

The Confidence Paradox

A confident leader is not always the best leader. Confidence without an equivalent amount of competence can lead to the ship being steered off course and bad decisions made.

Cornell University psychologists David Dunning and Justin Kruger called this the Dunning Kruger Effect in their 1999 paper. The pair found those who performed in the bottom quartile across various tests, rated their skills far above average. For example, those in the 12th percentile self-rated their expertise to be, on average, in the 62nd percentile. In fact, those who are the least skilled are also the most likely to overestimate their abilities. They concluded that those who are unable to examine themselves objectively suffer from ... "a dual burden: Not only do they reach mistaken conclusions and make regrettable errors, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to realize it." To compound this effect, when we make decisions over who we respect as leaders, very few of us make objective judgements based on skills, knowledge, and capability, we are easily wooed by confidence and conviction. Society and organisations reward those who dominate, who push their ideas, at times mistaking unyielding drive for intellect or vision, elevating them to leadership positions that their



'Confidence Tricks' bitumen and oil on canvas, size 100x80x 4cm 2018

competence may not warrant. Traditionally we have encouraged individualism and the capacity to heed no challenge in our leaders, rather than rewarding the skill of listening, the ability to create participation or a focus on the development of others. But this is at odds with what could be seen as the true secret of our success as a species, our highly evolved ability to work as a collective and coordinate groups. Whilst our heads have been turned and our attention focused on the loud,



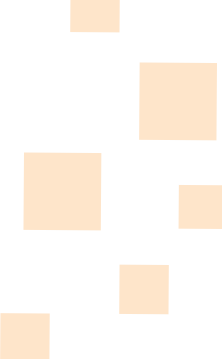
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over-confident individuals who proclaim their own 'leadership capability'; quiet, considered individuals have been creating shared endeavour. As Jacinda Arden said in 2019 'To me, leadership is not about necessarily being the loudest in the room, but instead being the bridge, or the thing that is missing in the discussion and trying to build a consensus from there.' (Newshub 2019).

A factor cited in the lack of gender parity in leadership in organisations is women's confidence levels; they are often criticised for not being pushy enough, told to grasp nettles, to 'lean in' and demand a seat. This perspective reinforces conventional dynamics and behaviours in organisations – that those that dominate the conversation win the argument, that those who talk over others wield the power. Women – and men – who do not fall into this narrative of success are often overlooked, their ideas unheard and their contribution unrecognised. The more we label them lacking in confidence, the more we create an illusory truth effect, where responsibility for change sits squarely with the individual, rather than in the system they inhabit. Indeed, it has been shown women lack confidence in no greater numbers than men, however, there are more men who overestimate their abilities and have been socialised to expect to be rewarded for this in the workplace. Even our most successful women leaders are challenged on their ability to dominate and wield power, Jacinda Arden again – 'One of the criticisms I've faced over the years is that I'm not aggressive enough or assertive enough, or maybe somehow, because I'm empathetic, it means I'm weak. I totally rebel against that. I refuse to believe that you cannot be both compassionate and strong.' (New York Times 2018).

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versatility; therefore, we demand more than we ever have from those who lead us. Being overly self-assured, dogmatic, or arrogant as a world leader may well pose catastrophic risks to our future as human beings, and similarly behaving business leaders can cast a shadow over an organisation's ability to evolve and succeed. We are drawn to great orators and to eloquence or even a few slick, repeatable phrases but what if there are quieter, more considered, and thoughtful leaders waiting in the wings? What if they have the secrets to unlock the organisation's next big win? Perhaps it is time to think more deeply about the types of behaviours we want to encourage around the table – to listen to quieter colleagues – to listen with a degree of decorum and respect – and, of course, to listen to have our minds changed.

ARTWORK BY DELPHA HUDSON

Delpha Hudson completed her BA in History at London University in 1985 had 4 children before returning complete her a BA Fine Art at Coventry University in 2001 and an MA at Dartington College in 2003.

She has always painted in addition to making inter-disciplinary performance, film and installation with commissions from Tate St Ives, Newlyn & Exchange Gallery. She has curated Arts Council funded exhibitions with art collectives including Art Surgery and Salon de Textes.

Delpha developed her own voice and resonant painting through her passion to represent often invisible lives of women and carers. Paintings have been shown and sold all around the UK in unusual spaces as well as galleries.

She currently has a studio in Bread Street, Penzance and shows regularly with Newlyn Society of Artists as well as a number of other networks and galleries around the UK.

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