

BUILDING OUR SELF-CONFIDENCE

INTRODUCTION

In my work I see time and again, leaders, even very senior leaders, worry about their abilities to handle certain situations. In some cases, these leaders label themselves as lacking self-confidence or gravitas, or presence or as imposters (see reference list at the end of this article for my piece on Imposter Syndrome).

“You can learn how to grow your specific self-confidence”

It is critical that we don't attach to these labels because they tend to become self-fulfilling prophesies. For example, for the vast majority of us, “imposter syndrome is what growth feels like”. The same is true of self-confidence. If we start labelling ourselves as lacking self-confidence, eventually we will live up to (or in this case, perhaps down to) the label. We need to remind ourselves that a lack of self-confidence in certain situations is perfectly normal and remember that we have successfully overcome these feelings in the past and gone on to success. We also need to remember that deliberately chasing general self-confidence (a term I explain below) is like chasing the pot of gold at the end of the proverbial rainbow; the harder we search the more elusive it becomes.

That said, we do want to have higher levels of self-confidence in specific situations because research has shown that it impacts our motivation, our perceptions and our thought patterns, and ultimately it affects our performance. Those with higher self-confidence tend to “work harder in approaching a task and exert more effort while at it, they will keep at the task longer without feedback and will stick to it longer in the face of problems and difficulties. Self-confidence helps us see situations as less threatening and less fearful, and by its nature helps us believe that we will be able to cope with the threats or our fears as they arise”².

CONFUSING DEFINITIONS

Part of the challenge in tackling a topic like confidence and more specifically, self-confidence, is that people use different definitions, some of which are overlapping, while other definitions that are used interchangeably, are distinctly different. Most researchers agree that self-confidence is our belief in our ability to successfully handle challenges and accomplish what we set out to do. It's how certain we feel about our capabilities and skills when facing different situations and demands^{2,3,4,5}.

Definitions

- *Specific Self-Confidence:* Belief in our ability to perform a specific task in a specific situation. Can be learned and developed
- *General Self-Confidence:* Belief about our ability to do well irrespective of the task or situation. Stable and resistant to change
- *Self-Esteem:* A judgement of self-worth, how much we like ourselves and independent of self-confidence

To confuse things further some talk about self-efficacy. While not identical to self-confidence, it is related, sufficiently so that in this article, I will use the term self-confidence to mean both.

In addition, self-confidence is further distinguished into ‘general / generalised’ or ‘specific/task-specific’ self-confidence. It is here that we need to tread with caution...as these two dimensions are quite different.

Specific Self-Confidence: Specific (sometimes called task-specific) self-confidence is our beliefs and feelings about our ability to do a *specific task in a specific situation* that we are facing at a *particular point in time*. For example, we may feel quite self-confident in completing a complex analysis of a particular problem, but not self-confident at all about presenting our findings to a Board or senior leadership team – we have specific self-confidence in one setting but not in the other. It is important to remember that there are very few people who are confident in every area of life².

Specific self-confidence is not stable; it is a changing mental and emotional state, associated with the task at hand. We update or alter our specific self-confidence level after each new experience³ which means it can change over time and as you will see in later sections of this article, we can take steps to build/strengthen our specific self-confidence.

General Self-Confidence: On the other hand, general or generalised self-confidence has to do with our beliefs and judgments about our ability to do well *irrespective* of the task or context. This kind of self-confidence develops early in our lives, within the context of our families and other social environments. These early childhood self-assessments become part of our personalities³. Think of it as an aggregate of lots of specific self-confidences. Multiple researchers suggest that general self-confidence is stable over time and resistant to change^{3,6}.

To bring the distinction to life, think of general self-confidence as being confident about surviving a natural disaster or an epidemic or fighting a war – highly useful in evolutionarily new and novel, non-recurring situations, whereas specific self-confidence is more useful when it comes to performing everyday familiar and recurring tasks or problems⁶, like those that we face most often in our organisations. In fact, "specific self-confidence has a stronger effect on our behaviour compared to general self-confidence"⁶.

For this reason and because task-specific self-confidence can be learned/improved, it is the focus of this article.

