

# Cultivating Confident Leadership

A 3-step process to help leaders overcome fear and unleash their potential

by Alison Reid



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## Executive summary

What would be possible if your leaders felt they were able to express themselves fully?

What could that mean for growth, for innovation, for engagement in your organisation?

When we talk about fear in leadership, so often it is with reference to the imposition of fear from above, often a domineering CEOs using fear as a tool of control.

**However, this white paper is not about how leaders use fear on others, but how fear holds leaders back from realising their full potential and helping your organisation thrive.**

I have coached many talented senior managers and directors in large complex organisations cross-sector facing a new leadership challenge. Their line managers are wondering why they're not stepping up – they want them to be more visible, more vocal and more confident. Why don't they just get on with it?

This paper explores what's going on and what can be done about it :

- **Underlying fears are holding these individuals back from performing at their best** – fear of being found out, fear of rejection, fear of failure. The increased challenge and exposure that comes with leadership means the strategies that helped them succeed as managers no longer work. Yet only a minority of leaders experiencing fear voice their concerns.
- **When fear is at play, survival becomes paramount** - pleasing the boss becomes more important than taking the lead. Not good news when CEOs are concerned that their emerging leaders lack the ability to think strategically and believe creativity is crucial for future leadership.
- **40% of employees feel stressed at work** in an environment where constant work pressure, limited resource and regular restructurings are the norm. Research shows they're afraid of losing their status, losing their job, and of unfair treatment at work.
- **Yet our response to external stressors depends on what we've learned to be afraid of.** Fear has shaped our survival strategies whether that's people-pleasing or procrastination.
- **We're not hardwired and we can change, but it's not easy** to work through long-held behavioural patterns which have evolved to keep us "safe".

I'll share a 3-step process which helps leaders to cultivate confidence and maximise their leadership impact :

- 1 **Awareness**
- 2 **Design**
- 3 **Practice**





## Introduction : The case of the missing leader

What if I were to tell you that there are leaders missing in your organisation? That there are voices, ideas, opinions and talent that are unheard and unseen? I'm not talking about a headcount issue or a rash of absenteeism, but leaders who aren't realising their full potential.

This isn't a "performance" issue – these talented individuals have recently been given a new leadership challenge whether a promotion, increased responsibility or a brief to lead an agenda for change or innovation.

Yet this is what their line managers say they need them to do more of:

- Lead more, manage less
- Execute faster, make change happen
- Be more visible and more vocal, especially with senior stakeholders
- Challenge more, share their thinking
- Have more confidence in themselves

There is an expectation that they step up seamlessly to leadership and often a level of frustration as to why the leader in question doesn't just "get on with it".

### Do you recognise this scenario in your organisation? So what's going on?

Underlying fears are holding them back from performing at their best.

- "I don't know how I'm going to keep on top of everything and make time to focus on strategic objectives."
- "I feel out of my depth having an opinion in an area where I don't have subject matter expertise, let alone leading it."
- "I'm afraid of speaking up with senior stakeholders because I may say something wrong and look stupid."
- "I'm not leadership material – I'm not charismatic or inspiring."
- "I'm afraid I'll fail."

*Examples shared in this paper are based on clients in senior leadership roles. The names and details have been changed to protect their anonymity.*

They're afraid of being found out – often known as Impostor Syndrome, of losing their reputation, of losing control, of not being able to provide for themselves and their family.

Whilst these leaders may appear outwardly confident, they are subject to negative thoughts, feelings of anxiety and fear, and behavioural patterns such as perfectionism, procrastination and people-pleasing which keep them from lifting their head above the parapet.

It's as though they're a swan gliding on the lake, their legs paddling furiously underneath the surface.

### The bottom line is that, when fear is at play, survival becomes paramount.

That means pleasing the boss becomes more important than pushing back, doing it right becomes more important than doing the right thing, keeping on top of daily demands supersedes creativity and independent thinking.

