

## PREFACE TO SELF-ESTEEM AT WORK

This essay is adapted from Dr. Branden's recently-published book, "Self-Esteem at Work: How Confident People Make Powerful Companies," to be published in 1998 by Jossey-Bass Publishers.

**PREFACE**

The theme of this book is the new importance of self-esteem in an information economy, and the practical implications of that importance for leaders, managers, and anyone seeking conscious control over his or her career.

By self-esteem I mean the experience of being competent to cope with the basic challenges of life and of being worthy of happiness. This means trust in your ability to think, learn, make appropriate decisions, and respond effectively to new conditions. It also means confidence in your right to experience success and personal fulfillment—the conviction that happiness is appropriate to you.

Self-esteem pertains to an experience of efficacy. This entails confidence in your mind at a very deep level. Not the confidence of knowing you can perform this or that task appropriately. Not confidence in how much you may know about any particular subject. But rather, trust in the processes by which you reason, understand, learn, choose, decide, and regulate action.

It is a trust that cannot be faked. It has to be reality-based—has to be earned. How it is earned is one of the issues I will examine.

Self-esteem has always been an important psychological need, ever since we evolved the capacity for abstract self-awareness. Now, however, in a way that was not true in the past, it has become an urgent economic need.

I will consider the nature and dynamics of self-esteem and its role in behavior and motivation, both personally and professionally, in Chapter Two. We cannot understand how and why self-esteem has acquired its new importance in the workplace if we do not understand what self-esteem is and how it operates. But first, in Chapter One, I examine how the workplace has changed—what are the new and unprecedented challenges that individuals and business organizations face—and how these challenges relate to self-esteem.

Following these two chapters, I will consider the implications of the new realities for leadership, management practice, and the requirements of creating a high performance organization characterized by continuous innovation and sustained profitability—in a ferociously competitive global marketplace.

Finally, I will examine the intimate linkage between working on your own development as a human being and striving to make yourself and your organization adaptive to the challenges of an economy that seems more ruthlessly demanding with every passing year. The message here is that work itself can be approached as a path to personal growth, so that self-esteem and professional competence can rise together and reinforce each other—while one avoids the error of identifying personal worth with career success.

The net result is a guidebook for working with self and others in a

business environment.

Business has often been skeptical of the intrusion of "psychology" into its domain. Understandably so. A great deal of what has been offered to the business community as "psychology" has had very little to recommend it. And some of the early attempts to introduce "personal growth work" into business—remember, for example, the early T-groups or encounter groups—led in some cases to employees feeling emotionally invaded and even damaged; it also led, in a few instances, to law suits. So if business is skeptical about the offerings of psychologists, it is wise to be—or, if not skeptical, then at least cautious and thoughtful. And yet, business cannot avoid psychology because it cannot avoid the question, "What must we do to motivate our people to give their best?"

Executives do not ask, "How can we establish an organizational culture that nurtures self-esteem?" They do ask, "How can we establish an organizational culture that supports high performance, personal accountability, and creative initiative?" The questions are different, yet the answers are essentially the same.

Although I have written a great deal about self-esteem in the past, this book assumes no familiarity with my earlier writings and is entirely self-contained. When necessary, I have permitted myself to borrow material from my previous books because I am aware I may be addressing executives who have never read anything in the field of psychology in general or self-esteem in particular.

I owe the genesis of this book, in part, to an encounter I had about fifteen years ago, before I began doing corporate consulting. I was conducting a self-esteem seminar for the general public at which six or seven business consultants were participants. It turned out they all knew one another and they invited me to lunch. I expressed interest in what had inspired them to take this particular course. Here is the essence of what they said:

"We feel something is missing in our consulting practice. We can design a program for an organization, elicit people's initial enthusiasm, and pretty soon they are seeing with their own eyes that the program works and produces desired results—and yet, after a while, they stop doing it and revert to their old ways. It's as if their self-concept—the way they view themselves and what's appropriate to them—can't accommodate this new way of being and doing. Somehow, it's not who they think they are. Their attitude seems to be, 'I'm just not a person who does things this way.' That's an issue of self-esteem, isn't it? So that's why we're here—to learn more about the principles of self-esteem and perhaps to learn if there's any way to incorporate self-esteem ideas in our work."

These consultants had grasped a profoundly important principle—that it is very difficult for people to act beyond their deepest vision of who and what they believe themselves to be. They may succeed in doing so for brief periods of time, but if their self-concept remains unchanged, the gravitational pull of their self-limiting beliefs will pull them back to old, familiar, and less productive ways of functioning. It was from that encounter on that I began thinking more and more about the application

of my work in self-esteem to the world of business. The problem raised by these consultants, important though it is, reflects only one of the ways that issues of self-esteem show up in the workplace. There are many others.

A simple example is the fact that analyses of business failure tell us that a common cause is executives' fear of making decisions. What is fear of making decisions but lack of confidence in one's mind and judgment? In other words, a problem of self-esteem.

Yet another example pertains to competence at negotiating. A study discloses that whereas people with healthy self-esteem tend to be realistic in their demands, negotiators with poor self-esteem tend to ask for too much or too little (depending on other personality variables)—but in either case being less effective than they could be.

More broadly, interpersonal competence—so important in corporate settings today—tends to be adversely affected by low self-esteem. Persons suffering from deep insecurities and self-doubts tend to behave in inappropriate and counterproductive ways in their dealings with others, whether this means being overcontrolling and gratuitously combative or timid and oversolicitous. Instead of being task-focused, too often their focus is on self-aggrandizement or self-protection; either way, their relations with others are adversarial rather than benevolent. Far more than lack of technical knowledge or ability, this problem is a major cause of career breakdown.

There is virtually no aspect of business activity—from leading, to managing, to participating in teams, to dealing with customers, to engaging in research and development, to responding to new challenges and new ideas, to devising ways to stay ahead of competitors—that is not significantly affected by the level of one's self-esteem. For this reason, everyone involved in the process of production, from CEO to the first-time employee, can benefit from an understanding of the principles and strategies that follow.