General Self-Confidence versus Self-Esteem: Before we leave the idea of general self-confidence, I want to clear up one fallacy, the confusion between general self-confidence and self-esteem. "Self-esteem is a judgement of self-worth, how much we like ourselves"² "across a wide variety of different situations"⁷. The factors that determine self-esteem are different from those of self-confidence and the confusion between them has resulted in widespread misunderstanding of the role that each play in everyday life"².

Mixing these two very different constructs can lead to people mistakenly assuming that self-confidence is an in-born personality trait (fixed and immutable) as opposed to a personality state (fluid and changeable) and that therefore they cannot do anything about their self-confidence². This in turns leads to people trying out strategies that don't work. Returning to the person in example above, their self-esteem can remain unaffected even though they are confident in complex analysis but feel less confident presenting to senior leadership⁷.

SOURCES OF SPECIFIC SELF-CONFIDENCE

There are four sources that influence the outcome of our efforts to build our specific self-confidence^{2,7,8}.

1. *Mastery Experiences* – in other words "we have done it before". We have tackled this situation previously and succeeded and so feel more confident faced with the same situation again⁷. "If we can conceive of ability as an incremental skill, we tend to spend more time diagnosing the task and are less prone to the negative impact of failures..." If on the other hand we view "ability as a given entity then we will likely see mistakes as indicative of intellectual (in)capacity, which may imply lack of personal control"⁷.
2. *Vicarious Experiences* – or more simply put "we have seen others perform the same or similar task and succeed". This is most influential with others who possess (in our view) qualities relevant to the setting that are like our own⁷.
3. *Verbal or Social persuasion*. Someone else who we respect and trust, has convinced us to execute on our goal⁷. This source relies on us believing that we have what it takes, or can develop it, and that the persuasion from the other is credible and realistic⁸.
4. *Our emotional and physical state*. Noticing our own emotional state and managing it is important – feelings like pride and excitement can have a positive impact, while feelings of anxiety, threat, exhaustion or fatigue can be a hindrance^{2,8} which we may incorrectly ascribe to lack of ability².

Sources

- *Mastery Experiences:* "I have done it before"
- *Vicarious Experiences:* "I have seen someone else do it who isn't that different to me"
- *Verbal or Social Persuasion:* "Someone I trust has convinced me to try to do it"
- *Emotional and Physical State:* "Feelings of pride and excitement"

Before talking about a plan to develop self-confidence, it should be noted of the above, that "not all experiences are equal. We need 'challenging enough' experiences; ones that cause us to stretch while still providing a reasonable chance of success. The same experience over and over, or success that is too easy gives us little new data producing minimal learning or increase in confidence"².

A MODEL FOR DEVELOPING SPECIFIC SELF-CONFIDENCE

Let's look at how our specific self-confidence is built. At the highest level it is developed through small self-reinforcing positive cycles, that follow a pattern very similar to most behavioural change: take a small risk toward a specific goal, succeed in that goal, and repeat with a slightly more challenging goal².

Specific self-confidence is a quality over which we have considerable control, built from our assessment of our ability to perform a certain task; it is not an overarching evaluation of oneself such as self-esteem².

Let's tackle some practical ideas for enhancing our specific self-confidence. The model I offer below integrates research from various authors, to which I have added my own experience derived from more than ten years of coaching senior executives across a wide range of roles, organisations, industries and seniorities.

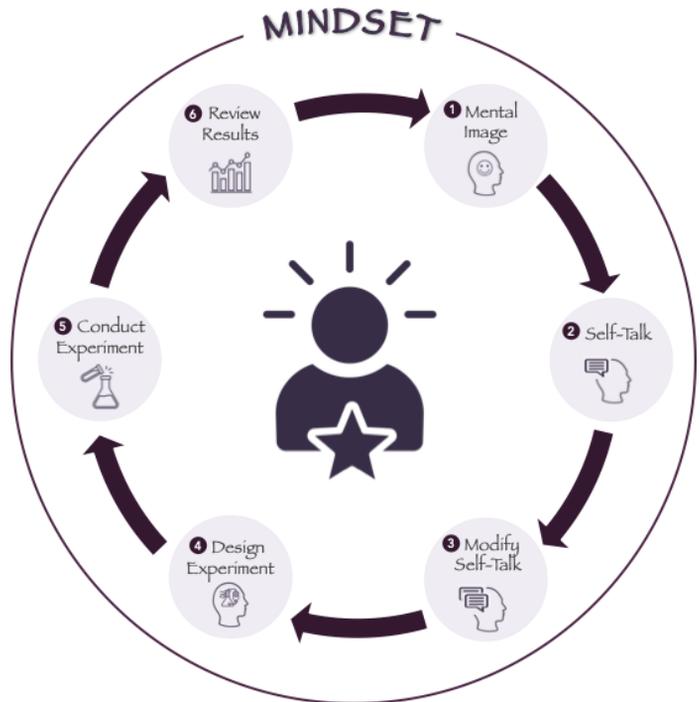
Let me start with a caveat. There are people who don't feel self-confident in **any** situation, at work or outside of it; if that is you, I recommend seeking professional support to help you change the belief systems which are negatively impacting your life and likely your performance.

