



Background

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy theory arises in the work of cognitive psychologists interested in personal causation; in other words, how people organise, adapt to and bring about change in their lives. This research is particularly associated with the work of Albert Bandura (1994) who states that:

'self-efficacy is the belief in one's capabilities to organise and execute the sources of action required to manage prospective situations.' (Bandura 1994).

Bandura argues that there are four main sources of personal beliefs about our efficacy:

1. Experiences of successes and failures and particularly the experience of failure that enables resilience. In other words, learning from failure in a way that enables us to bounce back and draw lessons, rather than be completely overwhelmed by the experience.
- 2) The influence of social models around us, with the impact of our perceived self-efficacy being strongly influenced by the perceived similarity to what we see in others around us.
- 3) Social persuasion: being verbally encouraged can help us mobilise greater efforts. However, persuasion is not sufficient on its own to inspire, but negative persuasion can be very undermining of people's efficacy.
- 4) People rely on their emotional and physiological states. For example, stress reactions and physical feelings are used as feedback to how well we are doing. Physical states associated with either good or bad moods (such as adrenalin, sweatiness, euphoria) can affect people's judgments of their efficacy.

Carol Dweck (2000) has conducted a lot of research in this field and argues that there are two essential patterns of behaviour: a **"helpless pattern"** and a **"mastery-orientated"** pattern. In the face of failure and difficulty the 'helpless' group withdraws and cannot use its skills whilst the latter group continues to pursue the task in hand, finding ways around difficulty. Those who have been classed as having high ability can often fail because they display patterns of helplessness. Helplessness can be characterised by self-blame, negative feelings, falling expectations, lack of persistence and absence of constructive strategies.

This work by Carol Dweck on self-theories links to the idea of mental models that was raised earlier. In his 'fieldbook' "The Fifth Discipline", Peter Senge (2003) argues that the exploration of mental models is an essential discipline for learning organisations and that **personal mastery** is part of the process of changing and redeveloping these mental models. All the mission statements and visions in the world cannot make a difference unless people both care to change and are enabled or supported to make changes in their personal attitudes, habits, beliefs and behaviours.

'The central practice of personal mastery involves learning to keep both a personal vision and a clear picture of current reality before us. Doing this will generate a force within ourselves called 'creative tension'. Tension, by its nature, seeks resolution.'
(Peter Senge, 2003 op.cit. p195)

Many coaching and cognitive self-development programmes, such as those run by The Pacific Institute (2000) start with this 'creative' tension and the role of self-talk in adjusting the current reality. This derives from Bandura's (1994) work on the importance of forethought in our lives. Both the Fifth Discipline and the Pacific Institute use a model of a rubber band that is held between two hands, one above the other.

The hands represent two poles with vision at the top and current reality below. With these poles working in tension as one pulls up or the other down we have to attend to both.



From Peter Senge, op cit. Page 195. This is safe to try at home!

There is no smooth process of 'snapping' into a vision for our lives. In other words, just because we pull the vision up to some high ideal, it does not follow that our current reality automatically follows. Try this with the band and you will feel the tension as the current reality stays below. However we cannot bring about self-efficacy without attending to a vision. Forming a vision is different to far-fetched fantasy and, if we made our vision too far removed from current reality, the rubber band would just snap. However, if our perception of current reality is very 'low' then our vision gets dragged down. It can be difficult to look at current reality; we need to ask ourselves reflective questions at both moments of stress and within the comfortable periods of our lives.

If we act in accordance with our self-image, who we believe we are, then we have to work on adjusting this self-image upwards in order to, correspondingly, pull our current reality 'upwards'. This action involves examining our comfort zones, habits, limiting beliefs and our 'self-talk'. It is a matter of deliberate practice through cultivating and attending to a way of thinking. There are rarely instant results and certainly not long-lasting ones without this concerted attention.

One evolutionary psychologist has suggested that depressives are often closer to the truth about themselves and others, but through 'fooling' ourselves somewhat we can be more effective and live longer, happier lives (Livingstone Smith, 2005)

In the UFA we use the term self-efficacy rather than personal mastery because efficacy is about a process; mastery implies that we may reach some finished state, whereas our lives are in a continual state of adjustment. We use the term self-efficacy as the cognitive element of the concept of disposition, recognising that the abiding tendencies we use have a large emotional element but that we can work on the the aspects we can access: the pictures and the voices in our head. That is where self-efficacy comes in.

As we go through our lives we constantly meet new challenges, new expectations and new relationships. We have to adjust our goals, adopt new strategies for attaining them, form new beliefs and take new risks. Beliefs, goals and strategies that allow you to succeed at one point in your life may become hindrances at another (Dweck, 2000). This idea is reflected in section 1 of this topic, where we examined whether dispositions could be helpful or unhelpful.



