



The Signature Voice

the quarterly newsletter for clients and friends of Isis Associates

Confidence: Can You Build It?

Confidence – we all want it. And, we all look for it in others, especially those in positions of leadership. Yet, time and time again, I encounter executives who do not feel confident nor exude confidence to others. (I also encounter those who are overly confident - to the point that they are blinded by it - but that is a topic for another article!) What these executives fail to realize is that what makes you confident in one situation will not necessarily have the same effect under different circumstances. Therefore, external circumstances cannot dictate one's confidence. Otherwise, your confidence feels like a loose piece of newspaper on a windy day - - swirling every which way depending on the force and direction of the wind. So, the real question is: "What builds a leader's confidence?" The answer lies in the three primary confidence-builders: Facts, Focus, and Faith.

Face the Facts: The starting point for building confidence in a difficult situation is to face the **facts**. A review of one's past accomplishments and professional track record typically shows that successes far outweigh failures. One need only look at a Tiger Woods to reinforce that idea – do any of his tour losses undermine his phenomenal track record? No – his record speaks for itself. Likewise, executives have track records with successes, and more importantly, with failures that they endured.

Take for example, an executive whom I coached at a global marketing services firm– we'll call him James. Having recently been promoted to a Vice-President position, James found himself facing new challenges: turning around a low-morale staff, driving new strategic initiatives, and rebuilding the reputation of his department. In addition, he now had a whole new set of relationships to manage given his position including being part of the executive team and being frequently sought after for advice by the CEO. "I often feel like I am going to 'get caught' - - that someone is going to realize that they made a mistake by promoting me into this position," said James at one of our coaching meetings. When James stepped into the executive suite, his confidence leapt out the window. After taking inventory of the various promotions that he had received throughout his career, James realized that he had successfully faced new, albeit different, challenges before. His success track record served as a basis of fact against the uncertainty he currently felt regarding his ability to excel in his new role.

Focus: With a track record as the foundation, it is helpful to **focus** on one's strengths to build confidence. Research shows that most people are very strong in a few competencies, weak in several others and average in the majority of skills. Rather than trying to be perfect at everything, successful leaders primarily focus on leveraging their strengths and closely managing their "average" and "weaker" areas. With the help of a 360 assessment, James accepted that he was not going to be great at everything (nor did anyone expect him to be). He recognized that his strengths in "managing others" and "creating vision" would be key contributing factors to his success in his role. By focusing on his contributions, James grew more confident that he could accomplish some of the challenges ahead.

Faith: It is not by chance that the Latin root of the word confidence is "*con fide*" which translates into "with faith". Ultimately, **faith** is a belief in the unseen. Leaders are called to create vision and change for the future out of uncertainty – fundamentally, they operate on a level of faith that gives purpose and strength to the path that they carve out for their organizations. James's fear of failing obstructed his ability to step out on the faith he needed to believe he could succeed in this role despite the newness of it all. By shifting his attention to the excitement of building, creating and leading something new, he tapped into a deeper purpose for his role beyond his own day-to-day successes and challenges. His confidence in the future gave him the ability to accept his place as Vice President and make the impact that he had been asked to make.

Confidence is a constant practice of building – especially as one's circumstance change. By tapping into a blend of Facts, Focus and Faith, you can continuously strengthen your confidence to prepare you for the next level. And when that next challenge comes your way, do not be surprised that others remark, "You are so confident - - how do you do it?"

- Muriel Maignan Wilkins

Quarterly Reflection: From Fear to Confidence

While a cliché of sorts, there is truth in the saying “confidence starts from within”. Ultimately, confidence is the counter to the fears we face including those that surface in our work lives - - fear of failure, fear of change, fear of inadequacy. The following comes from Marianne Williamson, a renowned author and lecturer in the area of personal change and growth. While written from a spiritual context, it is a message with wide reaching leadership application regardless of one’s own spiritual orientation.

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

Reflection Questions:

1. Think of a particular challenging situation or circumstances in which you lack confidence. What fear is obstructing your confidence in this situation?
2. What facts do you have from your past, which show how you have overcome similar, albeit, not the identical challenges?
3. What can your strengths contribute to working through the situation?
4. What will you need to believe, even though it does not yet exist or you cannot see it (faith), to make you feel more confident about the situation?

