

The **Confident** Leader It **Isn't** About Self-Confidence

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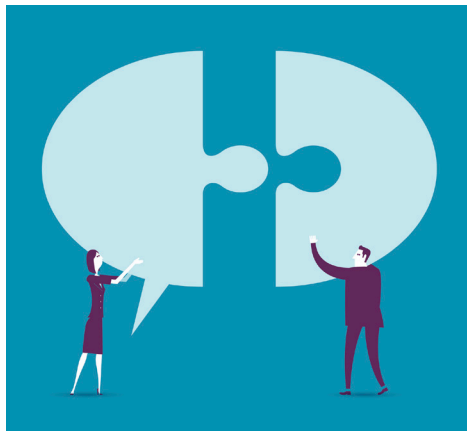
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What is Confidence in Leadership?

Lisa is a high-potential leader on the fast track who says she needs to work on her self-confidence. At the same time, she's highly regarded for her expertise and insights. Senior leaders routinely invite her to meetings. Yet, in her own mind, she doesn't belong. "I don't have as much experience as others in the room, and I'm not sure what to say." But, when others are asked how they view Lisa, people—including her bosses—say she's not only competent but highly confident.



Ben is a vice president of a \$15 billion food company, and he's leading a major change initiative. Like Lisa, he isn't exactly sure why senior leadership chose him, though he's working hard to do an excellent job. "I feel like the senior leaders already have the answers, so I lack the confidence to speak up," says Ben. Yet the senior team is giving him high marks for his thoughtful ideas and his ownership of the project.
















Many leaders are plagued by an inner voice that questions whether they feel the confidence to meet challenges head on. However, new research suggests that others may not notice when our self-confidence flags. What they in fact are evaluating is what they see—behaviors we exhibit—and these behaviors can suggest to them that we have a healthy kind of confidence. They are typically unaware of how we feel inside. And when it comes to getting things done, their perceptions are a lot more relevant than how certain we feel inside.

Much has been written about confidence, and most of it focuses on feelings of self-efficacy. We wonder: "Am I capable? Can I do this? What if I fail?" Amy Cuddy, author of *Presence*, has said that to be successful, it's important to "focus less on the impression you're making on others and more on the impression you're making on yourself." But is this true when it comes to leadership?

After three years of coaching and guiding senior leaders using a new, science-based assessment and model of executive presence, we've found that there's much more to confidence than that.

Data from more than 1,000 high-potential and senior leaders show that many who report feeling less than highly confident are still viewed as very confident and highly effective. In other words, leaders may harbor self-doubt, but when we measure how others see them, through a set of research-based behaviors, we find those leaders are often judged quite favorably. People see them as risk takers, decision makers and people who work in a reasonable and thoughtful way to move things forward.

We gathered this data through the Bates ExPI, a multi-rater survey that measures perceptions of leaders' executive presence. The **Bates Model of Executive Presence** is based on empirical studies and research in many disciplines, including leadership and management, communication theory, social action theory, psychology, and philosophy and ethics.

