The effectiveness of Efficacy programs
A successful approach to advancing underrepresented talent.
It’s one of the most vexing realities in workplaces around the world. Despite significantly increased diversity at the entry- and mid-levels, irrespective of industry, talent from traditionally underrepresented groups is not making much progress into senior leadership. Recent statistics bear this out:

- In 2016, among 3,400 publicly-traded firms worldwide followed by the investment bank Credit Suisse, only 130 had women CEOs, or about 4%.
- As of March, 2017, only seven CEOs, or 7%, of the UK-based FTSE 100 firms are women.
- As of March 2017, among the Fortune 500 firms in the United States, only 21 CEOs are women (4%), nine are Hispanic (2%), and five are African American (1%).
- In the boardroom of the 100 largest publicly-traded firms in the United States, among the directors appointed in the proxy season ending May 1, 2016, 29% were women, 7% were African American, and 5% were Hispanic.

This lack of diversity is not only disconcerting, it often is counterproductive. There’s a growing body of research indicating that firms that have a diverse group of senior leaders outperform more homogenous companies.

**Key Points**

- Alumni of Efficacy programs saw their career trajectories accelerate.
- An Efficacy mindset reduces fear and powerfully supports an employee’s ability to adapt.
- While Efficacy programs focus on taking personal responsibility for career outcomes, organizational inclusion is a shared responsibility among leaders, managers, and all employees.
Efficacy: The power to produce a desired effect.

The definition of Efficacy is simple: the power to produce a desired effect or outcome.

The concept of Efficacy can be further elaborated to include using all internal and external resources to problem-solve the individual, societal, and workplace challenges one faces and so be able to achieve the highest return on investment of one’s time and effort.

Efficacy is the result of a confluence of sciences — sociology, psychology, and neuro-science — coming together to provide an explanation for the racial and gender dynamics that play out in today’s American workplace when it comes to the inclusion and advancement of talent from underrepresented groups.

Efficacy research also provides answers for how this talent can make gains even when it finds itself in unwelcoming settings where support is sparse and the feelings of isolation intense.

While a combination of accountabilities would be ideal, with organizations and institutions doing their part in creating inclusive, fair, and safe environments, Efficacy is premised on individuals taking intentional and personal responsibility for their career outcomes.

The genesis of the Efficacy concept goes back to a young student who found himself among the first African-American beneficiaries of Affirmative Action in the mid-1960’s. Jeffrey P. Howard, Ph.D. and his peers at Harvard University had the grades and test scores to be admitted, and social and educational policy had forced colleges to allow them access. However, Dr. Howard noticed to his dismay that with each successive year, there remained fewer blacks and many of those were trailing their white counterparts with respect to GPA, student leadership, and campus involvement.

This painful observation fueled his curiosity to find out why obviously capable students would stop doing their best. Howard anchored his Ph.D. thesis research in this question, looking at the psychological variables that drive performance and how negative expectations from significant others can become internalized, impacting confidence and sometimes leading to the gradual withdrawal of effort, undermining the successful matriculation and career progression for so many high-potential African Americans.

Personal and professional interests gripped him to relentlessly seek to understand and document what he was witnessing. He captured it in his “Expectancy --> Performance Model” which sought to explain the incremental and devastating impacts of the Pygmalion Effect, the phenomenon whereby higher or lower expectations lead to a corresponding increase or decrease, in performance. In communities of color, the negative expectations of teachers, managers, mentors, and other important figures get internalized in ways that may negatively impact belief in individuals’ innate ability, leading to the withdrawal of effort and perhaps feelings of helplessness. This, Dr. Howard said, can affect whole groups who may then internalize the messages over generations.

Dr. Howard’s groundbreaking Efficacy approach examines how psychological forces some of them organizational, (some of them interpersonal, and others personal) can cause fully able people to doubt themselves: “Do I have what it takes to operate successfully here?” Through provocative discussions, revealing game simulations, and meaningful small group assignments, Efficacy training urges each participant to honestly confront and answer this question. Individuals most often emerge from this intensive classroom process armed with renewed confidence, clear professional goals, and actionable workplace strategies.
As research and initial training turned into consultancy, the interests of other cohorts were added including women, Latinos, Asians, and LGBTQ audiences. Many of Dr. Howard’s original revelations showed up for these groups as well, along with findings demonstrating that members in each of these groups also faced unique challenges to career advancement that were tied to their particular identity.

