



Cheering Works!

TRANSEARCH
EXECUTIVE SEARCH & LEADERSHIP CONSULTING

John O. Burdett



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“Self-confident leaders are drawn to risk because they see risk as the gateway to possibility.”

Wanting to get better

Agentic AI can independently set goals, develop the plan, contact the customer across multiple channels and provide implementation rigour. All with minimal human input. Its limitation? AI can provide a veritable blizzard of options ... but to find their way through the storm, leaders still have to write/interpret the music. Even a world-class orchestra needs an inspirational conductor. Indeed, as we move forward, what we call





“soft skills” are more in demand than ever. Soft skills that combat the impersonal and potentially dehumanising nature of intrusive technology. Soft skills that celebrate our uniqueness. Soft skills that emphasise the *human* in *human resources*. Soft skills that provide a safe emotional harbour in the ever-increasing fog of ambiguity. Soft skills that, more than ever, separate the wannabe leader from those who leave a legacy.

AI can help us get better.¹ Wanting to get better is an altogether different type of challenge. Addressing self-confidence is the start of it. Developing positive habits is part of it. But, for a leader, the spirit of affirmation lies at the very heart of it.

*“Nontechnical skills will be crucial in
building resilient, AI-enhanced teams.”*

– Jennie Rogerson (Global Head of People at Canva)

Self-confidence

In any endeavour, self-confidence is an important and often critical ingredient of success. Without self-confidence, “play to avoid losing” rules the day. Without self-confidence, the art of the possible falls prey to a myopic focus on the immediately attainable. Without self-confidence, boundaries defined by others describe where the action stops ... not where opportunity begins. Without self-confidence, victory remains a “hoped for” possibility. Without self-confidence, coming second is good enough.

To be self-confident is to see the glass half full. Self-confidence is the inner-belief that, given the chance, “I will get it right.” Self-confidence is knowing that to play an unheralded role in a successful project is more enriching than leading a noble failure.

1 AI has made a foray into affirmations. As an example, a bot can promote thanking colleagues for supportive behaviour. Data that can then be used as part of the performance management approach. Facebook introduced technology along these lines but unfortunately found that people were gaming the system. “If you say nice things about me, I will say nice things about you.” Automating affirmations is a nice idea but a poor substitute for human interaction.



Self-confident leaders are drawn to risk because they see risk as the gateway to possibility. Self-confident people are, in particular, comfortable with emotional risk. They confront those who do not live the organization's values ... they challenge the team leader if they believe the latter is on the wrong path ... they speak up in team meetings when what remains unspoken is holding the team back. By comparison, those who lack self-confidence wrap themselves in a cocoon of silence in the belief that blending into the background is a recipe for survival. The dilemma: holding back, not speaking up, being satisfied with the status quo, is to embrace mediocrity.

Self-confidence shouldn't be confused with self-delusion. To be self-confident is to know one's self. To be self-confident is to know one's limitations. Self-confident people are comfortable asking for help simply because they don't spend their lives protecting their ego. For the same reason, self-confident people are equally quick to offer help ... even if the individual in question is a rival. No less important, self-confident leaders do not long hold onto what might have been ... where others see failure, they see untapped wisdom and future opportunity. To be self-confident is thus to fail fast and move on.





To be a leader is to both be personally self-confident and nurture self-confidence in others. The first is possible only if we strive to be authentic ... willing to surface and then connect with our own story. Self-confidence in pursuit of someone else's dream is to build a house on a foundation of sand.

Self-confidence is to measure one's performance against standards that define excellence. Building self-confidence in others is rooted in asking great questions and creating opportunities that allow others to better understand their underlying mastery.

Self-confidence is enacted in a climate where the leader seeks to catch those around them "doing it right." When the leadership approach amounts to little more than a constant mantra of seeking to fix that which appears to be broken, self-confidence withers much as grass might if it were constantly weeded but not given water.

Building on strength and capability expands the human spirit. Constantly emphasising what is wrong is an ever-present reminder that failure beckons. One practical implication is that attempts to make coaching a systemic leadership capability without building a positive work climate at the same time would have to be judged as optimistic. "Naïve" is probably a better term.

