



# How Self-Doubt Makes Leaders Better

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# Rare is the leader who hasn't experienced self-doubt.

Even seasoned leaders who are confident in their industry expertise, problem-solving abilities and interpersonal skills can be overwhelmed when thrust into a new, unfamiliar role, or feel ill-equipped to deal with a sudden business crisis threatening to spiral out of control, or sense the urgency for soul searching when their values are out of sync with pressing business objectives.

Self-doubt can be especially paralyzing for leaders who buy into the cultural myth of the perfect leader. Knowing full well that perfection is unattainable, they nonetheless feel compelled to project the image of a calm, confident leader who always knows what to do and how to do it. Societal taboos that paint indecision in leaders as a sign of weakness only intensify the sense of isolation and uncertainty that breed self-doubt.

Change is the crucible in which ordinary men and women develop into leaders. Indeed, whether change flows from a leader's own vision and actions, or results from shifting circumstances within an organization or society at large, change almost always carries with it exciting opportunities for learning, growth and transformation.

Yet, even when change is welcome, struggle is often a natural by-product because it is the nature of change to nudge—and often forcibly shove—a leader out of his or her comfort zone. In those unsettling moments when you find yourself standing at the outer edge of all that is known and familiar, the uncertainty about how best to move forward can open wide the gateway to self-doubt. How you respond in those moments can accelerate your development as a leader.

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Venturing even a step or two into unfamiliar territory produces tensions, which throw a leader off balance as he or she struggles to adapt to a new environment, new circumstances, new perspectives or new values. This imbalance may manifest in any number of ways, from a nagging feeling that something important is amiss to an inability to concentrate on routine responsibilities. In more severe cases, a leader may feel weighed down by the crushing burden of high expectations, especially when those expectations are magnified by a complete lack of clarity in how to meet them. Many of the leaders I studied who were thrown off balance by change and its ensuing tensions found themselves temporarily exiled to the shadows and solitude of self-doubt.

Fortunately, a variety of successful strategies exist for moving through and overcoming self-doubt. The leaders profiled here,<sup>1</sup> ranging from CEOs to bankers to marketers, all found themselves enmeshed in circumstances uniquely their own. All of them, to some degree, experienced a crisis in confidence. As you will see, each of them resolved their episode of self-doubt in ways that were congruent with who they are as leaders and as human beings. Today, they are stronger leaders and better people for having summoned the courage to walk bravely into the midst of their self-doubt and demand that it reveal its secrets.

## STRATEGY #1: Grab a Lifeline

Loneliness is the constant companion of self-doubt. When you doubt your decisions or capabilities, your self-esteem takes a hit and you are more likely to retreat into the gloom of loneliness. In the darkest of moments, when you feel empty and defeated, you may feel that nobody cares about what you're going through, or even that you're not worth caring about—period. But there are always hands reaching out to help, support, and encourage you. Allowing yourself to sink deeper into the quicksand of despair can blind you to these lifelines.

<sup>1</sup> The stories of Rita, Kate Herzog, Mark Sheffert, Ken Melrose, and Sandy in this manifesto are derived from in-depth ninety-minute interviews during the course of my research on leadership struggle. Rita and Sandy's names have been changed to protect the privacy of those involved. The Anne Mulcahy story stems from public sources, including Bill George's book True North.

Even successful, accomplished leaders like Anne Mulcahy can fall victim to the loneliness of self-doubt. Five months into her tenure as president and COO of Xerox Corporation, Mulcahy's big-picture view of the company came into sharper focus. What she saw looked dismal. Third-quarter earnings for 2000 had fallen short of analysts' expectations and the company was close to declaring bankruptcy. Remarkably, Mulcahy herself almost delivered the company's deathblow. During an October investor conference call, she candidly stated, "Xerox's business model is unsustainable." The remark, which betrayed Mulcahy's lack of financial and leadership experience, sent the stock price tumbling and caused others to question her leadership.

In the months that followed, there were many near-death moments when Mulcahy wasn't sure the company would survive. After a long period of intense pressure produced by relentless change and uncertainty, she finally reached her breaking point one night on a Connecticut highway.