While the design has been adapted over 30 years to address the constantly evolving issues facing diverse groups, a 2016 Korn Ferry study has confirmed that the careers of a sample of more than 200 Efficacy corporate alumni show definitive and differentiated acceleration and success compared to members of their cohorts who did not experience the training. These excellent program results confirm Dr. Howard’s initial Ph.D. thesis finding: Most people are capable of brilliance when they are supported by high expectations, given challenging assignments, and provided with feedback that keeps confidence intact.

What follows are the key Efficacy principles that have yielded such impact on the personal and professional lives of thousands of training participants.
Efficacy’s five principles.

Efficacy alumni not only have an enduring connection to the training experience that provided deep emotional insights, they attribute much of their career momentum to having incorporated these five foundational principles into their personal philosophies around personal growth and achieving life goals.

1. It’s not the stimulus, it’s the response.
2. A capacity-building mindset mobilizes effort.
3. Development is a learnable, teachable process.
4. Risk-taking is fundamental to development.
5. Confidence is the key.

These institutional impacts need to be dismantled. However, as Dr. Howard discovered, the power of Efficacy is in revealing to these affected populations that, in spite of those real-world barriers, there are ways of thinking and behaving that will keep confidence intact, allowing individuals to develop mastery and show up as the indisputable “best people” for the job—capable of high-level performance, building successful communities and institutions, leading strong families, and influencing teams and societies.

The richest revelation of Efficacy is that these real-world barriers can be managed. It’s not the stimulus that counts; it’s the response!

While this Efficacy principle acknowledges real-world challenges, it recommends a thoughtful appraisal of available options. Practically, this means helping talented people understand that when faced with the stimuli of inevitable prejudices or difficult circumstances they have a choice. Rather than reacting and letting others control their ability to achieve desired goals, it is more productive and satisfying to respond with a problem-solving orientation. One can consciously and calmly choosing actions that will increase their longer-term influence over the situation and toward their desired short- medium- and long-term goals.

As the legendary neurologist Viktor Frankl said: “Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”
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Efficacy Principle #2: A capacity-building mindset mobilizes effort.

Before explaining a capacity-building mindset, we must start with defining its antithesis: the fixed-capacity mindset. This widespread belief posits that some groups were born with more intellectual capacity than others. This social construct was particularly useful in a previous era when economies needed hands, not brains, to do their agricultural and industrial work. Yet, this logic, even now, justifies the creation of categories of human potential — high, medium, or low.

This pernicious social manipulation of the lives and livelihoods of people begins in childhood education. Kids are sorted into different reading and math groups in school. They are categorized by how much innate ability each is assumed to have, as judged by important people and assessments—parents, educators, standardized tests. Inferences are made about how well each is likely to perform and how much potential for development each child has. And it doesn’t take long to slot people into categories. This tracking continues throughout middle school and high school. Under this logic, the less learning capacity one is perceived to have, the less opportunity for development he or she deserves. Decisions from then on are made about how to “track” them—who goes to college, who goes to trade school, who goes to prison. And in America, is there any wonder that this sorting process mirrors the demographic stereotypes and outcomes of the nation?

A similar sorting happens inside corporations. Managers who believe that some have it and some don’t provide developmental assignments and opportunities to those deemed worthy and limit opportunities for others. The group labeled as high potentials “merit” the plum assignments that support learning and ongoing development.

Everyone else is relegated to some lesser category of potential. Failure or difficulty is attributed to a lack of innate ability, and since ability is assumed to be a fixed, permanent characteristic, if someone can’t do it now, he or she won’t be able to learn to do it in the future. Why waste time and resources?

The capacity-building mindset in contrast (which we refer to as an Efficacy mindset), is rooted in the belief that most people were born with enough mental ability to achieve at high levels. This belief is the fuel for mustering the courage to try again in the face of failure, the spark that generates learning—“How can I get better at this?” or “What should I do differently next time?” It is the conviction that causes people to make the proper attributions around success and failure and to put in effective effort to achieve the result that may have been elusive the first time around. An Efficacy mindset is the only mindset that can combat self-doubt in an individual and in a group.

People are more likely to apply effective effort if they develop strong confidence in their learning capacities and are encouraged by people important to them. The way we think about our learning capacities has a strong influence on:

- What we think we can learn to do
- How we respond to difficulty or failure when we try something new
- The decisions we make about what we will try to do in the future

The Efficacy mindset:

- Reduces fear. People with an Efficacy mindset don’t allow fear to paralyze their effort. They are confident they can learn complex new skills and capabilities. In fact, they will pursue whatever learning they need in order to contribute to organizational objectives.

- Powerfully supports one’s ability to adapt. People who believe they can learn, even in entirely different disciplines or functions, are confident they can adapt and find ways to contribute, no matter what new challenges or organizational changes arise.