MINDSET

For the rest of us, we start with asking ourselves the question: 'Can intelligence, personality and character be continuously developed, such that our true potential is unknown and unknowable; or is our potential is determined at birth and therefore our intelligence, personality and character is inherent and static?'

To be able to positively influence your specific self-confidence, you need to believe in the former; you need to have what Carol Dweck calls a growth mindset⁹. If your answer is 'it depends' then I suggest you are in growth mindset at least some of the time and that is a good start.

As it relates to specific self-confidence, we need to believe that 'it is a skill that I can learn, just like I



Development of Specific Self-Confidence

have learned to [insert another skill that I have successfully developed]'. 'I can learn to be more self-confident in [insert specific situations]'. This headspace is important because it influences our performance and how we process the results of our efforts towards achieving the goals we set for ourselves.

This positive mental space is important at all times, namely before engaging in activities to increase our specific self-confidence, during the efforts we undertake to build our specific self-confidence, and again afterwards to help us analyse the results of our efforts, hence why the model pictured above is enclosed in a circle labelled 'mindset'. On the next two pages, I have laid out the headlines of each step; please contact me if you are interested to understand the detail of each step and/or would like support as you seek to build your own specific self-confidence.



1 Mental Image

Interestingly the brain doesn't distinguish between our imagining ourselves doing an action and actually doing it, so imagining ourselves as the self-confident version we want to be is a good starting point¹⁰. In this step we:

- *Describe what we are like when we are self-confident:* How do we behave and how do we feel in those moments?
- *Visualise our future self-confident version:* How do we *want* to behave in the specific situation that is our target for increasing our self-confidence.



2 Self-Talk

So often, our best efforts to change how we behave are sabotaged by what I describe as our internal narratives. These are the stories that we tell ourselves about how we *should* behave in any given situation which we have come to regard as truths, when in fact they are assumptions; assumptions that can be changed¹¹. They are our self-talk; "what we covertly tell ourselves"¹², and these thought patterns "are habitual ways of thinking.... both negative and positive chains of thought that affect emotional and behavioural reactions...that flow in relatively consistently repeated patterns when triggered by specific circumstances"¹².

Our internalised sentences are quite illogical and unrealistic when viewed through the dispassionate lens of an external observer. We often know that too, but we feel stuck. We can't simply say to ourselves, my beliefs are irrational and therefore I will be more self-confident; instead, we have to understand *when* these self-defeating beliefs occur and practice replacing them with "more rational and less self-defeating sentences"¹². The good news is that with deliberate and sustained practice we can alter our internal dialogue, minimising or even removing the barrier(s) to becoming more self-confident in a specific situation.

In this step we identify:

- *Our 'red light situations':* These are the situations in which our self-confidence is either under threat or vanishes completely and our not-so self-confident version emerges.
- *Our current behaviour:* How do we behave in these settings? What happens, how do we respond? What is the self-talk that is taking place in our head? What underlying assumptions are we making?



3 Modify Self-Talk

What we say to ourselves about ourselves at any given moment is based on our underlying assumptions. Think of them as our personal operating system that provides the playbook for how we think about and behave in any given situation. These behavioural patterns, that have been reinforced over the years, are deeply wired into our brain and direct our actions often below the level of consciousness.

The brain consumes an enormous amount of energy – more than would be attributed to it by virtue of its size relative to other organs in our body. To conserve this energy demand for things that are new, novel, complex etc. the brain puts as much as it can into auto-pilot: Think about times when you have driven home from work (a routine and often repeated task) and wanted to go the supermarket on the way (not part of the normal routine) and then find yourself pulling into your driveway – supermarket forgotten.

