

College of Business Review by Beverly Little

Title: "Confidence: How Winning Streaks and Losing Streaks Begin and End"

Author: Rosabeth Moss Kanter

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Publication Date: 2004

Length: 369 pages

Reading time: 15 hours

Reading rating: 8 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 4 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

I started reading this book for two reasons. I respect Rosabeth Moss Kanter as much as any current management writer for her skills at writing to the audience of the practicing manager. Secondly, I am fascinated by the concept of confidence -- the link between "expectations and performance" as Kanter puts it. Why do people with equal skills have different outcomes? Why do teams sometimes perform above their talent level? I was not disappointed. Using examples from sports and business, she weaves convincing parallels between such disparate organizations as the Philadelphia Eagles, Continental Airlines, Prairie View A&M University, Gillette and South Africa.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part explores the nature of confidence and why it affects outcomes. People who believe they can win put in more effort and persevere in difficult moments. They also get the benefit of the doubt from others. This is the phenomenon known as the "halo effect." Positive expectations influence willingness to invest, by the person/team and by others, which leads to a greater resource base. She also states that winning and losing are not events, they are trajectories. Anyone can lose once; losing twice matters far more. One of the more important statements she makes is that confidence is not just a mental attitude; it is a reasonable reaction to circumstances.

Part one also describes winning and losing streaks and their cyclical nature. Winning begets winning because it creates confidence at four levels: self-confidence (emotional), confidence in others (behavioral); confidence in the system (organizational) and confidence in external networks to provide resources (environmental). The disciplines that proceed and support a winning streak allow people to relax under pressure and trust their skills. Winning streaks often end because disciplines are relaxed and/or panic sets in after a fumble.

Losing spirals down for lack of all of those effects. Kanter coins marvelous phrases such as "doom loops," "the undertow of defeat" and the "timidity of mediocrity." My favorite anecdote in this chapter is the Tampa Bay Devil Rays player who did not swing at a pitch that ended a game with a third strike. He told Lou Piniella that he did not argue with the umpire because it didn't matter. He was caught in the undertow.

Part two addresses the hard work of turnarounds. Stopping a losing streak and changing direction toward winning has two parts, internal and external. Internally, the turnaround

agent has to change the culture by rebuilding the three cornerstones of confidence, accountability, collaboration and initiative. Externally, the turnaround agent has to rebuild image in order to regain access to external resources.

Part three is my favorite part of the book. Its first chapter is about the work of leaders in developing confidence at the individual, team and organizational level. Kanter says that leadership is not about the leader, but about how he/she builds the confidence of others, so that leaders emerge all over the organization. This is not just “putting lipstick on the bulldog”; this is serious, hard work that takes time. Confidence cannot be bought, it must be earned. But she does give specific things that do need to be done to address accountability, collaboration and initiative.

The final chapter applies the concepts of confidence at the personal level. Kanter stresses that a person should focus on what he/she can control in a situation rather than what is beyond control. The most profound statement (among many) in this chapter is that “The dividing line between winning streaks and losing streaks is the choice of behavior in response to setbacks.” Learning from setbacks rather than blaming the situation is a choice.

As you can guess, I highly recommend this book. It can be read as a great collection of anecdotes, as an application of theory, or as a “how-to” book for leaders and change agents. I found it satisfying on all three levels.

Beverly Little is a Professor of Management at Western Carolina University, where she teaches Introduction to Management, Human Resource Management, Organizational Behavior and Leadership Development. For previously reviewed books, visit our Web site at www.wcu.edu/cob.