- Assures the organization’s capacity to thrive in a competitive marketplace. Organizations that believe in all their people’s learning capacities are far more agile and aggressive. Because their people can learn and adapt, these organizations don’t just react to what their competitors do; they become innovators. They set the conditions in which others must respond.

The possibilities the Efficacy mindset opens up stands in quite a contrast to the limiting effects of a fixed-capacity mindset.
The common belief described in the previous principle, that the capacity to develop is an endowment of birth for only a select few, leads most managers to provide grooming experiences for a select few individuals whom they see as most likely to succeed—they’re “go-to” players. And these go-to players are exceptionally valuable. They welcome challenging assignments, they are committed to delivering quality outcomes, and they do it all with a positive attitude. When managers have a Fixed-capacity mindset, their often subconscious assumption is that there is a limited number of these exceptional talents and it doesn’t even occur to them that there are underutilized capabilities in the rest of their people.

So how can they tap into this underutilized source of exponential capabilities? This is where this third Efficacy principle—that development is a learnable, teachable process—comes into play. Efficacy training provides a framework founded on the belief that all people are able to and can learn. This belief, in turn, leads to increased capability to perform. This foundation engages a process of development that is based on three fundamental assumptions:

- Development is vital. Individuals have unique needs and interests that influence their choices around the areas for development, but ongoing mastery is essential. It is certainly true for long-term career success, but the desire to learn and grow is among the most intrinsic and universal of human drives. Our individual well-being demands it and healthy societies absolutely depend on it.

- There are formidable obstacles to development. Since immersive learning is required for maximum development, anything that disrupts effort interferes with the process. This is true for everyone, and may be especially true in environments that are non-supportive of certain demographic groups. For example, women may face longer proving periods than their male counterparts. It may be more difficult for professionals of color to secure the visible, important, and complex (VIC) assignments necessary to demonstrate readiness to take on roles above certain levels.

- Obstacles to development can be managed. Openly acknowledged and honestly confronted, impediments to development can be managed, and the speed of learning enhanced. It takes a true commitment by the individuals involved to engage fully in the process. It also takes an organizational culture that works sincerely to minimize managerial behaviors that undermine the development process. And the process is vastly enhanced when accompanied by the support of others (instructors, mentors, and peers) who share high expectations for everyone.

The bottom line is that development is based on a technique. It is a process that is available to anyone who is willing to engage in effective effort—a combination of tenacious engagement, an intense focus on feedback, and strategy formulation based on what the feedback is saying.
Efficacy Principle #4: Risk-taking is fundamental to development.

Embracing learning agility is a predictor of readiness to lead in a world that is challenging and uncertain. Willingness to pursue opportunities no matter what the circumstances requires a real appetite for learning to do something that one has never done before. But engaging in this process of development is risky. It will likely entail some failures, sometimes publicly. It requires a high degree of resilience, and an insatiable capacity to incorporate new information into the process, and it absolutely benefits from the support of those around you.

One of the simulations used to test for learning agility and risk tolerance with Efficacy participants involves a variation of the classic ring-toss game. Individuals are given four rings to try to land on a small peg. Using a tape running 16 feet away from the peg, and measured off in one-foot increments, participants decide how close or how far each will stand from the peg. The closer to the peg they stand, the lower the risk; the farther from the peg, the higher the risk of missing the peg.

It turns out that tossing rings from the moderate risk zone (four to eight feet in the game) is where the true opportunity for success and satisfaction lie. This is the place where goals are simultaneously challenging and realistic, producing the most meaningful information for getting better at the task. But tossing rings from the MRZ is also the place where people can feel most exposed and vulnerable, so many opt either to play it safe or swing for the fences.

How does the ring-toss game show up in real life? In his corporate consulting practice, Dr. Howard observed: White males were more likely to use a moderate risk strategy in learning how to succeed. They seemed more willing to volunteer for assignments that represented calculated risk-taking—the kind of risk that is a stretch, yet where the chances of success are realistically within reach, but still a challenge. This type of moderate risk taking results in rapid development of new knowledge and skills, and is something successful organizations look for and encourage in their next generation of leaders.

Given the multiple social and psychological dynamics at play, many minority professionals and white women tend not to enjoy the same level of organizational support and encouragement. Feeling that they are out on a limb alone in an environment that questions their right to be there at all, many avoid undertaking the risky assignments associated with high-level achievements, political involvement, and interpersonal connections at executive levels, thereby inadvertently decreasing the chances they will be noticed as emerging leadership talent.