This isn't good news when creativity is regarded as the most important skill for future leaders according to an IBM study of 1500 CEOs globally<sup>1</sup> and that many CEOs are concerned that their emerging leaders are lacking in the ability to think strategically and manage change effectively<sup>2</sup>.

### The real cost of fear is not what you can see, but what you can't.

- **The missing conversation** – for example, a leader holding back from connecting with a key influencer because Fear says, "Why would they want to talk to you?"
- **The missing voice in a meeting** – an idea, a challenge, an opinion that could change the course of an organisation is left unsaid because Fear says, "You'll say something stupid."
- **The missing request** – not asking for additional resource that will be the turning point between success and failure, because Fear says, "They'll think you can't cope."
- **The missing decision** – the decision that is never made, because Fear wants the leader to make sure it really is the *right* decision, whatever "right" is, to avoid imagined failure.

Fear may be keeping leaders in your organisation from speaking up, from pushing back, from making the time and space to create something that nobody has thought of yet – and from connecting with the right people to make it happen.

What would be possible if your leaders felt they were able to express themselves fully? What could that mean for growth, for innovation, for engagement in your organisation?

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*"I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not the one who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers fear."*

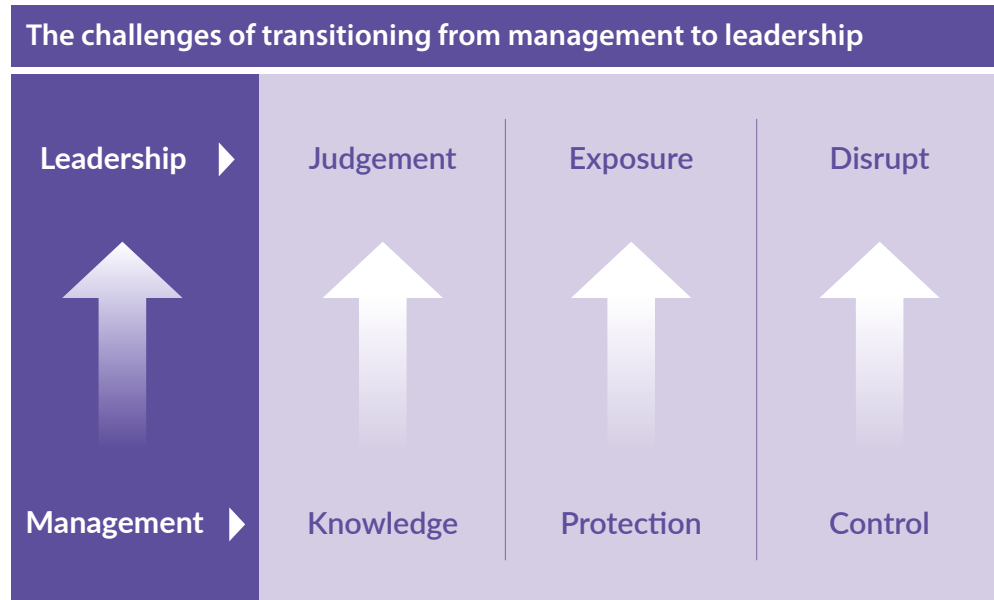
Nelson Mandela



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# The challenges of transitioning from management to leadership

Ironically, what has helped these individuals become good managers is not what they need as leaders.



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As these talented individuals progress through their career, several themes emerge :

- **The importance of judgement over knowledge :**  
A core element of their initial progression is about knowledge, building technical expertise in their area. They know the answers to questions and problems and manage others to do the same. However, as the scope of their responsibility increases, they find themselves needing to have opinions and make decisions in situations they haven't faced before. They need to trust their judgement when they can't fall back on tried and tested solutions.
- **Increased exposure :**  
Visibility increases and the stakes get higher. There is further to fall if they say or do something "wrong". On a personal level, they may have accumulated financial liabilities such as a mortgage and supporting family members, which means that their fear of loss becomes greater. Research shows that a context of regular "restructuring" – the polite word for headcount reductions – enhances anxiety.<sup>3</sup>
- **Expectation to disrupt :**  
They're often working in large complex organisations where the culture is fast-paced, they feel that they are expected to be responsive to multiple demands 24/7, and are constantly "on" on email and other media. They're afraid of the consequences of letting go of controlling everything to focus on bigger priorities, especially when there may be no, or limited, resource to delegate to.





