

Why Leaders Need to Grow Authentic Self Esteem by Homaira Kabir

Over the years, we've had a love-hate relationship with self-esteem, writes Homaira Kabir. There was a time when we believed self-esteem to be the royal road to flourishing. We had Stuart Smalley on Saturday Night Live provide us with Daily Affirmations to make us feel special. We tried to reinforce it in our children by letting them know how exceptional they were when they failed.

However, later studies showed that such increases in self-esteem did little for our happiness or performance, but ample for our egos. Professor Roy Baumeister's work with self-esteem showed that we'd been raising a generation of narcissists who went on to wreck havoc in their lives and in their workplaces.

It now appears that we'd been building the wrong kind of self-esteem - the kind that is contingent on external factors such as social approval, success or attractiveness. And as Professor Kristen Neff has shown, this comes at a price. Feeling better about ourselves as a result of social comparison ensures that our self-esteem takes a nose dive every time someone more popular, successful or attractive crosses our path. And in the global and competitive world we live in, it also sets us up for negative competition, unethical behaviors and a dearth of empathy.

However, authentic self-esteem is different. It's a feeling of worth in our abilities and qualities. As such, its not conditional upon external evaluations - instead its an inner security that provides us with the courage to step out into the world and do the right thing. And research shows that people with this form of self-esteem go on to live happy and productive lives where they are able to cope effectively with challenges and rise to their full potential.

This is especially important for leaders of today. In an increasingly uncertain world, having a sense of self-worth that stems from being a human worthy of respect, leads to courageous decisions that may not always win other people's approval. It also leads to investing energy in people and their growth, rather than in feeling superior and infallible, and safeguarding a faltering sense of self-worth.

A Skill of Resilience

Leaders with authentic self-worth come from a place of congruence where their daily activities are tied to long-term meaningful goals. Momentary failures are taken in stride as they encourage their people to continue striving towards a higher purpose that brings them hope and meaning. Dr. Richard Davidson's work in neuroscience shows that the ability to recover from adversity through a positive outlook builds the neural structure of resilience and leads to wellbeing.

A Culture of Compassion

Authentic self-worth and self-compassion go hand in hand. People who compassionately accept their imperfections are tolerant of those of others. As such, they recognize a common humanity and feel connected with others in the experience of life, rather than critical of their failings. This instills an environment where employees are motivated to do what they do best rather than push themselves beyond their window of tolerance and become disengaged at work.

A Practice of Mindfulness

Leaders with high self-esteem are able to be present in the moment rather than preoccupied with perceived personal slights, the need to be right all the time and other unhealthy behaviors to protect an inflated ego. They are also able to appreciate the vast flow of life and take perspective every so often to return to a state of homeostasis when caught in the stress response. Research shows that these skills are what integrate the neural fibers of the brain towards greater wisdom.

There is one caveat though. For better or for worse, authentic self-esteem grows in our very early years through the interactions we have with our primary caregivers. When those interactions are not attuned with our inner worlds, we grow up with feelings of self-worth that are contingent upon whatever external influences we grow up with. And studies over the past 30 years that led to the attachment theory have shown that sadly, that makes up more than half of us.

The good news is that the three qualities of self-esteem also build self-esteem. When we practice the skills of resilience, compassion and mindfulness, we step out of what Professor Jennifer Crocker, who researches this construct, calls the “ego-system” of contingent self-esteem into the “eco-system” of authentic self-worth.

And there is more. In their book *Resonant Leadership*, professors Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee show how these three traits are also indispensable for compassionate leadership. They not only bring out the best in employees, but also allow leaders to sustain themselves through the relentless demands of work and life and renew themselves physically, mentally and emotionally.

Now that’s an upward spiral worth aiming for!