

Positively Legal: The Art of Self-Belief and Building a Confident Mindset

Career Development



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In-house lawyers, particularly the General Counsel, and Legal Operations professionals, are trusted advisers to a business. They navigate complex commercial landscapes and guide the legal team and business to optimal performance. They must influence senior stakeholders and inspire confidence often in new areas of law and leadership. How can they inspire confidence when they may not feel confident themselves? Lawyers who are often confident in their recognized technical areas fall short in unfamiliar areas of law or leadership – why does this happen and what can we do about it? Why does telling someone “just act confidently” not always work and is being confident the same as having self-belief?

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Why having self-belief and confidence are different

Professional mentor and leadership coach, Ben Crowe, in his recent book Where the Light Gets In , describes confidence as evidence based and belief as carrying you through when confidence is shaken. “While confidence asks, *Have I done this before?* belief answers *Even if I haven’t, I’ll find a way.* When things get tough, confidence can crumble when results slip or when the stakes get too high. Belief, however, can endure even when failure comes – because fundamentally, it’s about who you are, not what you do.”

Confidence is based on past action. For lawyers, their confidence grows as they become technical experts in certain areas and develop subject matter expertise. They take on similar projects knowing they have done these things before and roughly know how they might do, they gain confidence giving presentations they have practiced. They know how to prepare and, while they may still get stressed, especially with high stakes projects, they expect things will go well and their confidence continues to grow in their specialized area. But confidence can drop if we expect something to go well, and it doesn’t – if a project we expect to go well doesn’t or if a presentation at a leadership conference or to the Executives goes poorly. The next time we take on the same or similar activity, our confidence isn’t as high. Confidence is strongly influenced by recent success or failure, feedback from others, and preparation. It naturally fluctuates depending on the circumstances and external factors.

Self-belief is the belief you have in yourself and your abilities without the evidence or experience to support your likelihood of success. People who have strong self-belief try new things, are willing to step out of their comfort zone, and tend to grow and achieve their goals. Self-belief is impacted by more than simply confidence levels. Self-belief is the ability to know you can cope even when things are difficult and even if we fail. It’s about trusting yourself and not needing to know things will work out. People with strong self-belief still feel nervous and anxious but still act. They recover more quickly from setbacks and tolerate discomfort and uncertainty well. They don’t overreact emotionally after mistakes or in uncertainty.

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Both self-belief and confidence are important to lawyers and legal operations professionals to flourish in their long-term careers and both can be grown.

How to improve your confidence

Prof Ian Robertson, a clinical psychologist and founding director of the Trinity College Institute of Neuroscience in Dublin, has been studying how confidence acts in our brains and bodies. “Confidence,” he says, “is not about feeling certain that our actions will achieve our desired outcome. There will always be some uncertainty. Instead, confidence is about effectively coping with the anxiety that this uncertainty produces.” He says that confidence isn’t a fixed trait, but rather a way of thinking and behaving that can be learned. And with the right approach, understanding and

practice, “it starts to feel effortless.”

Robertson says that confidence is the result of a network of several regions of the brain working together including the pre-frontal cortex (helps to assess yourself, weigh options, and make decisions) and the amygdala (important in helping trigger emotional responses such as fear). Confidence works as a loop in your brain learning from success and strengthening the belief that you can do something again. It is a learned response – being successful once can help the brain reshape itself. “Confidence is like compound interest … your small successes multiply into progressively bigger successes. So, the greatest engine of confidence is success.” He goes on to say that confidence and winning act like a neural buffer against stress. His suggestions to growing confidence are:

- Act the part and “faking it” – act despite feeling anxious as this activates the success mechanisms in your brain. Think of yourself and act as a “Confident Person” would. He says it won’t make much difference at first but over time, it does because confidence is a skill and not a fixed trait.

- Reframe anxiety – try to reframe nerves as “excitement” – this helps to adopt a “challenge mindset” which makes you more successful.

- Visualize the win – research has found that the brain can’t accurately tell the difference between a real memory and visualized scenario and this can help boost your confidence.



