



CONFIDENCE, CLARITY AND OWNERSHIP OF THE LEADER IDENTITY

The move to senior leadership is often accompanied by major knocks to confidence. Coaching may hold some answers, argues **Dr Andrea Kilpatrick**.

Having coached leaders during their transition to senior leadership over many years I have noticed that confidence is often significantly affected at this point. One of the key coaching outcomes frequently described as the coaching programme finishes (and observed throughout by myself and by organisational stakeholders, as well as by the leaders themselves) has been increased confidence. This motivated my desire to understand more, in my doctoral research, about confidence at this transition point and the role of coaching in supporting confidence.

Exploration of the literature showed confidence as a multi-dimensional concept that was difficult to define, and that there was no research in either the coaching or leadership fields exploring it in relation to leaders in transition. The largest body of research on confidence in both the coaching and leadership fields explores self-efficacy, a different but related concept to confidence, and this is mostly in passing rather than as the main research interest. These gaps in literature led me to conduct a first-person qualitative study of working with confidence in the transition to senior leadership, from the perspective of eight senior leaders and four executive coaches working with senior leaders at this transition point.

AN UNDERSTANDING OF CONFIDENCE

This study shows confidence to be a concept distinct from self-efficacy, though it shares what are considered to be some of its key

sources: feedback, support and preparation. As opposed to self-efficacy, this understanding of confidence is not related to any aspects of task, such as the belief in being able to achieve a particular goal or mastery (e.g., 'I feel confident because I have done it before').

Instead, four key areas of confidence emerged from the research, providing a new understanding of confidence within the specific context of senior leadership transition. Confidence was described as the following four areas:

- a feeling of ease and energy;
- remaining in control (primarily of emotions);
- having clarity (e.g., of direction, purpose and leader identity);
- being able to be vulnerable as a senior leader.

The experiences of loss of confidence, shown as the opposite of each of these, were even more prevalent in the findings, and these were described as:

- exhaustion and energy depletion;
- loss of control of emotions;
- lack of clarity and an experience of 'stuckness';
- the inability to show vulnerability as a senior leader.

These experiences have been drawn together in a framework (Figure 1) that is deliberately configured as a circle to show how each of these four areas interconnect.



Figure 1: A framework of the experiences of confidence and loss of confidence within the context of senior leadership transition

A significant part of the challenge to confidence for new senior leaders stemmed from what the organisation was not doing. Alongside a lack of psychological safety, three key areas were shown to impact confidence if lacking from the organisation: feedback, support and help with preparation for the transition. This brings new understanding to confidence, elevating it beyond being purely a concern of the individual.

HOW COACHING HELPS

Coaching was found to be critical to supporting confidence for leaders at this transition point. It was shown to do so through: the safe space of coaching; gaining clarity (in particular of leader identity); and feedback and support.

The **safe space of coaching** helped to support the leader's confidence by allowing them to explore, share and alleviate their experiences of vulnerability. This was significant because the leaders felt that they were unable to show vulnerability within their organisations. This is illustrated by one participant (Fahima) using the metaphor of war to contrast the safety of the coaching space with how she feels in her organisation: 'It was a momentary kind of reprieve. It was almost like I could go into the little trench with her, batten down the hatches and breathe for a few minutes, but then I still had to climb my way back out and run across the field with people shooting at me.'

The safe space was created in part by having the coach alongside, sharing the weight of responsibility, and thereby by reducing the experience of loneliness that many of the leaders felt.

Finding clarity through coaching was also shown to help confidence in several ways: being able to talk things through with the coach; working out priorities; the use of certain coaching tools to enable clarity through self-awareness; helping the leaders regain clarity of purpose and direction; and gaining clarity on and then taking ownership of leader identity. Indeed, the coaches interviewed discussed how the identity transition was one of the key challenges

faced by senior leaders that impacted their confidence – more on that in a moment.

How leader identity work is enabled by executive coaching remains largely unexplored in the coaching literature, with some recent exceptions,ⁱⁱⁱ and most studies focus on leader identity work in development programmes rather than coaching.^{iiiiv} This study shows how integral leader identity development work was for the leaders at this transition point in connection with confidence. The process of working with leader identity to enable confidence was shown to include the following stages: exploration, integration of 'old stories' about the self and the eventual ownership of the new identity.

The first stage of the leader identity development process included exploration, which involved working with the coach to understand and reject the expectations of others about leader identity. The coaches described how the leaders had previously passively accepted ideas about their leader identity from others and that, at this stage of seniority, they instead needed to reject these ideas and to create their own leader identity.