"I had just flown back from Japan," she said. "I came back to the office and found it had been a dismal day. At around 8:30pm, on my way home, I pulled over to the side of the Merritt Parkway and said to myself, I don't know where to go. I don't want to go home. There's just no place to go." In the midst of her despair, she checked her voicemail and found a supportive message from one of her colleagues telling her how much everyone believed in her and the company. That brief message was the lifeline that shocked Mulcahy back into awareness that she was not alone in her struggles, that she was part of a larger community that was pulling for her. Sustained and

nourished by that realization, she drove home and awoke the following morning with renewed confidence and clarity of purpose. Seven years later, with Xerox in sound financial health, Mulcahy was selected CEO of the Year by *Chief Executive* magazine.

## STRATEGY #2: Build Your Knowledge, Skills and Credibility

A public relations (PR) professional, Rita never questioned her competence until she began leading a small PR division within a large advertising agency. Given the considerable differences between the disciplines of advertising and public relations, Rita struggled to make her company's advertising-oriented policies relevant and meaningful to her PR team while simultaneously motivating them to produce exceptional work. Reporting on her team's projects and progress was especially stressful because the company's tracking system was designed solely for advertising accounts, with terminology, touch points, and deliverables that were foreign to the world of PR.

As Rita's distress mounted, her advertising-oriented boss began casting doubt on her leadership, which prompted her to doubt herself: "There was a point where I just thought, Maybe I'm crazy. Maybe I don't know what I'm doing. Maybe they shouldn't put me out there in front of clients. And that's a very frustrating thing when you're trying to lead, when you have self-doubts and your team is looking to you."

Like Anne Mulcahy, Rita began feeling isolated and overwhelmed. To her credit, she recognized the need for external support. But unlike Mulchay, who was more advanced in her career and therefore had a more mature, extensive network, Rita had to build her network from the ground up. She found the camaraderie she was seeking at a PR professional association and at peer support groups for women. Soon, she located a mentor who had the experience and wisdom to help her navigate through her daily challenges. These lifelines helped Rita fight through her sense of isolation and connect with a community that could give her support, encouragement and advice.

Loneliness, however, was only part of the battle. Rita also knew she needed to address the credibility issues that caused others to question her capabilities. After several months of preparation and studying, with guidance from her professional association, she passed her exams and received the APR (Accredited Public Relations) designation from the PRSA (Public Relations Society of America). Obtaining this accreditation not only provided external validation of Rita's PR expertise to her doubting boss, she was also pleased to discover that it boosted her self-esteem and improved her working knowledge of industry best practices. With greater trust in her judgment and the sense of empowerment that proficiency bestows, Rita became a more confident and effective leader.

Even when self-doubt is a product of our own distorted thinking, it's often based on an underlying kernel of truth. Identifying this root cause through introspective reflection can provide insight into the best ways to overcome it. When this rigorous self-analysis impels us to evaluate the status of our skills and credibility, it can lead to the same virtuous cycle that Rita discovered: improved knowledge, skills and credentials lead to greater self-confidence, which leads to better performance, which leads to greater credibility and leadership effectiveness.

This diagnostic process can guide you toward any number of paths. You may decide to track down relevant books and talks, enroll in self-study courses, seek the advice of mentors who have the skills you lack or pursue an additional degree or professional accreditation.

Or, you can try the approach of Kate Herzog, a young consultant in Ghana, West Africa, who was abruptly thrust into an overwhelming and bewildering situation.

At twenty-seven, after showing glimmers of promise in her work in the consulting division of Deloitte & Touche, Herzog was assigned the task of turning around a struggling beachfront resort in Ghana. Herzog had never even slept in a hotel, much less managed one. In fact, she had never managed a business of any kind. Recognizing that one of her new employees appeared to know what she was doing, Herzog appointed her as her assistant. Gradually, by watching and learning from her assistant, Herzog became more familiar and comfortable with hotel operations.

In addition, she began calling all 70 employees together, just like the custom of the local village where she had grown up. At first, the employees complained, but then they started coming up with their own ideas for improvements, many of which Herzog implemented. It wasn't long before Herzog's ingenuity and resourcefulness enabled her to achieve her goal of turning the struggling hotel into a luxury beach resort.

Herzog's triumph over self-doubt highlights a valuable but often overlooked resource for acquiring new knowledge and skills. Sometimes the critical insights you need come not from executives, educators or mentors, but from the very individuals you are leading.

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## STRATEGY #3: Trust In Your Integrity and Moral Compass

Even the most principled leaders may occasionally encounter circumstances that cause them to question their commitment to unconditional integrity. The higher the stakes, the more tempting it can be to at least consider options that appear to be less painful than doing the right thing.

