

If You Think You Can't... Think Again: The Sway of Self-Efficacy

Henry Ford said it best, "Whether you think that you can or you can't, you're usually right." But few of us realize the veracity of his statement. Fortunately, there's science (and a little bit of fiction) to back it up – so listen up and learn!

"I Think I Can! I Think I Can!"

Remember the children's story *The Little Engine that Could*? Defying impossible odds, the little engine did! But did we somehow miss the message of this tale? 50 years have past since the book was first published, and when trying to overcome hardship or pursue our dreams, many of us still think, "I can't." Sound familiar?

The scientific term is "self-efficacy" – the "I-think-I-can" psychological phenomenon that makes goal achievement possible. Introduced by psychologist Albert Bandura in 1977, over thirty years later the scientific potency persists (in academia). But even with science on our side, we still haven't quite gotten it. Unlike self-esteem, self-efficacy isn't about a sense of self-worth; it's about believing you are capable of producing a desired result – that you can achieve your goals.

The truth is -- there's so much more to "I think I can" than childhood fiction or a clichéd, feel-good maxim.

The Sway of Self-Efficacy

Everyone has something they'd like to change or improve; everyone has goals. Therefore, self-efficacy is of universal appeal and widespread need. Beyond that, it offers up some really great benefits for potential buyers.

For instance, people high in self-efficacy take better care of themselves, see tasks as something to be mastered, and they feel more empowered. They're not controlled by circumstances. They see setbacks as challenges to be overcome and can cope with hardship better than those with low self-efficacy. They learn from failure and channel it into success, like Thomas Jefferson, Walt Disney, J.K Rowling and apparently William Hung (for American Idol lovers). People higher in self-efficacy also have a greater sense of motivation and persistence.

Perhaps most important, according to Bandura, self-efficacy affects how we feel, think and act, and low self-efficacy has been linked to helplessness, anxiety and depression.² Fortunately, whether your current level is average, ample or absent, much like physical attributes, self-efficacy can be enhanced.

If you Build it, it will Come: Enhancing Self-Efficacy

Here are some simple exercises that you can use to boost your sense of self-efficacy.

Take One Step at A Time

Self-efficacy is developed, in part, through success – and even small achievements can pack a powerful punch. Pick one small change you'd like to make and go for it. Then pick another small change. Then another. Reflect on each success before moving on to your next small goal. Like any other change, enhancing self-efficacy is best achieved one step at a time.

Draw from Your Past

Reminiscing on past successes can help drum up a greater sense of self-efficacy. Reflect on times when you succeeded at accomplishing things you didn't think you could do. Reflect on those moments. What did you accomplish? How did you accomplish it? How can these accomplishments be channeled to help you achieve future goals? What do these accomplishments say about your ability to succeed?

See to Believe

Visualization is a powerful tool. Not only is seeing believing, when it comes to self-efficacy, believing is seeing.... results. Visualization not only primes your brain for success and enhances self-efficacy, it also helps you to see the smaller steps you need to take to reach your end goal.

Find a Role Model

Admire someone else's success. When you see someone else succeed, especially someone who you identify with, you are more apt to believe that you can achieve too. Hence, having one or two good role models can vicariously bolster your sense of self-efficacy.

Accept Self-Doubt...but Put it in its Place

Managing your self-doubt is just one more way to keep "I think I can't" thoughts from derailing your success. When self-defeating thoughts bubble up, accept them as part of the process and move on. These types of thoughts don't necessarily reflect your true capabilities. The key is to not let them stop you from moving forward.

Get Happy

A good mood can also boost self-efficacy while a bad mood can undermine it. Write out all the things that uplift you (i.e. special songs, favorite quotes, etc) and use them to your advantage as you navigate towards your goals.

Solicit Social Support

Another great way to build self-efficacy beliefs is to elicit encouragement from friends and family and to stay away from those who discourage you. Quality social support is a key ingredient to self-efficacy, persistence and ultimately success. Find your best advocates and invite them to be part of your campaign for change.

Source Material

1. Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change. *Psychological Review*, 84, 191-215.
2. Bandura, A. (Ed.) (1995), *Self-efficacy in changing societies*. New York: Cambridge University Press.