

Building Genuine Confidence as a New Executive

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The gap between the role and the feeling

Stepping into an executive role rarely comes with an automatic sense of readiness. Many new executives describe a noticeable gap between how capable they are expected to appear and how capable they actually feel, especially in the first months. This gap is normal, and it is worth distinguishing from a genuine lack of competence, which it is very often not.

Why performed confidence tends to fail

The common advice to "fake it until you make it" captures something true, behaviour can precede feeling, but taken too literally it can lead new executives to perform a confidence that does not match their internal state, which is often sensed by others as subtly inauthentic, particularly under real pressure. A more durable approach treats confidence not as a mask to put on, but as something built gradually through specific, repeatable experience.

What genuine confidence is actually built from

Accumulated small evidence, not a single breakthrough. Psychologist Albert Bandura's research on self-efficacy, dating back to his 1977 work and widely applied in leadership development since, found that confidence in a specific domain is built primarily through mastery experiences, direct evidence of having handled something successfully, more than through encouragement or observation alone. For a new executive, this means confidence tends to grow fastest not from pep talks, but from deliberately taking on and successfully navigating real, moderately challenging situations early in the role.

Preparation that is genuinely thorough, not just extensive. Confidence going into a high-stakes meeting is rarely just a mindset; it is frequently the downstream result of having done the specific preparation that situation required, understanding the data, anticipating likely questions, knowing where the real uncertainty lies. Leaders who attribute a lack of confidence purely to psychology sometimes overlook that the preparation itself was incomplete.

Honest calibration of what you do and do not yet know. Confidence does not require knowing everything; it requires being clear, even to yourself, about what you do know well and what you are still learning, and being comfortable saying so. Leaders who try to appear uniformly certain often feel more anxious, not less, because they are also managing the gap between appearance and reality.

A support structure outside the team you lead. A coach, a peer network, or a mentor who has navigated a similar transition provides a space to be genuinely uncertain without that uncertainty affecting how your own team sees you, which in turn makes it easier to project appropriate steadiness where it matters.

A common trap: waiting to feel ready before acting

Many new executives wait for confidence to arrive before taking on stretch opportunities, when the relationship more often runs the other way: action, even imperfect action, is usually what generates the evidence that builds confidence, not the reverse. Waiting for certainty before acting tends to delay the very experiences that would have built it.

What this means in practice

Rather than trying to manufacture an immediate feeling of confidence, new executives are usually better served by deliberately choosing a small number of early, visible opportunities to build genuine competence, preparing thoroughly rather than relying on charisma, being honest about the limits of their current knowledge, and giving the process realistic time. Confidence built this way tends to hold up far better under real pressure than confidence that was simply performed from the outset.