

Self-Esteem

The Key to Productivity

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Picture this situation:¹

From a large group I take six volunteers to another room. I select a trio of the six and, out of earshot of the other three, give them a private communication. I then take the trio back to the whole group and ask them to clean up the front of the room. They are sluggish, uncaring, clumsy, sloppy and slow. I thank them and ask them to sit down in the large group. I then return to the other room and give the remaining three volunteers another private communication. I escort them back into the room and also ask them to clean up the front of the room. They attack the task with vigor, divide the labor, go swiftly, and seem proud of their work. Question: What did I tell each trio? No, I did not tell them to go fast or slow, to be eager or slovenly, to be efficient or inefficient. In fact, I did not tell them anything at all about how to do the job. What then did I tell them? At the end of this essay the answer will be revealed, although it may be obvious before then.

After 15 years of working with organizations, I have concluded that a positive self-concept—self-esteem—is the bottom line, the key to increasing productivity and the quality of the workplace. This conclusion led me back to many thoughts I had beginning in the 1960s about this topic. I always had trouble understanding the criticism of the “me” generation. Tom Wolfe and others called it narcissistic, conceited, self-absorbed, selfish, prideful. From where I stood, near the center of the human potential movement, these descriptions were bewildering. With few exceptions, the people I knew who were successful in finding who they

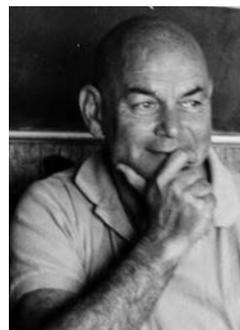
1. Thanks to Ron Luyet who created this exercise.

were had none of these traits. As each person came to “know thyself,” they seemed to me to be calmer, stronger, more real, more honest, more successful in their relationships, and genuinely caring and helpful people. I am certainly not saying that the “me” generation or some self-esteem advocates are entirely guiltless of the charges made. I am only speaking of the great majority of the people I experienced. From my vantage point, self-esteem advocates are exactly right. Self-esteem is, indeed, the heart of the matter.

Emotion is the chief source of all becoming—consciousness. There can be no transforming of darkness into light or of apathy into movement without emotion.

—Carl Gustav Jung

An answer to my puzzlement came from the dictionary. “Self-esteem” is defined in two ways and they are, in one sense, contradictory, which may help explain my dilemma. The Random House Dictionary defines self-esteem as:



Will Schutz (1925–2002), creator of The Human Element, FIRO® Theory and the Elements of Awareness.

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1. An objective respect for or favorable impression of oneself.
2. An inordinate or exaggeratedly favorable impression of oneself.

Apparently self-esteem advocates assume the first definition, while critics use the second meaning. The confusion may be a result of this paradox: if I have high self-esteem in meaning one (let us call it self-respect), I do not have an exaggerated sense of myself as in meaning two (call it arrogance). It is when I have low self-respect that I become arrogant, brag, and act conceited as a way to try to convince others—which means basically myself—that I am really all right.

What is Self-Esteem?

Self-esteem is the feeling I have about my self-concept. When what I want for myself matches what I perceive myself to be, I have a positive self-concept, which in turn helps me feel as alive, self-determining, self-aware, significant, competent, and likable as I want to be. Self-esteem comes from successfully choosing to be the type of person I want to be.

Self-esteem is both conscious and unconscious. It begins in childhood, and it is developed as I create my self-concept through internalizing (or rejecting) messages about me that I receive from my parents and others, and from my own experiences of what I can and cannot do and what I am and am not. I compare myself to others, or to an idea of the type of person I want to be, or to others' definitions of an ideal.

I am not aware of some parts of my self-concept. I choose them to be unconscious because I am uncomfortable with them, or I feel I cannot or do not want to deal with them. For example, I may have assumed that I was basically a bad boy, therefore not lovable by those who knew me well. I made this feeling of being unlovable unconscious; it was too painful to acknowledge. To hide this feeling from myself, or to defend myself against having to experience it, I may become arrogant; that is

I exaggerate my own importance, or I brag about my accomplishments, or I act too ingratiating. This behavior arises out of unconscious low self-esteem and unconscious low self-respect. I demonstrate self-esteem by being flexible, able to express myself fully, in charge of myself, and having accurate perceptions, and learning to make all my perceptions conscious.

At the height of the McCarthy era in the late 1940s, I was a graduate student at the University of California at Los Angeles, supporting myself through the G.I. Bill and my salary as a teaching assistant. As a university employee I was required to sign a loyalty oath in order to retain my job. I took the position that I would not sign because I felt people should be judged on the basis of their performance, not their political beliefs. I became very active in opposition to the oath. My father heard of what I was doing and flew out from the Midwest. He spent three days with me discussing the situation and the position I was taking. His attitude was, as always, very logical. "Of course you are right in principle, but you will jeopardize your future. You are an untested teaching assistant. No one knows you, and once you have your degree, others will be hired first. They are less risky for an employer."

