SELF-EFFICACY: A KEY CONCEPT FOR HUMAN ACCOMPLISHMENT AND SUCCESS

Dr Paul Perkins
High Performance Coach Development Advisor Australian Institute of Sport
Associate Professor University of Canberra Research Institute for Sport and Exercise

A brief overview

Self-efficacy is a key component of Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory that aims to understand the degree to which people believe they can achieve a specific goal or succeed in a particular situation.

These beliefs, however, are not personal judgments about one's skills, but rather about one's belief in what they can accomplish with those skills. In other words, self-efficacy is about what people think they can do.

Whilst this important mental construct is often used interchangeable with the concept of self-esteem (i.e., the level of respect a person has for themselves), it is probably more accurate to think of self-efficacy as a precursor to self-esteem, since it is mediated and influenced by personal attributes, thoughts and beliefs. For example, an athlete with high self-efficacy would be very confident in his/her ability to achieve a performance outcome in a sporting situation, whereas an athlete with low self-efficacy might underperform at the same event because of his/her negative view of themself (e.g., I'm not ready for this; I know I won't be successful).

Characteristics of low self-efficacy

Personal traits associated with low self-efficacy, include:

> **A fear of risks:** As can be seen in the above example, people with low self-efficacy believe they are unable to succeed in certain situations. As a result, they are generally unwilling to take risks, push boundaries and tend to stay in their "comfort zones".

> **A fear of uncertainty:** Research shows that individuals with low self-efficacy often experience self-doubt and avoid doing certain things because there are no guarantees that they'll be successful. Unfortunately, this can result in some people never reaching their full potential and/or discovering the things in which they could be highly successful with.

> **A fear of failure:** Similar to the above and another unfortunate characteristic of low self-efficacy is a frequent fear of failure. This results in hesitation, increased rates of self-doubt and individuals refusing to try new things and/or only attempting them half-heartedly. People with low self-efficacy are therefore less likely to experience success in certain situations and more likely to see themselves as a failures due to the perceived risks involved with completing a task.

> **Impression management:** This concept refers to the different ways individuals with low self-efficacy try to control how other people might perceive them. For example, an athlete with low self-efficacy may try to hide the fact that he/she has made a mistake rather than learn from the experience (receiving feedback from peers and coaches and engagement in critical self-reflection), which subsequently limits that person's ability to increase their sense of self-efficacy.

"If you think you can, you probably can. If you think you can't, well that self-limiting and self-fulfilling belief might well stop you doing something you're perfectly capable of doing"
- Albert Bandura

Paul Perkins is an associate Professor at the University of Canberra and a member of the Australian Institute of Sport High Performance Coach Development Team. He is a dedicated, passionate and experienced coach, educator and researcher with an extensive background in the Australian sport sector and a passion for helping others and seeing people succeed. Paul is skilled at, and highly experienced in developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating multi-layered sport-based development initiatives and has a thorough understanding of deductive, inductive and abductive reasoning and how these different processes can be used to draw conclusions, make predictions, and/or construct explanations. Whilst Paul's research has been multi-disciplinary and positioned within the broader societal context, he is currently exploring the benefits of more social and collaborative approached to coach learning and is interested in contributing to long-term positive outcomes through the use of Australian First Nations methodologies.

Characteristics of high self-efficacy

Qualities displayed by people with high self-efficacy, include:

> **Self-confidence:** Is one of the most obvious and prominent characteristics of high self-efficacy. As you know and have no doubt experienced, athletes with high levels of self-confidence have a strong belief in their ability to complete challenging tasks. However, the important thing to note here is that this type of behaviour also leads to more experiences and exposure of those situations and even higher levels of self-efficacy. One the other hand and something that is equally important to remember is that confidence in this context can also mean having a strong negative belief about something, as evident from the following passage: *"Confidence is a nondescript term that refers to strength of belief but does not necessarily specify what the certainty is about. I can be supremely confident that I will fail at an endeavour"* – Bandura. Self-efficacy then is about having a strong, positive belief in the *capacity* and *skills* to achieve a particular goal.

> **Accurate self-evaluation:** Individuals with high self-efficacy are able to examine themselves realistically, accurately evaluate their performances and pursue personally-identified areas of improvement.

> **Willingness to take risks:** Athletes with high self-efficacy are also willing to take calculated risks in pursuit of a goal. Researchers believe this is because people with high self-efficacy understand that attempting new things, reconsidering existing beliefs and refining their skills through trial and error are important processes and enables of success.

> **Sense of accomplishment:** People with high self-efficacy often feel a sense of accomplishment after completing a challenging task even if they make a mistake because they know that these situations provide important learning moments that are considered critical for growth and improvement.

Factors that can influence self-efficacy

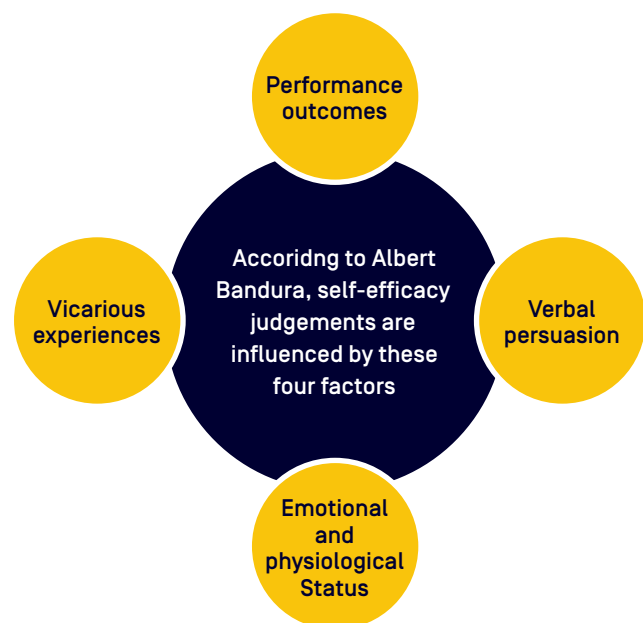Research shows that an athlete's self-efficacy is influenced by a number of factors, including:

> **Performance outcomes:** Previous experiences of a particular task (both positive and negative).