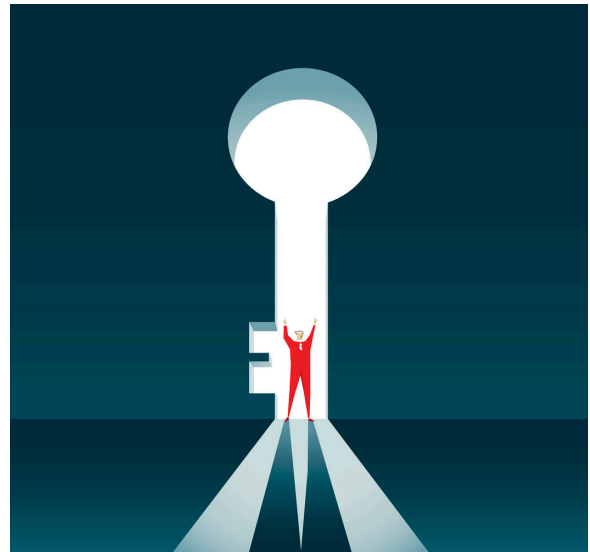
Dimensions	Character Qualities that are fundamental to the leader as a person, to his/her identity, and give us reason to trust him/her.	Substance Cultivated qualities of mature leadership that inspire commitment, inform action, and lead to above-and-beyond effort.	Style Overt, skill-based patterns of communicative leadership that build motivation and that shape and sustain performance.
Facets of Behavior	 <p>Authenticity The quality of being real, genuine, transparent, and sincere in one's relations and interactions with others.</p>	 <p>Practical Wisdom Highly honed qualities of insight and judgment that get to the heart of issues and produce prudent decisions.</p>	 <p>Appearance Looks and acts like an able executive, adapts dress and demeanor to the situation, and handles social situations with tact.</p>
	 <p>Integrity Acting with fidelity to one's values and beliefs, living up to high standards of morality, veracity, and promise keeping.</p>	 <p>Confidence Self-assured in decision-making and action; ready to accept the risk and responsibility for taking timely action.</p>	 <p>Intentionality Clarifies direction and keeps actions aligned and on track, all without stifling dissent or neglecting needs to adjust course.</p>
	 <p>Concern Demonstrating interest in others, encouraging adaptive development, and promoting a healthy sustainable culture.</p>	 <p>Composure Steady in a crisis, able to calm and focus others, and to bring objectivity and perspective to critical decisions.</p>	 <p>Inclusiveness Actively involves others, welcomes diverse points of view, encourages ownership in mission, and empowers initiative.</p>
	 <p>Restraint A calm disposition, characterized by reasonableness, and by avoidance of emotional extremes or impulsiveness.</p>	 <p>Resonance Connecting with others; attentive, attuned, and responsive to feelings, motivations, and thoughts; deepens alignment.</p>	 <p>Interactivity Promotes an interpersonal style of dialog and timely exchange of information and questions to coordinate action.</p>
	 <p>Humility Awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses, an openness to others, and a belief that all persons have worth.</p>	 <p>Vision Generates an inspiring, enterprise-wide picture of what could be; recognizes emerging trends, and engages all in strategy.</p>	 <p>Assertiveness Speaks up, values constructive conflict, and raises issues directly without shutting others down.</p>

The Double-Edged Sword of Confidence

Confidence is one of the 15 qualities of presence, defined as “the ability to engage, align, inspire and move people to act.” In mature leadership, it’s “being self-assured in decision making and action; ready to accept the risk and responsibility for taking timely action.” The Bates ExPI measures how the leader “shows up” in the eyes of others through observable behavior.

What we can safely say is that while it’s nice to feel a sense of confidence, many people don’t always feel it, and that’s okay, at least when you’re talking about getting the right things done. A high level of self-confidence doesn’t necessarily mean others evaluate us as leaders who are capable, ready, and high performing.

If you are highly confident, you may not see the point of getting input from others. Why bother if you’re sure that you’re right? The negative impact on others can be significant. It can ironically cause people to doubt you and be disinclined to follow you. A little self-doubt can help you slow down appropriately, invite others to weigh in, be more deliberate and thoughtful about decisions, and ultimately get better outcomes.



“Leaders who feel a lot of self-confidence are certainly less likely to be racked by doubts and lose sleep over decisions. As a result, they may move faster because they feel sure of themselves. However, this can be the proverbial double-edged sword.”

The Power of Perception in Leading Others

It is important to understand the difference between our own feelings of confidence and others' perceptions of how confident we are. Research has shown that perceived confidence in leaders:

- Is fundamental to a leader's credibility and to being taken seriously (Darling & Beebe, 2007)
- Results in employees who are more satisfied and committed (Kottke et al., 2013)
- Positively affects performance, boosts the confidence of direct reports, and lifts the collective performance of the organization as a whole (Hannah et al., 2008 and Peterson et al., 2008)



That is, *how you behave* is the critical aspect of confidence that impacts the performance of others. The right behaviors—from soliciting opinions, giving others a voice, and rallying a group to make tough calls together—has a powerfully positive impact on teams and organizations. When you give people a voice, they tend to buy in, own the solution, and hold themselves accountable. These behaviors enable mature leaders to engage, align, and inspire others to go above and beyond.