His arguments persuaded me. I went to lunch with my fellow nonsigners and told them I had decided to sign and "fight from within"—a euphemism we used for dropping the fight. When I left the restaurant and walked into the bright sunlight of Los Angeles, I felt as if I weighed three tons. My muscles were stiff and heavy, and I felt totally dark. At that point, a little voice whispered in my ear: "what kind of person do you want to be?"

"Be quiet," I said. "Can't you see I'm busy being miserable?" But the voice persisted, and I finally got the point: signing or not signing was not a matter of logic. Most people could think of many excellent reasons for taking either position. The decision depended on what kind of person I wanted to be. I decided not to sign the loyalty oath. My body lightened. I felt as if I

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weighed three ounces. I felt wonderful. My body was telling me what kind of person I wanted to be. When I followed that picture, I felt good. Looking back, I can see that this was my first experience of realizing that my self-esteem depends on how close I am to being the kind of person I want to be.

To the degree that I experience myself as being like my ideal, and as being unlike the self I want to avoid, I have positive self-esteem. Similarly, the more I fall short of my ideal, the more disappointed I am in myself, the more anger I feel toward myself. Feelings of disappointment in and anger with myself reduce my self-esteem. Why do I feel these inadequacies in my self-concept? How can I heighten my self-esteem? The answer to these questions lies in the concept of choice: I assume I choose feelings and behavior because, ineffective as they may seem, they will lead to a payoff. When I choose low self-esteem, it is because I get a payoff for it.

For example, suppose I want to be funny but am not. I am dour and ponderous. What do I get out of being humorless? On reflection, I find that it feels safer to me. I suspect that people are laughing at me anyway, and I fear that if I take something as a joke when it is meant to be serious, I will be caught off guard and feel hurt. Therefore, I assume that everything is serious, so I can avoid painful surprises. My fear prevents me from being the humorous person I want to be, and that lowers my self-esteem.

When I am not feeling good about myself, compliments and support from other people are pleasant to hear but do not make me feel better for very long, if at all. I dismiss compliments because I believe the complimenters do not know all my faults, all the thoughts and feelings I have, and all the things I have done. If they knew, they wouldn't feel the same way about me. I may even perceive other people's praise or liking for me as a threat. What if I do something to disappoint them? They may withdraw their liking, and so it is risky for me to feel good when they say good things about me. There are other payoffs for choosing not to like

myself more: "It is arrogant to like myself. If I appear modest, people will like me better ... People will not expect much of me if I appear unsure of myself ... I will not be impertinent enough to think that I am better than my parents or siblings ... I would be ridiculous to like myself if no one else did."

How Can The Organization Make Use of Self-Esteem?

Here is a new twist on an old saying: If I give a hungry woman a fish, she won't be hungry. If I teach her how to fish, she'll never be hungry. But, if I create conditions within which she teaches herself how to fish, she'll never be hungry and she may have enhanced self-esteem.

Self-esteem is at the heart of all human relations and productivity in organizations. For example:

- **Teamwork** difficulties arise from individuals' rigidities and defensiveness which come not from difference among members, but from low self-esteem and fear of exposure.
- **Conflict resolution** similarly depends on dissolving individuals' rigidities and getting people to see conflict as a logical puzzle for team members to solve together.
- **Problem solving** is blocked when a person is anxious about being exposed, or is determined to be right, or shows other kinds of defensive behavior that stem from low self-esteem.
- **Leadership** relies centrally on self-awareness, which in turn requires sufficiently strong self-esteem to acknowledge individual weaknesses and feel comfortable being known to others.
- **Performance appraisal** is successful to the extent each person feels acknowledged for his or her strengths and weaknesses and for who he or she is and, through healthy self-esteem, is willing to give up blame in favor of mutual problem solving.

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- **Injury- and illness-free workplaces** may also be attained through self-awareness.
- **Quality** programs succeed when personal agendas based on low self-esteem are handled effectively.
- **Diversity** may be celebrated when threats to the self-concept from “different” groups are alleviated.

Since productive and efficient functioning depends on high self-esteem, the organization can capitalize by enhancing self-esteem. From this standpoint, the goal of the ideal organization is to bring about the greatest self-esteem for the largest number of employees. If all employees have high self-esteem, the organization will inevitably be productive and successful.

But the organization cannot *give* people self-esteem. Providing housing or food or money is sometimes equated with increasing a person's self-esteem. Virtuous as these acts are, they are not necessarily related to increasing self-esteem. A hungry man given food is no longer hungry, but does not necessarily have any better feeling about his own ability to feed himself. This is not to say we should not be generous. It is only to point out that these acts do not inevitably lead to increased self-esteem.

