



# Confidence at work

Gladeana McMahon examines ways of increasing people's confidence

**"** *C*onfidence can get you where you want to go, and getting there is a daily process." Donald Trump, American tycoon

Confidence is one of those concepts that everyone instinctively understands, but you get a variety of answers if you ask people to define it. We all intuitively know that confidence matters and that a lack of it impedes professional effectiveness and career

progression, as well as personal wellbeing and satisfaction.

A number of organisations have introduced confidence-at-work programmes to meet the needs of staff, from graduate entrants through to senior managers. These programmes comprise traditional group training days, supplemented by individual coaching programmes to embed learning. Graduate entrants often sail through assessment centres, scoring extremely highly on their technical ability and potential,

but once in the workplace, find their ability to communicate, form effective relationships and generally deal with the realities of corporate life much more of a challenge. Senior managers are seen as having confidence because of the position they hold. However, what are often termed 'behavioural issues' such as a lack of effectiveness in managing others, and aggressive or inappropriate behaviour, are often down to a lack of confidence on the part of the individual.

Those who lack confidence tend to play it safe, avoiding taking risks and rising to new challenges and new situations. In addition, people who lack confidence tend to take longer over everyday interpersonal tasks than those who do not. All of this is likely to decrease an individual's chances of reaching his full potential, leaving both the organisation and the individual poorer as a consequence.

Take Marie, a junior partner in a well-established firm of solicitors. Marie avoided meeting clients wherever possible. She had attended networking and client management courses and, while she could quote the theory chapter and verse, she never managed to apply it. She was not bringing in new business and was failing to meet her targets in relation to her billable hours. Her organisation was concerned about her lack of performance and was considering whether she would be asked to leave.

Having attended a confidence-at-work training day, Marie, who suffered a high degree of personal anxiety, soon realised that her problem was purely down to the lack of confidence she had in herself. Subsequently, confidence-coaching sessions were used to embed the learning she had gained from the course. Once she knew what to do and how to improve and maintain her confidence, her situation changed dramatically. Her employers were delighted, as she was not only meeting targets but was exceeding them by 10 to 15 per cent each month.

At the end of the programme, Marie stated that she "wished I had known this stuff years ago as it would have made my life easier and I would have been far more successful than I have been". Her HR manager also said: "You wouldn't know it was the same person: she's gone from an uncertain future with us to someone we really value."

The combined costs of the confidence-at-work programme (training day and coaching sessions) to the organisation was £5,000 but, with her increased billable hours together with costs saved on recruitment, the organisation soon made back its money and more besides. Return on investment (ROI) is a difficult subject to quantify but, in this case, the figures added up and intangible benefits such as increased motivation and better relations with others made the programme even more effective.

Confidence is often mistakenly seen as something you are born with. Those who lack confidence

## Those who lack confidence tend to play it safe, avoiding taking risks and rising to new challenges and new situations

look on enviously at those who seem to have it, and some of those who appear to be confident on the outside spend their time feeling insecure on the inside. There is some evidence to suggest that certain elements of confidence, such as being an extrovert, are genetic and therefore passed on. But there is also an increasing body of research based on the well-established work of Pavlov's classical conditioning (1927), Skinner's operant conditioning (1953) and Seligman's original Learned Helplessness research (1975), that suggests that much of what we think of as being genetic is, in fact, only learned or conditioned behaviour.

One study, undertaken by Sonja Lyubomirsky of the University of California (2005), estimated that, even taking the most pessimistic of views, only

50 per cent of our behaviour could be put down to our genetic make-up and 10 per cent to life events, leaving 40 per cent in the hands of the individual. Psychology has provided a range of studies over a number of years, which demonstrate that anyone can learn the emotional as well as the practical skills required to become more confident.

The current corporate training and individual confidence-at-work programmes are based on what are known as cognitive behavioural approaches, which include strategies from positive psychology, emotional intelligence and mindfulness-based cognitive coaching, all of which originate firmly in the realm of psychology. The four areas that these programmes cover are impact, thoughts, feelings and action

### Impact

Impact focuses on the skill of understanding body language, how to use and read it, and the social skills associated with forming effective relationships. For example, people who lack confidence often find it hard to network, as was the case with Marie. Networking is often seen as an external activity to be used only with clients. However, successful individuals can use the same skills to develop an internal personal 'brand' as well as to foster more effective team and colleague relationships.

The mistake many people make is to assume that they have to be witty conversationalists, and people who lack confidence see such conversations as painfully daunting. But many individuals are seen as great conversationalists who say little about themselves but are, in fact, great listeners, who spend time focusing on the other person. By teaching the skills of using open questions (what, where, how, why, and when), individuals can elicit information from others and, when encouraged to develop

the skills of active listening, they have a sound foundation for such conversations.

Top this off with the OPEN formula (O = occupation, P = personal, E = environment and N = non-work activities) and you have the basic strategies to go into any situation at any time and hold a conversation with anyone on any topic. There are many such skills that help build confidence. Knowing what to do and how to create an impact provides the groundwork for part two of the programme.

### Thoughts

Drawing on the work of cognitive psychology, this part of the confidence-at-work programme helps people understand that it is the thoughts we hold about others, the world and ourselves that create a lack of confidence. Such programmes focus on identifying the types of self-defeating thinking that individuals engage in and providing counters to these.

While the training component can provide the overall framework, by identifying the most common cognitive errors that individuals engage in, the personalised coaching sessions tailor-make these to the needs of the individual concerned. For example, in Marie's case, part of her difficulty came down to a 'perfectionist' thinking style. This meant that one of the cognitive filters she applied was that of 'all or nothing' thinking (she saw everything as being either right or wrong), based on a life rule (the strategy by which we operate in the world) of 'if I get something wrong, people will think I am incompetent'.