*“ The only way to ease our fear and be truly happy is to acknowledge our fear and look deeply at its source. Instead of trying to escape from our fear, we can invite it up to our awareness and look at it clearly and deeply.”*

Thich Nhat Hanh

When increased challenge and exposure reach a critical point, the strategies they have employed to succeed in the workplace become untenable. They are left feeling overwhelmed and vulnerable.

As one client puts it, whilst she feels most comfortable when she’s “tinkering under the bonnet”, this isn’t an option when you need to lead others through change.

Unfortunately, only a minority of leaders experiencing symptoms of fear feel comfortable voicing their concerns to their manager. This can result in negative thoughts and feelings escalating and the individual perpetuating behaviours which limit their leadership impact.

Fewer than half of US employees surveyed who said that stress interfered with their work talked to their employer about it.

## Why?

Because they felt that they would be perceived as :

- unwilling to do the work **34%**
- labelled as “weak” **31%**
- or that it would affect their promotion opportunities **22%<sup>4</sup>**



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## The size of the problem : Stress = fear

The phenomenon of stress in the workplace is well-documented.

Research points to at least 40% of workers feeling stressed at work - 56% of those say this affects their workplace performance and 50% their quality of work. The number of stress cases is estimated at 40% of all work-related illnesses.<sup>5</sup>

However, what we call stress is actually a physiological response to fear.

We feel fear when we are faced with a threat, whether real or imagined, and it prompts our body to get ready to act. Whilst a surge of adrenalin can be useful, for example to motivate us to perform well in a presentation, sustained exposure to a perceived threat creates a condition of chronic stress which, amongst other negative effects, impairs our ability to think.

Research names the main causes of work-related stress as job reorganisation or job insecurity, work pressure, bullying and lack of management support.

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Findings from the 2012 UK Skills and Employment Survey showed the **3 main causes of fear** in the workplace as:

- fear of loss of job status **52%** employees
- fear of job loss **25%**, jumping up to **31%** where there had already been job reductions
- and fear of unfair treatment at work **31%**.<sup>6</sup>

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In the modern-day work environment, and particularly since the crash of 2008, leaders work in an environment where constant work pressure, limited resource and regular restructurings are the norm. Living and working in an environment of external stressors means many of us will be feeling anxious or fearful on a constant basis. In fact, our evolution has programmed us to look out for danger all the time<sup>7</sup>.

However, the external stressors are just one part of the problem. Our assessment and response to these stressors are unique depending on what we have learned to be afraid of as we have grown up.

*“ We are born to feel afraid so that we have the best chance of surviving”*

Dr Paul Brown

## Why fear is a serious matter

Our sense of fear developed to keep us alive. As Rick Hanson<sup>8</sup> so beautifully puts it, our ancestors could make 2 kinds of mistakes :

- 1 Thinking there was a tiger in the bushes when there wasn't one
- 2 Thinking there was no tiger in the bushes when there actually was one.

The cost of the first? Needless anxiety. The cost of the second? Death.

Unsurprisingly, we evolved to make the first mistake over and over again to avoid making the second one.

