

Self-Esteem

A Core Driver of Success or Failure in our Personal and Professional Lives

By Jaime Jusidman

At the age of 70, David Silverman is a very successful business man in Mexico City. David is a self-made multimillionaire, who built one of the largest consumer product corporations in Mexico, and is a major exporter of hardware tools to the USA and Latin America. His company's brand is one of the most widely recognized in Mexico and his products are carried at the Home Depot and other major hardware chains throughout the USA. He has all of the material things he's ever wanted or dreamed of. He owns a beautiful condominium in one of the most expensive buildings in Mexico City, an ocean front villa in the South of France, and an expansive penthouse overlooking Central Park in what is considered the most expensive building in New York City. He sails the world in his private yacht with a personal chef who indulges him with the most spectacular meals. David is a wine connoisseur and only drinks the best wines. He also enjoys art and has accumulated an art collection worth more than \$10 million. He is a philanthropist and has donated large sums of money in his own name to a number of organizations in Israel, Mexico, and the USA.

The last time I met with him, we met for breakfast at a very trendy restaurant on La Reforma Avenue in Mexico City. While sitting with him and conversing, I was surprised by how many statements he made that seemed to be motivated by his need to be seen by others as relevant, powerful, valuable, and successful. In spite of all his success, he was still looking for recognition and admiration from others to validate his own self-worth. He is the perfect example of what I would refer to as an INDIRECT SELF-ACCEPTANCE ADDICT (ISAA).

As I reflect on over 30 years as an executive coach, I can easily say that most of us have a bit of this addiction. I don't mean this in a negative way, but as a statement that describes one of the most important psychological forces behind human behavior. Self-acceptance is the outcome of the way we view ourselves in comparison to others – an expression of our self-esteem. It's the image we carry of ourselves, an image with a long history, a picture that has developed from the very beginning of our existence, which is influenced by both genetics and socialization processes, and continues to be reinforced throughout our lives. Unfortunately, this socialization process

comes with an inherent cost of diminished self-acceptance and implicit low self-image. This cost is related to the sacrifices we are expected to make in order to fit in with groups that help us build a sense of identity. These boundaries, norms, limits, and expectations, which are placed on us by others so that we can be accepted, loved, or respected, fundamentally infringe on our natural sense of well-being. In order to counter these effects, we engage in behaviors that seem to increase or protect our self-worth.



Going back to David, I'd like to share his story and how he became an ISAA.

His father, Sam, emigrated from Russia to Mexico in 1921 at the age of 21, leaving his entire family in the old country. It was a hard time for the Jews in Russia; the people were being persecuted, women and children raped, and men killed. Their towns were ransacked with the implicit and often explicit license of the local authorities. Sam was sent to Mexico to lay the foundation for the rest of the family to escape the suffering. Several years later, Sam's brother Max followed him to Mexico.

Sam and Max were hard working men and, as immigrants, their focus was to survive and to establish themselves financially and socially, so they could bring the rest of the family to safety. Unfortunately time ran out and they failed to bring the family to Mexico. In 1930, at the age of 30, Sam married a Russian-Jewish immigrant woman. Out of this marriage, David was born. Sam was very involved in his business and did not spend much time with the family. When he was not



at work, Sam chose to spend time socializing and playing cards with other immigrants who had very similar life experiences. He engaged in this behavior as a way to escape and avoid his feelings of having failed to bring the rest of his family out of Russia.

David's mother was a very introverted, stoic woman who had survived a number of bloody pogroms (violent riots against the Jews) throughout her childhood and teenage years, leaving her with deep scars; as a result, she grew to become a skeptical adult, with little or no empathy towards others. This prevented her from establishing a nurturing and intimate relationship with her son David. Needless to say, the family environment was one with little expression of emotion or affection, and David's self-esteem was depleted instead of nurtured. Both parents were coping with the cards that life had dealt them the best way they knew how and with the emotional tools they had.

In 1944, at the age of 4, David started kindergarten at a Jewish school. The school was mostly staffed by Holocaust survivors who carried the weight of their suffering and the tools that helped them survive the terrifying experiences of Treblinka, Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and other concentration camps. Among their survival strategies were strict adherence to rules, to not draw attention to themselves or become invisible, to do whatever they could in order to survive, and to accept the feeling of worthlessness. The Nazis had implanted the seed of worthlessness so deeply in the prisoners' souls that, without being aware, the teachers were transferring this same message onto the children in their classrooms, including David. The teachers acted with extreme rigidity and with an authoritarian style. In some ways, their behavior was an unconscious reflection of the way the guards in the concentration camps dealt with them. All the way from kindergarten through 12th grade, David struggled with this type of discipline and his grades were well below those of his classmates. He was always compared to other seemingly well behaved kids and eventually earned a reputation as an unruly troublemaker. Socially, he was very popular but to the authorities and teachers in school he was a real challenge. In class, he was unable to sit still; his mind was always wandering from boredom and he spent time thinking of tricks he could play on his teachers and how to make his classmates laugh. Nowadays, with our current understanding of psychology and brain function, a child exhibiting these behavioral characteristics would be diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and treated with therapy and/or medication. However, in David's time, the teachers simply punished, ridiculed, and often embarrassed him in front of his classmates. Once, when he was in the 5th grade, his mother was called to the principal's office where, in front of David, the

principal proceeded to tell her that they were unable to deal with her son's behavioral problems because the school was "not a mental institution." These experiences left David with a severely depleted self-image from a very early stage in his life.