At 40, Mark Sheffert was promoted to CEO of the Trust Division of a large bank. A rising star at the bank, he had amassed an impressive set of accomplishments that led the bank to put him in charge of a delicate and complex situation: the bank's computer system had melted down, causing errors on many 401(k) statements the bank had prepared for employees of its large corporate clients. Sheffert was faced with two options: He could openly admit the problem to the bank's clients, shut down the system for three months for repairs, and then reissue the statements with the correct information. The second option was to continue with the current system until a fix was available and then quietly slide in the changes without any fanfare.

Both options carried risks. A system shutdown could cause clients to abandon the bank, placing a large recurring revenue stream—and Sheffert's career—in jeopardy. Keeping quiet also had plenty of downside. The system would continue to produce erroneous data for several more months, putting pressure on the sales force to provide evasive answers that kept customers at bay.

When Sheffert learned that some board members and senior company leaders favored the quiet route, he did some intense soul searching. “I had always operated with a high degree of ethics, and I totally believe in being open and transparent,” he told me in our interview. “But the fact that we had a thousand employees’ lives sitting in my hands was stomach-acid creating. And because the bank was a subsidiary of a much larger bank holding company, it going under could have a profound effect on the entire enterprise. Given the magnitude of those various struggles, it did cause me to sit back and think, Gee, maybe we could do this.”

Sheffert, who had always prided himself on his uncompromising rectitude, acknowledged that he found himself playing mind games in an attempt to rationalize the unethical behavior endorsed by the bank’s senior leadership. “The feeling that this could be my career Waterloo certainly was a factor,” he said. “I didn’t know whether I could pull this rabbit out of the hat.”

Sheffert decided that his peace of mind and self-respect were non-negotiable. After convincing his board to go with the transparency strategy, Sheffert personally visited the CEOs of all of his large clients to explain the situation. He humbly asked for their patience and promised the problem would be fixed within several months. The strategy worked. The bank lost very few clients.

Sheffert's dilemma illustrates that even good leaders can drift toward rationalizing away unethical choices. What distinguishes the best leaders is that they don't act on those rationalizations, even in the face of pressure they might feel from those in higher positions of power. If you find yourself doubting that the high road is the only road worth taking, follow Sheffert's lead and hold fast to your integrity. Let your doubt get the best of you, and you may find yourself haunted the rest of your career by the vision of the leader you might have been.

## STRATEGY #4: Turn to Your Faith

When, despite our best efforts, we find ourselves in stressful, seemingly unsolvable predicaments that make us doubt our abilities and our place in the world, it's natural to assume that life can be unfair and random and that we just happened to be in the wrong job at the wrong company at the wrong time. Yet the many leaders who have a deep and abiding religious or spiritual faith believe that, no matter what the circumstances are, a higher power is at work imbuing every event with meaning and purpose. Their beliefs give them the comfort and strength they need to carry out their responsibilities while trusting that everything will unfold for the highest good of all concerned.

Such faith can make all the difference when, as in the case of Ken Melrose, what is demanded of a leader is necessary and right for the organization, but difficult to reconcile on a personal level. At 40, Melrose became CEO of Toro Company, the lawn care giant, as it teetered on the edge of bankruptcy. He was charged with guiding the company through a change of epic proportions—shedding 2,400 employees representing 60 percent of the workforce. In our interview, Melrose acknowledged that he was ill-prepared for leading the company through such a tumultuous transition. He abhorred the idea of deciding the fate of so many people, many of whom had become his friends. “My background was marketing, which meant caring for customers,” he said. “It meant growing the company, finding ways to build. And now I was in a position where I had to unbuild and dismantle.”

The worst part of his job was sitting down with employees face to face and telling them they had lost their jobs. “Some employees would cry, men as well as women,” Melrose recalled. “And I would be sitting there feeling just terrible about it, about myself, and about what I was doing. It was a depressing period of time. I felt lost. Who could I go to? I was the boss. I couldn’t go to my boss and say, ‘I don’t like doing this. Can you get somebody else to do it?’ The buck stopped at my desk, as they say.”

Then one day, a colleague reminded him that he was not as alone as he thought he was. When Melrose told him that he didn't see anybody above him he could complain to, the colleague replied, "What about God?" Startled, Melrose replied, "You're right. I'm not in this alone." In that instant, his perspective shifted, which changed everything. He told me, "From then on, if I were feeling kind of low after terminating someone or making a difficult decision affecting others, I would think, God is with me. This is going to be okay."

