SELF-EFFICACY: DO YOU BELIEVE YOU CAN BE SUCCESSFUL?

By KARIN KIRK

So there you are at the top of a steep bump run. The light is flat, your legs are tired, and the snow is less than ideal. Oh, and you're right under the lift so lots of people are watching you. What's that voice in your head telling you? Most likely, that voice is a reflection of your *self-efficacy*—your belief in your ability to be successful. When you enter a demanding situation with a feeling that you'll be able to achieve the desired outcome, you most likely will. And at those unfortunate moments when you become doubtful that you'll pull it off, you often don't.

So what's with that? Can simply believing that we'll be successful make it so? Are there certain things we can do or say that will help raise our own performances and that of our students? In short, yes. By boosting your understanding of self-efficacy you can build upon this important aspect of your students' skiing and riding. Moreover, you can gain insights about how to improve your own performances too.

BOUND BY BELIEFS

Self-efficacy is commonly defined as the belief in one's capabilities to achieve a goal or an outcome. People with a strong sense of efficacy are more likely to challenge themselves with difficult tasks and be intrinsically motivated. These people will put forth a high degree of effort in order to meet their commitments and goals, and attribute failure to things that are within their control, rather than blame external factors. Self-efficacious people also recover quickly from setbacks and, ultimately, are likely to achieve their personal goals. As you read that description, I bet you can imagine people who fit this pattern. Perhaps this describes you (and if so, congratulations!). But what about the other end of the spectrum?

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Self-efficacy is commonly defined as the belief in one's capabilities to achieve a goal or an outcome.

Those with low self-efficacy believe they cannot be successful. They are less likely to make a concerted, extended effort and may consider challenging tasks as threats that are to be avoided. Thus, students with poor self-efficacy may find themselves in the midst of a self-fulfilling feedback cycle, with low aspirations leading to disappointing performances. I'm sure you've heard discouraged students exclaim, "I knew I couldn't do it." And of course, they were right.

Many aspects of self-efficacy are intuitive. If you have been teaching awhile, you are already familiar with both ends of this spectrum and you've observed that emotions play an important role in people's performances. Raising your awareness of the nuances

of self-efficacy will help you recognize how this affects student performances and will allow you to use specific strategies to boost self-efficacy.

BUILDING SELF-EFFICACY

In part, the degree of self-efficacy students bring to your lesson is a reflection of their overall outlook from other aspects of their life. But their on-snow experiences will directly affect their self-efficacy as a skier or rider. Teaching strategies can have a direct impact on students' self-efficacy (Fencl and Scheel, 2005).

There are four sources of self-efficacy. These strategies are drawn from research in educational psychology, are backed up by experimental data, and have clear applications for snow-

sports (Bandura, 1994, Margolis and McCabe, 2006).

Mastery Experiences

Successful experiences boost self-efficacy, while failures erode it. This is the most robust source of self-efficacy and is a key tactic to keep in mind both while coaching students and while pushing your own skills. The trick is to build a series of successful experiences, such that each new step is supported by previous successes (Bandura, 1994).

This approach is summed up nicely by Ashley Coe, an instructor at Montana's Bridger Bowl. As we hiked our way over to a 50-degree couloir, I asked her what gave her the confidence to drop into intimidating runs. "I grew up skiing in New Hampshire and we didn't have terrain like this," she said. "But after living here and spending a few years just getting used to it and doing it more often, it's gotten easier."

Mastery experiences most commonly stem from successes at a similar task, but many different types of mastery can be relevant to snowsports. The idea of "teaching for transfer" can help students realize that skills they've

mastered in other areas of their lives can be transferred to skiing and riding, and you can leverage these successes as you coach a student.

From the coaching point of view, it's important to recognize that mastery experiences have a powerful effect. Whether it's for your own goals or those of your students, make it a priority to set up a series of good experiences such that each step can build on the previous one. Remind students how their prior experiences tie in to their present challenge and do what you can to ensure success rather than push too far and encounter a failed experience.

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Vicarious Experiences

While one's own experiences are the most powerful element in building self-efficacy, observing a peer succeed at a task can strengthen beliefs in one's own abilities. You've no doubt experienced this in a clinic when, say, at first you're not sure you can ride switch through the bumps. After watching your friends do it, however, your mental state shifts and you realize it's not so impossible after all.

A key aspect of this is that it's the success of a peer that builds self-efficacy. When an examiner executes perfect arcs across frozen corduroy, a common response is "well of course they can do it," and it almost lowers the efficacy of the mere mortals in the group. You may have this same effect on your students when you demonstrate a silky smooth open parallel to a group of persistent wedge-turners.

So capitalize on the power of peers. Set up situations for your students in which they can build off each others' successes or follow each other through demanding terrain. For your own skiing and riding—and that of your colleagues—find a group of partners that mutually push each other toward goals and increased levels of skill.

