

How to Turn Anxiety into Performance

By Dr. Travis Bradberry



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There are two kinds of people in this world: those who believe they can make things happen, and those who believe things happen to them. The first group is convinced that the outcome of their lives and careers is more or less in their own hands, and they would not have it any other way. The second group takes more of a Forrest Gump approach—they sit around and wait for the bus to take them somewhere.

University of Florida psychologist Tim Judge and his colleagues have overwhelmingly shown that people who feel like they control the events in their lives more than the events control them and are confident in their abilities, end up doing better on nearly every important measure of work performance. In Judge's studies, these individuals—we will call them "*the Empowered*"—were found to:

- ◆ Sell more than other employees do
- ◆ Give better customer service
- ◆ Adjust better to foreign assignments

Take home an average of 50 to 150 percent more annual income than people who feel less control over the fate of their careers

Self-Managing in Good Times and Bad

Of course, when good times are rolling, nearly all of us believe we have the world by the tail. What makes *the Empowered* people special—whether they work the shop floor or in the C-suite, is that they do not grow consumed by self-pity when the going gets tough. Just like you, *the Empowered* feel anxiety when hard times strike, but they use this anxiety differently. Since *the Empowered* believe that they have control over the outcomes in their lives, their anxiety fuels passion instead of pity, drive in lieu of despair, and tenacity over trepidation. Whether *the Empowered* find themselves presiding over a division with tanking revenues, on the receiving end of a scathing performance review, or staring yet another job-hunting rejection in the face, they refuse to wave the white flag. They redouble their efforts.

The good news is that we can all get better at managing the anxiety we inevitably feel when facing difficult and uncertain situations.

Here is how you can empower yourself and turn anxiety into action:

Expect and prepare for change. People change and businesses go through ebbs and flows. It is a fact that even *the Empowered* people from Judge's study cannot control. They have found themselves out of work. Their companies have gone through recessions. The difference is that they believe they are fully capable of dealing with changes and making something positive happen. In other words, they are mentally prepared for change—and you can be too. If you do not anticipate change naturally, you need to set aside some time regularly—either every week or every other week—to create a list of important changes that you think could possibly happen. The purpose of this task is not to predict every change you will face. Rather, it will open your mind to change and sharpen your ability to spot and respond to impending changes. Even if the events from your lists never happen, the practice of anticipating and preparing for change will give you a greater sense of command over your future and prepare you for steps two and three.

Focus on your freedoms, not on your limitations. We have all had the old mantra “life isn’t fair” beaten into our brains since we were young. This mantra is a voice of despair and passive inaction. While it is true that we sometimes have limited ability to stop negative events from occurring, we are always free to choose our response. On your list of possible changes from step one, jot down all of the positive ways in which you can take action and respond to each change. You will surprise yourself with how much control you can wield over seemingly uncontrollable circumstances.

Re-write your script. Step three is going to be the hardest because it requires you to change the mode of thinking that you have grown accustomed to. Over time, we all develop mental scripts that run through our heads and influence how we feel about our circumstances and what we do in response to them. These scripts go so far as to tell us what to say and act in different situations. In order to be empowered, you will need to rewrite your script and change how you approach change. To do this, recall a tough time you went through recently. What was it you believed about your circumstances that prevented you from making the most of your situation or responding more effectively? Write this script down and label it as your ‘hard-luck script’. Since hindsight is 20/20, go ahead and write a more effective and empowered mental script next to it that you wish you would have followed. This is the ‘perseverance script’ you will use to replace your ‘hard-luck script’. File this away so that you can pull it out and study it whenever you are anticipating or facing changes. When you do pull your scripts out, compare your present thinking to your ‘hard-luck script’ and ‘perseverance script’. This will keep you honest and enable you to adjust your thinking so that you are operating from an ‘empowered script’. These periodic reminders will eventually rewrite your script completely, enabling you to operate from a place of empowerment.

The key thing to understand is that you are in fact facing uncertainty—the outcome of your future has not been decided. It is up to you to develop the beliefs and mental toughness that will make you one of *the Empowered*.

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With a relentless commitment to learning, Linkage also offers conferences, institutes, summits, open-enrollment workshops, and distance learning programs on leading-edge topics in leadership, management, human resources, and organizational development. More than 200,000 leaders and managers have attended Linkage programs since 1988.

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