

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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THE SUCCESS DELUSION: WHY IT CAN BE SO HARD FOR SUCCESSFUL LEADERS TO CHANGE

Any human, in fact, any animal will tend to repeat behavior that is followed by positive reinforcement. The more successful we become, the more positive reinforcement we get—and the more likely we are to experience the success delusion.

I behave this way. I am successful. Therefore, I must be successful because I behave this way.

Wrong!

The higher we move up the organizational ladder, the more our employees let us know how wonderful we are! Our behavior is often followed by positive reinforcement, even when this behavior makes absolutely no sense. One night over dinner, I listened as a very wise military leader shared his learnings from years of

experience with an eager, newly-minted General, “Recently, have you started to notice that when you tell jokes, everyone erupts into laughter—and that when you say something ‘wise’ everyone nods their heads in solemn agreement?” The new General replied, “Why, yes, I have.” The older General laughed and continued, “Let me help you. You aren’t that funny, and you aren’t that smart! It’s only that star on your shoulder. Don’t ever let it go to your head.”

We all want to hear what we want to hear. We want to believe those great things that the world is telling us about ourselves. Our belief in ourselves helps us become successful. It can also make it very hard for us to change. As the wise older General noted—we aren’t really that funny, and we aren’t really that smart. We can all get better—if we are willing to take a hard look at ourselves. By understanding why changing behavior can be so difficult for successful leaders—we can increase the likelihood of making the changes that we need to make—in our quest to become even more successful.

Why We Resist Change

UNUM, the insurance company, ran an ad some years ago showing a powerful grizzly in the middle of a roaring stream, with his neck extended to the limit, jaws wide open and teeth flaring. The bear was about to clamp on an unsuspecting salmon jumping up stream. The headline read: *You probably feel like the bear, we’d like to suggest that you are the salmon.*

The ad was designed to sell disability insurance, but it struck me as a powerful statement about how we all delude ourselves about our achievements, our status and our contributions.

We often:

- Overestimate our contribution to a project
- Have an elevated opinion of our professional skills and standing among our peers
- Exaggerate our project's impact on profitability by discounting real and hidden costs

Many of our delusions can come from our association with success, not failure. Since we get positive reinforcement from our past successes, we think that they are predictive of great things to come in our future.

The fact that successful people tend to be delusional isn't all bad. Our belief in our wonderfulness gives us confidence. Even though we are not as good as we think we are, this confidence actually helps us be better than we would become if we did not believe in ourselves. The most realistic people in the world are not delusional—they are depressed!

Although our self-confident delusions can help us achieve, they can make it difficult for us to change. In fact, when others suggest that we may need to change, we may view them with unadulterated bafflement.

It's an interesting three-part response. First we are convinced that the other party is confused. They are misinformed, and they just don't know what they are talking about. They must have us

mixed up with someone who truly does need to change. Second, as it dawns upon us that the other party is not confused—maybe their information about our perceived shortcomings is accurate—we go into denial mode. This criticism may be correct, but it can't be that important—or else we wouldn't be so successful. Finally, when all else fails, we may attack the other party. We discredit the messenger. “Why is a winner like me,” we conclude, “listening to a loser like you?”

These are just a few of our initial responses to what we don't want to hear—denial mechanisms. Couple this with the very positive interpretation that successful people assign to (a) their past performance, (b) their ability to influence their success (as opposed to just being lucky), (c) their optimistic belief that their success will continue in the future, and (d) their over-stated sense of control over their own destiny (as opposed to being controlled by external forces), and you have a volatile cocktail of resistance to change.

Our positive beliefs about ourselves help us become successful. These same beliefs can make it tough for us to change. The same beliefs that helped us get to here—our current level of success, can inhibit us from making the changes needed to get to there—the next level that we have the potential to reach.

Belief 1: I Have Succeeded

Successful people have one consistent idea coursing through their veins and brains—“I have suc-

ceeded. I have succeeded. I have succeeded.” This strong belief in our past success gives us faith to take the risks needed for our future success.

