

Self-Efficacy in the Workplace: Implications for Motivation and Performance

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ABSTRACT

Self-efficacy (beliefs about one's ability to accomplish specific tasks) influences the tasks employees choose to learn and the goals they set for themselves. Self-efficacy also affects employees' level of effort and persistence when learning difficult tasks. Four sources of self-efficacy are past performance, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional cues.

Mainly due to the work of Albert Bandura, self-efficacy has a widely acclaimed theoretical foundation (Bandura, 1986), an extensive knowledge base (Bandura, 1997; Maddux, 1995, 2002), and a proven record of application in the workplace (Bandura, 1997, 2004; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Nine large-scale meta-analyses consistently demonstrate that the efficacy beliefs of organization members contribute significantly to their level of motivation and performance (Bandura & Locke, 2003).

Self-Efficacy Defined

Self-efficacy (also known as *social cognitive theory* or *social learning theory*) is a person's belief that she is capable of performing a particular task successfully (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Think of self-efficacy as a kind of self-confidence (Kanter, 2006) or a task-specific version of self-esteem (Brockner, 1988). Self-efficacy has three dimensions: *magnitude*, the level of task difficulty a person believes she can attain; *strength*, the conviction regarding magnitude as strong or weak; and *generality*, the degree to which the expectation is generalized across situations. An employee's sense of capability influences his perception, motivation, and performance (Bandura, 1997). We rarely attempt to perform a task when we expect to be unsuccessful.

Following is an example. One professor may believe that she can learn how to teach graduate courses online on her own. Another professor may have strong doubts about his ability to learn how to teach graduate courses online without taking some formal training. Self-efficacy has powerful effects on learning, motivation, and performance, because people try to learn and perform only those tasks that they believe

they will be able to perform successfully. Self-efficacy affects learning and performance in three ways (Bandura, 1982):

1. *Self-efficacy influences the goals that employees choose for themselves.* Employees with low levels of self-efficacy tend to set relatively low goals for themselves. Conversely, an individual with high self-efficacy is likely to set high personal goals. Research indicates that people not only learn but also perform at levels consistent with their self-efficacy beliefs.

2. *Self-efficacy influences learning as well as the effort that people exert on the job.* Employees with high self-efficacy generally work hard to learn how to perform new tasks, because they are confident that their efforts will be successful. Employees with low self-efficacy may exert less effort when learning and performing complex tasks, because they are not sure the effort will lead to success.

3. *Self-efficacy influences the persistence with which people attempt new and difficult tasks.* Employees with high self-efficacy are confident that they can learn and perform a specific task. Thus, they are likely to persist in their efforts even when problems surface. Conversely, employees with low self-efficacy who believe they are incapable of learning and performing a difficult task are likely to give up when problems surface. In an extensive literature review on self-efficacy, Albert Bandura and Edwin Locke (2003) concluded that self-efficacy is a powerful determinant of job performance.

Sources of Self-Efficacy

Since self-efficacy can have powerful effects on organizations, it is important to identify its origin. Bandura (1997) has identified four principal sources of self-efficacy: past performance, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional cues. These four sources of self-efficacy are shown in Figure 1.

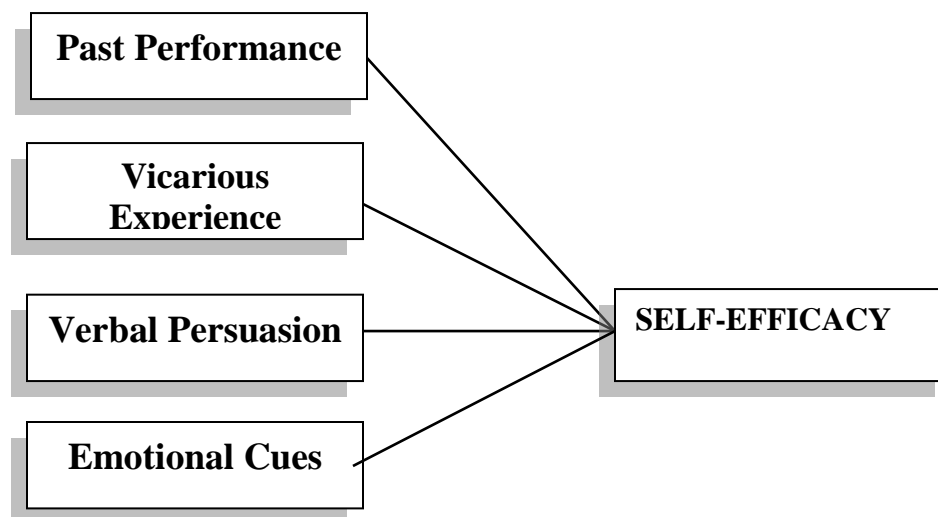


Figure 1. Sources of self-efficacy.