In More Impact, More Easily, Rebecca Houghton, suggests additional ways increase confidence:

- Play to your strengths (most of the time) – we enjoy activities we are better at and we get better at activities we enjoy.
- Lean in – realize you are not alone – if other leaders who don't feel capable can do it, then so can you.
- Seek advice – ask a trusted friend, mentor, or peer.
- Have goals – looking at your long-term goals will put current setbacks and gaps into perspective, so they don't derail you. Short-term goals (under 30 days) also have a role to play – the completion of smaller tasks on a regular basis lead to larger goal completion, reinforcing your sense of achievement and boosting your sense of capability
- Have purpose – being specific about what outcomes you want to make purposeful. What are you looking to achieve with this meeting.
- Act – stop your planning brain from getting excited about options and start narrowing them down.
- Expect the unexpected – all plans are subject to change. Few moments make you feel more capable than when all hell breaks loose and you're able to say, "I thought that might happen and here's the plan."

Support your well-being and check out the ACC **Well-being Toolkit for In-house Lawyers**.

How to grow my self-belief

People with strong self-belief have a growth mindset. According to Dr Carol Dweck's Mindset theory, we all fall somewhere along a spectrum of beliefs. On one end of that spectrum is the fixed mindset — where people believe that their abilities, intelligence, and talent are all fixed traits.

Prominent positive psychology teacher Tal Ben Shahar describes people with a fixed mindset as those who think they are either gifted and talented, in which case they will succeed in sports, relationships, and at work, or they are permanently deficient and consequently doomed to failure. He said someone with a fixed mindset finds hard work threatening "as it indicate[s] that her abilities are limited and that, by extension, she is, too."

On the other end of the spectrum is a growth mindset, "the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts," according to Dweck. In her Ted Talk, she explained how the word "*yet*" defines the growth mindset: "I haven't learned how to do that, *yet,*"
"I haven't mastered that, *yet,*" or "I don't understand that, *yet.*" Those with a growth mindset see obstacles as an opportunity for learning, recover quickly from mistakes, and see them as part of learning and growing.

Our mindsets are on a continuum. We may have a fixed mindset about one ability but a growth mindset about another. For example, we may think we are not very "sporty" and will be less likely to try out a new sport or challenging hiking holiday and miss opportunities for mental and physical growth, as well as making new friends.

On the other hand, we could have a growth mindset about learning a language or public speaking and be more likely to seek out opportunities where we can use these skills and continue to improve.

Dweck, on Guy Kawasaki's podcast Remarkable People podcast, described People who had more or endorsed more of a growth mindset, they took on those challenges. They wanted to grow those abilities. "So challenge is threatening. Maybe I'll be unmasked as an imposter. Maybe I'll find out I'm no good."

People with a growth mindset have stronger self-belief. In my earlier article, Leading with a Growth Mindset, I identified other ways to cultivate a growth mindset including: using language like I have not mastered something "yet"; celebrating wins; recognizing hard work pays off not only talent; learning from mistakes; recognizing gaps in your skills are a chance to grow and cultivating your interests. In addition, in an earlier article, What Shaped Lawyer Are You, I suggested lawyers should grow their expertise to becoming more "T-shaped" or "O-Shaped." This can help build both self-belief and confidence as you become more proficient in different areas outside of your core expertise.

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Behavioral researcher, Dr Shade Zahrai, in Big Trust, suggests using play as a way to improve performance and mindset. It sparks creativity but it also reduces stress, boost productivity, and helps you slip into a state of flow. It can also strengthen your self-belief and makes you better at your job. In a study of more than 500 Nobel Prize-winning scientists, researchers found they were almost three times more likely than the average scientist to regularly dabble in creative hobbies like painting, playing music, or writing. She suggests setting aside ten minutes for a creative, playful activity where the outcome doesn't matter – doodle, strum a guitar, or write a poem – the idea is to remind yourself it's OK not to be great and to explore without pressure. You are rewiring your brain to embrace experimentation and diversifying your interests. At the end of the week see if it got easier without judging. She also suggests using "side-quests" to build self-belief i.e. additional ways to grow outside of your core skill set that can increase curiosity.

Why mindset matters

Mindset matters. Lawyers and legal operations professionals need both confidence and self-belief to thrive in their workplace, lead their teams, and have fulfilling careers. Tal Ben Shahar says, building self esteem needs coping, putting ourselves on the line, trying, doing things and failing. To build lasting confidence, one must embrace failure as a necessary, non-definitive experience that acts as a stepping stone. We should all aim to build both our own and our teams' confidence and self-belief.

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Outside of work, Cavallaro loves traveling, snorkeling, meditating and spending time in nature.