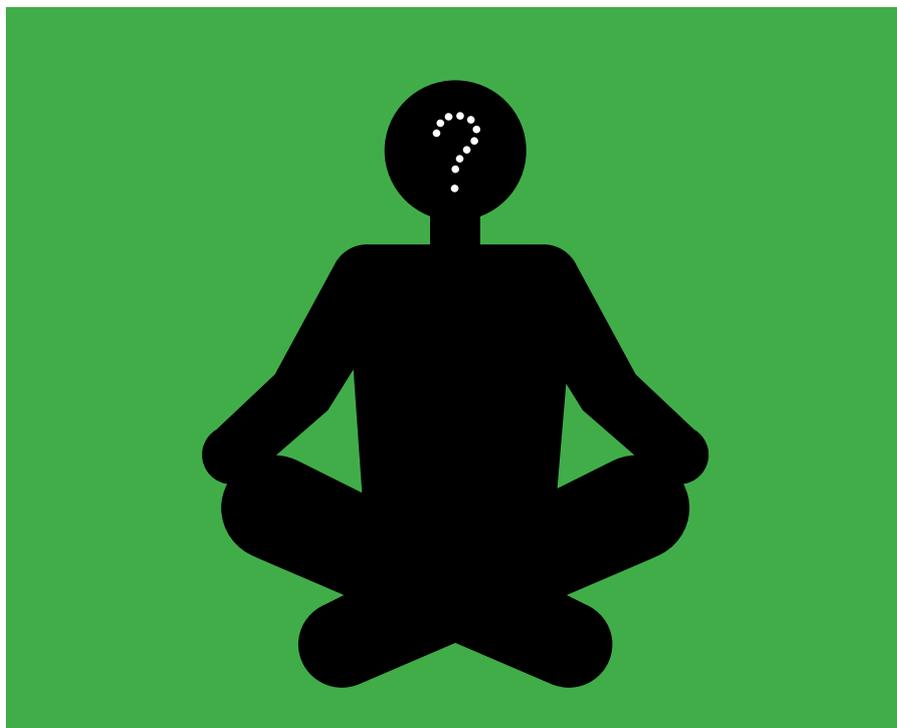


WHY SELF-DOUBT MAKES LEADERS BETTER

BY DR JASON FOX



Confidence, certainty and conviction: these have traditionally been qualities we would associate with a strong leader. And yet, such strong qualities may be the very thing preventing meaningful progress. One of my favourite books of 2013 was Oliver Burkeman's *The Antidote: Happiness for people who can't stand positive thinking*. In this book Burkeman challenges many of the conventional positive thinking approaches to happiness, instead advocating what he calls *the negative path* to happiness.

Rather than trying to actively pursue happiness (while trying to avoid or run away from negative emotions), Burkeman suggests we go the other way: looking to negative experiences and embracing the learning inherent within them. A similar approach can be applied to the concepts of clarity and conviction. If you want these things, you could set forth a clear goal. You can make it rock solid, and temper it with unwavering persistence and conviction. Or - you could take a counterintuitive approach,

and turn toward the hidden benefits of doubt.

Doubt makes ideas stronger

It is quite apparent that doubt is fundamental to discovery. It is an inherent element of the scientific method, and the precursor to all great questions and breakthroughs. Doubt births wisdom and is deeply linked to quality ideas. It is uncomfortable, but we know that all growth and development happens just outside our comfort zone.

The best business strategy sessions I have experienced are the ones that are full of angst and doubt. They are not joyous or comfortable – they are a hard and frustrating kind of fun. Quick fixes are resisted, and time is spent within the held tension of uncertainty. From this space, new ideas and pathways emerge that would not have been possible if we were simply ticking boxes and following a rushed agenda. Doubt makes us ask more questions – *better* questions – which makes us explore more pathways. This, in turn, can lead to more clarity,

confidence and conviction. We see more, and through the pursuit of good questions; we know more.

Doubt makes leaders better

Have you ever felt that, sooner or later, your colleagues and everyone around you will realise that you are not as smart as people think you are. That you are not really that qualified for the position you hold. And that one day people will point at you and shout “impostor!” – exposing you for the fraud that you are.

I get that feeling nearly all the time. It is called the impostor syndrome. It is the scenario whereby we constantly compare ourselves to our talented peers. Or more specifically, we compare our own doubt-ridden internal perceptions with the confident facade that others project. We feel that there is a big discrepancy – but for all we know, they could be full of self-doubt too. In fact, if they are any good, they probably are.

This sense of *impostorism* is as a natural symptom of gaining experience. The more you progress in your work or career – the more likely you will encounter talented people to compare yourself negatively against. It actually gets worse as you get better. So, the good news: if you are full of self doubt, you are probably doing great!

It is much better to feel like an impostor than to suffer from the Dunning-Kruger effect – a scenario whereby people harbour inaccurate illusions of superiority. Unburdened by self doubt, they don't realise how inept they are. There is plenty of standard advice for managing the impostor syndrome (stop comparing yourself, accept that you are successful, focus on providing value). Most of it is about reassuring yourself.

But you could take a different tact, and embrace the doubt. Accept that the doubt is there, and use it to do more and be better. This is exactly the quality we want in leaders – the ability to question themselves, to think deeper and accept that no one and no thing is perfect, but we can learn. Much better than a leader unburdened by doubt.

Doubt makes life more wonderful

So often we think in binary mode, in terms of what is right and what is wrong. This places us in a near-constant state of judgement – of ourselves, and of others. To be right, someone must be wrong. Binary right/wrong thinking certainly does not enable self-compassion, nor compassion or empathy for others.

We can play a game in which there is no clear right and wrong. Nothing is conclusive. A game in which there is always room for wonder, and win-win scenarios that are wonderful. We see this in science: theories that were thought to be right and true, are dismantled in light of new evidence. Everything is always open to further questioning. Want more wonder in your life? Relinquish the need to be right, and instead embrace doubt and the opportunity to learn.

It's not always wonderful

It's uncomfortable, remember? The thing we need to be careful of, is when we make conclusions. “I can't do this” is an unhelpful conclusion. “I'm not sure I can do this” is a bit better. Because there's only one way to find out – do it. And then if that doesn't work, you could fall back to the conclusion that you, in fact, can't do said thing. Or maybe you can keep the doubt alive! Maybe it was an issue with your methodology, or some other factor. Avoid conclusions. The best kind of doubt ends in a question mark. “How can I do this?” Let's find out.

There is a time and a place for doubt.

You choose the time, and you choose the place. What does this look like at work? It looks like leaders being comfortable enough to share their doubts and insecurities with each other during meetings and retreats, but to rally with conviction when it counts. It looks like time scheduled for deep, slow thinking – time spent in angst over the relevance of current business models in a changing world. It looks like time dedicated to real strategic development that searches for the best path (the hidden, clever path – not just the quick

fix or the convenient default). And it looks like time spent on the frontier, playing in the intersection of trends and researching what may be.

The rest of our work

The business as usual stuff, where the thinking needs to be fast. Where we default to systems and processes, reducing cognitive burden and enabling us to get work done. Good businesses dance between these two types of thinking. They carve out time for slow thinking – be it as part of their ongoing leadership development, research or learning (or deliberate work culture rituals) – they ensure there's always time for good thinking and questioning.

And then, when it counts, they can make decisions with more confidence, clarity and conviction – because of the doubt. Such companies are less likely to be blindsided by disruption, and are more equipped to embrace emerging opportunities and change. Ask more questions. Give yourself the benefit of the doubt.

References

Burkeman, O. 2013, *The Antidote: Happiness For People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking*, WF Howes Limited, United Kingdom

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