

The Tension between Belief and Permission

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It's advice we all get often, but what does it mean to "believe in yourself?" Such rhetoric sounds great on the surface, but whenever I hear that expression I cringe.

Success does require giving oneself the freedom to pursue challenges and take risks, but it's not sheer self-confidence alone that we need. I enjoy cheerleading and encouragement as much as anyone, but simply exhorting more effort without first examining and streamlining the underlying fundamental processes at hand, well . . . this brings back bad memories from my previous career as a musician.



For many years I played the double bass with the Boston Pops and other orchestras, and I had the privilege of playing for many top-rate conductors. But I also played for a few misguided maestros. They were convinced that the way to achieve better performance was to simply crank up the emotional energy. They would say things like, "Make it more beautiful!" or the classic, "Okay everybody . . . this time . . . WITH FEELING!!!"

Don't ask me what these phrases meant. I have no idea.

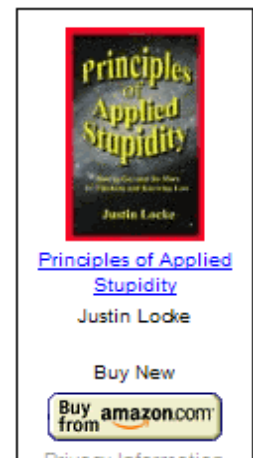
The phrase "believe in yourself" reminds me of these second-rate conductors. So let's take a moment to think very calmly, logically, and scientifically about the concept of believing in yourself.

Let's suppose I suggest that you go out and rob a bank.

You would resist this suggestion, and that resistance would likely be expressed by some version of the phrase, "I could never do that."

You have an obvious conflict. On a purely practical level, robbing a bank is not that hard. You could acquire a gun easily enough, either legally or illegally. In a minute you could write a note demanding that the teller hand over all the money, and if you don't own a getaway car, you could easily rent one (or, since you're already preparing to rob a bank, steal one).

What is stopping you from robbing the bank is not a logistical barrier. It is your knowledge





of right and wrong and your appreciation of the risks and possible repercussions. Along with the probability of imprisonment, the looks of disapproval and disappointment from your neighbors, friends and family are, for most people, too terrible to countenance.

I could exhort you to “believe in yourself and in your ability to rob the bank,” but the issue here is not one of belief. It is not a question of whether or not you can physically commit the act. The reason you can’t do it is your morals.

Morality is complex, and a big part of it is suppressing immediate desire in order to receive the collective benefits of society. Most of the time, it is your own unique morality – what you think it is permissible within your social framework – that will stop you from doing something, not your actual ability to do it. The reward for “obeying the rules” is a sense of social belonging, something we are loath to ever give up.

Along with laws against armed robbery, our world is also full of more subtle prohibitions in every avenue of life. Every time someone offers you a “proper procedure” for doing something, there is an implicit implication that other approaches are *improper*. Everything seems fine until you try to step out of the status quo and you run smack into your internal sense of “this is not permitted.”

For example, I always wanted to be an author and a speaker, something I eventually chose to pursue as a second career after retiring as a musician. This was not easy. I felt that I needed permission from a higher authority to veer off my established path, and I spent many years looking for a great wizard to give me the brain, heart, and courage I thought I needed. But, like Dorothy, I eventually learned that I had invested too much power in external wizards and witches, who all too often prove to be illusions.

Finally, I just clicked my heels and gave myself permission, recognizing that no one else could do it for me. It was not a question of needing greater belief or effort; the fix as was to rid myself of the belief that I needed outside permission. It was not a lack of confidence in myself that held me back; it was excess confidence in the status quo. Once I removed that barrier, I had the freedom to do what I wanted.

Stop wasting time on the vague ritual of drumming up more internal belief. Stop worrying about whether you are practically able to do what you want. And don’t let external forces of disapproval tell you what is or is not allowed.

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