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JOURNAL REPORTS: LEADERSHIP

Are You a Confident or Overconfident Boss? Here's How to Tell

Four questions to ask yourself to make sure cockiness isn't interfering with your—and your team's—performance.

By Sydney Finkelstein

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Ask most people what traits make for great leaders, and self-confidence would almost certainly be near the top. The best managers not only act decisively, but draw on their confidence to support—and challenge—team members. These managers also instill confidence in their people —a near-impossible task if they don't model confidence themselves.

But there's a fine line between self-confidence and overconfidence.

Too much self-confidence leads to arrogance, which can alienate employees, customers and other stakeholders. It blinds us to our own failings, preventing us from growing and improving, and prompting us to rush headlong into ill-advised decisions. And it can lead us to overlook new opportunities: With our delusions of certainty and all-knowingness, we become lazy and fail to seek out novelty.

Here's the problem: Most people are so busy with daily work that we fail to realize when that endearing swagger we've developed tilts over into hubris. And why should we, since we're always told that self-confidence is something to treasure, not fear.

Overconfidence, in other words, is what plagues other people. *We're* just confident.

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How can somebody know when self-confidence has become overconfidence, when a commanding presence has turned into cockiness? The key is to ask yourself probing questions about your behavior. The questions might seem obvious, but as you answer them, you'll see they force you to examine your behavior in a way that is far from obvious.

As my research and consulting experience has shown, four questions in particular are worth posing:

Question 1:

How much time do I *really* spend listening?

Overconfident people like to hear themselves talk. In their minds, they alone have access to the best answers, so why bother listening to others blather on?

Most people, of course, don't think of themselves as blathering. They think of themselves as imparting wisdom. So it's crucial to see yourself as others do. To do that, you need to ask trusted colleagues what they think, and solicit regular, 360-degree feedback from your team. One helpful action is to record team meetings a couple of times a quarter, and then go back and watch the recording. Are you doing most of the talking? Are you shutting down others' ideas?

If the answer is yes (and it's surprising how often it is), make a practice of giving others more airtime. Don't just listen—do so *actively*. Instead of letting team members' ideas wash over you, or worse yet, reacting with a knee-jerk "no," embrace curiosity about the ideas. How would a project proposed by a team member unfold? What consequences would the project have for other parts of the business? How would the team member handle proposed setbacks? By making such inquiries, you win over team members, and you might actually come away with a great idea or two that you can use.

Question 2:

Do I originate most of the ideas?

When leaders verge into arrogance, team members often react by going silent. Why bother putting out new ideas or challenging the boss when it will fall upon deaf ears, and even occasion a negative response?

One senior executive complained to me that his team wasn't taking enough initiative. Why, this person wondered, won't team members stop asking for permission and just *act*?

When I spoke with team members, they grumbled that their leader constantly shot down their ideas and demanded that the team fall in line with his thinking. Eventually, team members decided that thinking for themselves wasn't worth it. They became yes men and women, serving a boss whose healthy self-confidence had mushroomed out of control. The team's performance faltered.

My suggestion for such bosses: On a quarterly or annual basis, gather your team together to perform a "creative audit." Brainstorm all of the new programs or projects your team has implemented. Who originated these ideas? If the fingers keep pointing back to you, then either you've hired a team of creative duds, or more likely, your self-confidence has veered out of control.

In the latter case, you can make it easier for team members to raise concerns by appointing a team member to play the role of Devil's Advocate in meetings when the team discusses important decisions. You might also invite team members to critique your proposed solutions and suggest alternatives. "What am I missing here? What's the worst-case scenario if we do what I think we should do? What can we do to mitigate that risk?" Posing questions like these can draw team members out, conveying that you really do respect and value their opinions.

Question 3:

Do I often feel like I'm the smartest person in the room?

Overconfident executives are enthralled by their own intelligence. When customers, competitors, colleagues or other partners contradict them, these executives automatically think, "They're wrong, I'm right." They secretly (or perhaps not so secretly) hate to be contradicted, even when their interlocutor delivers the message in private and in a nonthreatening way.

So convinced are they of their righteousness that they dismiss clear obstacles to their present course of action, playing down the risks and ignoring or explaining away inconvenient facts. When a report they commissioned comes back with findings that they don't like, they assume that the report's methodology or analysis is askew. I've seen this with senior executives reviewing customer-satisfaction and employee-engagement surveys. Bad result? Must be something wrong with the data.

My advice to leaders: Give yourself 10 minutes at the end of the workday to reflect on how you mentally reacted to new ideas, criticism directed at you, and inconvenient facts. Were you less open-minded than you might have liked? One senior executive I know made a practice at the end of each day of recording three interactions that had gone well and three that might have gone better. The act of writing fixed his mistakes in his memory, while the regularity of the practice allowed him to track his improvement over time.

In addition, every month or so, executives should reflect back on occasions when they tried something new and failed. What did you learn? Did those failures lead to subsequent successes? How did you persevere to get to the next level? After running through this exercise, share your failures and the lessons learned with team members. You might be smart, but even the smartest among us make mistakes—and that can be a good thing. Just make sure you're learning from them.

Question 4:

Do I think of myself as indispensable to my business's success?

Overconfident people tend to believe their business or team can't succeed without them. This attitude leads them to play down or disparage others' contributions and highlight their own. Team members come away feeling ignored and devalued. Over time, the most talented among them leave.

To spot problems in this area, executives I know keep spreadsheets tracking departing employees, their stated reason for departure, their length of tenure, and their new place of employment. If your team has become a revolving door, you might want to look in the mirror. Team members move on for many reasons, but my research suggests that the boss' inflated sense of self often plays a key role.

To counter this, make a practice of giving others the limelight. Credit your team members with coming up with the big ideas. Invite them to speak first in meetings. Give them high-profile opportunities to lead, without interference on your part. Make sure that promising team members gain increasing levels of responsibility, so that they can one day equal or even eclipse your accomplishments.

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Asking yourself all these questions—and taking action in response—can prevent healthy self-confidence from verging into unhealthy hubris. Ultimately, you want to achieve a sense of balance, introducing a measure of humility to round out your self-assurance.

Because, after all, in management as with everything else, you really can have too much of a good thing.

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