

Confidence: The Secret to Success

by Swanee Hunt, Confidence: The Secret to Success, February 16, 2005

The Patriots have done it again. Dynasty talk filling the airwaves isn't a surprise to Harvard Business School professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter. From the football field to the corporate boardroom, she argues in her book *Confidence*, believing in one's self—and others—makes all the difference.

The 21st century has already seen its fair share of corporate scandal, weak economies, and failing schools. We need strong leadership: whether in business, politics, home, or elsewhere. Winning or losing isn't simply a function of money or even innate talent. Victory and failure aren't single incidents that happen to us, but are "self-perpetuating trajectories" shaped by us over time. Success requires leaders who inspire others and build teams that work together to turn losing streaks into winning streaks.

Americans place great value on leadership. Donald Trump demands it on "reality TV." Voters need to see it in candidates. Stock prices rise and fall based on the reputation of a CEO.

Why is leadership so important? Because, Kanter insists, people, organizations, and even nations succeed when leaders inspire them. But what makes an effective leader? A prolific scholar and tested advisor to Fortune 500 companies, Kanter wanted an answer. She studied people and institutions as diverse as Nelson Mandela, Continental Airlines, and the University of Connecticut women's basketball team. Skilled leaders, she found, generate long-term success by using three cornerstones of confidence: accountability, collaboration, and initiative.

The thought of CEOs holding their employees accountable invokes a dreaded sense of judgment followed by reprimand or reward. But Kanter believes measurements should empower, not punish. Leaders must send clear messages about expectations while encouraging others to welcome responsibility and transcend the limitations of their job descriptions. Gillette CEO Jim Kilts, who assumed leadership of the failing company in 2001, accomplished the ultimate in workplace culture U-turns. Within only a few days, Kilts hit the road to get insight from Gillette sales representatives, demonstrating to employees at every level that their input was wanted and expected.

As for the second cornerstone, by helping team members build faith in self, others, and the team, a leader constructs a culture of collaboration. When people are confident in their own abilities and those of others, a team can transform individual contributions into shared success. By 2001, the Montreal Expos were down on their luck. The team had talent, but players saw Montreal as only a pit stop on the road to success. Turning each player into part of a solid alliance was a challenge for manager Frank Robinson. On his first day, he asked the players to indulge him in an exercise. The players stood together, held hands, and shared their feelings about being labeled losers. Catcher Michael Barrett remembered, “At the end of it, we felt that we were one.” The team was transformed.

Finally, Kanter stresses the importance of initiative. At the heart of failure is resignation, the sense that heavy clouds shadow every move. Great leaders promote enterprise and, in turn, personal investment by establishing opportunities to generate ideas. At the German company Siemens-Nixdorf, CEO Gerhard Schulmeyer defied German convention by turning to innovative employees—not necessarily the most senior—to shape the company’s direction.

A leader’s commitment to building a sustainable culture founded on accountability, collaboration, and initiative can transform the most brutal losing streak into cause for celebration. Witness the Boston Red Sox.

It’s easy to write off these strategies as lessons only for CEOs and managers of sports teams. But everyday people need confidence as much as a mega-conglomerate. Inspiring confidence transforms families, schools, and communities. Parents help kids reach new heights. A schoolteacher sees her students thrive. A neighborhood association sees a community development project soar.

Confidence fortifies all successful ventures—no matter how basic or complex. But those ventures ultimately can be reduced to individuals. As we mature, we shed the insecurities of childhood and grow into confident adults—or try, at least. “Make believe you’re brave and the trick will take you far. You may be as brave as you make believe you are.” The musical team Rodgers and Hammerstein gave those words to the court governess Anna, who “whistled a happy tune” as she prepared to confront the King of Siam. According to Kanter, the sentiment holds true today. In striving to strengthen our communities, we must start with ourselves. We will become as confident as we imagine we are.