

NURTURING YOUNG LEADERS

Here are seven very useful steps to building leadership self-confidence. By Iain McCormick.



While experienced and successful leaders typically exude self confidence, this is not usual for young aspiring leaders. What should self-conscious young leaders do to develop this trait?

1 UNDERSTAND WHAT CONFIDENCE REALLY IS

Self-confidence is typically seen as the belief that you can successfully carry out difficult tasks. This is an unfortunate definition as it implies that you must feel confident before you can act confidently.

This is rarely the case with any challenging leadership task. Most leaders find starting a serious performance discussion with a longstanding but underperforming staff member difficult

if not anxiety-provoking. It is only after undertaking these sorts of tasks a number of times that the feelings of confidence start to arrive.

So what are the implications of this for leaders? Once this is understood, the key to building self-confidence is clear – self confidence comes from successfully undertaking difficult tasks – no matter how uncomfortable or nervous you feel at the time.

2 DEAL WITH UNCOMFORTABLE FEELINGS

However this leaves the question of what young leaders should do with their uncomfortable feelings and sensations when they start these new challenging tasks.

The art of dealing with these emotions is

not to fight them but to recognise them for what they are – just thoughts and feelings rather than guidelines or directives to influence behaviour.

The young aspiring leader may say to him or herself, “I know my gut is in a knot but I am going to confront this staff member with their poor performance anyway.”

Alternatively the leader may say – “I am worrying about how this meeting will impact on my team but I am going to push ahead with the discussion anyway.”

3 DEAL WITH UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS THAT ARE TRUE

Some thoughts are particularly troublesome because they are true. The young leader who is about to give a speech

may find him or herself thinking – “I really hate giving speeches because I am useless at it.”

In this case it is useful for the leader to ask – even if these thoughts are true are they helping me develop as a leader? If the answer is “no” – the person can acknowledge the thoughts but say “I am going to do my very best even if I am not very good at this yet.” Just because a thought is true does not make it useful.

4 BE CAREFUL WITH POSITIVE AFFIRMATIONS

Many people believe that they key to building self confidence is positive thinking. Yet recent psychological research in the area suggests that this is not the case.

In her book *Rethinking Positive Thinking: Inside the New Science of*

Motivation, Gabriele Oettingen outlines studies where those subjects that were instructed to recite positive affirmations, typically performed worse in tasks such as losing weight when compared to those who did not recite such affirmations.

It appears that rehearsing general positive statements does not improve performance, however, if a person mentally rehearses the specific steps that he or she would take to overcome barriers to success then this is likely to be helpful.

For the young leader preparing to give a major speech it can be useful to mentally rehearse standing up to give the speech, feeling a bit nervous with a slightly dry throat but starting with a loud forceful voice. Rehearsing that you will get a standing ovation for every speech you give will get you nowhere.

5 ACCEPT YOUR FAILURES

Self-confidence also comes by accepting who you are and not beating yourself up for your failures. Michael Jordan, the famous and hugely successful American basketball player, said: “I’ve missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I’ve lost almost 3,000 games. Twenty-six times I’ve been trusted to take the game winning shot... and missed. I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. That is why I succeed.”

Young leaders need to learn that being overly self-critical about failure has a corrosive effect on self confidence. It is vital to learn to challenge harsh put downs and give yourself credit for effort, determination and courage even if the result was not what you wanted.

6 REALISE THAT LEARNING IN PUBLIC IS CHALLENGING

Aspiring leaders must learn in public, which makes their mistakes very visible and often more painful. Under these circumstances self confidence can easily be eroded if the person dwells on their mistakes or pays too much attention to detractors.

A simple public admission of error is often the best way to deal with these challenges as it enables the issue to be dealt with and allows the leader to move on.

7 UNDERSTAND YOU WILL NEVER HAVE ALL THE INFORMATION

Leaders learn that there are usually no clear right answers in business and that decisions often need to be made with very incomplete information.

Understanding this and not tying your own sense of worth as a leader to making clear right decisions is very important. Self-confident leaders make good and bad decisions.

In the latter case they work hard to learn the lessons from failure and move on as quickly as they can.

Building self-confidence is about being courageous, taking smart risks and accepting that occasional frustration and pain is as much a part of life as satisfaction and achievement. **M**

Dr Iain McCormick enables senior executives to experience fulfilment in their work life and he develops fun, high-performance teams that people love to be part of.

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