G. Greenwald (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers, 1986), 120; Joel Brockner and A. J. Blethyn Hulton, “How to Reverse the Vicious Cycle of Low Self-Esteem: The Importance of Attentional Focus”, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 14 (1978): 564-578; Christopher J. Mruk, *Self-Esteem: Research, Theory & Practice*, 2nd ed. (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1999), 87, 94–97; and Leary and Downs, “Interpersonal Functions of the Self-Esteem Motive: 124.
6. Cited in Leary and Downs, “Interpersonal Functions of the Self-Esteem Motive”: 125-126.
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9. Cited in Joel Brockner, *Self-esteem at Work: Research, Theory, and Practice* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath and Company, 1988), 2.
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11. Ibid.
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14. Cited in Daniel Goleman, *Working with Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998), 321.
15. See Ranjit Singh Malhi, *Enhancing Managerial Performance: Empowering Yourself to Become a High Performance Manager* (Kuala Lumpur: TQM Consultants Sdn. Bhd., 2000), 20.
16. Ranjit Singh Malhi, *Enhancing Managerial Performance*, 136.
17. See Bernard M. Bass, *Bass and Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, and Managerial Applications* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 154.
18. Nathaniel Branden, “Self-Esteem in the Information Age”, in *The Organization of the Future*, eds. Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith and Richard Beckhard (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), 224.
19. See Todd F. Heatherton and Nalini Ambady, “Self-Esteem, Self-Prediction, and Living Up to Commitments” in *Self-Esteem: The Puzzle of Low Self-Regard*, ed. Roy F. Baumeister (New York: Plenum Press, 1993), 133.
20. See Brockner and Hulton, “How to Reverse the Vicious Cycle of Low Self-Esteem, 565; and Heatherton and Ambady, “Self-Esteem, Self-Prediction, and Living Up to Commitments”: 133.
21. See Heatherton and Ambady, “Self-Esteem, Self-Prediction, and Living Up to Commitments”: 133.
22. See Kathy L. Indermill, “Positive Self-Esteem at Work: The Eight Behavioral Keys”, in *Heart at Work*, eds. Jack Canfield and Jacqueline Miller (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 55.
23. Virginia Satir, *The New Peoplemaking* (Mountain View, California: Science and Behavior Books, 1995), 33.

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26. Cited in Leary and Downs, "Interpersonal Functions of the Self-Esteem Motive": 127.
27. Cited in Gilmore, *The Productive Personality*, 32.
28. See Roy F. Baumeister, "Identity, Self-Concept, and Self-Esteem" in *Handbook of Personality Psychology*, eds. Robert Hogan, John Johnson and Stephen Briggs (San Diego: Academic Press, 1997), 690.
29. Branden, *Self-Esteem at Work*, 29.
30. See Bass, *Bass and Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership*, 154.
31. See Jerry M. Burger, "Need for Control and Self-Esteem: Two Routes to a High Desire for Control" in *Efficacy, Agency and Self-Esteem*, ed. Michael H. Kernis (New York: Plenum Press, 1995), 219-220.
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36. Ibid.
37. See William J. Holly, "Students' Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement" in *Student Self-Esteem: A Vital Element of School Success*, Vol. 1, ed. Garry R. Waltz and Jeanne C. Bleur (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Counseling and Personnel Services, Inc., 1992), 49.
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39. Ibid.
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41. See Baumeister, "Identity, Self-Concept, and Self-Esteem" in *Handbook of Personality Psychology*, eds. Robert Hogan, John Johnson and Stephen Briggs, 689.
42. Cited in Robert W. Reasoner, *Self-Esteem and Youth: What Research Has to Say About It* (Port Ludlow, Washington: International Council for Self-Esteem, 2000), 56.
43. Cited in Reasoner, *Review of Self-Esteem Research*, <http://www.self-esteem-nase.org/research.html>, 2.
44. Ibid.