



# When your confidence is shot:

Practical Ways to Build Confidence as a Leader

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If you look at all the greatest leaders, it's easy to become engulfed with their successes, styles and personality. While they do have incredible qualities that make them who they are, make no mistake: most leaders still question themselves.

And while questioning oneself is healthy and often drives our growth, it can sometimes lead to self-doubt.

Confidence – the necessary leadership trait that is so critical to effectively lead others. But it's also one of the most common themes that arise with my clients.

Too much confidence, and leaders are perceived as reckless and egotistical. Too little, and leaders don't muster the courage to make difficult decisions and take appropriate risks.

## So, Why Do So Many Leaders Struggle with Confidence?

After working with leaders for the past decade, I've seen what plagues my clients' confidence levels, and often it has to do with the many expectations and often competing demands set upon them.

Leaders are expected to be strong but supportive, innovative yet compliant. Planning for the long-term, but getting to the end of today's task list (or to the end of a bottomless inbox). When failure is viewed as a setback, or worse, as a weakness, these opposing demands and expectations of a leader can crush the confidence of even the most experienced leader.

Regardless of why or how you're struggling with confidence, we're going to look at three practical ways you can increase confidence in your leadership.

## **Solution #1: No Experience? No Problem.**

Want to know the number #1 reason people lack confidence? Because they've never lived through it. Seems obvious, doesn't it?

The big promotion is great, but it also means leaders are consistently facing new experiences, and along with them, imposter syndrome (I shouldn't be in this position, I'm not qualified to do this, Bobby/Susie/Karen would have been better for the job, etc.).

So when clients tell me they have no idea what they're doing, I often reply with: take stock and be honest with where you're at in your leadership experience. It's time to get real with what you know, what you're prepared for, and what you need to do.

You may not have a specific skill now, but what's more important is to get moving. You don't build experience by not trying. You don't gain confidence without experience. Confident leaders take action, and refuse to let the fear of failure hold them back.

### **Take Katrina's situation:**

Katrina has been managing others for less than two years. While her organization has experienced some significant changes, including a restructuring, her team of five has remained relatively stable, with three members predating her.

Her team delivers the majority of its work in good quality and on time, but two team members don't get along well, destroying any chance at innovating, creating conflict and stymying overall progress. Katrina tells herself that 'some personalities just don't mesh', although in truth knows she's tolerated inappropriate behaviour from both sides for far too long.

When the tensions reach her boss, she feels the need to take action, but isn't sure what to do, let alone where to start.

Rather than trying to fix the problem, Katrina's made an effort to ignore it. But the avoidance technique left the issue on her boss' desk. Katrina doesn't know her next step, but can take a refreshed approach as she builds experience in these scenarios.

### ***Some tips on developing leadership experience:***

#### **Apply Your Growth Mindset:**

Senior leaders understand the importance of gaining new experiences to grow, even if that requires failing in order to progress. If you don't try, you won't learn. If you don't learn, you don't gain the necessary skills and experience that will drive your confidence. Even if you don't know where to start, begin with an honest conversation.

Imagine if Katrina – as an example – sat down with these two colleagues and said: "This has been keeping me up at night, and while I'm not sure about the best way to resolve this, we're going to start by talking about what's working and what's not." While people appreciate honesty, it also demonstrates a commitment to meeting the issue head-on, and

regardless of the outcome, it will be a learning experience that drives your learning and, therefore, your confidence.

### **Use your Support Network:**

Start with your boss to get support. If your boss exhibits the leadership skills of Michael Scott, then who else do you have in your network who could provide you with some clarity or ideas on how to approach it? Often the value of working with a coach is giving leaders an outside perspective without the bias. Or use your digital network. The internet is filled with resources on specific topics to ignite ideas on how to address your situation.

### **Question Period: Key Questions to Drive Your Confidence**

- What's truly holding you back?
- What's the worst thing that happens?
- Who could support you with this?

### **Solution #2: Small Wins = Big Gains**

Whether you're faced with non-stop office fires, sweeping organizational changes or an underperforming team, too many of my clients are stuck on the hamster wheel. They go around and around, with no change or exit in sight. Every day feels the same: busy, but with no sense of accomplishment. The result is overwhelm and decision paralysis.

#### **Take Cindy's case:**

Cindy leads a small team. Within a week, her only two employees left the company at the same time. Not only did Cindy have to pick up their work as well as her own, she also had to recruit for these roles. She didn't know what to prioritize and felt paralyzed at work. She was in complete overwhelm mode. Her confidence plummeted.

When proverbial brown stuff hits the fan, it's hard to see past it.

That's where Small Wins can have a huge impact.

Small Wins means taking whatever challenge you're hit with and focusing on what you can do – today. Stop being consumed by your task list. Instead, tackle what will have the greatest impact and move yourself one step closer to a larger solution or outcome.

When we begin to string together small wins, it makes the larger goal seem less daunting and generates the necessary momentum and confidence for us to continue moving forward towards our goal.

Easier said than done when you're hit with a tough situation, though, isn't it?

With that, here are some ways to build confidence through Small Wins:

### Identify what's in your control. And what's not:

Look at what's in front of you, identify what you can (versus can't) manage and what you can action. Dump the rest.