Past Performance

According to Bandura, the most important source of self-efficacy is past performance. Employees who have succeeded on job-related tasks are likely to have more confidence to complete similar tasks in the future (high self-efficacy) than employees who have been unsuccessful (low self-efficacy). Managers or supervisors can boost self-efficacy through careful hiring, providing challenging assignments, professional development and coaching, goal setting, supportive leadership, and rewards for improvement.

Vicarious Experience

A second source of self-efficacy is through vicarious experience. Seeing a co-worker succeed at a particular task may boost your self-efficacy. For example, if your co-worker loses weight, this may increase your confidence that you can lose weight as well. Vicarious experience is most effective when you see yourself as similar to the person you are modeling. Watching LeBron James dunk a basketball might not increase your confidence in being able to dunk the basketball yourself if you are 5 feet, 6 inches tall. But if you observe a basketball player with physical characteristics similar to yourself, it can be persuasive.

Verbal Persuasion

The third source of self-efficacy is through verbal persuasion. Essentially this involves convincing people that they have the ability to succeed at a particular task. The best way for a leader to use verbal persuasion is through the *Pygmalion effect*. The Pygmalion effect is a form of a self-fulfilling prophesy in which believing something to be true can make it true.

Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) classic study is a good example of the Pygmalion effect. Teachers were told by their supervisor that one group of students had very high IQ scores (when in fact they had average to low IQ scores), and the same teacher was told that another group of students had low IQ scores (when in fact they had high IQ scores). Consistent with the Pygmalion effect, the teachers spent more time with the students they *thought* were smart, gave them more challenging assignments, and expected more of them—all of which led to higher student self-efficacy and better student grades. A more recent experiment conducted by Harvard researchers in a ghetto community produced similar results (Rist, 2000). The Pygmalion effect also has been used in the workplace. Research has indicated that when managers are confident that their subordinates can successfully perform a task, the subordinates perform at a higher level. However, the power of the persuasion would be contingent on the leader's credibility, previous relationship with the employees, and the leader's influence in the organization (Eden, 2003).

Emotional Cues

Finally, Bandura argues that emotional cues dictate self-efficacy. A person who expects to fail at some task or finds something too demanding is likely to experience certain physiological symptoms: a pounding heart, feeling flushed, sweaty palms, headaches, and so on. The symptoms vary from individual to individual, but if they persist may become associated with poor performance.

Self-efficacy has been related to other motivation theories. Edwin Locke and Gary Latham suggest that goal-setting theory and self-efficacy theory complement each other. When a leader sets difficult goals for employees, this leads employees to have a higher level of self-efficacy and also leads them to set higher goals for their own performance. Why does this happen? Research has shown that setting difficult goals for people communicates confidence (Locke & Latham, 2002). For example, suppose that your supervisor sets a high goal for you. You learn that it is higher than the goal she has set for your colleagues. How would you interpret this? You would probably think that your supervisor believes you are capable of performing better than others. This sets in motion a psychological process in which you are more confident in yourself (higher self-efficacy) and then you set higher personal goals for yourself causing you to perform better. Self-efficacy also may be related to effort-performance relationships in expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964).

Implications of Self-Efficacy in the Workplace

Bandura devotes considerable attention to the workplace in his groundbreaking book, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. More recently, he provided an extensive review of the growing body of research dealing with the direct and indirect influence of self-efficacy on work-related personal and organizational effectiveness (Bandura, 2004). This research review of the impact of self-efficacy includes a wide range of topics such as training and development, teaming (i.e., collective efficacy), change and innovation, leadership, and stress. From this considerable body of theory and research on self-efficacy, the following managerial and organizational implications are provided (Ivancevich, Konopaske, & Matteson, 2011; Luthans, Yuussef, & Avolio, 2007):

Selection/Promotion Decisions

Organizations should select individuals who have high levels of self-efficacy. These people will be motivated to engage in the behaviors that will help them perform well in the workplace. A measure of self-efficacy can be administered during the hiring/promotion process.

Training and Development

Organizations should consider employee levels of self-efficacy when choosing among candidates for training and development programs. If the training budget is limited, then greater return (i.e., job performance) on training investment can be realized by sending only those employees high in self-efficacy. These people will tend to learn more from the training and, ultimately, will be more likely to use that learning to enhance their job performance.

Goal Setting and Performance

Organizations can encourage higher performance goals from employees who have high levels of self-efficacy. This will lead to higher levels of job performance from employees, which is critical for many organizations in an era of high competition.

Conclusion

Self-efficacy (beliefs about one's ability to accomplish specific tasks) influences the tasks employees choose to learn and the goals they set for themselves. Self-efficacy also affects employees' level of effort and persistence when learning difficult tasks. Four sources of self-efficacy are past performance, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional cues. Managerial and organizational implications of self-efficacy in the workplace include hiring and promotion decisions, training and development, and goal setting.

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