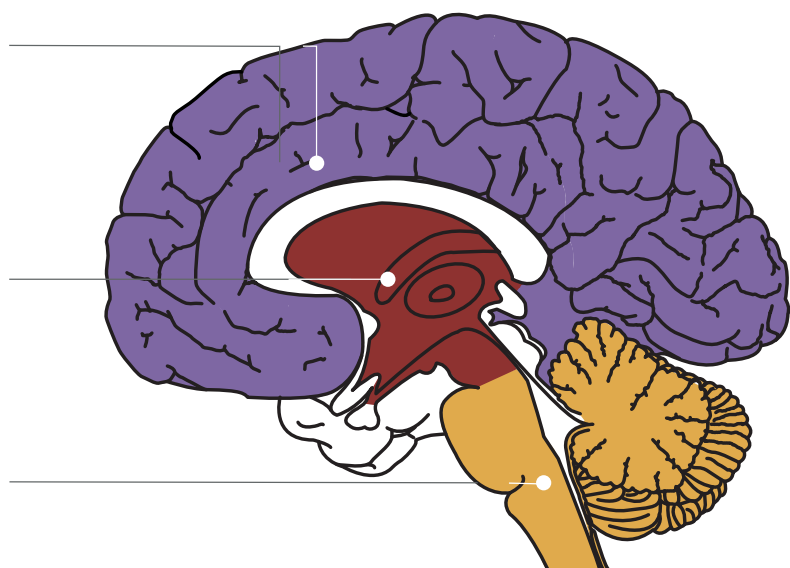
The human brain evolved to keep us safe, to connect us with others and to navigate the complexities of living in a social group. As we grow up, the brain, which is only partially constructed when we're born, develops in response to our environment, seeking out behaviours to keep us as safe, connected and respected as possible.<sup>9</sup>

And the basis of that evolution is emotions. Emotions underpin how we think, act and feel. They drive our behaviour even when we are not aware of them.

Neuroscientists tell us there are 8 basic emotions driving our behaviour of which 5 are designed to protect us from danger, yet fear is the easiest emotion to trigger because it is most closely connected with our survival – it keeps us alive.<sup>10</sup>

### The Triune Brain

- Neocortex (*thinking*)  
**Respect**  
To navigate living in a social group
- Limbic brain (*emotions*)  
**Belonging**  
To keep us connected
- Reptilian brain (*survival*)  
**Safety**  
To keep us alive



## What does this mean in practice?

“There is circuitry in the brain to ensure we not only learn what to be afraid of, but to never ever forget it”<sup>11</sup>

As we continue to learn and adapt, fear helps us develop survival strategies in response to our experiences. Our relationships with our parents, or primary caregivers, and our family are particularly influential along with institutions such as school or church.<sup>12</sup>

These strategies become ingrained patterns of behaviour, often known as “conditioned tendencies”<sup>13</sup>, which we default to when under pressure – when we think there is a modern-day tiger in the bushes. For example, if you learn to avoid making your parent angry by doing what they want, a volatile boss will trigger your learned, people-pleasing behaviour.

Conditioned tendencies	Associated behaviours
Move away from (flight)	Avoid conflict, withdraw, procrastinate
Move against (fight)	Challenge, intimidate
Move towards (appease)	People-please, perfectionist
Immobilise (freeze)	Thought paralysis

When experiencing chronic stress, these behaviours become the norm.

A contemporary behavioural tendency to add to these is busyness, a response to a fear of losing control in “a world of too much”, as Tony Crabbe puts it<sup>14</sup>. This phenomenon appears particularly dangerous to business given that CEOs require leaders to be able to think in order for their organisations to survive and grow<sup>15</sup>.

Conditioned tendencies in practice	
Move away from (flight)	<i>Ben had a critical father and holds extremely high expectations for himself. When under severe pressure, he withdraws and becomes uncommunicative as he grapples with seemingly overwhelming demands.</i>
Move against (fight)	<i>Jess becomes angry when she's challenged because she feels she's being attacked, a learned behaviour from being bullied at school.</i>
Move towards (appease)	<i>Jane was treated as the “favourite” by her parents which has shaped a sense of guilt. She feels that she needs to “give back” to others and accommodates the demands of colleagues and managers at the expense of focussing on her key priorities.</i>
Immobilise (freeze)	<i>David's mind goes blank when he's put on the spot in company meetings - all he's aware of is being frozen with panic.</i>





### Why it isn't easy to work through fear

Contrary to cultural belief, we are *not* hardwired. You *can* teach an old dog new tricks.

