

Confidence as Well as Competence

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I work with leaders to build their skills. Further, I help them build leadership competencies in their direct reports--future leaders--who will assume greater responsibility as the organization grows.

Yet I inevitably also deal with each leader's confidence. You might think that confidence would correlate with competence--the higher the skill level, the higher the confidence. Not always so! I'm fascinated that these two characteristics can seem quite independent.

Your confidence has a lot to do with the stories you tell yourself about your past, your inherent capabilities, your effectiveness, and even your beliefs about your future. It seems that we all have insecurities. Anyone who claims not to have occasional anxiety is likely self-deceived. We are all inadequate alone; that's why I stress collaboration so heavily in my work with leaders.

An intriguing video has shaped my thinking on this topic, and I commend it to you. Go to www.ted.com. "TED" started in 1984 as a way to share insightful ideas from the worlds of technology, entertainment, and design. Thought leaders share their expertise in live presentations of 18 minutes or less.

Click the "search" box (the magnifying glass icon in the upper right corner) and enter "Daniel Kahneman." Kahneman is perhaps today's most influential living psychologist. He also received the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2002 for applying his knowledge of how humans make decisions relative to money matters. Standard economics presumed people are rational in making money decisions. Kahneman showed that our emotions heavily influence the handling of our finances. With this insight, Kahneman invented the field of "behavioral economics."

Click on the video entitled "The Riddle of Experience vs. Memory." Though Kahneman's comments focus on "happiness," his observations seem to apply equally well to "confidence".

Kahneman distinguishes between our "experiencing mind" and our "remembering mind." Our experiencing mind lives in the "psychological present," which Kahneman says constitutes about a three-second interval surrounding the fleeting "now." We have about 20,000 of these "present" moments a day. We generate memories about some of these events, but most pass unceremoniously.

Our remembering mind operates in the past and the future. Our remembering self automatically makes up stories about our history, current events, and our anticipated future experiences. We routinely (and involuntarily) "make meaning" of situations as they occur in our lives. Because we are biased, these stories usually do not reflect "the truth." Instead, they reflect the unique perspective of our beliefs, self-image, hopes, doubts, anxieties, fears, etc.

Based on our good and bad memories and anticipations, the remembering self is usually a major contributor to the decisions we make. Even when we think about the future, we involuntarily imagine potential future memories, so we typically choose actions that are likely to deliver what we anticipate.

Thus, the remembering self drags the experiencing self through life. Your experiencing self spends its small, incremental moments making decisions based on anticipated memories and past recollections of successes and failures, all delivered courtesy of your very opinionated remembering mind. (See references to your reticular activating system in "Your Imaginative Brain and Your Future" and "Articulating Your Vision of the Improved 'You'" available on my website—address below.)

Your confidence at the moment is heavily influenced by the stories your remembering mind has made up regarding your past and future choices and the actual or imagined outcomes of your behaviors. If you view your past mistakes as learning events from which you've grown in competence, your current level of confidence will be higher than if you view those past mistakes as evidence of your inadequacy.

Further, if you expect your future achievements to be successes based on the actions you take now, your confidence level will be far greater than if you anticipate dismal (or even limited) failure.

Typically, all of this "story-making" occurs at the subconscious level. You don't make meaning of every event in your life based on willful analysis. On the contrary, you tend to dismiss a lot of what happens as inconsequential. Yet the emotional and mental impacts are there. That's why therapists will always be in demand; we've all made mistakes that we regret, and we've all been acted upon by authority figures who intentionally or unintentionally inflicted pain on us. That's also why psychologists (and your team members) have determined that "emotional intelligence" is so beneficial to effective leadership.

Now that you are aware of the power of your remembering mind, you can better understand why you do what you do. Further, you can choose to think and act differently from this point forward. For example, realizing that you have "made up" the meaning of past experiences, you can now recognize the impact those stories have had on your behaviors and self-image. Changing those past fabrications may be hard, but you can at least now be aware of their sometimes detrimental effects.

More importantly, as you experience new situations, you can intentionally envision a favorable outcome and consciously take the action that will most probably deliver that result. That is, you can begin to enhance your confidence by being more conscious of the stories you make up about the situations you faced (or currently face), how you handle them, and the meaning you ascribe to them.

Recognize that you have a lifetime of habits that will automatically take over if you are not intentional and consistent about the meaning you give to events. With increased awareness and discipline, however, your new insight will allow you to modify your decision-making process and your behaviors, enhancing your confidence with each new victory.

Please ponder Daniel Kahneman's teaching deeply. Use your logical mind to intentionally explore your emotions regarding your confidence--or lack of it--as you seek to influence others. Realizing that your feelings influence your logic (that is, the choices you make) may be something you've discounted in the past. Emotional intelligence and confidence are significant contributors to any leader's effectiveness!

Dennis Hooper is an executive coach in Atlanta. His website is www.buildingfutureleaders.com. He welcomes your comments and questions at dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com or 770-286-2250.