## STRATEGY #5: Get Grounded and Stay Centered

A graduate of a prestigious business school, Sandy found her passion in retailing, quickly rising to senior vice president of merchandising for a large department store retailer while still in her thirties. She survived, and even thrived, through the many changes as the retail industry began consolidating in the early 2000s and was well on her way to realizing her dream of becoming chief merchant of a major retailer. When her company was sold, she confidently led her team through the transition. Then the parent company that had acquired her company was bought by another major department store chain in a huge department store consolidation play. Virtually overnight, many of Sandy's well-developed strategies were suddenly rendered irrelevant. Even worse, she found herself working for what she perceived as callous, uncaring owners who demanded impossible-to-achieve results.

Sandy's low point came in a presentation to the new management team. "They asked us to be very strategic, so I talked about what the strategy was going to be and the key initiatives," she told me. "And one of the senior leaders stopped me in the middle of talking and said, 'You know, I don't know how people even understand you or follow you when you talk.' Here I was, talking the way I always talk, the way that had gotten me great feedback through my whole leadership career. And the person in charge just stops me fifteen minutes into my presentation and tells me in front of everybody, 'I don't understand what you're saying,' in a really arrogant and derogatory sort of way. All of a sudden, everyone in the room is looking at you like you are an absolute idiot."

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The impact of working in such a toxic environment began eroding Sandy's confidence and core identity as a leader. For the first time in her life, Sandy began to doubt her ability to deal with and overcome whatever adversity came her way. "I could feel myself not quite knowing what to

do much of the time, and I hadn't ever felt like that before," she confessed. "I started to doubt myself: I am not the merchant I thought I was. Do I really know what I'm doing?"

Fortunately, Sandy's commitment to well-being practices was the life preserver that saved her from drowning in the river of self-doubt. She enjoyed healthy and supportive relationships with her husband, her twin sister and her numerous friends. These relationships kept her grounded and provided emotional security. A marathon runner, she had learned how to discipline her mind and body to keep herself in balance even in tense situations. In fact, she rigorously prepared for particularly stressful meetings where she knew her leadership would be tested: "I would not only do Pilates, I would also probably run eight miles," she said. "I would get myself totally pumped up so I could be as energetic and authentic as possible." Sandy also made a point to spend time in nature and developed a meditation and mindfulness practice to gain added clarity. Her daily routine was an anchor that kept her moored and centered and enabled her to weather the storms raging around her at work.

Three years after the acquisition, the mega-retailer announced that it would close down the divisional buying operation and Sandy learned that she would soon lose her job. After absorbing the initial shock of that blow, something surprising happened: "That's when I felt all the freedom in the world," she said. Her last three months were actually the highlight of her leader-

ship career. Her team beat their goals and earned a bonus that benefited not only her immediate team but also the entire company.

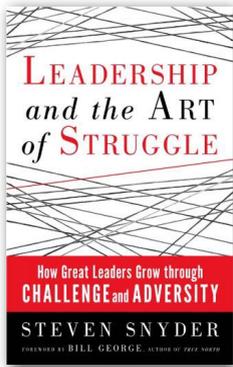
Reflecting on her experience, Sandy realized that the self-doubt that had plagued her was unwarranted; she had taken the right path far more often than she had stumbled. Losing her job turned out to be a blessing in disguise. She became interested in the developing field of holistic well-being, and started taking courses to become credentialed as a wellness counselor.

As you put in place a regular practice that fosters physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being, you will discover that this foundational strategy supports and reinforces the other four strategies. The more grounded and centered you are as a human being, the better equipped you'll be to work through and conquer the inevitable self-questioning that arises when you are challenged to redefine the limits of your skills and capabilities.

All of the stories presented here demonstrate that self-doubt, even when it brings leaders to their knees, can serve as a catalyst for life-changing insights and professional growth.

**Indeed, self-doubt can be a useful tool for gaining clarity about your personal and professional values and goals, and, ultimately, serve as a portal to recommitment or reinvention. 📖**

# Info



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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | An innovator in thought leadership, Steven Snyder has developed the breakthrough concepts based on years of leadership studies, intensive research, and data derived from extensive interviews with real-world executives from major corporations. His advancements in the practice of leadership also derive from his own leadership experiences as an early leader at Microsoft where he worked closely with Bill Gates, as well as his experience as a CEO of a publicly held company.

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