You may not think that this applies to you. You may think that this is ego run amok. But look closely at yourself. How do you have the confidence to wake up in the morning and charge into work, filled with optimism and eagerness to compete? It’s not because you are reminding yourself of the screw-ups you have created and the failures that you have endured. On the contrary, it’s because you edit out failures and choose to run the highlight reel of your successes. If you’re like the successful people I know, you’re focused on the positives, calling up mental images when you were the star, dazzled everyone and came out on top. It might be those five minutes in the executive meeting when you had the floor and nailed the argument that you wanted to make. (Who wouldn’t run that highlight in their head as if it were the Sports Center Play of the Day?) It might be your skillfully crafted memo that the CEO praised and routed to everyone in the company. (Who wouldn’t want to re-read that memo in a spare moment?) When our actions lead to a happy ending and make us look good, we love to replay it for ourselves.

When it comes to the thoughts successful people hold in our heads, we are not self-deprecating, we are self-aggrandizing—and that’s a good thing! Without it, we wouldn’t be so excited about getting up in the morning.

I once got into a conversation about this with a major league baseball player. Every hitter has certain pitchers whom he historically hits better than others. He told me, “When I face a pitcher whom I’ve hit well in the past, I always go up to the plate thinking I ‘own’ this guy. That gives me confidence.”

That’s not surprising. To successful people the past is made up of rose-colored prologue. But he took that thinking one step further.

“What about pitchers that you don’t hit well?” I asked. “How do you deal with a pitcher who ‘owns’ you?”

“Same thing,” he said. “I go up to the plate thinking I can hit this guy. I have done it before with pitchers a lot better than he is.”

In other words, not only did he lean on his past success to maintain his positive attitude—he relied on it even when his past performance was not so rosy—i.e., when the evidence actually contradicted his self-confidence. Successful people don’t drink from a glass that is half empty!

When achievement is the result of a team effort—not just individual performance—we tend to over-estimate our contribution to the final victory. I once asked three business partners to estimate their individual contribution to the partnership’s profits. Not surprisingly, the sum of their answers amounted to over 150% of the actual profit. Each partner thought that she was contributing more than half!

This over-estimation of our past success is true in almost any

workplace. If you ask your colleagues (in a confidential survey) to estimate their percentage contribution to your enterprise, the total will always exceed 100%. There is nothing wrong with this. (If the total adds up to less than 100%, you probably need new colleagues!)

This “I have succeeded” belief, positive as it is in most cases, can become a major obstacle when behavioral change is needed.

Successful people consistently over-rate themselves relative to their peers. I have asked over 50,000 participants in my training programs to rate themselves in terms of their performance relative to their professional peers—80-85% rank themselves in the top 20% of their peer group—and about 70% rank themselves in the top 10%. The numbers get even more ridiculous among professionals with higher perceived social status, such as physicians, pilots and investment bankers.

MDs may be the most delusional. I once told a group of doctors that my extensive research had conclusively proven that half of all MDs had graduated in the bottom half of their medical school class. Two of doctors insisted that this was impossible!

We all tend to accept feedback from others that is consistent with the way we see ourselves. We all tend to reject or deny feedback from others that is inconsistent with the way we see ourselves. Successful people feel great about their previous performance! The “good news” is that these positive memories build our self-confidence and inspire us to try to

succeed even more. The “bad news” is our delusional self-image can make it very hard to hear negative feedback and admit that we need to change.

Belief 2: I Can Succeed

Successful people believe that they have the capability to have a positive influence on the world—and to make desirable things happen. It’s not quite like a carnival magic act where the mentalist moves objects on a table with her mind. But it’s close. Successful people literally believe that through the sheer force of their personality, talent and brainpower, they can steer a situation in their direction.

It’s the reason why some people raise their hand and say, “Put me in, Coach” when the boss asks for volunteers—and others cower in the corner, praying that they won’t be noticed.

This is the classic definition of self-efficacy, and it may be the most central belief driving individual success. People who believe they can succeed see opportunities, where others see threats. They are not afraid of uncertainty or ambiguity, they embrace it. They take more risks and achieve greater returns. Given the choice, they bet on themselves.

Successful people have a high “internal locus of control.” In other words, they do not feel like victims of fate. They see their success as a function of their own motivation and ability—not luck, random chance or fate. They carry this belief even when luck does play a crucial role in success.