Self-confidence is anchored in our identity. It is part of who we are. That doesn't mean that self-confidence is a constant. Even the most optimistic of us flirts with the fear of failure. Even the most resilient of us is tempted to listen to self-talk that says, "Hold back, you may not be up to the challenge." To be self-confident is to be able to recognise our self-doubts. To be self-confident is to have the courage to drag uncertainty from the depths of our unconscious self, confront that which holds us back and negotiate a positive outcome.

*"Whether you think you can, or that you can't,
you are usually right."*

– Henry Ford



Leadership and affirmation

In the face of adversity we can choose doubt and holding on to what we have ... or we can opt for possibility and potential. In winning the battle of self-talk we are helped when the imagery and emotion of success is fresh, vibrant and meaningful. Outstanding leaders understand this. Outstanding leaders are masters of positive feedback, not because it makes people feel good, but because affirmation provides the weaponry **we all need** to stay positive in an uncertain and competitive world. Cheering works!

One of the questions that invariably surfaces when affirmation is discussed tends to be along the following lines, “I understand the need to be positive, but we have a lot of tough issues to deal with here. Doesn’t an attempt to make people feel good fly in the face of good old-fashioned honesty?” The answer: leadership is rooted in truth.

Affirmation is not about creating an overly optimistic atmosphere. To lead is to be authentic. Authenticity is to share not just what the leader knows ... but perhaps even more important, how they feel about what they know. Holding back, putting a spin on the facts, partial truth and/or conversations slanted to serve the leader’s needs destroy trust. Conversely, an agenda that is a constant and repetitive litany of the things that need to be fixed destroys respect.





A not uncommon comment from executives about affirmation is, “I see the value of positive reinforcement as a tactic for middle managers, but at the top of the house we really don’t have the time for this stuff.” The counter-argument? Napoleon, for whom victory was everything, was the master of affirmation. He was quick to promote the brave. The more courageous the officer, the faster they could be expected to be promoted. To battalions that had fought bravely, he awarded special flags. To the hundred bravest men in his army, he awarded damascened inscribed with the words “Given on behalf of the Executive Directory of the French Republic, by General Bonaparte to citizen ...”² Like all of those who accomplish great things, Napoleon understood that passion lies not in the head, but in the heart. He knew that winning was far more about emotional commitment than it was about having the right plan. Indeed, he built his armies around the belief that strategy was unlikely to survive the first cannon blast.

Let’s take a moment to consider an average day in the life of a typical employee. Assuming that one of the first things they do in the morning is to check their phone, it can be taken for granted that the news will be dominated by problems and tragic events. Switching on the television (if they have one) will yield more of the same. Listening to the radio on the drive to work, same again. By the time the employee arrives at work, just to retain any degree of emotional sanity, they will have had to push a veritable mountain of bad news into a space marked “not my problem.”

Now let’s move the day forward an hour. The employee is invited to a meeting and told that the company’s sales over the preceding quarter were a disaster. Guess what? The tried-and-true defence mechanism kicks in. The bad news is filtered, rationalised and depersonalised until it becomes yet one more piece of data ready to be filed away. Consider an even more desensitising scenario. The employee, through choice or contractual obligation, doesn’t attend the workplace – they work full-time from home.

If nothing changes, nothing changes. Unless ... the employee (remote or not) has an emotional stake in the game. Unless ... the employee’s feelings of self-worth and the organization’s success are connected. Unless ... the behaviour that points the way forward is brought to the fore as passionately and aggressively as are the problems that arise. Simply put, every act of affirmation is an emotional investment that increases the likelihood that concerns and problems will be recognised, taken to heart ... and acted on.