Quarterly Book Selection: Walking in this World

What dog-eared, highlight-filled books are on our bookshelves that we find ourselves turning to time and time again and frequently recommending to others? Here’s our book selection for this quarter:

“It serves us to consciously find windows to the world of wonder...the imagination is not linear. It needs to step beyond ordinary time and space.” In this inspirational book, Julia Cameron offers a 12-week adventure into expanding our creative capacities. In today’s competitive marketplace, creativity is a critical competency to develop – whether to drive innovation in our organizations, expand our strategic vision, or nourish our weary spirits. Leaders who differentiate themselves from others “see” futures that other’s cannot, seize possibilities, and demonstrate resilience in the face of ambiguity and rapid change. Scientific research now recognizes the two hemispheres of the brain. For many, our professional lives leverage the left side known for its sequential and logical deductions. But it’s the right side – our creative brain – that sees the “bigger picture”, is known for its visual and spatial adeptness, and makes critical connections between parts to the whole – all skills which higher levels of leadership demand. Cameron’s book – fluid and lyrical in its prose – carries the reader away from the linear world of time and day-to-day management – and opens the door to “discovering a sense” of things such as proportion, momentum, discernment, resilience, and authenticity. Through her vivid descriptions of the creative process by which great artists, writers, and musicians create – we learn their powerful tools and practices to unleash our own creative capabilities. By the book’s end, you will not only have uncovered new possibilities for your team or organization, but are also likely to have rediscovered old childhood passions, which strike at the core and renew your overall spirit and energy.

From the Coach's Corner: "Working Smarter with a PATH"

From the Client:

"I have been recently promoted to my group's director with increased managerial responsibilities and work scope. The promotion is something I have worked towards for some time – but now that it is here, I feel constantly behind and overwhelmed by the sheer number of items on my plate. There does not seem to be enough time in the day to accomplish everything on my never ending to-do list and working longer hours is taking a toll on my family and me. What can I do to work smarter and more efficiently versus just working more hours to compensate for the increased responsibilities? I really want to do well in this position as my long term career goal is to be part of senior management."

From the Coach's Corner:

First of all, congratulations on the new position. When reaching a significant milestone like this, don't forget to acknowledge yourself for the accomplishment. Reflecting on and integrating our successes leads to greater self-confidence and capacity for taking on higher levels of work. In addition to managing our emotional fitness for the new role, we can also work smarter by strategically and tactically carving a "critical path" through the mountain of to-do's, tasks, and responsibilities in the new role. Senior leaders have cultivated their abilities to "path" their own work effectively and ultimately help others on their team do the same.

Prioritize: The first step in pathing is to prioritize – making clear distinctions among your perceived to-do's and assessing which ones are of highest importance. Start by writing down everything you feel is swimming in your mind. Then, create a screen to filter the list. What will your screen be? Items that have highest impact on the business? Those with the greatest tie to the strategic priorities of your firm? Generating new business development to hit your numbers? After this first screen, then consider the immediacy of the task. Many clients are shocked to find they spend a disproportionate amount of time on "fire-fighting", immediate, non-vital, low impact items versus taking steps to move forward longer term, significant projects.

Act: Next, gain momentum along your critical path by keeping an eye towards the "next action" to take for each of your priorities. When clients show me their to-do lists, I immediately notice those written in non-actionable formats. The item "strategic partnership with Dell" is too big, covering too large a time frame for a weekly action list – this inevitably leads to overwhelm and frustration. Instead, consider the next critical action in moving the project forward – i.e. "Schedule meeting with legal to review Dell contract". By articulating concrete, actionable steps each week, you ensure time spent on clearly defining work scope and managing resources and timing more tightly.

Time "Chunking": Working smarter, also means developing an instinct for matching tasks against time – too often, we inappropriately try to "squeeze in" working on high priority work right before a meeting with 5 minutes to spare. Consider how you schedule your day. Do you have meetings at 9, 11:00, and 3:00pm breaking up the flow of your entire day? One of the most successful executives I know intentionally schedules herself in a way which creates blocks of work time at the end of her day – 3:30-5:00 to work on her most important priorities or to think about the strategy and big picture for her group. Another client, a morning person, attempts to keep 7:30-9:00am for himself. A 1.5-hour work chunk is optimal for those priorities requiring high mental concentration, focus, and energy.

Hindsight: Sharpening our abilities to critical path – prioritizing, acting, and time "chunking" – comes from consciously reflecting back on our previous work successes and failures – and noting key learnings from each situation. At the end of key deliverables, ask yourself, given the outcomes, how well did I prioritize? What would I have prioritized differently or will the next time around? What action steps were most impactful or significant in moving the project forward? How did I manage my time – what time chunks best maximize my mental focus, concentration or energy levels? Use hindsight to your advantage – leverage your past to work smarter in the future.

- Amy Jen Su

If you have a particular challenge or question you would like for us to address, feel free to email it to us at info@isisassociates.com.