Her fear of making an error meant she never actually tried. Once the coaching programme has unearthed the particular thinking style of the individual concerned, a bespoke set of techniques and strategies can be implemented to counter it. As



## It is the thoughts we hold about others, the world and ourselves that create a lack of confidence

what we think drives the way we feel and, in turn, our feelings drive our actions, this is probably the most important part of the confidence-building and the one that takes the greatest skill on behalf of both the trainer and the coach to implement.

### Feelings

The human emotions of anxiety, anger, guilt and shame are probably the feelings most commonly experienced by people who lack confidence. This part of the programme considers practical strategies aimed at targeting individual feelings, which are linked to the thoughts part of the programme that provides the cogni-

tive framework from which such feelings originate.

Strategies include everything from learning how to undertake an emotional 'cost/benefit' analysis (the individual is introduced to a way of identifying underlying issues), keeping a 'worry book' (learning new ways of dealing effectively with anxiety-provoking situations), learning how to use a responsibility pie (a way of dealing with guilt associated with being unrealistically responsible) to undertaking a major work/life audit exercise to gain control of day-to-day events.

### Action

The final part of a confidence-building programme focuses on the behaviours the individual needs to cultivate in order to act in a more confident manner. Success breeds success and, therefore, the more effective the behaviour, the better the result and, in turn, the more this reinforces the new behaviour.

## Confidence-building case study

Michael was the director of strategy and a board member of a prestigious City institution. He had taken up his appointment two years previously and during this time had instigated a number of projects that were seen as of significant benefit to the business. However, due to various personality-related issues, he found that his positive start was now dogged by difficult relationships with some of his fellow board members.

Although he had reached a senior position, he was aware he could have achieved far more success in his working life, having been held back by what he termed "a lack of confidence". Michael felt this manifested itself in terms of personal anxiety and an inconsistency in the way he managed difficult situations such as board meetings and presentations. There were times when he felt he came across as confident, knowledgeable and in control, and was able to field any questions effectively, and there were other times when he found his style to be less than effective. He was able to provide examples of these occasions and the comments he had received.

He arranged to attend a confidence-at-work programme that comprised a one-day training event followed by six, 90-minute executive coaching sessions.

After the one-day confidence-training event, Michael was given a series of psychometric tests to identify his personality type and work-based strengths and weaknesses, and these were used to help develop the skills he needed to change his situation. Although it would have been useful to use 360° feedback, it was not deemed appropriate on this occasion due to the nature of the coaching contract. In addition, using the skills and techniques of cognitive psychology, his coaching focused on his personal thinking style and the interplay between thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

It quickly became evident that one of the key personal challenges Michael faced was a fear of failure – this manifested itself in an unhelpful preoccupation with what people would think about him and a fear of making errors. He could see that this concern meant he was unable to stand back from situations to make objective judgements, as his anxiety blocked his ability to move beyond his emotional reaction.

Another area of work was helping Michael to undertake an analysis of his fellow board members' communication styles and motivations. A SWOT analysis was used to help him consider his position on the board as well as generally within the organisation.

By the end of the coaching programme, Michael reported feeling emotionally consistent and was able to cite a number of examples of dealing with difficult meetings in a calm and effective manner.

He was able to give examples of comments received from others that confirmed a change in the way he presented himself and, while the relationships with some board members were still difficult, he felt he now had the strategies to understand and deal with these, as well as the personal confidence to do so.

As with the other parts of the programme, the training provides the overview of the most common strategies, while the personalised coaching sessions create an individual action plan. Strategies include understanding the behavioural model of how change happens, why change takes time, how everyone goes through a set number of stages (although the length of time someone stays

in any given part of the four-stage model varies), developing a specialised contingency-planning model as well as strategies adapted or taken directly from assertiveness training and behaviour modification, for example structures to deal with getting your message across, as in the Three Step Model used in assertiveness training, to the 'micro skills' practice of new behaviours from behaviour modification.

The programme also emphasises what is called Bibliocoaching – an adaptation of Bibliotherapy (Pardeck, 1998), in which individuals use a set book or reading material as a way of reinforcing the skills that need to be acquired (McMahon, 2001). The use of psychometrics plays a part for those who have not undertaken such an exercise, or whose psychometric assessments are now out of date.

Confidence is an essential requirement of 21st century corporate life and if organisations are to capitalise on the skills and talents of their people, in what has been identified as a shrinking talent pool (Frank, Taylor, 2004), such programmes are essential to ensure individuals are equipped to deal with the changing corporate environment. ■

### Resources

1. Pavlov I P (1927) *Conditioned Reflexes: An Investigation of the Physiological Activity of the Cerebral Cortex* Oxford University Press, UK
2. Skinner B F (1953) *Science and human behavior* Macmillan, USA
3. Maier S F and Seligman M E P (1976) Learned helplessness: Theory and evidence *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 105, 3-46, USA
4. Lyubomirsky S, Sheldon K M, and Schkade D (2005) Pursuing happiness: The architecture of sustainable change *Review of General Psychology* 9, 111-131, USA
5. Pardeck J (1998) *Using Books in Clinical Social Work Practice: A Guide to Bibliotherapy* Haworth Press, UK
6. McMahon G (2001) *Confidence Works – Learn how to be Your Own Life Coach* Sheldon Press, UK
7. Frank F and Taylor C (2004) *Talent Management, Trends that will Shape the Future Human Resource Planning* Michigan, USA

**Gladeana McMahon** is head of executive coaching for Fairplace plc, co-director of the Centre for Coaching, and a transformational and personal development trainer and coach. She can be contacted via [www.fairplace.com](http://www.fairplace.com) or [www.gladeanamcmahon.com](http://www.gladeanamcmahon.com)