

Confidence is contagious – how to catch the bug and spread it to your employees

Do you have confidence? Or do you look at seemingly confident colleagues with a sense of envy? Perhaps you worry that a lack of confidence is holding you back at work and in your personal life? The good news is that confidence is contagious - you can catch (and spread) the confidence bug.

Research suggests that we mix up confidence and competence. We make an assumption that someone who speaks and acts with confidence must know what they are doing. We place our trust in the confident doctor; we are unnerved by the doctor who appears to lack conviction. In simulated job interviews, confidence has been found to be a more successful strategy than modesty, and people making stock market choices have been shown to prefer confident financial advisors. The truth is that confidence is contagious and if we are confident in ourselves, then others are more likely to trust in our abilities.

The good kind of bug

What makes confidence the kind of bug that we want to catch? Confidence propels us forward, enabling us to try new things, to step into new experiences,

to stretch, to grow. Confidence increases our odds of success – thinking that we can do something is often self-fulfilling, and confidence gives us access to more opportunities because we back ourselves and say yes.

How to catch the confidence bug

Let's suppose that you're convinced of the benefits of confidence – you can see how it acts as fuel for life, opening up opportunities and increasing your chances of success. Great. So you'll just choose to be more confident then, right? Unfortunately, it's not quite that easy. Confidence isn't always easy to find, and it doesn't always stick around – it comes and goes. So what can you do to grow your self-belief, how can you set out to catch the confidence bug?

This is a sizable question which could have a sizable answer, but for the sake of brevity, I'll offer 3 key to-do's:

1. Be brave. There's a paradox that in order to build confidence, we must push ourselves to take action without it. It's the repeated experience of acting, learning and progressing – in spite of our self-doubt – that grows our confidence over time. Seek out opportunities to step beyond what you're comfortable with.
2. Befriend your inner critic. You know that voice in your head that sometimes tells you that you're going to look like an idiot? That's your inner critic, and he (or she) lies to you all the time. Try giving your inner critic a name – it's a way to put some distance between what they say and your sense of self. Saying "Oh, Margaret is off again with her predictions of doom" helps to diminish the impact of the inner critic's harsh words.
3. Do a strengths audit. Write the sentence starter 'When I'm at my best, I...' at the top of a piece of paper and then fill the sheet with as many ways as you can think of to finish that sentence. When you think you've finished, pick up your pen again and add at least two more points. Now read your strengths back to yourself – ideally out loud – and consciously try to absorb the words as truths.

How to spread it

As a leader, your job goes beyond catching the confidence bug – you also need to spread it within your team, burnishing team members' self-belief. This is another meaty topic that I'll distill into 3 things to try:

1. Stretch them just enough. This is about helping your team members to be brave. Challenge them with assignments that they see as just beyond their capability and then offer your support as they gather their courage

- and push themselves to tackle this new and scary thing.
2. Help them to see their own achievements. Invite them to write a really long list of achievements over the past month – a long list of successes, big and small. Then ask them to take you through their list, lingering long enough to really encourage them to take ownership of each success and to recognise the skills and capabilities that enabled them to achieve it.
 3. Tell them (clearly and frequently) what you value about their contribution. Take the time to give specific, positive feedback, and vary the mechanic that you use – the occasional voice note, text or email is great because it's something that they can come back to multiple times. And if something doesn't go well? Support your team member to pull out the learnings and to avoid the trap of black and white thinking – rarely is anything either a 100% success or a 100% failure.

Team contagion

There's another form of confidence contagion, one which sparks a collective power in teams. This contagion is when seeing your confidence leads me to feel more confident in myself: 'If you feel confident in this thing we're about to do together, then I feel confident too.' We've already looked at how confidence can increase our odds of individual success, so it's easy to imagine how this multiplying up of confidence can be transformative for a team.

The simplest thing that you can do to spark this collective power? Convey positivity and optimism. Not wild delusion, but grounded optimism. This is particularly powerful when you're facing a new challenge as a team. Your reports will take their cues from you, and your confidence (or lack of it) will strongly influence the level of collective belief. Tell them: "I haven't got a clue how we're going to do this, but I know it can be done, and I know we'll find a way." Then watch as confidence grows, along with the creativity, energy and commitment that will be needed to make your words a reality.

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