



Is Belief Crucial To Success?

Do I have to believe in what I am doing in order to be successful at it?

The power of belief is the stuff of legend. In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy must defeat the Wicked Witch of the West to build enough belief so the magic ruby slippers will send her home. But in real life, belief involves both more and less than Dorothy endured. Depending on what you're doing, belief may be optional. But even then, belief makes life much easier. And if you're leading an organization, belief is one of your most powerful tools.

When you believe, it comes out in your body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions. Even great liars can't fake it for very long; they always give it away somehow. Poker players call this a "tell." It's how you know someone's bluffing. They may shift in their seat, play with their ring, or otherwise reveal a lack of sincerity.

You've seen it in personal life. When my significant other invites me to the ballet, I say, "yes" in the interest of domestic harmony. But the insincerity of that "yes" is loud and clear. When we go out to an event we'll both enjoy, though, we both know it, and it strengthens the relationship.

It's the same in business. When people don't believe, their relationships fade a bit. A mid-size company had employees who had only contempt for the CEO and his business practices. Watching them give job interviews was a hoot. Candidates asked, "How do you like it here?" They replied, forced through a fake smile, "It's a great place to work. I love it so much." They gave conflicting signals, and the interviewees knew something wasn't right.

Usually, other people notice the lack of belief but don't consciously know how to interpret it. They may think you don't trust them, or you're distracted, or the deal at hand is a fraud, or that you're just distant. But however you slice it, they won't feel a strong connection, because you'll be holding back.

If success demands good relationships with customers, vendors, and employees, a lack of belief can be a problem.

Belief brings commitment and persistence

Is there anything you love so much you'd do it every day and enjoy it every time? I'll bet it's something you believe in. When we believe in a vision, we have the energy to keep pursuing it. We do what it takes to help bring the vision to life.

When you doubt the organization or its goals, it's an ongoing struggle to stay motivated.

If your company is treading water, creativity and persistence may be optional, but for growing companies and companies in competitive environments, innovation and problem solving are keys to success. When you believe in a possibility of achieving something, you'll bring your full creativity to bear and will pursue it relentlessly. When things go wrong, you'll be out in front

with new ideas, schemes to hatch, plans to make, and alternatives to pursue.

A nonprofits board met for a day to brainstorm strategy. Their organization wasn't doing as well as they wanted, and they needed some serious survival plans. People sat around coming up with a vague thought here and there, but the conversation went nowhere. Finally, a member spoke up: "I just don't believe in the goals we've chosen." After lively discussion, the group chose new goals that everyone believed in. And suddenly, there weren't enough flip charts to hold all the new ideas.

When you doubt the organization or its goals, it's an ongoing struggle to stay motivated. You think, "This must get done, even though I don't believe it's the right thing to do, or a worthwhile thing to do." Naturally, you'll disengage and just go through the motions—what psychologists call "cognitive dissonance." Much of your energy goes to fighting the tension between "must do" and "don't believe" instead of going directly to finish the task.

When you're completely aligned, you'll be at your best, body and soul. If it ends up that you don't reach the goal, it won't be for lack of trying!

Belief impacts morale—especially for leaders

The biggest issue with belief is morale. Most of us just aren't very happy when doing something we don't believe in. We might resign ourselves to it, but futile resignation isn't exactly a fun place to live day by day. Furthermore, it's probably not going to bring out your best.

Psychologist Marty Seligman relates in his book *Authentic Happiness* (Simon & Schuster 2002) that we're happiest when using our personal strengths to overcome challenges, all while doing something we believe makes a difference. Did you catch that last part? People are happiest in a job they find worthwhile. In fact, people often work harder for fewer rewards for causes linked to deep belief.

If you're in a leadership position, it isn't just your morale that will tank; everyone who works for you will feel it, too. A leader whose heart isn't in it is deadly to a group. Even the group members who want to commit will feel like they're committing to a phoney cause.

People watch leaders to know how to behave. They don't listen to their leaders; they watch. If you're listless, if you're holding back, if you're putting in 50 percent effort, they'll know, even if you don't. Your behaviour will signal everyone around you to disengage.

In coaching, this comes up over and over. An executive wonders why their team isn't performing. I'll ask, "What would a high-performing team look like?" They'll tell me, showing all the enthusiasm of a slug on a salt lick. When I point out the discrepancy, we suddenly recognize that the team is performing—exactly to the belief level of the executive. Change the executive and the team changes as well.

After all, if you don't believe, how will you be able to recruit and lead a team who does?

Sometimes, you don't need belief to succeed

So sometimes, believing is critical to success. But plenty of jobs don't depend on forming deep relationships, working with commitment and creativity, or leading people. If you're in a transaction-oriented environment, belief is probably optional. And let's face it; front-line retail jobs rarely require belief. Those jobs have massive turnover, and no one expects spiritual engagement from a fast-food checkout person.

But I've been talking only about belief, when you also asked about success.

Many people think success means making a lot of money, getting a lot of status, and having a lot of power. It turns out they're wrong. Studies on success show that above subsistence level, more external "stuff" doesn't mean more happiness. People who feel unsuccessful keep finding new ways to feel that way on different playing fields. "I don't have the money for a new TV" becomes "I'm not getting a high-enough return on my investments."

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The people who really feel successful get their success as much from the process as the end results. Yes, they may want money, power, and status. But they get it in ways they enjoy, so they feel successful all along the way. Really thoughtful people use a "balanced scorecard" approach, and consider friendships, community, family, and, yes, doing something they believe in as essential ingredients in a good life.

Warren Buffett, history's most successful investor, says he invests because he loves it. Even as a kid, he counted vending machine bottle caps to understand what was selling. His love led to persistence, skill, and finally, billions. He lives a modest lifestyle with his wife in the house they bought forty years ago. His joy comes from living, not having. He could have power, status, and huge skyscrapers bearing his name. But he wouldn't enjoy that. For him, success is eating at McDonald's and drinking Cherry Coke—well within the means of us non-billionaires. And, of course, investing, which he'd be doing it even if it didn't pay.

So can you make money without believing in what you're doing? Sure. In relationships, creativity, and culture building, belief helps. But either way, only you can answer the real question: Do you need belief to feel successful? And if the answer is "yes," what are you waiting for?

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