> **Vicarious experiences:** Observing other athletes successfully perform a specific task that is within their perceived skill range.

> **Verbal persuasion:** A coach or peer giving an example of a previous experience and/or explaining how that person has the necessary skills to be successful in a specific situation. However, it should be noted that evidence for persuasion is not very strong and needs to be logic based to have any effect.

> **Emotional & physiological status:** Describes how physical and mental states of a person will influence how they judge their self-efficacy and therefore effect their performance. Stress, for example, can dampen confidence, limit capabilities and result in poor performance, whereas positive thoughts and high levels of readiness can boost a person's confidence and belief in their skills.

Practical example

The following uses a hockey situation (don't laugh Colin, Anthony and Rod) and aims to demonstrate how self-efficacy could materialise in a "real-world" HP sporting situation.

A hockey player is involved in a cricital situation – a penalty shootout at the Olympic Games. Under these conditions, the player would be thinking about his/her ability to successfully execute the task within a pre-defined and well known set of parameters (e.g., score a goal within 8-seconds against an opposing goalkeeper without the ball going outside the field of play). Such thoughts would be based on self-appraisal of previous outcomes in similar situations and take place before the shootout begins. For instance, if a particular method was successful at a previous international tournament, that player might assume the positive result was due to his/her ability to correctly interpret the information (e.g., personally strengths and weakness, perceived deficiencies and preferred actions of opponent, space and time constraints, task readiness) and implement the most appropriate action. The player's self-efficacy would therefore be of a very high level and increase the probability that his/her actions will be successful. Importantly, athletes who are successful in these types of situations are able to create positive reinforcement cycles that are continuously modified by increased levels of confidence and self-belief.

Unfortunately, the above process can also yield negative outcomes and increase rates of self-doubt by lowering levels of self-efficacy and creating periods of negative cycles. These types of cycles tend to occur after a perceived poor performance and can manifest as negative and unproductive displays of behaviour in DPEs and other areas of a person's life - low-levels of motivation, withdrawal from family and friends, and task avoidance (i.e., persistent patterns of only partially completing or totally avoiding certain tasks).

Performance outcomes

Vicarious experiences

Accoridng to Albert Bandura, self-efficacy judgements are influenced by these four factors

Verbal persuasion

Emotional and physiological Status

Strategies aimed at improving self-efficacy

A list of suggestions aimed at assisting and improving the self-efficacy of athletes and fostering their development is provided below.

> Help athletes develop specific learning plans and, as they proceed, ask them to monitor and share their progress with the team (e.g., other athletes, support staff, coaches).

> Establish specific, short-term goals that will challenge athletes and advance their development, yet are still considered as doable and attainable.

> Capitalise on athletes interests and motivation by connecting key concepts to previous real world situations and events.

> Provide honest evaluation of current skill levels and give specific advice aimed at improving deficit.

> Focus on specifics and avoid giving general unconstructive feedback, especially if it is negative.

> Reinforce displays of appropriate behaviour by giving specific praise.

> Provide psychological skills training that focus on finding and maintaining optimal individual levels of performance intensity.

> Design and implement activities that aim to hit the "sweet spot" (i.e., slightly above the athletes' current ability level so they are forced out of their comfort zones but are not too stressful, difficult or overwhelming).

Comfort zone	Growth zone (sweet spot)	Panic zone
> Low challenges	> High challenges	> Very high challenges
> Low stress	> Moderate stress	> High stress
> Low cognitive loads	> Moderate to high cognitive loads	> Cognitive overload
> Limited thinking	> Thinking required	> Unable to think clearly
> Limited learning	> Effective learning	> Limited learning
> Little to no growth	> Moderate to high growth	> Little to no growth

Practices and strategies to avoid

Approaches that may have unintended consequences and diminish the self-efficacy of athletes include:

> Comparing individual performances against one another in front of athletes.

> Generalised instructional methods that are inflexible and do not allow for the input of athletes.

> Blaming, shaming and getting angry.

> Focusing on disappointments instead of future successes and not using setbacks as constructive ways to induce positive changes and avoid replicating the same errors in the future.

> Displays of negative thinking and behaviour.

Recourses and additional information

> Short video
> Anxiety & avoidance
> Research paper
> Confidence and self-efficacy guide

Questions and critical self-analysis

> To what extent does the above resonate with you?

> Is self-efficacy an area of concern for you and your program?

> How important is self-efficacy for team culture and performance?

> Are your personal traits, beliefs and actions positively or negatively influencing the self-efficacy of the people you work with?

> Is there anything you could do that might improve the self-efficacy of the athletes you work with?

> How could you monitor and evaluate your effectiveness to achieve the above task?

> How do you ensure your practices are hitting the sweet spot?

> How would the athletes and people you work with describe your current approaches?

> What changes and/or additional support are required to ensure the highest levels of self-efficacy are consistently displayed by your athletes?