Several years ago six of my partners wanted to get involved in a very large deal. Since I was the senior partner, they needed my approval. I was dead set against the deal and told them that it was idiotic. I finally agreed, but kicking and screaming. Seven years later my personal return from their “idiotic” investment exceeded seven digits to the left of the decimal. There was no way to credit my windfall other than my pure, dumb luck. When I told this story to some of my successful friends, they refused to see it this way. They insisted that my good fortune was really a deserved payoff for years of hard work and dedication. This was a classic successful person’s response. Successful people tend to believe that good fortune is “earned” through an individual’s motivation and ability, even when it is not.

Of course, this belief makes about as much sense as inheriting money and believing that you are a self-made man. If you are born on third base, you shouldn’t think you hit a triple. Successful people believe that there is a causal link between what they have done and the results that follow—even when no link exists. This belief is delusional, but it is also empowering.

This belief is certainly better than the alternative. Take the example of people who buy lots of lottery tickets. They tend to be less successful. This is why the state-run lottery is actually a “regressive tax” on the poor. If you believe success is a function of luck, you might as well buy lottery tickets. (This is why you seldom see millionaires scratching

tickets.) To make matters worse, serious scratchers often blow the money if they actually win the lottery. Why? The same misguided beliefs that led to the purchase of the tickets are reinforced when they win.

Successful people trade this “lottery mentality” for an unshakable belief in themselves. This presents another obstacle in helping them change behavior. When we believe that our good fortune is directly and causally linked to our behavior, we can easily make a false assumption. “I am successful. I behave this way. Therefore, I must be successful because I behave this way.” It can be especially challenging to help successful leaders realize that their success is happening in spite of some of their behavior.

Belief 3: I Will Succeed

Successful people are optimists. Anyone who has ever been in sales knows—if you believe you will succeed you might not—but if you don’t believe that you will succeed you won’t! Optimists tend to chronically over-commit. Why? We believe that we will do more than we actually can do.

It can be extremely difficult for an ambitious person, with an “I will succeed” attitude to say “no” to desirable opportunities. The huge majority of leaders that I work with today feel as busy—or busier—than they have ever felt in their lives. They are not so busy because they are losers. They are so busy because they are winners. They are “drowning in a sea of opportunity.”

Perhaps this has happened to

you. You do something wonderful at work. Suddenly, lots of people want to associate themselves with your success. They think, quite logically, that since you pulled off a miracle once, you can do it again—this time for them. Soon opportunities are thrust upon you at a pace you have never seen before. Since you believe, “I will succeed,” it is hard to say “no.” If not careful, you can get overwhelmed—and that which brought about your rise will bring about your fall.

In my volunteer work, my client was the executive director of one of the world’s most important human services organizations. His mission was to help the world’s most vulnerable people. Unfortunately, his business was booming. When people came to him for help, he didn’t have the heart or inclination to say no. Everything was driven by his belief that “we will succeed.” As a result, he promised more than even the most dedicated staff could deliver. His biggest challenge as a leader was not letting his personal optimism lead to staff burnout, turn over and missed commitments.

This “I will succeed” belief can sabotage our chances for success when it is time for us to change behavior. I make no apology for the fact that I’m obsessed about following-up with my clients to see if they actually use what I teach them—and achieve positive change in behavior. Almost every participant who attends my leadership training program intends to apply what has been learned back at work. Most do, and they get

better! Many do absolutely nothing and might as well have spent their time watching sit-coms.

When I ask the “do-nothings,” “Why didn’t you actually implement the behavioral changes that you said you would?” by far the most common response is, “I meant to, but just didn’t have the time to get to it.” In other words, they were over-committed. They sincerely believed that they would “get to it later,” but “later” never came. Our excessive optimism and resulting over-commitment can be as serious an obstacle to change as our denial of negative feedback or our belief that our flaws are actually the cause of our success.

Belief 4: I Choose to Succeed

Successful people believe that they are doing what they choose to do, because they choose to do it. They have a high need for self-determination. When we do what we choose to do, we are committed. When we do what we have to do, we are compliant.

A child can see the difference between commitment and compliance. Even a skeptical wise-guy teenager like me could see that some teachers had chosen the profession (and loved to teach) and others did it to just make a living—and the best teachers were clearly the former. They were committed to their students rather than being controlled by external forces (their paycheck). Successful people have a unique distaste for feeling controlled or manipulated. I see this daily in my work. Even when I’ve gotten

the greatest advance build-up as someone who can help people change for the better, I still meet resistance. I have now made peace with the fact that I cannot make people change. I can only help them get better at what they choose to change.