Leaders who demonstrate perceived confidence are more effective in increasing engagement and driving performance. You can learn to lead this way, whether or not you always look in the mirror in the morning and feel fully confident you are going in exactly the right direction.

How Leaders Learn to Look at Confidence Differently

Lisa was pleasantly surprised by her feedback on the Bates ExPI, especially what she heard from senior leaders. Sure, some commented in the open-ended section that they would appreciate it if she spoke up more in meetings. Still, the Confidence facet on the ExPI was her second highest-rated facet of

the 15 facets. Her manager gave her an average rating of 4.83 out of 5.

What did the manager see? On the item “Willing to take on the difficult issues without delay or avoidance” her average score from her manager, peers and direct reports was a 4.50, with her manager giving her a 5. When she saw her feedback, Lisa said, “I guess my lack of confidence and experience is in my head!”

Ben rated himself lower than everyone else on every single one of the 15 facets. On the Confidence facet, his average self-score was 2.83. Yet, the average score from everyone else was a 4.56 – almost a two-point difference. His self-rating in Confidence was tied for his lowest self-score, while others rated this facet in the top 5 of the 15. Confidence was obviously a “happy blind spot” for Ben. People commented that “his actions are something

Ben's Ratings in Confidence



others should aspire to,” and “he quickly grasps complex situations and delivers high-quality results.”

Ben’s boss saw him as capable and confident. His average score from others was a 4.67, and his boss gave him a 5. On the item “Willing to take on difficult issues without delay or avoidance” he gave himself a 2 and his average score from others was a 4.56. Ben didn’t realize that others saw him as a confident leader who successfully challenged the status quo and getting results.

For Ben and Lisa, a great step in their development was at hand. Both of them felt better knowing how others viewed them—as extremely effective leaders who achieved real business results. This is a significant benefit of using a research-based assessment that looks at confidence and other qualities of executive presence: not as a gut feeling, but as behaviors.

Coming to Grips with the Impostor Syndrome

Some people might assume that Ben and Lisa suffer from the Impostor Syndrome (also called the Impostor Phenomenon). First identified by Clance and Imes in 1978, the Syndrome refers to successful people who cannot internalize or accept their accomplishments. They think they are frauds or fakes and their success is due to luck or something other than their abilities.

Just as the research on the Impostor Syndrome would predict, interestingly, our experience also shows that getting positive feedback about their perceived confidence does not always have an immediately positive impact. People may reject positive feedback, or it may confirm for them, wrongly, that they are a fake! They believe they are successfully fooling others.

So, what can change this? We do not lay claim to a solution to deep-seated feelings of inadequacy, nor is that the subject here. What we have found when our coaches provide feedback to leaders is that they are often inclined to seriously reexamine the whole concept of confidence. If we can redefine confidence for these leaders, not simply as self-efficacy but also as how others see the way they behave, people like Lisa and Ben often do embrace a different view of their leadership capabilities.

We are skeptical that advice such as “Fake it until you become it” works for everyone. There are many reasons why a person may or may not feel they’re right for a job, prepared for a promotion, or making the right call on a tough matter. The reasons we have doubts are often unconscious and therefore unknown to us.

However, we believe perceived confidence can be improved in many or most leaders. This is true even if we



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get lower ratings in Confidence on the Bates ExPI assessment. What we have found is that leaders who change their behaviors can change perceptions. Often, small changes can make a big difference in how others perceive our confidence, as well as the other 14 qualities of executive presence.

