

# Staff Development Services

building strong businesses one employee at a time.

## ***Self-Esteem -- The third in our series discussing the 13 tendencies in our reports.***

Self-esteem -- This term is one of the oldest concepts in psychology first appearing in 1890 and, as recently as 2003, was the topic of over 25,000 articles, chapters, and books. But, to some degree, it is also one of the least understood elements of the human character.

One of the first definitions of self-esteem was a ratio found by dividing one's successes in the important areas of life by their failures. The problem with this approach is that it does not make sense to believe that unsuccessful people do not have self-esteem. In the 1960's, the most frequently used definition came into usage, identifying it as a stable sense of personal worth or worthiness and that it could be measured. In the 1920's, Maslow discussed two types of esteem needs with one being the respect of others and the other being the need for self-respect.

Here at Staff Development Services, our measurement of self-esteem is more or less a combination of all those ideas. But, by itself, it has little context in the hiring process without considering the work one does. The level of self-esteem of a potential hire is not as much of an issue as is the type of job a person does and how self-esteem relates to that work.

The person with low self-esteem is very aware of their personal shortcomings or faults and, in a sense, is always saying "I am no good" or is always thinking, "I am only worthwhile when doing things that please others." Usually, but not always, this type of person feels a need to prove themselves to others which can make them an even better employee since they respond well to coaching or mentoring. However, if a person's self-esteem is too low, they can feel so badly about themselves that they have difficulty accepting any praise or help from others.

Those with lower self-esteem can feel so unsure of themselves that they even take blame for things they did not do. They can also misinterpret others' actions or words as criticism of them when that was not the intention. It can be difficult for a manager to keep an open line of communication with this type of individual and, if this employee also has low optimism, their distrust of others can make it even more difficult to manage them. Really low self-esteem can make the person feel that the best defense is a strong offense and, if they are a very assertive person, they may verbally attack anyone they feel is being critical of them as a way of protecting themselves.

Having good self-esteem is definitely beneficial to a person in all aspects of his or her life. But, as in all areas of a person's character, too much of a good thing can be a bad thing. Many people in today's world have such high self-esteem that they feel they have no personal shortcomings or that there is any reason for anyone to criticize them. (If you don't believe me, just watch some of the contestants on *American Idol* who do not make it to Hollywood.) Those with high self-esteem are quick to deflect the blame for anything that goes wrong away from themselves in order to maintain their high sense of self-worth. And, therefore, they do not learn from their mistakes or change in order to improve themselves.

However, there are actually some jobs in which a very high self-regard is more acceptable. Higher self-esteem can protect someone in a high-risk job from obsessing about his or her failures. Generally salespeople, attorneys, soldiers, policemen, and others in risky vocations need the protection of feeling that they are doing their best and that failures on their part are not always attributable to them.

Very high self-esteem could enable a lawyer who loses a case to take on another or a doctor who loses a patient to continue practicing by protecting them from feelings of unworthiness. This is not a justification for overly high self-esteem but simply an observation that it can protect some people from feeling guilty about their failures and allows them to continue doing their jobs.

This may protect them from feeling bad about themselves but it also increases the difficulty of managing them. Therefore, although everyone should always be open to improving, this is especially true for anyone working in a support type of role. They need to be open to negative feedback and to be capable of taking responsibility for their workplace weaknesses in order to become a more effective employee.



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Although the Simmons Personal Survey measures a person's level of self-esteem, it can sometimes be detected during the interview process. Does the job applicant take responsibility for performance shortcomings or are problems always someone or something else's fault? Or, is it easier for the candidate to talk about his failures than his successes? Before a candidate is hired, the level of coaching or supervision or how much risk is involved in a particular role needs to be considered and then compared to the person's level of self-esteem.

Self-esteem tends to be a very important aspect of each of our lives and can mean the difference between success or failure in a given role.

***"There's only one corner of the universe you can be certain of improving, and that's your own self."*** Aldous Huxley

Health and Happiness

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