

The Confidence-Competence Loop: Which Comes First?

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A question with a counterintuitive answer

It is tempting to assume that confidence is simply the natural result of competence: get good enough at something, and the confidence follows automatically. The relationship, as it turns out, runs in both directions, and for many leaders, confidence-building interventions earlier in the loop produce competence gains faster than waiting for competence to arrive first.

How the loop actually works

Modest confidence tends to encourage action, taking on a stretch assignment, speaking up in a meeting, attempting a difficult conversation. Action, in turn, generates real experience, which is the primary raw material competence is built from. That growing competence then feeds back into confidence, creating a self-reinforcing cycle. The reverse is also true, and more common than leaders often realise: low confidence discourages action, which limits the experience available to build competence, which keeps confidence low, a pattern sometimes described as a confidence trap.

Why waiting for confidence rarely works

Many leaders delay taking on a stretch opportunity, speaking up in a high-stakes setting, or applying for a more senior role, until they feel sufficiently confident. Because confidence in a domain is built substantially through direct experience in that domain, as reflected in Albert Bandura's research on self-efficacy, this waiting period can extend indefinitely: the confidence that would justify the action is itself partly dependent on having already taken similar action.

Where to intervene instead

Act on evidence, not on feeling. A leader who has genuinely prepared well and has relevant, if incomplete, experience is usually ready to act whether or not they feel fully confident. Treating "I don't feel ready" as decisive, rather than as one data point among several, keeps many capable leaders stuck longer than necessary.

Choose deliberately graduated challenges. Rather than either avoiding stretch opportunities entirely or taking on something so large it risks a genuinely damaging failure, selecting a moderately challenging next step, one that stretches real capability without exceeding it, tends to build both competence and confidence most efficiently and most sustainably.

Treat early attempts as information-gathering, not final verdicts. A leader's first attempt at a new kind of challenge, a first board presentation, a first difficult negotiation, is rarely their best. Judging overall capability from a first attempt, rather than treating it as one early data point in an ongoing competence-building process, tends to suppress confidence unfairly.

Interrupt the trap directly when you notice it. If you find yourself consistently avoiding a category of action because you do not yet feel confident enough, it is worth naming that pattern explicitly, since the confidence being waited for may depend on taking the very action being avoided.

Why this matters for how leaders develop talent, not just themselves

Leaders who understand this loop tend to give team members real, moderately stretching responsibility earlier, rather than waiting until someone "seems ready," since the readiness itself is often partly a product of being given the opportunity. This is one of the more practical, high-leverage insights from the research on confidence and competence: appropriately placed trust can build the very capability it appears to be waiting for.