To disrupt these patterns and change our self-talk requires conscious and sustained effort, but with practice, it can be done. So, in step 3 we:

- *Test our assumptions:* We challenge whether the assumptions we identified are 100% true 100% of the time? Often what we discover is that maybe there *are* some situations where our assumptions are true, but usually they are not universally true. Seeing this distinction can open up a whole range of possibilities for us to experiment with and, as a result of that experimentation, shift our perspective.
- *Develop new scripts:* We take the unhelpful sentences that we tell ourselves – and create different, more helpful and more accurate sentences that are more closely aligned with how our self-confident version would behave. In other words, we update our personal playbook.

Interestingly research has demonstrated that self-talk is most effective when we address ourselves by our given names in our internal thoughts and directives (known as self-distancing). Avoiding the pronouns 'I' and 'me' helps distance us emotionally so that we can focus on the task, working through our thoughts and feelings to rationally compare the needs of the situation with our known aptitude and skills².

“Self-distancing enhances people's ability to regulate their thoughts, feelings and behaviour under social stress, and leads them to appraise social anxiety provoking events in less threatening terms”¹³



4 Design Experiment

Next, we “initiate action”¹⁴; we design an experiment that moves us out of our comfort zone; the place where we do things that are familiar and that don't require a lot of risk.

The key here (as with all behavioural change) is to keep the experiments small and manageable, able to be executed quickly, and unlikely to generate disastrous consequences if they don't go well – in other words, stretching but not too much¹⁵. The aim of these experiments is not to solve the problem – doing them once successfully won't suddenly make us more self-confident in that area, rather they are designed to gather information on what happens if we behave in a way that challenges our assumptions. Kegan and Lahey's (2009) Immunity to Change¹⁵ is a great read on the methodology behind this approach.

In this step, we:

- *Design our experiment:* We start with one of our assumptions and we design an experiment focused on seeing what happens if we behave in a way that is opposite to our usual behaviour. We start small and in a relatively safe space, before attempting a more challenging version.
- *Prime ourselves:* Priming is a technique common to psychological practices – saying something out loud to ourselves or writing it down on a piece of paper that others can't see or writing it on a post-it note and having it visible during a virtual meeting. The practice brings to our conscious awareness the thing that we are trying to practice and in so doing, increases the likelihood that we will actually do it.
- *Create 'get out of jail free' cards:* This is a reference to the old game “Monopoly” and can be thought of as ‘free passes’. Part of the challenge with our assumptions and self-talk is that they are so deeply ingrained within us, we are saying or doing something before we have even have the time to think about it. Part of the key to interrupting this pattern is to create a ‘circuit breaker’. To quote Victor Frankl “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” Get out of jail free cards give us words to say in a variety of situations and help us open up that space.
- *Identify and request support:* One of the sources of self-confidence comes from vicarious experiences, noticing and modelling our behaviour on others. We need to pick someone who is similar to us in personal characteristics and general experience but behaves in the way that we would like to. Seeing them achieve their goals through effort and persistence can be a powerful source of inspiration and motivation. Another source of support can come from asking someone we trust to give us honest and constructive feedback, asking them to observe us as we conduct our experiment. This is another form of priming and can be an effective motivator for trialling the new behaviour.
- *Mentally rehearse:* As we saw above, the brain doesn't really distinguish mental rehearsal from the actual event. This approach is used in many different training scenarios from defence force or emergency services personnel mentally rehearsing how they need to respond in various situations, to giving a speech or conducting a difficult performance conversation. We visualise ourselves in the situation that we have chosen and play it out in detail in our minds. “Anxiety, or stress, negatively influences our self-beliefs about our ability to cope, so managing anxiety is an important way to increase self-confidence in anxiety prone situations. We can mitigate the anxiety by rehearsing the event in our imagination ... over time, this builds confidence that we can cope with many kinds of stressors”².



5 Conduct Experiment

Finally, it is time to conduct our experiment, remembering that its purpose is not to solve, rather it is to gather data in a setting where you are behaving differently from your typical pattern.

