

# **The Power of Choice**

# **What's in it for me? Learn how embracing personal responsibility can help you overcome setbacks at work.**

Have you ever felt like you didn't fit into your workplace culture? Maybe you have to work harder than your peers to get noticed, or you feel that people don't respect your authority despite your title. If few professionals from your background have been successful at a particular level of leadership, it can be especially challenging to stick it out. But by choosing to focus on what you can control, you can confront these unfortunate realities with confidence. In the following blinks, we'll talk about how you can overcome low expectations from others on your professional journey, expand your network, and exert influence within your team and organization. In these blinks, you'll learn

how elite soccer players' birthdates and levels of proficiency are connected; how to transform personal failure into constructive feedback; and why exerting influence is ultimately a choice you have to make.

## **Bypass others' low expectations of you by focusing on what you can control.**

Say you're a confident graduate who gets hired by a top firm in your field. Then, on your first day at your new job, you notice you're one of the few people among your peers from a minority background. A week later, you overhear a senior partner invite the only other junior hire out to lunch. Over the next few weeks, that junior benefits from personal mentorship, while you get little if any coaching. Just as you're questioning whether you fit in, you miss an important deadline. After your manager rebukes you in front of your peers, you're left completely dejected. You're sure that it's time to throw in the towel. But is it really? Or could it just be that you are caught in a downward spiral of low expectations? The key message here is: Bypass others' low expectations of you by focusing on what you can control. Despite the progress toward diversity in the workplace, many of us still have to confront lingering stereotypes: People doubting a woman's ability to make a tough call, or an executive of color's ability to lead an all-white organization. Although it's certainly demoralizing to confront low expectations from others, the greater harm happens when you internalize their doubts in your own mind. Sometimes all it takes is detecting suspicion in a colleague's voice, or noticing that you're not being considered for opportunities as regularly as your peers. This can trigger the downward spiral of low expectations mentioned earlier. Say someone's overt or subtle skepticism about your abilities leads you to seriously question whether you have what it takes. Once confidence is compromised, people tend to exert less effort; as a result, performance is less likely to be satisfactory, which ultimately acts to confirm the original low expectations. To avoid getting caught in this downward spiral, the author – who heads a leadership development organization for Black CEOs and senior executives – recommends focusing on what you can control. Regardless of what others say or do, he maintains that your power to achieve your desired outcomes rests on how you respond. In his own words, "It's not the stimulus, it's the response." The response he recommends focuses on embracing personal responsibility in your career

development and expanding your sense of possibility about what you can accomplish. In these blinks, we'll look at the underlying principles, which involve cultivating the technical, relational, and influential skills required to grow your network and career.

## **Think about failure as feedback on how to get better - not as a lack of ability.**

In research cited in a 2006 New York Times article, psychologist Anders Ericsson noticed that a large percentage of the world's elite soccer players were born in the first three months of the year. Sound like a coincidence? Ericsson didn't think so. The cutoff birthdate for youth leagues is usually December 31, he reasoned. So these players are nearly a year older than their peers born late in the year. Not only are these older players physically more mature, they also benefit from a whole additional year to practice and develop their skills, making them more likely to get selected for the most competitive teams. It goes to show that even something that appears to be a function of natural talent, like world-class soccer proficiency, is driven by practice and effort. Here's the key message: Think about failure as feedback on how to get better - not as a lack of ability. Have you ever tried your hand at something, like an instrument or new language, failed during one of your first attempts, and immediately thought, "I'm just not cut out for this?" This response would be an example of what's called the fixed-capacity mindset - the belief that a failure indicates your inherent limitations in ability. A fixed-capacity mindset is destructive to confidence and inhibits efforts to learn and grow. By contrast, to build confidence, it helps to direct your attention toward a useful response - or what's called a capacity-building mindset. That's when you see failure as feedback on how to improve instead of an indication of your potential. When it comes to long-term growth and development, a capacity-building mindset is absolutely critical. So when you fail at something, instead of saying "Oh, I'll never be good enough" or "I'm just not that good," try to identify an opportunity to learn. To put this into practice, immediately after a failure, ask yourself three questions: What happened? Why did it happen? How can I improve? Focusing your attention on the feedback provided by the experience facilitates a thought process that builds confidence. For example, if you fail to make new contacts as often as you'd like, instead of thinking, "I'll never be good at networking," be analytical and curious about what you can do differently. If it's because you haven't really gone out of your way to initiate contact with a new range of colleagues, then turn that into a goal. When you turn negative self-talk into proactive tasks, you put yourself in control - and boost confidence.