When David was 24 and attending engineering school, his father died from a sudden heart attack, and David was left to take the reins of the family business – a small foundry that, through his business acumen, shrewdness, tenacity, and ruthless ambition, he turned into a multimillion dollar enterprise. But behind his success was the need to gain the respect, admiration, and often envy from others in order to fuel his sense of self-worth.

Over the course of his adult life, David married, had three sons, divorced, married again, and divorced again. Today, he has no contact with his middle son and only very distant relationships with his other two sons. As part of my coaching intervention with David, I interviewed some of the people who work for him, as well as some of his friends and family. The central themes that came out of the interviews were:

- “David is a very successful businessman and he never lets you forget it.”
- “When you are with him, you feel as though he's sucked the life right out of you. When you leave him, you come out with a very low sense of your own self-worth.”
- “He always has to be right and has to show you that he knows more than you.”
- “Undoubtedly, he is a successful businessman but he is very difficult to be around.”
- “My Dad does not know how to show affection or intimacy. Everything is about money and material things. He puts his wealth on display through his top-notch lifestyle.”

David is an ISAA who has clearly succeeded financially and professionally, but has failed interpersonally.

His need for validation and recognition has come at the expense of others, and he now feels lonely, lacks intimacy with his family, and has very few friends. As a leader in his business, he has gone through a number of executives who just got burned out by working under him. His current employees don't have a strong loyalty towards him as a leader. At this point in his life, he is trying to figure out how to come to terms with the outcome of his unconscious life strategy to gain self-acceptance at the expense of others, and regain the intimacy that is so important to him.

David's life story may not sound exactly like yours, but it is an invitation for you to reflect. What experiences shaped who you have become? How has your self-esteem affected your personal and professional lives? As we know, life is full of both disappointments and happy moments. Unfortunately, human nature often lets the negative experiences overshadow the positive ones, and we place an imbalanced and often crucial weight on our self-esteem. Our histories are made up of small stories that contain the essence of our sense of self-worth and the trigger of our "life script." The more we understand our "life script" and come to terms with it, the healthier and more fulfilling our lives will be in dealing with our own ISAA tendencies.

Core Strategies and Personal Approaches to meet and deal with Indirect Self-Acceptance Addiction (ISAA) There are two common approaches that people often employ to cope with their own ISAA tendencies: **ACTIVE** and **PASSIVE**. The chosen strategy is often an adaptation of a learned behavior that worked for us at a certain critical stage in life, but may not continue to work for us in other stages. These behaviors or paths become fundamental blind spots throughout our life because they become so embedded in our natural way of being with no understanding or awareness of the negative impact that they have on others.

The **ACTIVE APPROACH** is aimed at increasing, enhancing, or protecting the individual sense of self-worth by engaging others and proactively moving and seizing opportunities, which are presented to us, in order to gain respect, admiration, power, economic status, love, and inclusion.

The basic philosophy of this approach is, "if I don't act to achieve my sense of self-worth, nobody will see me or value me." If I fail, I will not make the impact that I deserve and I will end up being completely inconsequential throughout my life. I will be devalued, feel invisible, and become irrelevant. I fear that I will be beneath those I am competing against; the ones I measure myself against in order to gauge my self-worth.



With the active approach, we tend to compare ourselves to those we consider to be better than us and never against those that are beneath us. When balanced with a strong self-awareness and empathy, an active approach can lead to a productive life and a sense of accomplishment and wellbeing. Those who lack self-awareness and empathy become "self-esteem vampires," sucking out the self-esteem from others to replenish their own. Common behaviors of self-esteem vampires include needing to prove that they know best, interrupting or correcting others during a conversation, and monopolizing the conversation airtime talking about their own achievements with little or no attention to others in the conversation.

On the other hand, the **PASSIVE APPROACH** protects and prevents the depletion of self-worth. The basic philosophy is, "if I retreat, disengage, or make myself unnoticed, I will not be devalued and I won't have to risk being rejected by others." Individuals who take the passive approach tend to be very helpful, accommodating, compromising, conflict-avoidant, and conventional. When balanced, they get their sense of self-worth by doing steady reliable work. They like to be helpful in a non-assuming way and are loyal as long as they don't feel their own self-worth is depleted. When threatened, these individuals can become "closet self-esteem vampires," protecting their sense of self-worth by devaluing or undermining others behind their backs. They tend to gossip and may display a passive-aggressive attitude towards those who make them feel threatened.

I invite you to review your life journey and identify the approach you have taken to protect or enhance your sense of self-worth, and the impact that your path may be having on those around you. In a series of upcoming articles I will be discussing, in more detail, the different styles and strategies that people embrace in order to satisfy their ISAA and the impact that those strategies have on the way we interact with others in our different roles as parents, spouses, friends, leaders, and co-workers. I will also explore processes and interventions to make ISAA a source of healthy and productive living as well as looking at ways to choose positive life strategies and the work that is needed to successfully implement them.