In Dweck's research, goals that young people formed were found to be either **performance** related or **learning** related. Performance goals are concerned with winning positive judgments about your competence: about looking good and avoiding negative feedback. A learning goal reflects a desire to learn and understand new things. In an ideal world both goals could underpin achievement and both are necessary at times, but what often tends to happen is that for those whose personal radar sets them toward helpless patterns of behaviour, performance goals drive out learning goals.

In this section we work on the pictures and voices that can help alter self-belief, because individuals can exercise more control over their lives than they think possible. This process of altering self-belief is the cognitive, self-efficacy, part of resilience that can work on combating patterns of helplessness. However this process is about more than uttering shallow statements about being positive, this process is hard work and it is about re-aligning habits that are sometimes deeply ingrained.

Sometimes the consequence of holding a belief is far more important than the truth of that belief and we act in accordance with who we subconsciously believe we are. However, as Martin Seligman (1998) has shown, unwarranted optimism can sometimes be a dangerous strategy, a little pessimism can be a useful reminder in life. It is our disposition to take lessons from the negative and it is our styles of explaining failure or success that will allow us to learn more deeply or to render us helpless.

Five points to make are:

1. That self-regulation does not work consistently just because we say "I will do..." statements such as "I will or I am going to get fit." To make a lasting change we need to engage our emotional memories (Stoch, 2005). What this means is that we have to visualise the goal we wish to achieve and associate a vivid memory that carried emotional significance. Think of all the great moments in your life and the things that you remember well and there will undoubtedly be a strong recall of the emotion you experienced at the time. Emotion is a means by which certain memories are tagged and stored for later processing. If we have a goal such as keeping fit, we need to visualize the experience strongly and associate the emotion of how good we felt last time we were fit. This process has to become a habit in order to imprint on our unconscious desires, which may well include the feeling of being very comfortable, thank you, without putting myself through the pain of keeping fit. There is a big difference between self-control – I will make myself go running – and self-regulation – I run because I enjoy it as a regular routine.
2. Self-regulation is hard work: not everyone succeeds and not all issues and challenges in life are surmountable through altering our self-talk. One way of looking at it is creating a climate or culture for yourself that makes the future more manageable and physically healthier, all other things being equal.
3. The research into self-efficacy comes from the social-cognitive tradition within psychology. This tradition is now extremely well researched and evidenced based. There may be overlaps and similarities between the research paradigm we draw upon and the claims of the Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) movement. There is still some doubt as to the evidence and research base of NLP (Kemmer, 2005), so it is something to watch with interest, but be cautious of the claims made by some of its practitioners.



4. Research into the brain suggest that there are direct linkages in the 'wiring' between areas associated with emotion, such as the amygdala, and the pre-frontal cortex where planning and forethought are 'sited'. In fact, the route from the amygdala is faster in transmitting messages than the highway from the cortex (Glynn 2000.) The importance of this point is that the ability to control impulse and delay gratification is an extremely important element in thinking behaviour. We can develop this disposition through the brains plasticity, its ability to adapt and, almost like a muscle, become enhanced through continued usage (Robertson, 1999.)
5. As we are 'apprentice' learners, using models from people around us, it also stands to reason that there is a powerful effect if expectations of those around us are high and other people hold similar self-theories. Research suggests that teachers who do not hold a limiting view of learner intelligence achieve more success with the young people they teach (Hart et al 2004). A powerful argument for getting the learning culture to model the dispositions we want to see exercised.

Concluding thoughts

This section may also read as an unwarranted emphasis on the self at the expense of others and at first glance, have little to do with learning in the environments that we work in.

There are a number of responses to this.

Firstly, we live in an age and culture where the self, or the idea of the self, has undergone dramatic shifts, so that living in the world presents us with a number of tensions and dilemmas that previous generations may not have faced (Giddens, 1993). For example, globalisation has meant that, for large numbers of us, the world has become 'smaller,' more interdependent on a large range of other people. However, at the same time, the world seems to be more fragmented and individuals more isolated from the traditional orders that once gave them security; in post-traditional orders there is both greater uncertainty about our place in the world, but also a plethora of opportunities to create our own individual stamp upon it (Giddens, op. cit). We need to have tools that can support self-identity and make the most of the creative opportunities that are available.

Secondly, one in ten children in Britain were reported as having some recognised mental disorder, with 4% experiencing anxiety or depression. (Source: Survey of the Mental Health of Children and Young people in Great Britain, 2004.) Self-efficacy cannot be a cure for all deep-seated mental health issues, but for many young people these positive habits can make a deep impact upon their lives if practised from an early age.

Thirdly, only by understanding ourselves and working upon our own self-efficacy can we have an impact upon others.

Fourthly, the process of self-efficacy needs to be exercised with an idea of what might impact upon those around us. Self-efficacy does not of itself lead to wisdom. Wisdom derives from putting the choices we make in an ethical context and from understanding the power we possess as agents of change.