For example, if someone receives relatively low scores on the Confidence item “Self-assured enough to invite and consider dissenting views,” the leader can, at their next meeting, break the team down into small groups and ask them to challenge assumptions the leader is making that could lead to problems in the future.

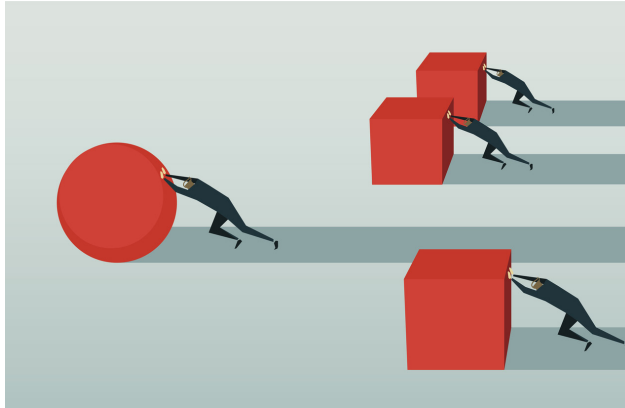
There are many other ways a leader can signal confidence—by thoughtfully communicating to others what the metrics are so people know how they will be held accountable, or by setting priorities and timelines for making group decisions. Through these actions, we demonstrate confidence and it can have an impact on how we feel. As we notice others responding differently to us, it can increase our feelings of self-efficacy, and continue to reinforce the behaviors.

Managing Over-Confidence



As we touched on earlier, there’s a fine balance between confidence and over-confidence. A bit of healthy doubt guards against hasty, ill-considered decisions. Too much action bias, which is highly rewarded in business today, can mean we make a call too soon, leading to unintended consequences. On the other hand, the right kind of confidence can help leaders drive change and innovation.

When we reviewed our data on the difference between leaders perceived as innovative and those who aren’t, the innovative leaders seem in general more inclined to “slow down to speed up.” Interestingly, there is no difference in the way innovative leaders, and those perceived as not innovative, scored on two items related to taking quick action:



- “Even under pressure is able to weigh options and act in a timely manner”
- “Willing to take on the difficult issues without delay or avoidance”

However, these innovative leaders score higher than their less innovative counterparts in:

- “Accountable for results and consequences even when they are not positive”
- “Trusts his/her judgment and willing to take reasonable risks”
- “Acts decisively when situations require action”

So what differentiates innovative from non-innovative leaders isn’t necessarily how quickly they work, or how fast they make the call, but whether they are accountable. These leaders are perceived as okay with taking reasonable risks, and able to be decisive. They’re not decisive for the sake of being decisive but, rather, when situations require action.

With so many organizations looking to leaders to innovate and drive change, we believe that the right kind of confidence as defined by a science-based model, is a better, more powerful way to evaluate leaders and for them to judge themselves! If each of us could embrace the idea that confidence is a cultivated quality of mature leadership, we might use a more accurate—and, in a way, forgiving—measure to evaluate how we’re doing. That in turn might help us feel better when the stakes are high and we’re not sure what direction to go. It might also make us more inclined to pat ourselves on the back when we demonstrate real, mature confidence.

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Summary: What the Confident Leader *Is* About

In a nutshell, it seems then the honest measure of confidence is whether or not a leader thoughtfully takes on challenges and is decisive in carrying them out. It is helpful and healthy to take into account how we are showing up to our peers, those who work for us, and our managers. This isn't to say we may not want to develop a stronger sense of inner confidence. But we can also accept that certainty and conviction are not always possible, or even necessary. If we can listen to others' views, bring them together around a decision, act in a timely way, act responsibly, and answer for our decisions, these are great accomplishments and will be noted by all.



In order to achieve success, it's better to focus on changes we can make to be the best leaders we can be. If we work to bring a healthy balance of humility and mature confidence to our work, we will deliver good results for our organizations. That in turn helps us feel a genuine sense of satisfaction, gratification and fulfillment. We know we're doing right by ourselves and others. And that in turn can help us truly believe in ourselves.

About the Authors:

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