Too widespread is the notion that helping means giving something *I* think is of value. Many of our failures of relationships result from giving you what *I* want to give you and being amazed at your resentment. Such a result follows from not bothering to find out what is of value to *you*. Giving because I want to be seen by others as generous is not true generosity. Typically, it comes from feeling low self-esteem. If I feel truly generous, I bother to find out what will be seen by you as helpful. My focus is on being helpful, not on **being seen** as helpful.

For a social or personal action to be effective for increasing self-esteem, it must be carefully thought through. *Helping is a fine art*. If I want to help you increase your self-esteem, I must be inventive enough to create conditions within which you will develop your own abilities

and overcome your fears of not being adequate (recall the fish story above). It is my experience of doing and being something I formerly did not feel capable of that leads me to feel increased self-esteem. So, although the organization cannot give employees higher self-esteem, it can create conditions within which it is easier for them to enhance their own self-esteem.

Atmosphere Goals of an Ideal Organization

To achieve the goal of The organization facilitating individuals feel ... tates an atmosphere of ...

Alive	Participation
Self-determining	Freedom
Self-aware	Openness
Significant	Recognition
Competent	Empowerment
Likable	Humanity

The table lists the specific links between individual self-esteem and the organizational atmosphere conducive to bringing about those individual feelings. More detail on these dimensions follows.

For the individual, the goal is to continuously enhance the six dimensions defining self-esteem:

- **Aliveness.** I'm fully alive. I use myself well. I'm energetic. I'm not bored.
- **Self-determining.** I choose my own life. I'm self-determining and autonomous. I feel free and not coerced. I'm responsible for myself.
- **Self-awareness.** I tell the truth to myself and to others. I'm aware of myself. I'm aware that I have an unconscious and constantly strive to be more conscious. I don't deceive myself.
- **Significance.** I feel significant. I'm an important person. I make a difference.
- **Competence.** I feel competent. I can cope with the situations presented by life.

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- **Likability.** I feel likable. I enjoy my own company. I like the person I am.

For the *organization*, the goal is to create an atmosphere that fosters all employees' self esteem, specifically by means of the following factors:

- **Participation.** The organization offers full participation in its business. I, the employee, do not want (nor am I required) to participate in all activities, but I do have the opportunity and am invited to do so. I'm kept informed of company activities and included in the appropriate activities I wish to pursue.
- **Freedom.** I'm trusted to determine my own best courses of action.
- **Openness.** The organization and I are fully open with each other. We keep no secrets (except certifiable industrial or security secrets) and do not withhold. I answer all question truthfully and completely.
- **Recognition.** I am known and recognized by the organization. As a policy, the organization routinely acquires an understanding of the worth and abilities of each employee.
- **Empowerment.** I am fully empowered and do everything voluntarily. I participate in final decisions on all the issues that I know the most about and that most affect me.
- **Humanity.** The organization appreciates and knows me as a person and encourages social contacts.

How Can I Increase My Self-Esteem?

If the organization, or anyone, can't increase my self-esteem, how can I do it myself? Five methods are described here for beginning a process of improving self-esteem.

1. Affirmations

The first approach is at the behavior level. Although it does not get at the root of low self-esteem, it is helpful to practice more positive behavior while the pursuit of causes—the next four methods—is progressing.

At the level of behavior, these behaviors may be practiced as an aid for increasing self esteem:

- Tell my truth, let myself and others know what my truth is.
- Be aware that I am always choosing and accept responsibility without blame for everything happening in my life
- Seek deeper self-awareness, read, discuss, ponder, improve my awareness of old programs and deeper levels of being.
- Give up blame, postpone judgment, listen and understand before defending or attacking or making others wrong.
- Envision my ideal self. Keep in mind I am choosing the way I want to be.
- Don't lie, don't blame, don't withhold, don't deceive myself.
- Question my limiting beliefs. I am aware that any time I tell myself I cannot do something, I am right.
- Be in touch with my body, listen for ever present cues.
- Treat my growth and myself with respect and patience, rather than irritation and judgment, and maintain the larger perspective of developing along my own path.

2. Ideal Self

This method converts into a measurement the concept that self-esteem depends on how much I am like my ideal self. It helps me pinpoint which aspects of me are unsatisfactory and therefore prevent me from feeling better about myself. Once I find the unsatisfactory parts, I can discover my payoffs for not being more the way I want to be. By taking the difference between what I am and what I want to be, I derive a measure of my self-esteem.

Example of items are:

- I act more competent than I really feel.
- I don't feel alive enough.

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- I prevent people from seeing I am as significant as I am.