Risk-taking is fundamental to learning new competencies and must be undertaken as part of every development process. Unlike their white male counterparts, minority professionals and women often have to undertake the work of getting themselves ready for visible and important assignments without the support of managers and peers. Through Efficacy, minority professionals and women are encouraged to find out how good they can be in every task they undertake professionally, to worry less about proving themselves to their doubtful colleagues, and focus specifically on improving themselves against the rigors of complex work. The capacity to block out distractions, focus on incremental improvement, and use failure as feedback for the next attempt is the essence of effective effort. This proficiency is available for those who make the proper attributions about success and failure, thus Efficacy Principle #5.
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Efficacy Principle #5: Confidence is the key.

If we were to talk about the Efficacy tenets in the language of DNA, the common gene would be “confidence.” But what exactly is confidence, and can it be cultivated?

Confidence is the belief that life and career outcomes can, to a great extent, be managed. Confidence is undergirded by self-talk that assumes that innate ability and effort drive success. People with a high level of confidence experience greater determination and more curiosity after a failure. They ask themselves, “What did I learn from this? What should I do differently next time?” Highly confident individuals trust their capacity to accomplish whatever is required. They understand that learning is a process, and they operate with commitment, focus, and strategy. They are secure in the belief that development and hard work will produce the desired outcomes.

As a result, confident people face new challenges with enthusiasm and energy. They live their lives by design, not default. Attaining long-term goals and sustaining the success of those goals—whatever the vision—requires confidence in three significant areas: intellectual, political/influential, and relational.

Intellectual confidence

In intellectual situations, confidence is knowing one is capable of delivering quality performance and can learn to increase that capability. This area of confidence is tested formally and informally at school, at work, and in life in general. Being recognized as “smart” is highly valued in U.S. society, so much so that success at intellectual endeavors is often mistaken as the totality of confidence required. For higher job levels, two additional types of confidence are required, and may, in fact, be the secret to at last breaking through barriers to senior leadership roles.

Political/influential confidence

The capacity to understand human dynamics coupled along with the courage to exert power is at the heart of political confidence. This is the primary tool of all great leaders. Politically confident people understand how systems work and know that influence is about impacting outcomes. They learn to master the skill and the art of human interaction and persuasion. They learn how to position themselves and their ideas to elicit the support of others.

Many confident people, however, lack political will and often express contempt for it. Those same people feel bad when others don’t listen to their brilliant ideas or follow their recommendations. Their contempt may reflect a belief that politics is something one “gets caught up in,” rather than an opportunity to act decisively.

Influence situations present themselves every day, and no team, organization, or community can thrive without people who are willing to take a stand on behalf of others, inspire action, persuade those in doubt, describe benefits and consequences, and insist on follow-through.

Relational confidence

Those with relational confidence think of themselves as appealing and worthy of inclusion. They feel they are a significant and contributing part of any community to which they belong and are genuinely entitled to attention and consideration—even in the face of treatment to the contrary. Those with relational confidence also believe they can learn to be socially skillful even if when they believe themselves to be naturally reserved.

We tend to admire those individuals who are socially graceful across differences. People’s defenses come down when they are in the presence of someone who is warm, authentic, and inclusive. At the same time, they recognize that building substantive, effective workplace relationships, with enough trust and mutually agreed outcomes, doesn’t necessarily require being friends with or even liking the other person. Strong relational confidence allows one to see relationship building as an essential skill with a range of responses from building strong trusting relationships to building enough of a relationship to get the job done.

Developing and exhibiting these three confidences is vital for career advancement and success. Confidence is the underlying source for operating with an Efficacy mindset.
A call to shared responsibility.

The five Efficacy principles reinforce one another to generate the power to produce a desired effect or outcome. This capacity-building mindset has contributed to the career success of thousands of women and people of color for a generation. The principles are so well grounded that even with massive transformations in society—through technology, demographics, and changing social mores—they continue to yield the promised results for Efficacy alumni.

A final note: while Efficacy focuses on taking personal responsibility for career outcomes, organizational inclusion is a shared responsibility among leaders, managers, and all employees.

Leaders need to provide clarity to all talent about the organization’s goals and expected skills and behaviors to achieve them. But then they must ensure that equitable talent development and succession management processes are in place and followed. Leaders have a principal role in creating a culture that engages all to do their best work.

Managers in turn need to champion the business case for a diverse workforce by examining their personal biases that interfere with proactively positioning women and people of color for growth and development, providing stretch opportunities coupled with explicit feedback and coaching, and building meaningful relationships that provide support, advocacy, and sponsorship.

With these shared contributions in place, leaders and managers can expect women and talent of color to step into the fullness of their potential, redefining and achieving their own personal goals and professional aspirations. This combined effort will lead to them to find a welcoming environment that will optimize their rising effective effort for the good of the entire organization.
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