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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.



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.

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.

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

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!)

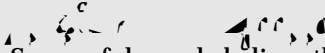
This “I have succeeded” belief, positive as it is in most cases, can become a major obstacle when behavioral change is needed.

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.



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 *tive id new*

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 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 *Stick to It*, and 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 r9