Social Persuasion

Instructors can boost self-efficacy with credible communication and specific feedback to guide students through the task or motivate them to make their best effort. Note that your feedback should include both verbal and non-verbal cues, so make sure that your body language and the words you choose are both on the same page.

An essential point to remember is that your encouragement will have the most benefit when it is credible and specific. For example, since we know that mastery experiences are the most powerful way to build self-efficacy, an effective form of social persuasion is to remind students that they have been successful at similar tasks, and to provide specific cues for the movements they'll need for that particular situation.

It's also important to note that social persuasion can work in either direction. In fact, it's easier to discourage someone with negative comments than it is to boost their self-efficacy with positive feedback (Pajares, 2002). So be especially careful to not let a wayward comment throw your students off track.

Emotional State

When you reflect on your best runs, you may find they are accompanied by a sense of high energy and a positive mood. That's because a positive emotional state can boost one's self-efficacy, while anxiety can undermine it (Bandura, 1994). A certain level of emotional stimulation creates an energizing feeling that contributes to strong performances.

Instructors can help by trying to avoid stressful situations and by lowering anxiety related to poor conditions. You can do this by changing your students' focus away from the conditions themselves and instead coach

them on specific tactics they'll need to use to be successful. You can also point out that adapting to new and challenging conditions will raise their game overall and make them stronger athletes.

Lastly, you can use some cheerleading, real-time praise, and positive energy to create an elevated emotional state within your class to raise their self-efficacy and bring out strong performances.

STRATEGIES FOR STRUGGLING STUDENTS

While athletic, confident, and coachable students make our jobs easy, you'll want to be more attentive to the self-efficacy of students for whom snowsports do not come naturally. When assessing student performance, keep in mind that attitude and emotional state may be obstacles to learning. In these cases, here are some techniques that can help: (from Margolis and McCabe, 2006)

Strategize with struggling students to let them know that you are willing to work with them on an individual basis and can tailor the skiing and riding tasks to their needs. This is true even within a group lesson. For example, take a chairlift ride with a student who is falling behind or is having a bad day. During the lift ride you can check in, see what may be behind the difficulties, and help come up with a plan for success that is specifically tailored to that student.

The extra time and attention from you, plus added information about how the student can be successful can go a long way toward improving the outcome.
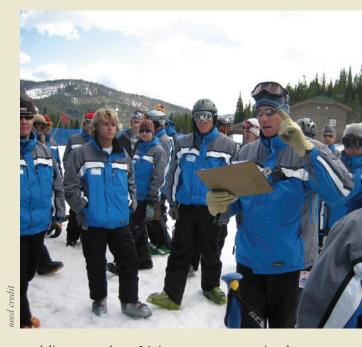
Use moderately difficult tasks. If the task is too easy it will be boring or embarrassing and may communicate the feeling that you doubt their abilities. A too-difficult task will be likely to result in failure which re-enforces low self-efficacy. The target for difficulty is slightly above the students' current ability level.

As students work toward their goal, have them verbalize the next step in their plan. As they proceed through the task, ask them to note their progress and verbalize the next steps. Be sure to allow the students do the talking, so they can clarify exactly what they intend to do next (Schunk and Pajares, 2002).

BUILDING HIGH SELF-EFFICACY IN INSTRUCTORS

Snowsports instructors with a high sense of efficacy about their teaching capabilities may have an easier time motivating their students and helping them accomplish their goals. These instructors are generally able to rebound from setbacks and are more willing to experiment with new ideas or techniques. Instructors with low self-efficacy may rely more on a controlling teaching style and be more critical of students (Woolfolk-Hoy, 2003–04, Bandura, 1994). So how can snowsports school managers and trainers help instructors build their self-efficacy and, thus, become more effective in their jobs? Here are seven useful tips (drawn from Margolis and McCabe, 2006).

1. **Create mastery experiences for instructors**
   Instructor training clinics should be designed to produce positive outcomes, not, for example, to embarrass instructors into realizing they can't do short-swing turns. Similarly, the most appropriate lesson assignments will keep instructors within their comfort zone yet allow them to take small steps toward raising their game.

2. **Leverage peer models for maximum benefit**
   Sometimes trainers or supervisors don't have as much influence as they might like. In part, this is because people in these positions are not necessarily peers. But a peer can improve self-efficacy in different ways than a trainer or supervisor can, and you can put peer-

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modeling to good use. It's important to recognize the power of peer learning and to allow instructors to learn by watching each other's successes. You can set up training partnerships and encourage instructors to work together for mutual benefit. Peers may be drawn from groups defined by gender, age, certification level, social circles, or professional focus (such as children's instruction or freestyle).