Our brain is the most malleable organ in our body and changes more times in our life than any other organ in our body. The principles of neuroplasticity<sup>16</sup> mean we can self-direct how we think and feel. And life events can shift our perspective.

One Director I interviewed discovered as she became more senior that the leaders she had put on a pedestal didn't always know what they're talking about. For her, it felt like an "unveiling" of the truth behind the story she had created that leaders were highly intelligent and knew all the answers.

Another Director had a mentally-ill father who was sometimes physically abusive. He made a conscious decision to overcome fear and, with time and practice, his response to challenging situations is a tingle of nerves rather than abject terror.

However, given 40-45% of what we do every day is habit<sup>17</sup>, a behaviour which we do automatically because it has become unconscious, it's challenging for an individual to recognise their own habitual behaviours, let alone change them.

For example, until brought to attention in our conversations, Jess was unaware that she was feeling anger, Ben hadn't realised that, when he was trying to figure things out, he scrunched himself up over his desk, and Jane assumed the constant stream of negative thoughts in her head was real.

And when we perceive danger, real or imagined, it can feel as though our body takes over, whether we clam up, lash out or freeze.

In order to "reprogramme" unhelpful, fear-driven behaviours, we need to :

- 1 Bring awareness and curiosity to those strategies before we can create new ones.
- 2 Practise new strategies outside trigger situations so that we build our capacity to respond differently when we are in them.

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**40-45%** of what we do every day is habit<sup>18</sup>, a behaviour which we do automatically because it has become unconscious.

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## A 3-step process for confident leadership

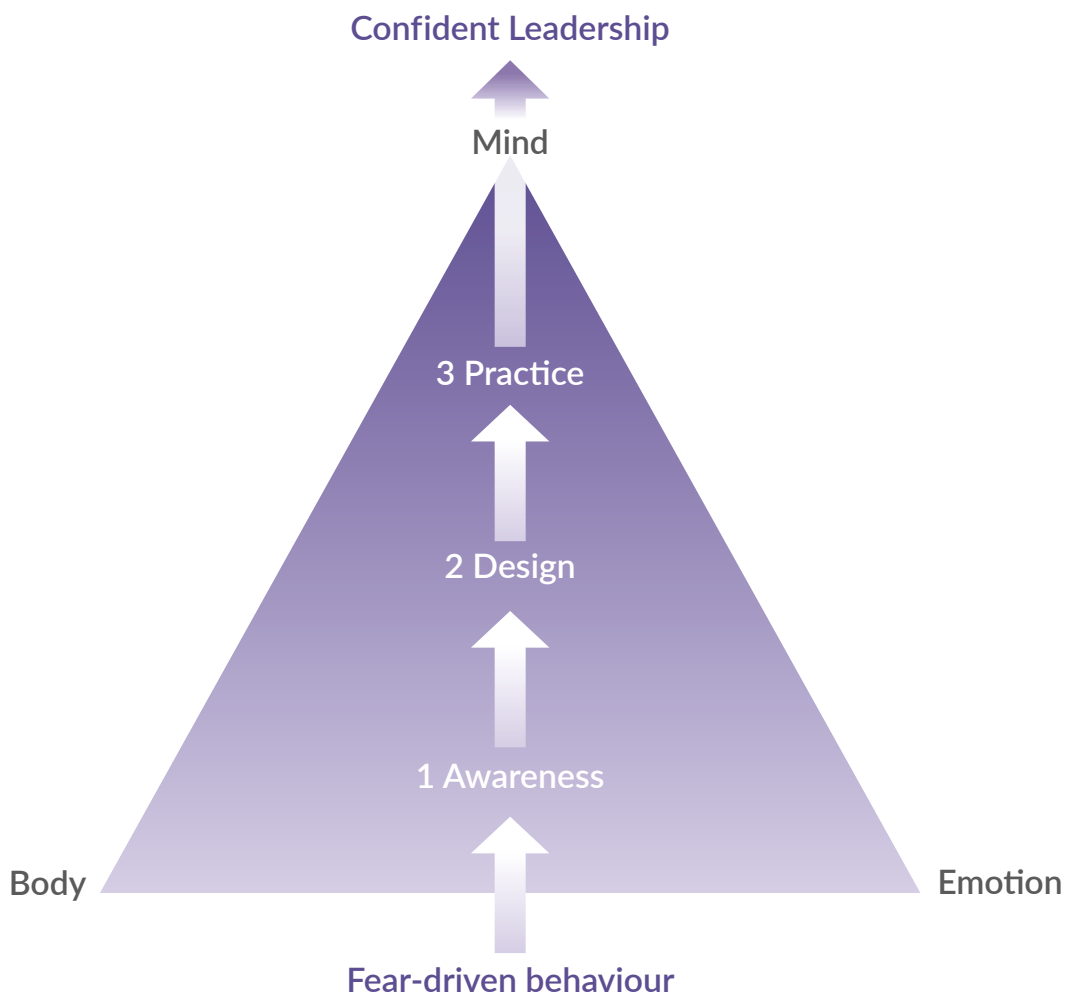
To change ineffective behavioural patterns driven by fear, we need to :