## **To get the most out of your efforts, be clear about what kind of outcome you want.**

Germaine worked for an insurance company for five years, and she was really good at her job - maybe too good. To meet her manager's expectations, she often corrected her colleagues' work. This meant she spent ten hours a day doing largely the same task - for five years. Then her manager offered her an opportunity to join a team working on a software evaluation. As hard as Germaine strove to expand her professional horizons, she was so busy with her usual workload that she had to decline. Germaine was working

harder than ever, but she felt she was wasting much of her time and energy – and that was largely because she was not focused on what she actually wanted. The key message here is this: To get the most out of your efforts, be clear about what kind of outcome you want. It's easy to confuse working hard with working effectively. While focused effort is critically important to your development, it also has to be effective; that is, every effort you make should be an investment in developing the skills and capabilities that drive your career. First, you need to have a clear idea of where you want to end up. Imagine that you're driving without any destination in mind. You'd probably end up going around in circles. Similarly, it's hard to be strategic about shaping your career and garnering the support of others if you don't know what outcomes you're trying to achieve. To form your vision, take time to reflect on what matters to you and how you want to spend your time. Ask yourself what you want to achieve by the end of the day or year. Similarly, what do you want to accomplish at a meeting? When you think about your work, what part of it is most satisfying and energizing? Try to be as specific as possible about what you want to achieve in the short term as well as in the long run. The more precisely you can identify a goal, the more likely you will be able to figure out a strategy for accomplishing it. Knowing what's important to you will also help you make critical decisions about which opportunities you spend your time and energy on and which ones you pass up. Ultimately, your vision is the key indicator that you are taking action to move toward your goals.

## **Take the first step in building professional relationships, even when it's uncomfortable.**

Eduardo was a young Mexican-American production manager who was offered a promotion and a transfer to Ohio – far away from his tight-knit community of extended family and friends in Texas. Six months into the new job, Eduardo found that coworkers were still reserved with him, and he even suspected that some mistrusted him. It was also evident that his was the only Hispanic family in his neighborhood. The more he missed Texas, the more he wondered if the promotion had been a mistake. The author gave him some advice. He suggested that Eduardo had what it took to turn the situation around. If his coworkers weren't accommodating him, he should reach out to them. The key message here is: Take the first step in building professional relationships, even when it's uncomfortable. As difficult as it is to adjust to the demands of a new job or team, it can be especially hard to reach out to new colleagues with backgrounds different from your own. But usually, you'll just have to endure the discomfort of making the first move and introducing yourself. It's worth taking that step out of your comfort zone to build relationships, however. That's because no matter how hard you work, people need to enjoy working with you if you are to be valued as an integral member of your organization. In advance, prepare an introduction that conveys who you are – your job, career interests, or personal attributes. Consider what professional and technical value you have to offer, including any major qualifications, but mainly focus on trying to make it memorable. Think about what's interesting about you – for example, your hobbies, opinions, or anecdotes. No matter their positions in an organization, people want to meet interesting people. The author refers to one quiet, unassuming manager who, in order to impress a consultant, mentioned that he spent his weekends racing motorcycles. The image of this man in leather, donning a helmet and dragging his knee on the ground as he rounded curves at speed, would certainly leave an impression! By

preparing your best first impression ahead of time, you can make the most out of these opportunities. But just like any relationship, a professional partnership involves much more than being acquainted. Trust builds gradually, with time, as people get to know one another's personalities, motivations, and incentives.

