

Feel good *The business of self-esteem*

Self-esteem has a profound impact on every aspect of our existence including how we interact with people and behave in the workplace, how we interact with those closest to us as well as the degree of personal happiness that we experience in our personal lives.

Author Nathaniel Brandon defines self-esteem as “the reputation we have with ourselves.” He states that, “Of all the judgments we pass, none is more important as the one we pass on ourselves.”

Self-esteem is the symbiotic dance between self-confidence and self-respect. With self-confidence we feel both competent and capable. With self-respect we feel appreciation and acceptance of who we are.

The higher our self-esteem, the more likely we are to:

- » Form healthy rather than destructive relationships.
- » Treat others with respect because we are not threatened by them.
- » Be ambitious.
- » Experience life.

A CEO (and dear friend) confessed over lunch that for most of his adult life, he’s been waiting in silence until the day comes when “they find out that I’m not as good as they think I am.” I sat stunned by his admission. He added in a whisper, “Sometimes I feel like a fraud . . . like I’m an impostor.”

Brandon writes that “To achieve success without positive self-esteem is to feel like an impostor anxiously awaiting exposure.”

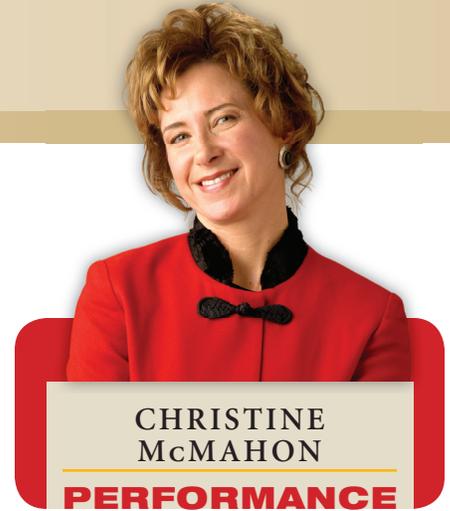
It’s interesting that we can be rewarded at work for our contribution and yet feel that we are not good enough. Or that we can project confidence while simultaneously feeling inadequate. Or that we can be loved by others, and yet not love ourselves.

Many people suffer from feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, self-doubt, guilt, or fear. The challenge is that these feelings are not always consciously recognized.

I recently witnessed how a leader allowed his insecurities to influence the dynamics at a corporate retreat. On the morning of the first day, without discussion or consensus, he announced a wholesale change to the agenda. While some people were upset, they gave him the benefit of the doubt. But by mid-morning when it became evident that there was no “bigger agenda” other than his personal desire to be in control, some people felt anger while others just mentally and emotionally checked out.

“People who enjoy high self-esteem take full responsibility for their life situation.”

During a break that afternoon, the leader attempted damage control but by then, it was too late. Recognizing that a mutiny was brewing, he turned the following day’s agenda over to a capable team member. But within two hours, he had once again hijacked the direction of the discussion and ultimately, control of the meeting. By day three, people were completely disengaged and finding reasons to leave. Precious time and energy were wasted, feelings were hurt, and most importantly, the opportunity to engage in creative team brainstorming was lost.



The annual 2009/2010 U.S. Strategic Rewards Survey indicates that employee engagement levels have dropped close to 25 percent for top performers and 9 percent overall. The cost-cutting actions that employers have taken this year to offset the impact of this economic storm have contributed to a sharp decline in employee morale. What is the impact on productivity moving forward? Only time will tell, but what past research demonstrates is that a leader’s attitude is contagious. And if top performers become discouraged, it’s only a matter of time before the whole or-

ganization emotionally retrenches.

Several years ago I interviewed a veteran top performer while working on a productivity assessment for a national life insurance corporation. She gained notoriety as one of the company’s top producing female representatives, a position she celebrated for five years. Then she experienced a sharp two-year decline. I asked her if she was able to explain what contributed to that downward shift and without hesitation she replied, “I stopped subscribing to my ‘no excuse’ policy.” She explained that her “no excuse policy”

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meant that she took responsibility for what she could control rather than shift the blame to something or someone else. When faced with adversity or challenges she would ask herself, “What can I do to change this situation?”

She revealed that her sales fell into the abyss when she got caught up in the blame game – blaming the company, her boss, market conditions, etc. “When I projected blame, I gave my power away,” she said. “I have since learned that my success is solely the result of what I control – period.”

People who enjoy high self-esteem take full responsibility for their life situation.

Brandon suggests that if there are areas of your life that you want to improve, “Think about the next seven days of your

life and then ask, ‘If you were to practice greater self-responsibility, what might you do differently?’ Write your answer in a notebook. Then consider translating what you have written into action. Don’t think of committing yourself for a lifetime, just for the next seven days – as an experiment.”

The action you take will impact how you feel about yourself.

As leaders, we are not immune to adversity. Our responsibility is to find the opportunity in any given situation, and preserve our team members’ self-esteem. When done well, the grace with which we do this will become contagious. ■

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