

Redesign Attitudes with Affirmation

Philosophers, poets, and other writers from many centuries in the past have left us a rich legacy of literature that demonstrates one of the most vital tools of personal leadership development. This technique is the firing pin for rapid-fire change, the scope for the rifle of self-direction. This marvelous tool is **affirmation**. The dictionary calls affirmation “the act of asserting or affirming as true a positive assertion.” Affirmation is a positive declaration that describes what you want to be, what you want to have, or how you choose to live your life.

There is nothing particularly startling or new in using affirmation as a method of personal growth. It has been done for thousands of years. More than a hundred years ago, the French doctor Émile Coué began telling his patients they would feel happier and better if they adopted one simple idea: all they had to do was say over and over “Every day in every way I’m getting better and better.” Many people laughed at Dr. Coué. His method was so simple that they doubted its validity. He was teaching his patients nothing new. It was just another way of describing the power of affirmation used with spaced repetition to affect attitudes.

The repetition of a positive thought over and over, day after day, affects your subconscious mind — the creative power within you. We all use affirmations whether we realize it or not. Quotations, proverbs, sayings, and axioms are all affirmations. For example,

- *A penny saved is a penny earned.*
- *A fool and his money are soon parted.*
- *To have a friend, you must be a friend.*
- *A stitch in time saves nine.*

These are all borrowed affirmations — ideas appropriated from someone else to support the value system we hold. Borrowed affirmations are the most commonly used but are effective only when genuinely internalized. Borrowed affirmations are not the only familiar type. How many times have you said something like this: “I said to myself, ‘I can do better than that,’” or “I told myself to remember where I was putting that book.” Talking to yourself may be conscious and directed, or it may be subconscious and reflexive; but you do engage in self-talk, and that, in essence, constitutes affirmation.

When you see in the world what you believe to be there and affirm it through self-talk, you psychologically reinforce your opinions and ideas. You may say, “this does not alter reality. The fact that I believe or disbelieve doesn’t change anything.” Objectively, an affirmation may not change anything, but subjectively, it certainly does. You tend to live up to what is expected of you, to your reputation — good or bad. The real importance of this truth in the area of personal leadership is that you tend not only to live up to what others expect of you, you also live up to what you expect of yourself. This is why the use of affirmation is such a dynamic tool for personal leadership development.

When you consciously practice the use of affirmation, the law of reinforcement begins to work for you. First you begin to look for those strengths and changes that you have affirmed. Because you expect to see such changes, you also begin to act like the person you have decided to become. You literally change because you act according to the expectations you have set for yourself. Your affirmation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

There is nothing mysterious about the power of affirmation. Although at first you may find it difficult to make conscious use of affirmations, the reinforcement principle actually is simple and relatively easy to apply. Your confidence in the value of affirmation increases gradually as you take each progressive step and learn from your experience that it is worthwhile.



Redesigning Attitudes through Displacement

While the most common type of affirmation is one borrowed from another source, the most powerful affirmation is one you have composed for yourself and that is specifically tailored to your goals, your plans,

and your personality. While a borrowed affirmation may be better phrased or more poetic than an affirmation you compose for yourself, it may lack the element of relevance to your own personal situation. Unless the affirmation relates directly to your goals and your personal sense of values, it lacks the power to inspire change in your personality or your life.

Some people are skeptical. They cannot believe that anything they say — even repeatedly — affects what they think or do, yet such people may practice negative affirmation. For example, some people say repeatedly, “I just can’t speak before a group.” This is negative affirmation, and what is affirmed inevitably happens. Because they think failure and live by it, if they do muster up courage to attempt a speech, they botch the job. Conversely, people who say, “I can speak effectively,” believe that they can. They affirm to themselves, “I can speak before a group because I believe in what I say. The more I speak, the more effective I become.” When they believe in themselves so firmly that they begin to expect to speak effectively, they do. Of course, just saying something doesn’t make it so. Affirmation is more sophisticated than that. It works because it sparks action — action that makes the expectation come alive.

Affirmation works according to the law of displacement. No matter how many negative thoughts and ideas are stored in your subconscious mind, you can displace or eliminate negative thoughts — at least for the moment — by consciously feeding your mind a positive thought. That positive thought is also stored in your subconscious mind. Many negative thoughts and ideas from the past will also remain in your memory subject to recall. If, however, positive affirmations are used with repetition, you soon begin to form new, positive thought habits. The new habits turn off old, negative thought patterns and, in effect, displace them.

The process of displacement may be illustrated with a simple experiment often demonstrated for beginning students in physics. If you drop stones into a bucket full of water, they displace an equal volume of water. When the bucket is filled with stones, very little water is left. It has been displaced. In similar fashion, a positive thought fed into your subconscious mind by repeating an affirmation displaces a negative thought. When you continue to feed positive thoughts into your mind by the repetition of affirmations, you eventually displace practically all negative thoughts, doubts, fears, and indecision.

The trick to displacing the water in the bucket — or the negative thoughts in your mind — lies in spaced repetition. Just as more and more water is displaced by the continued dropping in of stones, in the same way, more and more negative thoughts and habits are displaced by the constant repetition of positive ideas.

Affirmation works for you in a manner similar to the process known in chemistry as osmosis, the flow or absorption of a solution through a semipermeable membrane. Repeated exposure to ideas results in mental absorption of ideas through repeated exposure. It works like this:

- 1st Exposure: “I reject it because it conflicts with my preconceived ideas.”
- 2nd Exposure: “Well, I understand it, but I can’t accept it.”
- 3rd Exposure: “I agree with the idea but have reservations about its use.”
- 4th Exposure “You know that idea expresses exactly what I have been thinking.”
- 5th Exposure: “I used that idea today — it’s terrific!”
- 6th Exposure: “I gave that idea to a friend yesterday. In the truest sense of the word, the idea now belongs to me.”

When you understand the processes of displacement and mental absorption of ideas, you will trust in the power of affirmation to work for you.