

The Silent Self-Doubt of Powerful Performers

As a senior executive, have you ever heard a colleague talk openly about how their self-doubt may be impacting their performance? The C-suite is not exactly the place for that kind of conversation. C-level leaders are working under heavy expectations. Meanwhile, your peers are competing with you for resources. And your multiple stakeholders are expecting you to produce results. **Even if you have doubts, you're probably not going to talk about them.**

However, I meet a surprising number of highly successful VPs and C-suite executives who do experience concerns

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about their confidence in specific areas. Rarely do we stop to consider that business changes so much these days and so quickly that almost anyone can at some time begin to doubt their ability to keep up—let alone step up.

SILENT TRIGGERS

Several different types of situations can trigger self-doubt in a high-performing leader.

When an organization or an industry is going through **disruptive change**, leaders at VP level and above often feel especially vulnerable. By virtue of their position so close to the top and the size of their compensation package, they realize that they may become targets. Some C-suite positions are more prone to casualties than others (for example, Fast Company, a business magazine, was reporting this for Chief Marketing Officers over five years ago). Under this constant threat, your confidence can take silent unrelenting hits even if you are effectively keeping up with your daily challenges.

Another trigger for executive leaders is when they're promoted into new or significantly different roles. Their

self-confidence may take a quick silent hit when they first step up. The **increased scope and complexity** of their new role can leave them overwhelmed and doubting their capacity to deliver. Never mind the additional pressure of realizing that the higher you go, the more your success depends on your ability to influence people over whom you have no authority.

Last week, I was talking with one such leader who was struggling after having been promoted to divisional VP at a financial services company. He sensed that his bosses were looking to him for immediate answers. Even though he had a breadth and depth of experience in his business area that far exceeded his superiors, he doubted his ability to make the right choices. He also believed that his superiors, as well as his team, were more knowledgeable and better informed than he was. He felt challenged by his direct reports when they questioned him and pushed back on his decisions. He thought he needed to have all the answers and he was very uncomfortable with the fact that he didn't. **"Needing to have all the answers" was actually his blind spot.**

Executive leadership today is not about having all the answers: it's about inspiring your teams of talented high achievers to create the answers. What this VP is not seeing is that his biggest contribution as a leader is in leading a team to commit to a vision and facilitating the conversations that the team needs to have to create strategies and execute on that vision. A key part of his job is to coach and develop people so they have the courage to speak their ideas and the skill to carry them out.

WHAT'S AT RISK IF YOU DON'T HANDLE SELF-DOUBT?

High achievers who don't address self-doubt thoroughly—whenever and wherever it occurs—risk their performance, their health and their well-being.

When self-confidence starts to drop, leaders subtly (and often unconsciously) shift their behavior: they pull back on contributing or, paradoxically, they go into overdrive and start working longer hours. Like the financial services

continued on next page

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continued from previous page

VP, you may find yourself becoming more tentative in meetings, holding back your ideas and suggestions, or avoiding controversy. This is all very subtle at first—barely noticeable—but you feel the stress. Unfortunately, in competitive environments, either of these strategies (pull back or work harder) may have you heading straight for executive burnout, being marginalized, or even being terminated.

Sometimes executives try to achieve a better balance by hiding their doubts under a mask of false confidence.

To all appearances, they've got it all together. Yet they assert themselves a little too strongly and try a little too hard to prove themselves. Underneath this, a prevailing

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sense that they're "not enough" drives them. The result is a usually negative impact on their leadership. Others can interpret this behavior, this false bravado, as slightly 'edgy' or 'arrogant'. Some people tend to respond to this by withdrawing their trust.

Over time, any of these behaviors (pull back, work harder, hide out under false confidence) negatively influence your ability to deliver the impact needed at the VP or C level. The joy of facing challenges and creating innovative solutions fades when you're trying to survive the day with your image as a leader intact. Overwork is a constant danger. A subtle, low-grade anxiety lingers in the background. Unfortunately, none of this goes unnoticed for long.

CONFIDENCE @ WORK

We can successfully avoid dealing with self-doubt for a while. However, when I coach senior executives, we look at the potential downstream impact of hidden self-doubt.

Most senior executives that I work with have come to realize that, in today's market, there is no job security at VP level and above. This is not a reflection on you. This is how the game is played.

So how can you be confident?

More than ever before, the secret to powerful performance and a successful executive career lies in having confidence in yourself, your abilities and especially in your *personal presence* as a leader.

- Real security lies in playing the game with the confidence of an entrepreneur. **Get comfortable with the fact that there is no job security.** Keep up your networks, get skilled at negotiating, and be prepared to go into job search mode on short notice.
- **Remove self-doubt at its core.** It takes courage to face our fear. This is where coaching is a useful tool. (I also have a coach myself.) The benefit of having a partner to help us fully explore, understand and create strategies to eliminate self-doubt can be invaluable.
- Rather than base your self-confidence on your title and compensation package, build a new self-confidence. One based on **being crystal clear about what your contribution is and its value**—independent of what company you may be in at the moment.

Genuinely confident people do not have to pretend that they're all-knowing or invincible. They realize that their performance is only one variable among many in determining their longevity. **Powerful performers have confidence in who they are.** And in today's world, that confidence forms a critical foundation for their success.

Meet Val Williams



Val Williams, MCC, is an Executive Leadership Consultant who specializes in helping senior executive leaders develop vision, strategic plans, people development strategies, virtual skills, and the powerful

executive presence that actually influences. Since 1994 Val has delivered individual executive coaching, team coaching, training seminars, management retreats and keynotes. Her approach combines her own hands-on experience as a corporate executive leading teams of 700+ people with her training and certification as a Master Certified Coach by the International Coach Federation.

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