Self-Confidence Gone Awry:
Can it be harmful to feel competent?

"Believe and achieve" bellowed a candidate on the popular T.V. game show—*Deal or No Deal*. "We believe" screamed the zealous fans at the college basketball game. "Self-confidence is key to personal success" asserted the instructor of a leadership seminar. "Self-affirmations enable you to reach your dreams" declared the keynote speaker at a professional development conference.

I bet most readers have heard these or similar statements. In the academic world these motivational slogans reflect "self-efficacy"—the belief one can accomplish a certain task well. Research suggests clinical therapy can only be effective if the client has self-efficacy regarding the therapeutic process. In other words, treatment cannot work unless the client believes it will work. The title of Albert Bandura's renowned 600-page text published in 1997 says it all: *Self Efficacy: The exercise of control*.

Does all of this sound like good common sense? Do you believe? In this article, I play "devil's advocate" to this self-efficacy position. This is not done merely for sake of argument, but rather to seriously challenge this staple of motivational speakers and clinical psychologists. I propose too much self-efficacy or self-confidence can be self-defeating in some situations. When those situations involve risks or hazards, the result can be injury or death.

A Self-Evident Example

The popular reality T.V. show—*American Idol*—began a new season in January, and millions watched one "idol wannabe" after another show off vocal talent (or lack thereof). Contestants travel long distances and wait in long lines for their chance to "strut their stuff." And it's clear from pre-performance interviews these contestants believe they have the "stuff." Many

believe they could be the next "American Idol." Their self-confidence is at peak levels, perhaps "over the top".

Readers who have seen performances of early *American Idol* contestants realize where I'm going with this. Numerous candidates strut confidently on the stage, and then display no talent. Their performance is often humorous and the judges do not refrain from laughing. How could anyone embarrass themselves like that on national television? Why didn't someone tell them earlier they cannot sing? Perhaps some contestants had been misled by family and friends who gave them positive feedback to build their confidence and avoid hurting their feelings.

Perhaps some candidates do not feel competent, but are only looking for three minutes of national attention. However, many performers are visibly surprised and devastated by the judges' negative reactions. These individuals' extreme self-confidence put them in position to be publicly ridiculed and become emotionally distraught.

Relevance to Safety

The conceptual leap to industrial safety is neither difficult nor risky. Can over-confidence on the job put workers at-risk for injury? Does extensive experience at a hazardous task (like driving in heavy traffic) lead to an unhealthy degree of self-confidence or self-efficacy?

Many drivers, for example, gain so much confidence they add distracting behaviors to their driving routine, such as using a cell phone or fumbling for a CD. How about the common belief "It won't happen to me"? Does this come from excessive self-confidence? Can the perception we are overly competent at a task put us at risk?

How About a Reality Check?

Here's another common slogan, "Perception is reality." Perception may be reality for the individual, but there is a more accurate and valid reality out there. The self-confidence of the incompetent and foundering contestants on *American Idol* gave them a biased reality before their performance, but afterwards feedback gave them another reality. Likewise, risky and distracted workers re-evaluate their realities after a near hit or injury. Some call this a "wake-up call"; I call it a "reality check."

Self-Confidence and Outcome Feedback

The reality check after an embarrassing performance or a personal injury is too late. Yes, this outcome feedback will likely alter an individual's reality and inspire a need to change. But what kind of change is called for? And will the person accept the recommended change?

Sometimes people get so invested in a particular approach or paradigm, they resist change. Self-confidence can fuel such resistance. In other words, a person's perception of self-effectiveness can inhibit facing the reality of a need to change. Another saying comes to mind: "You can't teach an old dog new tricks".

After receiving devastating feedback from three judges, some contestants on *American Idol* verbalize intent to try again next year. Their strong self-confidence softens the blow of unfavorable and unfriendly feedback. That's good news and a benefit of self-confidence. However, the bad news is more costly and undermining. Excessive self-confidence can cause denial of the reality of failure and motivate a "stay-the-course" attitude rather than a realistic re-evaluation of talents, resources, and future possibilities.

Self-Confidence and Process Feedback

Whether considering contest contenders or line workers, I'm sure you can see the special value of process feedback. People benefit more from feedback that pinpoints behaviors to continue and behaviors to eliminate than from simple outcome feedback that evaluates the end result. Learning how well one accomplished a task is certainly useful, and can motivate or de-motivate subsequent performance. But knowing the end result (like where a golf ball lands) is not as helpful as knowing what behavior(s) can be improved (such as posture and follow through).

The earlier people get feedback about the desirable and undesirable qualities of their behavior, the greater the acceptance and application. This is common sense, right? When we are first learning a task we ask for process feedback, and if a correction is advised, we adjust accordingly. But after substantial experience at a task, process feedback often has less impact.

Self-efficacy plays a role here. Before we gain confidence and a sense of effectiveness at a task, we willingly accept and apply process feedback from a credible source. However, after experience and self-confidence, process feedback can feel insulting. Now the credibility of the source might be questioned. "Who are you to tell me how to improve? I've been doing it this way longer than you've been a safety coach."

In Conclusion

It certainly sounds important and worthwhile to believe in oneself, and support this conviction with self-affirmations. But what does this mean? It is foolish to believe self-confidence and self-affirmations alone can enable the achievement of any goal.

Self-confidence and supportive self-affirmations must be realistic. But what does this mean, given individual variation in perception and the impact of perception on reality? I hope

this discussion enables readers to answer these questions, and consider how early-on, process

feedback can help people see the reality others see and improve to be the best they can be.

Self-confidence should be task oriented. People possess varying degrees of self-

confidence for the variety of tasks they perform each day. Through behavior-based process

feedback, we learn to be more competent at a particular task. After believing we are competent

however, appropriate corrective feedback, whether about the outcome or the process, is apt to be

denied, distorted, or denigrated.

We need to understand how the self-confidence of ourselves and others can go awry and

inhibit continuous improvement. Such understanding can lead to the kind of reality testing that

enables realistic aspirations, and sets the stage for acceptable and applicable behavior-based

feedback. Does any of this activate thoughts of humility? This is a theme of my *ISHN* column

next month.

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help companies worldwide apply research-based knowledge toward improving leadership for safety and beyond. Coastal Training and Technologies Corporation has published Dr. Geller's new book: *People-Based Safety: The Source*, as well as five video/CD/DVD programs, accompanied by relevant workbooks and leader guides. For more information, please long on to www.people-based-safety.com or call SPS at 540-951-7233.