3. **Teach specific strategies**
   Give instructors a concrete plan of attack for various aspects of their jobs, rather than simply turn them loose. For common situations an instructor is likely to encounter, lay out each step of what the instructor

If a student is not successful at a given task, point out that this does not mean that he or she is hopeless or suffers from a lack of ability. Keep failures in context and adjust the challenge so that the next endeavor is a successful one.

Compare student performance to the goals set for that student, rather than to the rest of the class.

Keep in mind that mastery experiences are the most powerful way to raise self-efficacy. Structure the lesson to deliberately bring out a series of successes, and be sure to point those out along the way. For example, partway through the warm-up run, make a point of describing the best aspects of your student's riding. This will immediately provide a self-efficacy boost and will reassure the student about what he or she is doing right. From there, raise the level of difficulty gradually and break complicated tasks into manageable components so that the student is likely to be successful each time.

TEACHING PRACTICES TO AVOID

In his chapter on self-efficacy in 1994's *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior*, Albert Bandura notes that certain well-worn teaching practices may have the unintended effect of diminishing the self-efficacy of students who aren't at the top of the class. These include:

Generalized, "lock-step" instruction, which is inflexible and is not tailored to individual student performances. Formulaic instruction makes it harder for students to ask questions, get individualized feedback, or learn at a pace that is different from that set by the instructor. The result may be that students who become discouraged, confused, or bored are likely to remain so.

Excessively goal-driven instruction, which can put pressure on students and emphasize extrinsic outcomes rather than intrinsic skill development. Pushing students toward a goal like a particular run, trick, or park feature creates a situation in which the students' needs are secondary to the achievement of a certain goal. This is especially true if the instructor selects the goal, rather than the students.

Statements or teaching practices that compare students' performance against each other can ultimately backfire and lower the motivation within the group. A competitive environment

should do, so that they can take comfort in having a plan to follow. This is especially important for new instructors who may be uncertain about how to handle various situations or for instructors who are taking on unfamiliar assignments.

4. **Allow instructors to make their own choices**
    The ability to determine one's own path leads to high motivation, while dictating every step of the job can result in disenfranchised employees. Set up some areas of your instructor development program that allow instructors to make their own decisions and to be responsible for those outcomes. Encourage instructors to focus their development along paths that are the most desirable and relevant to them, and strategize with them to outline steps to help them achieve their professional goals. Pathways that allow instructors to develop specific skills include freestyle, big-mountain skiing and riding, children's development, race programs, women's programs, adaptive programs and so on.

5. **Give frequent, focused feedback**
    Getting feedback and encouragement is essential for every instructor. Use praise when earned; make it credible and avoid hyperbole. Make sure the feedback is accurate and meaningful and is more specific than a simple "nice job" type of comment. The more feedback you provide, the better your instructors will understand what you expect of them and what type of behavior they'll need to be successful. If corrective feedback is needed, do so earlier rather than later, so that the instructor has not had opportunity to veer far off course and has only small changes to make. When giving feedback on instructor performance, compare to past performances by that instructor; resist the temptation to make comparisons between instructors.

6. **Encourage accurate attributions**
    Listening to how instructors attribute their successes and failures can provide insight to their motivation and efficacy. Attributions are particularly easy to spot after certification exams. Was a failure due to poor conditions, a biased examiner, or a bad advice from trainers? Or was it due to not spending enough time training, needing more practice, or making inopportune decisions in preparing for the exam? Help instructors understand that they don't fail because they lack ability or potential; they fail because their skills need further development.

7. **Help instructors rebound from setbacks**
    A failed exam. A student injured in class. A yard sale under the lift. Obstacles and setbacks are part of life, and snowsports instruction has its share of pitfalls. In addition to attributing the causes accurately, instructors with high self-efficacy are more likely to get themselves back on track and working toward meeting their overall goals. But instructors with low self-efficacy may need help getting oriented after a failure. For these instructors, take time to help them chart a new course back to success. Set specific tasks and short-term goals rather than a large, looming goal. Set up teaching assignments and skiing goals to rebuild some all-important mastery experiences. — Karin Kirk

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may raise the self-efficacy of the top students, but is likely to lower the self-efficacy of the rest of the class.

APPLICATIONS FOR SELF DEVELOPMENT

So, back to that steep bump run that you were gazing down. Knowing a few things about self-efficacy can help you formulate the following plan for your own performance: draw on successful experiences you've had on similar runs; pick a favorite peer to watch or follow; give yourself a pep talk and pick up on the high-energy, athletic vibe that helps you perform at your best. At the bottom of the run, reflect on how it went and which factors were in your control and which were not. And what's next? After the success of that run, plot your course for new challenges that will propel you toward your overall goals. By being attentive to self-efficacy in yourself and in your students, you are more likely to achieve those goals and have fun doing so. **32°**

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