Basketball coach Rick Pitino wrote a book called *Success Is a Choice*. I agree. “I choose to succeed” correlates closely with achievement in virtually any field. People don’t stumble on success; they choose it.

Unfortunately, getting successful people to say “and I choose to change” is not an easy transition. It means turning that muscular commitment on its head. Easy to say, hard to do. The more we believe that our behavior is a result of our own choices and commitments, the less likely we are to want to change that same behavior.

There’s a reason for this, and it’s one of the best-researched principles in psychology. It’s called cognitive dissonance. It refers to the disconnect between what we want to believe and what we actually experience in the world. The underlying theory is simple. The more we are committed to believing that something is true, the less likely we are to believe that its opposite is true, even in the face of clear evidence that shows we are wrong.

Cognitive dissonance usually works in favor of successful people when they apply it to achieving their mission. The more we are committed to believing that we are on the right path, the less likely we are to believe that our strat-

egy is flawed, even in the face of initial evidence that indicates we may be wrong. It’s the reason successful people don’t buckle and waver when times are hard. Their commitment to their goals and beliefs allows them to view reality through rose-tinted glasses—and that’s a good thing in many situations. Their commitment encourages people to “stay the course” and to not “give up” when “the going gets tough.”

Of course, this same principle can work against successful people when they should “change course.” The old saying “winners never quit” is often true. Sometimes it is important for even the most successful people to quit doing something that isn’t working. It is hard for winners to quit!

How the Success Delusion Makes Us Superstitious

These four success beliefs all filter through us and create in us something that we don’t want to believe about ourselves. Our success delusion is actually a form of superstition.

“Who, me?” you say. “I am an educated and logical person. I am not superstitious!”

That may be true for “childish” superstitions such as bad luck ensuing from walking under a ladder, or breaking a mirror, or letting a black cat cross our path. Most of us scorn superstitions as silly beliefs of the primitive and uneducated. Deep down inside, we assure ourselves that we’re above these silly notions.

Not so fast. To a degree, we’re all superstitious. In many cases,

the higher we climb the organizational totem pole, the more superstitious we become.

Psychologically speaking, superstitious behavior comes from the belief that a specific activity that is followed by positive reinforcement is actually the cause of that positive reinforcement. The activity may be functional or not—that is, it may affect someone or something else, or it may be self-contained and pointless—but if something good happens after we do it, then we make a connection. My undergraduate background is in mathematics. Mathematically speaking, superstition is merely the confusion of two words—correlation and causality.

B. F. Skinner showed how hungry pigeons would repeat meaningless twitches when the twitches, by pure chance, were followed by random small pellets of food. In much the same way, successful leaders can repeat dysfunctional behavior when this behavior is followed by large pellets of money—even if the behavior has no connection with the results that led to the money.

One of my greatest challenges is helping leaders see how their confusion of “because of” and “in spite of” behavior can lead to the “superstition trap.”

Making the Changes We Need to Make

Now let’s turn the spotlight on you, because few of us are immune to the success delusion. Pick one of your own quirky or unattractive behaviors; something that you know is annoying to friends, family or coworkers. Now

ask yourself: Do I continue to do this because I think it is somehow associated with the good things that have happened to me?

Examine it more closely. Does this behavior help you achieve results—or is it one of those irrational superstitious beliefs that have been controlling your life for years? The former is “because of” behavior, the latter “in spite of.”

Overcoming the success delusion requires vigilance and constantly asking yourself, “Is this behavior a legitimate reason for my success, or am I just kidding myself?”

The first step in achieving positive change in behavior is to realize that it is hard for successful leaders to change—for all of the reasons that we have discussed. Realize that the same beliefs that have helped you get to where you are, may be holding you back from where you want to go.

All of my personal coaching clients are either CEOs or people who have the potential to be CEOs in major corporations. I don’t get paid if they don’t achieve positive, measurable change—not as judged by themselves, but as determined by their key stakeholders. These top executives are brilliant people, who have achieved amazing success and who want to get even better. Even with all of this motivation and ability, every one of my clients will verify that changing behavior may be simple—but it is far from easy.

How can you achieve positive change? Get in the habit of asking the key people in your life how you can improve. Recruit them in