

Success-Avoidance And Its Effect on Motivation

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Abraham Maslow suggests that after physiological needs, safety needs must be met to in order to achieve at higher levels. I contend that success can be viewed as a threat to safety. Just look at where success may lead and consider the trade-offs involved. I offer real life reactions from students with whom I've talked as examples.

Success may lead to:

- **An expectation that it continue:** many youngsters talked of the burden of getting good grades. "If I do well one semester, they'll expect me to continue to get A's. If I do poorly, they think it's great if I occasionally get a high grade, but they're not pushing me to do it all the time."
- **Less freedom to make mistakes:** The following was a typical response, "Hey, I'm considered a "screw-up". It's expected. I don't want anybody saying 'we don't expect that of you'. I get to do what I want."
- **School loyalty:** The fear of being seen as liking school was of major concern. "Only nerds like school. My gang ain't gonna accept me being loyal to the school. I have to be loyal to them."
- **Upward or outward mobility:** I once had a college student who came into my office in tears after Thanksgiving. She said, "I'm not studying for any of my exams." When questioned further, she responded "When I went home for Thanksgiving I told my family I

had changed; I was trying no longer to be bigoted and I didn't agree with the way they viewed the world. My brother accused me of thinking I was too good for them; my Mom started to cry and say they were losing me; my sister said I wasn't as much fun any more. I don't want to be distant from my family. I think I'm trying to flunk out of school so they'll accept me again."

Another example was the young man whose teachers kept urging him to take higher track classes. He told me they didn't understand that meant giving up his friends, dressing differently, and spending the whole day with kids who didn't accept him. It was far too big a risk.

- **Pressure to conform:** conform in new ways, that is. Adults have a tendency to criticize young people for being conformists, yet we constantly teach them to conform to middle class values and society's rules and expectations. We tell kids they don't have to dress like their friends and then we dress like our colleagues and go to work. Where does that leave them except with hard choices, indeed?

Incidentally, by insisting that children unquestioningly follow the will of adults, we are also teaching them to be followers rather than leaders. Respectful questioning is essential in leadership. For instance, the little kid who gets to question parents and adults is more likely to question her or his teenage peers when they try to lure her or him into dangerous behavior.

- **Increased competition:** For the non-competitive person, this is a major source of anxiety. For the person who succeeds, it may mean even more tradeoffs. One boy told me he purposely does

poorly in one class a semester to keep himself off the honor role. When asked why, he said, "If I get into the Honor Society and have to go to the ceremony, everyone will know my parents don't care enough to show up."

- **The promise of a "career" vs. a "job":** The term "career" for many implies a more serious commitment and a high standard. For some, it is so far beyond their own identities that the notion is scary.
- **More money and/or higher status:** sounds good, doesn't it? Well, unless you consider the distance that puts between a known lifestyle and an unknown lifestyle. Unfamiliar settings, whether considered negative or positive, can be frightening. I remember talking to a young man in prison who predicted he'd be back in jail months after his parole. I was baffled and reminded him that he professed to hate prison. He was baffled and said, "Hey, some people hate the suburbs, but they know it's where they belong."
- **Power, or perceived power:** Power is the ability to influence. For people who have considered themselves powerless and/or are part of a larger group whom society has stripped of power, to be powerful is a major change. This has ramifications for minority populations as well as the individual who feels like an "outsider". Power, and particularly the fear of abusing it, is not to be taken lightly.
- **Increased stress:** stress is not the result of hard work. Rather, it is the result of the gap created between working hard and not accomplishing what one would like to accomplish. For instance, if you work really hard and achieve what you'd hoped, then you are

tired but not stressed. If you work hard and fall short of that achievement, stress is induced. It is also true, that hard work might lead to achievement in that area, but widen the gap in other areas of ones life. So the student who studies and gets A's might experience the stress of leaving friends and family behind or unattended.

- **Becoming more visible:** in our society, we're taught not to "show off, have a big head, or be the center of attention". Succeeding puts people in that position. It is a mixed message that some are not willing to grapple with or attempt to sort out.
- **Being viewed as better than average:** Average is the norm. I like to stand outside the middle school on report card day. Often the kids hiding their grades are the ones who got the F's and ones who got the A's. It's the ones who got the C's who seem to be more forthcoming. Average is synonymous with normal. To be a huge success is as much outside the norm as to be a failure and being on the outside often results in loneliness.
- **The envy of others:** when ostracized, it is of little comfort to write it off as another's jealousy. Whatever the reason, it feels like rejection. Youngsters who got the lead in the school play, high praises for good grades, or seem extraordinarily popular reported that they were saddened and frightened by the jealousy of their classmates. Once again, they were separated from the group.
- **Less time for other things:** to succeed in school may result in time taken away from friends, enjoyed activities (whether seen by adults as positive or negative) and time for oneself.