3. Choice

Now, I use the concept of choice, or self-responsibility, to take the next step. Rather than simply promise myself to “just change” those items I feel are unsatisfactory, I assume I choose to have these deficiencies because I get a payoff for it. To find the payoff, I remind myself that this is not an exercise in judging myself as good or bad. I must allow myself to see myself without judgment, in the spirit of exploration and understanding. After bringing my payoffs to my awareness, I am in a position to make a conscious decision about what I want to do. For each of the most unsatisfactory items I write down my payoff for feeling this way. The payoff must be positive and not flippant. I keep in mind that the payoffs are rewarding enough to prevent me from esteeming myself more, so they must be potent.

Example of a payoff: I act less competent than I am because I don’t want people to be disappointed in me because they expect too much.

4. Childhood

The next approach to improving the self-esteem is through exploring the origins of these unsatisfactory feelings and opinions about myself. Where did I get my ideas about who I am? As with the other approaches, this is not a panacea. It simply points me in directions that are relevant and potentially valuable for increasing my self-esteem. All of these approaches are even more valuable if I can gather another person, or even a group of friends, who will complete these exercises with me and participate in a discussion after we have finished.

Part I: I explore how my feelings about myself may have started in each area of behavior and of feelings. One of the early sources from which I derive my picture of

myself is the inferences I drew about myself from my parents’ actions around and toward me. This is not an exercise in blaming parents. It is an attempt to understand myself better. I keep in mind that these were always *my interpretations* of what they did. Examples:

How did my parents react when I said, implied, or felt:

... I want to be included? (Examples, “Can I go with you? Can I sit at the table with you? Can I come into your room? Can I go to the store with you? Can I go visiting with you?”)

... I want to be in control? (Examples, “I want to do it myself. I won’t do what you told me. I want to do it my way.”)

... I want to be open with you and have you be open with me? (Examples, “Tell me how you really feel about me. Tell me your real feelings about other people, events, or about yourselves. I want you to know how I really feel, what I am afraid of, what I like about myself.”)

Part II: Using the results of this inquiry may help me find the origin of the decisions I made about myself that I am now not satisfied with. To explore where the decisions that determine my self-esteem originated, for each unsatisfactory item listed above I ask myself:

- When is the first time I recall acting or feeling this way?
- Did I ever act this way toward a parent or close relative?
- Did any close relative act or feel this way toward me during my childhood?
- What is my payoff now for acting or feeling this way?
- Is this what I really want?
- What am I willing to do about it?

2. Ron Luyet also made the original formulation of these statements.

3. The complete statement of the next three steps are presented in the instrument called Element E: Self Esteem™, available from The Schutz Company. (866) 302-2720.

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5. Essence Imagery

The fifth technique uses a method to contact the unconscious and bring it under conscious control. Following are the instructions.

Please shut your eyes. Think of three things you like most about yourself. (Pause 10 seconds.) Now rank these three traits from the most important, number one, to the lesser important, numbers two and three. (Pause 10 seconds.) Now imagine yourself having traits one and two, but not three. Feel what that would be like, and get a picture of that situation. (Pause 10 seconds.) Now imagine yourself with trait one, but not two or three. (Pause 10 seconds.) Now imagine you have none of these traits. Notice how you feel. What pictures come into your head? (Pause 10 seconds.) Now please open your eyes, noticing your feelings as you open your eyes. (Pause 10 seconds.) What is it that is left after you have eliminated all three traits?

Participants have a variety of reactions from elation and freedom to fear and desolation. It is valuable to assume that what remains is your essence. You are not your traits. By reaching your essence in a tangible form, it is possible to alter it consciously. Participants may now go back to the picture of their essence and work with it. They are encouraged to strengthen it, if they wish, by talking to it, touching it, feeding it, seeing other people there to help them strengthen it, or whatever else they wish. In other words, they have an opportunity to reshape their own self-concept in the directions they wish. This is the deepest level of work with self esteem.

Completion of The Original Exercise

My communication to each group was very simple. To the first group I said "You have very low self-esteem. By that I mean you don't feel alive, you don't control your life, you are not aware of yourself, and you feel insignificant, incompetent, and unlikable." To the second group I said "You have very high self-esteem. By

that I mean you feel alive, in charge of your life, aware of yourself, and you feel significant, competent, and likable." AND THAT IS ALL.

This exercise illustrates that the feelings about self-esteem govern a vast amount of behavior. To bring about a poor or an excellent job from the trios, it is not necessary to be specific about what behaviors to perform. Their condition of self-esteem determines morale, efficiency, relationships, and other important aspects of human functioning. A change in self-esteem is so fundamental that it automatically changes specific behavior, as demonstrated by the dramatic difference between the two teams. X