## **Build better professional relationships by identifying common ground with others.**

A manager named Darnell found himself stuck squarely in the middle of a contentious disagreement between the manufacturing company he worked for and a longtime supplier. Things got so heated that both parties threatened to call off the relationship – something Darnell believed would be a serious mistake for both sides. So he set up a meeting with each party. At both meetings, he articulated how each side was integral to the potential success of the other: Darnell's company would become the supplier's largest customer, while the supplier had technological capacity that the company lacked. Within a week, it seemed Darnell's approach had worked. By painting a vision of mutual gains, the two parties were able to find common ground. Here's the key message: Build better professional connections by identifying common ground with others. To maximize the impact of your relationship-building efforts, be strategic. First, find common ground that will serve as the basis for working together. Understand that common ground comes in many different forms. You don't have to share a person's working style, gender, or cultural identity to have something in common – but you do need to understand each other's needs and offer mutual support. To start out on the path to partnership, you have to unearth those shared interests. For example, take initiative and hold a meeting with your manager. Ask her whether she is a person who loves to talk through all the angles of a problem, or if she's someone who wants only the bottom line. Does she want to know the details of your projects, or just the problems you're experiencing? The better you understand your manager's expectations of you in terms of deliverables and working style, the better you'll be able to shape an effective working relationship. In the same way, be curious about what your colleagues are responsible for accomplishing. Be genuinely interested in learning their stories and finding out about their goals. You don't have to like everything about someone; when you encounter differences, try to reserve judgment and simply focus on looking for ways to connect. It takes time to build trust in any relationship. As with any other skill, the more you practice relationship-building, the easier it gets to make connections – and the greater the range of personalities and perspectives you'll be able to engage with effortlessly.

## **Choose to be more influential by finding ways to voice your opinion and participate.**

A young supervisor in a distribution warehouse was assigned to join a new committee, tasked with improving some of his company's processes. He was about to decline when the author encouraged him to take advantage of the opportunity. Why not look for active

ways to participate and be visible? Taking the author's advice, the supervisor joined the committee. As he picked up on his colleagues' thoughts, he began to think about solutions to their problems. He proposed one solution during a committee meeting, and later saw a version of it implemented. Like him, you can take the author's advice and choose to be influential – by making your voice heard. The key message here is this: Choose to be more influential by finding ways to voice your opinion and participate. The third and final pillar of professional development is the ability to influence. That starts with the choice to exert influence – and often, making this choice is the most difficult step. If you've gotten used to working in the background or relying on the decisions of others, it can be uncomfortable to take more control and to accept the responsibility of leadership. This is especially the case if you have to work harder than your peers to get noticed, or fight to get heard in the first place. But if you don't speak up, people stop seeking your opinions, and you risk becoming invisible within your organization. So first, you have to decide you want to influence – and then you have to trust that you can learn the skills to do so. To make that happen, study how things get done in your organization. How do effective leaders create commitment among their team? How do they present their ideas in a way that gets approval or invites cooperation? How do they handle opposition or rejection? Every work situation presents opportunities to suggest improvements or motivate others to act. For example, you can take your manager aside and give your opinion, offer to take over a small project, or share your point of view more regularly in meetings. Success or agreement is never guaranteed, but the power of choice is about focusing on the possibilities. To be a more effective leader, you have to take the risk and make that first step – and then progress to the other principles we've covered. Whatever setbacks you may experience, let nothing stop you from developing a vision, being proactive about your professional relationships, and making your voice heard.

## Final summary

The key message in these blinks is: Whether you're being underestimated at work or struggling to fit into your team, you can confront any professional setbacks by focusing on what you can control. This includes building self-confidence by turning failure into action, embracing a vision for your career, reaching out to peers, and finding ways to participate in your team or organization. Actionable advice: Ask for feedback from your peers. After a demanding project or presentation, take a peer aside and ask for a debrief. Make sure to reach out to someone you trust to give you specific strategies for improving. When you're willing to ask for feedback, you can tap into new approaches to accelerate your growth.