

## SUBLIMINAL SELF-HELP MESSAGES: DO THEY DELIVER?

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### ABSTRACT

A number of techniques and procedures have been developed that are not part of the mainstream but may have utility for managers trying to enhance employee performance. This article discusses one such commonly touted technique, subliminal self-help, and critically examines its effectiveness and whether this technique can assist managers improve worker performance.

### I. INTRODUCTION

One of your supervisors tells you that her husband recently lost 25 pounds in two months using subliminal tapes. She states she has seen many different subliminal tapes in bookstores and the producers of her husband's tapes claim success in changing many aspects of human behavior, including improving worker concentration and performance. She realizes that this is an unconventional approach to improve employee productivity but with organizational demands continually increasing she is willing to try just about anything, and asks you to authorize a purchase order for some of these tapes.

As a practicing manager, you are certainly interested in approaches to improve performance and gain an edge on the competition, but you are not too sure about this "new age" subliminal tape technique. You realize that business has historically been plagued by someone hawking some program or approach as having a significant impact on profits, effectiveness, absenteeism, turnover, etc. You know that fads abound in this area and you suspect that one such fad is subliminal self-help products. In the above vignette, what would you tell your supervisor about the approach she is suggesting?

### II. SUBLIMINAL SELF-HELP PRODUCTS

Build self-confidence! Lose weight! Reduce pain! Quit smoking! Speak effectively! Read faster! Improve productivity! Increase personal effectiveness! These are but a few of subliminal program titles available to help people improve some part of their lives. The subliminal self-help industry is booming with annual retail sales topping \$50,000,000.

The word subliminal is defined as below the threshold of consciousness. Typically, what happens is messages are hidden either visually in a videotape or auditorially in an audiotape that suggests the listener improve in a selected area. The premise underlying subliminal stimulation is that the hidden message is noticed by

the unconscious and from there changes our actions. Given this idea, products are marketed claiming people can effortlessly accomplish in a short time what others struggle or fail to do in a lifetime, hence making these mass-marketed tapes very attractive. For example, Gateways Institute's audio tapes advertise: "Subliminal tapes work, so you don't have to.... Simply play the tapes while you work, play, drive, read, exercise, relax, watch TV, or even as you sleep. No concentration is required for the tapes to be effective. They work whether you pay attention to them or not."

### III. POPULAR METHOD

Audiotapes are the most popular subliminal media. Commercial subliminal audiotapes share a common format. When played, all the listener consciously detects is sound consisting of rain, music, or ocean waves, with an occasional cricket or sea gull. Although each company's tapes may be distinguished by a unique mix of blanketing sounds, different tapes produced by the same company are often indistinguishable. Presumably, what separates the many different tapes produced by each company are the claimed embedded subliminal messages that are impossible for a listener to consciously detect.

### IV. EFFECTIVENESS

Do these tapes work? In a word, NO. A comprehensive review of the relevant research conducted by the Committee on Techniques for the Enhancement of Human Performance of the National Research Council flatly concluded that there is neither theoretical foundation nor experimental evidence to support claims that subliminal self-help tapes enhance human performance. Countless researchers have made it very clear in demonstrating the ineffectiveness of subliminal tapes no matter which behaviors were targeted. But, these findings fly in the face of the extremely positive testimonials sometimes given by individuals using such tapes.

There are several reasons to question the belief that subliminal suggestions are in any way responsible for, or even play a part in, any self-perceived improvements in behavior. In the first place, by buying and using a subliminal self-help product, the person has demonstrated not only a desire for personal enhancement, but also some degree of commitment to change. The very act of making such a commitment may be therapeutic in its own right. For this and other reasons testimonials are not accepted as appropriate evidence by any science.

A second related reason that subliminal tapes may seem to have beneficial effects has to do with the social-psychological phenomenon of effort justification: the finding that the harder we work at something, the more we like it. After buying a subliminal tape and using it daily for several weeks many people would be reluctant to admit to themselves or others that they had wasted their time and money. Instead, it has been demonstrated that they are motivated to detect any sort of change in some aspect of their lives, in order to rationalize their questionable actions or purchases.

A third reason for attributing positive effects to subliminal tapes relates to what is called the expectancy effect. In one interesting study, researchers recruited

individuals from a newspaper advertisement soliciting volunteers especially interested in subliminal self-help tapes and thus probably similar to those most likely to purchase such products. Then they were given either a commercially available tape for improving self-esteem or one for enhancing memory. The intriguing aspect of this study was that only a randomly selected half of the group actually received the tape they thought they were getting: one-quarter got the memory enhancement tape mislabeled "self-esteem," and the rest received the opposite mislabeled tape.

After taking their tapes home and listening to them for 5 weeks, as recommended by the manufacturer, there were no differences, positive or negative, of either self-esteem or memory. Interestingly though, many participants believed and reported otherwise. Half of the participants believed their esteem or memory had improved no matter which tape they really listened to.

In summary, a critical review of subliminal self-help training techniques clearly demonstrates that this performance enhancement technique is ineffective. The paradox is that regular use of these products may make users more conscious of their problems, which may not necessarily make them better and may make them worse. As long as users continue to falsely assign improvements to using subliminal products, they will continue to purchase and promote them, like the supervisor in the opening example. Subliminal self-help products are not going to secure the organizational objectives she hopes to achieve. To improve the work performance of her staff, the supervisor should rely on proven approaches such as performance management, behavior modeling, positive reinforcement, and incentive programs. We must diplomatically communicate that subliminal techniques have not been shown scientifically to be effective.