- **The unknown:** we are talking about the fears surrounding the unknown. What and who we are may be lacking but it is, at least, familiar. We know how to do it - how to be who we think we are.
- **Liking it!:** What could be wrong with that? Liking the changes may mean giving up something or someone else. Perhaps, unwittingly, we will lose far more than we gain.
- **Change in image:** this, in my opinion, is the major reason for avoiding increased success. Our image is a result of our perceived identity. We hold it dear.

THESIS: Incorporated into identity is a level of success above which people do not imagine themselves. Rather than threaten that identity, individuals may choose to maintain the internal consistency, i.e. their basis for security, by limiting their success.

Given the complicated dynamics, our best source of information is the person who is experiencing success avoidance. S/he knows the reasons and to her or him, they make all the sense in the world. Ask the question, “What would happen if you were successful or stopped your destructive behavior?” Wait for the answer and try not to judge or comment. You may hear, “My friends will make fun of me,” or “everyone will expect me to get high grades from now on,” or “They’ll transfer me to higher level classes,” or “I will be unfamiliar to myself,” or any number of other responses.

The next question should be, “How can we help you deal with that?”

It's tempting to minimize the reasoning, but keep in mind that the student thinks it's important enough to minimize her or his success. Changing identity is a powerful and scary experience. If you do see some changes and, then, it's followed by regression – avoid pointing out that the student didn't change after all. Rather, say “Wow, we haven't seen that in a long time.”

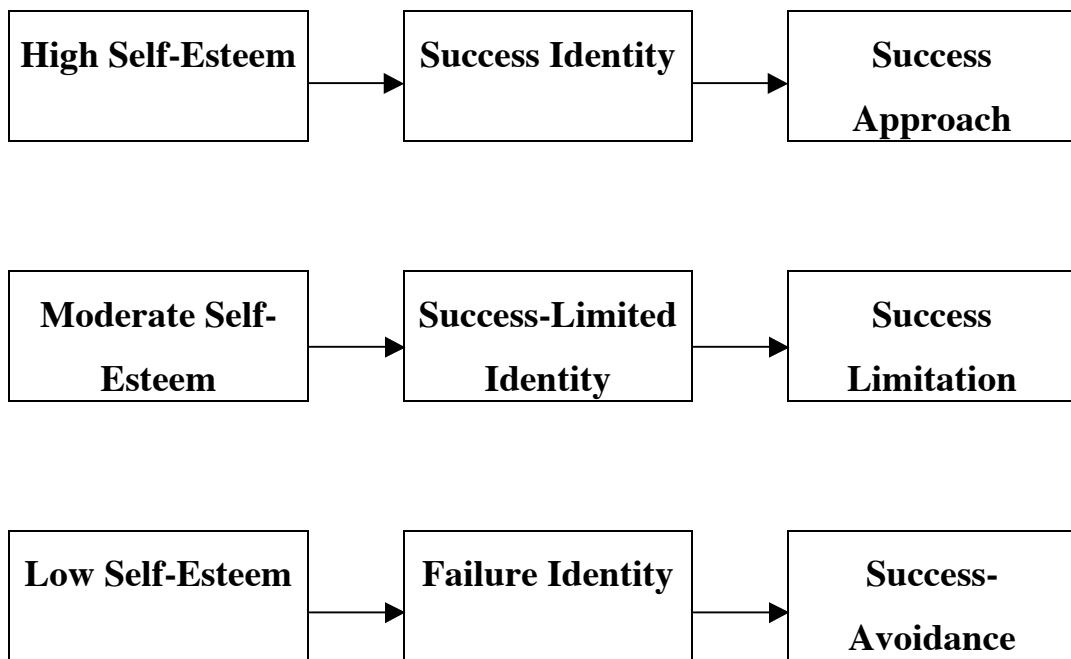
We can't encourage success by pointing out failures. We can, however, help the person move forward by building on the successes (ever so small) that have already been accomplished.