The second stage of the leader identity development process included the integration of 'old stories' about the self. These stories had often been a defining part of the leader's identity, and often implying a sense of not being good enough – buried deep, but still affecting the leaders. Surfacing and integrating these stories into the new leader identity helped to create a sense of wholeness and congruence for the leader, which gave them confidence. The integration of personal identities and the resulting congruence of identity builds on our understanding of the importance of having a coherent sense of self after leadership transition.^{vi}

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The final stage of the leader identity development process included ownership of the reconstructed leader identity: helping the leader, through coaching, to claim how they wanted to be and, as such, a proactive (rather than passive) creation of identity. Ownership of their leader identity was shown to give the leaders confidence, described through references to energy and movement. They signified confidence throughout this study, summarised in the following excerpt from one of the coaches (Renée): 'Once they realised it was up to them to create [their identity], suddenly there was a real excitement and energy burst, because they could become the leaders that suited them, not what other people wanted from them.'

The findings also suggest that taking ownership of their identity helps leaders to have a sense of acceptance about themselves, despite any perceived or real shortcomings. The stage of ownership in the leader identity development process and the confidence it gives the leader, facilitated by the coaching, has not been previously researched in leader identity development research.

FEEDBACK AND SUPPORT

In contrast to the lack of feedback and support found in their organisation and the resulting impact on their confidence, these leaders described how the feedback and support provided by the coaching gave them confidence. This was 'informal' affirming feedback, such as a reminder of what the leader had achieved or a simple affirming message, as described by one participant (Tina): 'You're doing really well.'

In the coaching literature, the use of affirming feedback from the coach in the confidence-building process has been given only brief attention in a handful of studies.^{vii,viii,ix} Use of affirming feedback is indicated as a core coaching competency only by the ICF, and its role in the confidence-building process could be explored further.

Support in coaching was described in several ways: taking away the loneliness of senior leadership through being able to share the weight of responsibility; having the coach there alongside; and the use of normalising. This understanding is helpful when we consider that the only reference to support in a coaching competency framework is in relation to the coach needing to demonstrate 'empathy and genuine support for the client'.^x

Focusing directly on confidence and how coaching supports it, this study gives an understanding of the critical role that coaching plays in supporting confidence within the context of senior leadership transition. It brings a specificity to the understanding of confidence and loss of confidence for these leaders, including showing the importance of gaining clarity on leader identity and being able to own the process. This is important because it potentially allows us to be able to work with confidence more productively, both in coaching and also in organisational leadership development.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr Andrea Kilpatrick is an experienced executive coach working with senior leaders across all sectors. Andrea has a particular interest in transitions, confidence and leadership development. She is an accredited senior practitioner with the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) and is training to be a coach supervisor. She has a doctorate in coaching from Oxford Brookes and an MSc in career management and coaching from Birkbeck, University of London. For more information, please contact Andrea at andrea@kilpatrickexecutivecoaching.com.

NOW WHAT?

These recommendations might be helpful to coaches working with confidence in the context of senior leadership transition:

- Focus on creating a safe space for the coaching, such that the leader feels able to share vulnerability in a way in which they may not within the organisation.
- Think about the physical signs of confidence as indicators of levels of confidence (e.g., ease and energy versus exhaustion and depletion).
- Work with vulnerability in coaching. For example, explore the perceived need for the façade of confidence at the expense of authenticity; self-doubts and alternative perspectives; loneliness; and the need to belong.
- Help the leader to feel in control of their emotions, but recognise the complexities of doing so and the impact it might have on their confidence if they don't feel authentic.
- Focus on how to give the leader support by being alongside them. Encourage them to share the weight of responsibility, and discuss what other support the leader can find within the organisation, such as mentoring, sponsors, a peer group or a supportive line manager.
- Give regular informal affirming feedback and discuss whether the leader is adequately supported by feedback within the organisation.
- Normalise the challenges that the leader is experiencing (drawing on leadership research or the coach's experience of coaching other leaders at this transition point).
- Help the leader to prepare adequately for the transition (ideally, aim to start the coaching before the transition).
- Help the leader to gain clarity by giving them the space to talk about and reflect on their challenges; exploring 'stuckness'; helping the leader to find direction; clarifying priorities; and enabling the leader to move forward.
- Work with the leader on exploring, clarifying and owning their new leader identity.

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