- 1 Raise **awareness** of unhelpful behaviours evoked by a fear response
- 2 **Design** a new behavioural strategy to respond to situations that evoke a fear response
- 3 **Practise** new behaviours both inside and outside trigger situations

This 3-step process involves exploring and shifting how we think (mind), how we use our body and how we feel (emotion) in order to act from confidence rather than fear.

It is applicable where an individual is experiencing pervasive anxiety as well as for specific situations which trigger a fear response.

### A 3-step process for confident leadership



## A 3-step process for confident leadership

### 1 Raise awareness

The first step is to identify situations which trigger fear, and then dissect and examine what happens for us in those moments. Our behaviour will involve a posture or physical movement, what we're thinking in that moment (what we say to ourselves), and what we say – and how we say this – to others.

Knowing why we behave as we do can be helpful, but not always necessary – some of the experiences that shaped our fear may have happened at such a young age that we do not remember them.

### 2 Design a new behavioural strategy

Next we need to understand the desired outcome. How do we want to show up? What impact do we want to have?

Designing a new behaviour may involve challenging and shifting our thinking, working with our posture and/or capturing a positive feeling from a situation where we performed well. Our mind, body and emotion are interdependent – if we change how we use one, we'll impact the others.




For example, when Ben realised he hunched over with his hands on his head when he was feeling overwhelmed, he was able to experiment with adjusting his posture. This resulted in a sense of perspective and clarity, he felt more energised, and the possibility emerged for him to negotiate deadlines with stakeholders, a possibility which he couldn't “see” before.

### 3 Practise new behaviours

There are 3 elements to practising a new behaviour :

- **Disrupt** : Habitual behavioural patterns are wired into us. This means uprooting them in order to plant new patterns. When the trigger situation arises, the first step is to notice the trigger and interrupt our habitual reaction. For example, noticing that an email has triggered a feeling of stress and choosing to take a deep breath instead of reacting immediately.
- **Repeat** the new behaviour regularly and frequently in low-pressure situations. This strengthens the new behaviour so that we are more likely to be able to call upon it in a critical situation. For example, practising saying “no” to cold callers as practice for saying “no” to a demanding boss.
- **Experiment** with the new behaviour as often as we can in the trigger situation. It will take time and practice to reprogramme our fear response.