By letting go of those out-of-your-control items, you're freeing up your energy and headspace to move forward. If Cindy is focused on "What if no one applies for the position? What if I burn out? How will I get two new employees up to speed?", then she won't have the mental firepower to construct a killer talent attraction process or build a kick-ass onboarding process. So why waste energy worrying about the unknowns? Instead, get perspective on what you're trying to achieve, and your best way to pursue it.

### Ask: what can I get done right now?

Rather than trying to complete an enormous task or solve a tough situation all in one hit (or doing absolutely nothing because you feel you don't have the confidence to move forward), shift your focus. Instead, break the Big Job down into smaller tasks. Do a brain dump. Make a to-do list – a real one, not the 17-item list on your desk. Set your sights on the immediate future and string together small victories. These smaller steps generate momentum and will make you feel more confident about what you're doing and the progress you're making.

### Question Period: Key Questions to Drive Your Confidence

- What's within your control?
- What's not within your control?
- What would you do if there were no barriers?
- What's one thing you can start with today?

### Solution #3: Get Out Of Your Head: Re-framing the Situation

*"Problems cannot be solved with the same mindset that created them." – Albert Einstein*

How many times has something great happened at work, but you manage to focus on the one thing that didn't go as planned?

It's easy to focus on the negative and it can crush our confidence – especially if we feel embarrassed or ashamed about what happened.

No matter how hard we work or how successful we are, we're going to have setbacks that impact our confidence.

## Take Eli's Case:

My client, Eli, was new to the company, and doing incredible things with the organization and his team. During a coaching session, he described an interaction with his CEO that was less than perfect. He was beating himself up over this single exchange. Meanwhile, in the same conversation, he had shared four positive things that HE was responsible for yet he was dwelling on one not-so-great interaction with his CEO.

Warranted or not, his confidence took a big hit. Eli started to question the strength of his relationship with the CEO and his value to the company, and he couldn't get past it.

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We're often harder on ourselves than anyone else, so how do we take a refreshed look at things so we can be at our best?

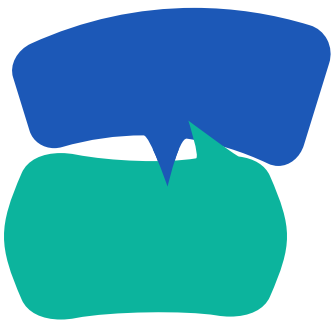
That's when we need to re-frame.

Re-framing allows us to see a situation with a fresh perspective. Re-framing requires us to see things through a new lens, often initiated by questions that challenge traditional thinking when something goes awry. It ultimately grounds us.

## ***Here are some ways to re-frame a situation and gain back your confidence:***

### Would you call a friend stupid?

Brené Brown points out how we would never think to call our peers or subordinates 'stupid', but we'll quickly say it to ourselves. If you're beating yourself up, question whether you'd talk to a friend, colleague or family member in this same way. Likely not. So why are you listening to this negative self-talk? Instead, give yourself a break. Practice self-compassion and counter any negativity and doubt with a positive talk track.



### Get a Fresh (and Unbiased) Perspective.

One way you're going to get through this is to talk with someone else you trust, and preferably someone with an unbiased view. That can be a mentor, peer or executive coach. Get a fresh perspective and unique insight on the situation. Have them say it back to you in their own words. Chances are you'll hear it differently a second time. And if you don't have someone to bounce it off, then ask what you would say to someone who brought the same situation to you.

When my client re-played the entire conversation with his CEO back to me, guess what? It wasn't really that bad. It was obvious he was dwelling on a particular part of the discussion and it was clouding not only the entire conversation, but the whole relationship. The hit to his confidence was founded in, well, not much. He was able to recover and address his concern with the CEO directly in the next conversation, actually deepening the relationship, and certainly boosting his confidence. But only because he was able to think about it differently (i.e. re-frame his thinking of the situation).

## Question Period: Key Questions to Drive Your Confidence

- What does that entire picture look like?
- Am I focusing on the 10% that's negative?
- Who is someone I trust who I can talk it out with?
- I get that this sucks, but where's the silver lining?
- What possibilities now exist because of this?

## Final Thoughts

So there you have it – three ways you can build your confidence as a leader: lean into new experiences, generate small wins, and re-frame.

Tying in these practical strategies into your everyday work life will help build your confidence throughout your leadership journey.

I wish you well in your leadership.

## ABOUT JEFF LUCIER

Jeff Lucier is the founder of Catylyst Leadership Development & Consulting and believes deeply in the power of leadership. He is passionate about partnering with those navigating the challenging, yet fulfilling leadership journey, while helping leaders and organizations prepare for their future. Service offerings include Executive and Leadership Coaching, Leadership Development and Millennial Leadership.

Jeff is a Certified HR Leader (CHRL) through the HR Professional Association (HRPA). He earned his Master of Science in Management, a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, a Post-Grad Certificate in HR Management, and is a Certified Executive Coach (CEC) through Royal Roads University. With over a decade of experience working as an HR Professional, Executive Coach and Consultant, Jeff has partnered with leaders of all levels across multiple industries.

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