And, finally, consequences meted out by others rarely work. Values cannot be changed by punishment and reward. Behavior might be, but only if the child cares about the consequence. If s/he ceases to care, they're meaningless. It is why I think the policy of not allowing kids to play sports or be in extracurricular activities if they get poor grades is ineffective. What I used to hear from students who were expelled from those activities is “Well, now I'm a complete failure.”

A more effective response is to say, “You show up at practice religiously, memorize all the plays, work well on the team...how can we transfer that same motivation and those skills to Algebra?” Once again, build on the success already in place and point out to the student that s/he is already skilled and those characteristics are transferable to other areas of her or his life.

We're trying to encourage lifelong values and coping mechanisms – approaches that the student can integrate and use long after the adults in her or his life are no longer major influences. Luckily, students are experts regarding themselves. They are their own (and our) best resources.

The following model illustrates the theory graphically:



Toward Safety Needs Fulfillment

King's Success/Self-Consistency Model

Someone with high self-esteem has a success-identity and when offered the opportunity for more success is more likely to take it. That increases her/his success-identity, which increases her/his self-esteem. A person with a low self-esteem is more likely to have a failure identity. When s/he is offered the chance to succeed, s/he may well refuse or resist rather than risk the tradeoffs in changing a self-image. That is likely to increase her/his

failure identity, which, in turn, supports her/his low self-esteem. Most people fall within the category of moderate self-esteem (either on the low or high side). When s/he is offered the chance for more success, s/he ponders whether the opportunity will fall out of her or his identity boundary. If so, it is possible that s/he will refuse to take advantage of the opportunity. That, as in the above, reinforces a success-limited identity, which, again, reinforces moderate self-esteem.

It's all about safety. There is safety in familiarity (yes, even in negative circumstances). To risk change and have to face new ways of being and a myriad of unknowns is to risk safety.

What does this mean for the motivator? It means reevaluating the rewards offered to see if they are perceived as punishments. Are they turning students off? Are they seen as high risk?

The role of the motivator is

1. To create an environment conducive to encouraging motivation.
2. To provide reasons for working hard and to suggest relevance.
3. To help students understand themselves and reach acceptance.
4. To listen and understand youngsters' needs.
5. To increase students' feelings of belonging, worthiness, and self-confidence.

Incentives are individually dictated. Consequently, each person has a unique motivational response. This, of course, calls into question general motivational policies that are supposed to provide incentive for everyone.

To truly know what someone's incentive is, it is necessary to know the person. This is difficult in a group situation. However, the time taken at the outset to form relationships and gather information may save a great deal of time in the future.

It is commonly accepted that the two most important variables in motivation are pride and relevance. Feeling good and worthwhile while also absorbing the significance of the activity, form the basis of incentive.

The above is tied into priorities. The school system sets certain priorities, which may or may not be compatible with the student involved.

Required also are

- relatively high self-esteem.
- feelings of safety.
- empowerment.
- acceptance of self and by others (including recognition).
- trust.
- stimulation and challenge.
- chance of attainment.

They are also individually determined.

So, the idea is to find out what students want and help them understand how working for it will help them get it. At the same time, when there is resistance, it is essential we be willing to help the student identify what s/he is afraid of losing; what are the perceived tradeoffs? This discovery is

accomplished by understanding, observation, and communication. There is no substitute for time. Everyone has her or his own pace. Are we willing to let a person go at that pace, allowing time for reassessing safety needs, and providing support along the way? Are we willing to let a person slip back into old behaviors (if they are not dangerous) or will we do a values' assessment in order that s/he can regain the strength to face the unknown? Do we have a choice?

It means approaching the student with empathy, the willingness and skill to listen, energy, and enthusiasm that matches the pace of the person we are attempting to motivate. It requires flexibility and enough caring and respectful consideration to trust in the student's process. In addition to good communication skills, we have to believe in what we're doing and offering (but not in a judgmental way). Most importantly it requires perseverance. Are we willing to "hang in" for the long haul? Are we willing to see deviations from the path as meaningful clues to the student's fears and concerns? Are we willing to support a change in self-image without attempting to force it? You see, no matter how well - and for how long - we know the student with whom we're working, we can never know her or him better than s/he knows her or himself.

Is this too long and laborious a process? Ask again: is there a choice?