## The 3-step process : case study

<b>1 Awareness</b> 	<i>Alice was promoted to a Director role in an area outside her expertise. Previously confident, she had developed a fear of speaking up in executive forums because she didn't think she had the relevant expertise and the stakes felt higher. We discovered that, when she did speak up, she felt anxious and her breath became shallow. She spoke softly and avoided eye contact. Her over-riding thought was, "I don't want to look stupid." The impact was that she wasn't heard.</i>
<b>2 Design</b> 	<i>When I asked her what was important about the impact she made, we experimented with what it felt like to hold the thought, "I may or may not be right, and I am entitled to have an opinion." She noticed a shift in confidence and I asked her to adjust her posture to reflect this. She sat up straighter and made eye contact.</i>
<b>3 Practice</b> 	<i>Alice committed to practising the new behaviour in low-stake meetings in the run-up to the next executive forum. When we next spoke, she had become increasingly confident through her practice, reinforced by positive feedback from senior stakeholders who complimented her on her compelling argument.</i>

## How to cultivate confident leadership in your organisation

We know that less than 50% of workers experiencing a lack of confidence feel comfortable voicing their concerns for fear of repercussions, and that is a pattern I see play out with my clients.

Here are some suggestions for supporting individuals who may be experiencing fear and anxiety as they make leadership transitions :

- **Assess the quality of line manager support.** Are they equipped to create a safe space for employees to voice their hopes and fears? Be aware that, if the relationship is new, the level of openness will be impacted.
- **Don't assume the individual feels safe to talk.** Be proactive in creating the opportunity for them to discuss their aspirations and concerns - for example, with a peer or HR or L&D professional.
- **Explore what support the individual needs.** One of my clients requested of her manager that they double-hand high-stake meetings as she eased into her more senior role.
- **Create facilitated peer groups for leaders to share their experiences** in a safe environment and build a support network.
- **Consider whether to engage a coach** to help them explore and change fear-driven behaviours which are limiting their leadership impact. A skilled coach will pick up on behavioural patterns which the individual concerned may be unaware of, crucial to surfacing insight which then paves the way for action.

Finally, raise awareness of the role of fear in driving behaviour and the danger this poses to the success of your organisation. Make it acceptable to say, "I'm afraid".





## Conclusion

When fear is at play, survival becomes paramount. In the workplace, that means pleasing the boss becomes more important than pushing back, doing it right becomes more important than doing the right thing, keeping on top of things supersedes creativity and independent thinking. Whilst being afraid is part of our human make-up, our fear is often disproportionate to the challenges we face.

The good news is that we are not hardwired – we can change. Cultivating confident leadership will enable your organisation to thrive through growth, innovation and engagement.

**Are you ready to help your leaders overcome fear and cultivate confidence?**

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*“ If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself, but to your estimate of it, and this you have the power to revoke at any moment.”*

Marcus Aurelius



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## About the author

Alison Reid is an expert in developing leaders from the inside out. She helps executives cultivate the confidence to conquer new leadership challenges and drive business growth.

An Oxford graduate, Alison has over 20 years' international business experience with organisations including Procter & Gamble, PriceWaterhouseCoopers and BakerMcKenzie, specialising in leadership development over a decade ago. She works with clients in a range of private, public and third sector organisations across the US, Europe and Asia Pacific.

Alison helps her clients think, feel and act like leaders by raising their awareness of mindset and behaviours that are holding them back from performing to their full potential and helping them design, practise and embody strategies which maximise their leadership impact. Alison's commercial experience means she understands the context her clients work within, the challenges they face, and the importance of setting measurable outcomes.

Alison is a certified Ontological Coach accredited with the ICF (International Coach Federation) and a keynote speaker.



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*“ You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do.”*

Eleanor Roosevelt

# Thank you to...

Susan Scott, author of [How to prevent burnout](#)

Dr Eunice Aquilina, author of [Embodying Authenticity](#)

The 18 senior managers, directors, consultants and CEOs cross-sector who kindly allowed me to interview them about their experience of fear in the workplace whose anonymity I wish to protect.

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*" Do not fear mistakes. You will know failure.  
Continue to reach out."*

Benjamin Franklin



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White paper

## Cultivating Confident Leadership

A 3-step process to help leaders overcome fear and unleash their leadership potential

by Alison Reid

*"Courage starts with showing up and letting ourselves be seen."*

Brené Brown

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