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A Matter of Confidence

This crucial leadership trait involves more subtleties than swagger.

By John Baldoni

Now they are being hailed as the first sports dynasty of the 21st century. That's what happens when you win three Super Bowls in four years, the first of which came in January 2002, a few short months after September 11. It somehow seemed appropriate then that the winning team was named the *Patriots* and they hailed from New England. It may be a stretch to liken a professional football team to our nation's revolutionaries but there is one parallel that is unmistakable. Both embody the aspirations of our era; both embody what we want to be. America's first patriots were steely, scrappy and tenacious; they made do with what they had, not what they wished they had. Our football Patriots, under the direction of coach Bill Belichick, are equally resourceful, with defensive players joining the offense and offensive players playing defense. Injuries do not hold them back; they push them forward. The net result of this attitude is something that our Founding Fathers certainly had and winning teams always have. It's called confidence.

You Gotta Have It

Using that word as the title of her [new book](#), Harvard professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter writes, "Confidence is the bridge connecting expectations and performance, investments and results." Winning organizations have it in spades; losing teams cannot seem to spell it. Yet, as Kanter points out, confidence is necessary for success. Why? Because confidence is that inner fire that says we can do it if we try. It also is that inner voice that knows when to ask for help. For example, Michael Jordan did not win a championship without a smart coach and a savvy supporting team. Fred Smith did not build the world's most successful air freight system without a superior team of logisticians and dedicated pilots. Confidence is knowledge of one's own strengths as well as one's own limitations. In other words you need to know when to say when you can go it alone or call in for reinforcements. As such it is a valuable leadership trait. Here are some ways to nurture it.

Invite them to look up. Leadership by nature is aspirational. It must inspire people to want to achieve. Leaders play their part by setting goals and inviting others to add to those goals. For example, a sales manager may set a goal of achieving one million dollars in new sales per month. A turned-on sales team will take that as a challenge and strive to bring in another \$100,000 in new monthly business. When they do they feel good about themselves and want to keep on achieving. In sales we call it the "swagger." A sales team without swagger is like a ship without a rudder, drifting on a sea of apathy.

Let them see you sweat. Yes, this is the reverse of the Broadway adage. But we're not talking acting; we're taking real life. Confidence comes from working the details, being willing to be part of the team and sharing the burdens with them. It is honed by discipline and attentiveness. This is not micromanagement; it's sharing of burdens. And when things turn around, and goals are met, it's a sharing of glory earned by the sweat of the collective brow.

Learn from your mistakes. John Madden, America's leading football analyst, has said, "Coaches have to watch for what they don't want to see and listen for what they don't want to hear." What Madden means is that it is human nature to avoid confronting mistakes, especially if the mistakes are being committed by people for whom you are responsible. This is folly. Mistakes are learning opportunities. Capitalize on them as learning lessons. When you correct them properly, you will likely not repeat them. And that has to inspire a degree of confidence.

Radiate hope. Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison for the cause of African nationalism in South Africa. Throughout those long years of deprivation without family he did not lose hope in the righteousness of his cause. In her book, Kanter cites Mandela as a model of confidence. Mandela embodied the hope of his nation, first to his followers inside prison and then outside of it. He showed just how hopeful he was when he became president of the new South Africa; he did not seek retribution but rather reconciliation, which in the long run was the only way to avoid bloodshed and to integrate economic, political and global resources. By doing so, he provided hope for all people of South Africa.

A Key Difference Maker

Of course you can be too confident. For example, after the devastation of the Great War, the French built the Maginot Line, a fortified wall of concrete and armaments designed to keep the Germans from ever attacking again. The French government put its faith in the wall; the Nazis ignored it, entering France through the Low Countries. The Nazis too had their own margin of defense, the Siegfried Line, which of course the Allies blew through via air, artillery and tank power. Overconfidence prevents companies from seeing the dangers lurking over the corporate parking lot; these may include anything from a changing market to a new competitor or a breakthrough product.

Nonetheless, confidence is essential to leadership. A leader without confidence can neither guide nor inspire; she can only sit in the shadows while others carry the load. Confidence is a unifier that brings people together because it feeds upon their collective energies. Confident organizations are those that do succeed because they draw upon the strengths of their leaders and followers pulling together for common cause. A genuinely confident leader is one who knows herself, her people, and her abilities to move an organization forward to achieve their goals. And that's something about which both our Founding Fathers and the New England Patriots would agree.

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