In this penultimate step, we:

- *Monitor our physical and emotional state:* To the extent that we can, we need to monitor our emotional and physical state. “We tend to interpret our physical symptoms as indicators of our competence. Thus, managing our emotions in our physical output can help improve our self-confidence for various tasks”². Simply pausing and breathing (though often difficult to do in the moment) can help soothe our nervous system, as can noting down something (it need not be what the other person has said, it might be your mantra), or picking up your pen, or taking a drink of water. Remember the purpose is not to add more content to the conversation, it is to create a space for your thinking brain to come online, to come back to a better equilibrium and give you half a chance to practice with some of your new approaches and self-talk.
- *Adopt the observer vantage point:* Part of the challenge in difficult situations is that we get caught in and buffeted by the waves in the conversation, we become more reactive, our thinking brain starts to go offline, and our assumptions get themselves back into the driver’s seat. One technique to help slow down this cascade is to adopt the observer vantage point. This narration can decrease the emotional valency of the interaction and keep us grounded without losing the thread of conversation.



6 Review Results

Our interpretation of information about our past performances “has the strongest and most lasting effect on our self confidence, for better or worse ... so it is only insofar as we credit *ourselves*, rather than external agencies, with our successes, that our memories of the experiences contribute, over time, to a robust sense of self-confidence”². So, we need to be careful with the analysis of our performance during our experiments.

As stated earlier, mindset wraps the process described above—a belief at the outset that specific self-confidence is a skill that we can build or enhance with practice. When it comes to evaluating our efforts, our mindset needs to be self-compassionate. Too often, our inner critic gives us a report card and uses words that we would never dream of saying out loud to others, especially those that we care about. That is not to say that we should gloss over areas where we didn’t do as well as we wanted or that there isn’t room to improve, rather the voice needs to be more like ‘we are practising with new behaviour patterns; no-one gets it right first time’. Think about the fact that if it ‘works’ even 25% of the time, we will be considerably ahead of where we were—and on the road towards a more self-confident persona.

Once we have reviewed the results, we consult our mental image of the self-confident version of ourselves and if necessary, make modifications or updates.

Rinse and repeat

When changing difficult behaviour patterns and beliefs (and building specific self-confidence fits squarely into that category) it is never one and done. Remember, lasting change takes time: We need to repeat our experiments, at least 30 minutes practice every week for 10-12 weeks until we have developed our new way of being in that setting.

As we develop self-confidence in one setting, we modify the experimental design (based on the data we have gathered) and run another experiment, extending it to more challenging settings. Throughout this part of the process, we need to be alert to the following:

- The first experiment can seem easier than the second because of the momentum built up through the process of uncovering our assumptions, designing new behaviours and trying out a new way of showing up.
- Alternatively, it can be the hardest because we are testing an assumption that we have believed to be true for a long time. It can feel decidedly uncomfortable to challenge our thinking in this situation.

- We may find that the second experiment is the hardest because we have lost momentum, perhaps feeling that ‘daily life’ has got in the way.
- Alternatively, we may find that our first experiment went really well. In this case, it is tempting to think ‘we are done’ and not undertake any more experiments. This is a fallacy. No single experiment is likely to be conclusive; we need more than one. It is the cumulative weight of several tests that begins to shift our behaviours and belief patterns.

As we build specific self-confidence in one area, it will enable us “to go beyond the comfort zone barriers to consider pursuing new challenges [in other areas] ... it helps to overcome self-doubt by enabling us to understand that taking risks can lead to successful goal achievement¹⁴.

Finally, gradually over time as we successfully conduct experiments across different situations we can also positively influence our general self-confidence, such that we may feel more self-confident in tackling a situation that we have never experienced before.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Specific self-confidence is a skill that we can learn/enhance as long as we start with the mindset that our intelligence, personality and character can be continuously developed and that they are not traits that we are born with that can’t be changed. As general self-confidence is really the sum of lots of specific self-confidences, I would also suggest that over time we can positively impact our general self-confidence. There are multiple sources from which we can draw specific self-confidence, and the model described in this article offers practical tools and strategies to enhance our self-confidence in our target area.

As with all things related to behaviour change, success breeds success and even a small positive shift opens up many possibilities that were not open to us previously.

If you are interested in finding out more or would like support in working through the model to build your own self-confidence, please don’t hesitate to contact me via the details below.

“We learn from our successes rather than our failures”¹²

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NOTES:

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