2 Vincent Cronin, *Napoleon* (London: Fontana, 1990), 154.



Conclusion

Affirmation isn't merely something that's nice to have. It's central to how strategy is implemented. When affirmation becomes an intentional habit, it shapes trust and impacts retention. A culture of affirmation recognises individual differences and yet can be a highly influential dynamic in team performance. Affirmation in the customer space is especially important. Conversely, when employees feel that their contribution goes unrecognised they pull back their commitment. When high performers sense that they are being taken for granted, they quickly become disillusioned. And when change initiatives lack emotional support, the desired outcome becomes a bridge too far.

Above all else, employees want to feel valued. Affirmation is caring writ large. To lead is to care. AI can help us get better. Wanting to get better is an altogether different type of challenge!

“If you treat people like winners, they perform like winners.”

– Vince Lombardi



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Affirming Actions



“Catch ’em doing it right.”

In the typical organization there are at least five negative comments for every one that is positive. One study suggested the ratio is 15 to one! And yes, that means you and me. Address the balance by deliberately starting out each day with three affirmations in your hip pocket. Make sure that you end each day with that pocket empty. Three seems a small number, but over the year it amounts to hundreds of affirming actions. If everyone on your team did the same thing, the impact on self-confidence (and performance) would be dramatic. Cost: nothing. Value: priceless.

The following affirming actions are drawn not from imagination or conjecture but from observing what outstanding leaders actually do. That is to say, all of the suggestions listed are drawn from real life. Go through the inventory of actions and define three things you can do immediately; three actions that will start to make affirmation part of the way you interact with others. And remember, it matters not what role you play on the team (that said, if you’re not the team leader, a number of the suggested actions will not apply), you can still practise affirmation; you can still have a profound impact on the self-confidence of those around you. Know also that when affirmation becomes one of your personal strengths, you will have unleashed one of the enduring tenets of a great organization. You will have also set your career on an upward trajectory. If you want a seat at the top table, focus not on what you need but on how you can make a difference.

For the most part, the suggestions reinforce affirmation within the team. Affirmation is no less powerful with customers and suppliers. Indeed, striving for mastery in a sales role without exemplary skills in affirmation is to reach for the impossible dream. Go through the suggested actions a second time and pull out ideas that you can bring to your relationship with key customers.



1. Look the employee in the eye, smile and with authenticity say THANK YOU. Affirm team members in front of the team.
2. Reward success by taking the individual(s) with you to a leading-edge workshop or seminar.
3. Reinforce success by writing a handwritten note recognising the contribution made. Carry around blank 6 x 4 postcards (ideally with the organizations values or a relevant symbolic design printed on one side) and discreetly give them out with handwritten congratulatory comments.
4. We always have a choice whether to smile or frown. Smile when you come into a meeting. Smile when you start a presentation. Smile when you are asked a tough question. A smile leads the audience to believe that the speaker is open and optimistic. A frown ... that they would rather be someplace else.
5. Do the unexpected. Give out company-ware (a hat, T-shirt) to celebrate when important milestones have been met. Movie tickets for the kids. Pay for a session at the hair salon (be careful this isn't taken the wrong way!). Come in early and tie balloons to the employee's chair. Buy someone a tie, arrange





for for a limo to pick them up from home, give them concert tickets, a visit to a spa, tickets to the opera, send flowers (and yes, this includes sending flowers to men). If the success was achieved as a team, send the team to a spa. Avoid golf! It embarrasses those who don't play and frustrates the heck out of those who do. Note: The traditional "employee of the month" picture that hangs in the entrance hall is a nice idea, but all too quickly becomes problematic by likely suggestions of bias.

6. Contract for a series of planned coaching conversations as a reward for meeting key goals. Engage a well-known external coach? Challenge the employee to move to the next level.
7. Ask a high-potential employee to chair an important meeting.
8. Invite outstanding performers to join a projects team where the work the team does will have a real impact on the organization's strategic journey, for example, an introduction to AI, selecting external resources to support talent acquisition or designing a career development program.
9. Ask top performers to attend an important meeting with a customer, client, supplier, and/or vendor with you. Make it special – a meeting they wouldn't ordinarily attend.
10. Send a thank-you card to the employee's home. Phone someone at home and tell them how delighted you are with their performance. Better still, leave a message and know how good they will feel when the message is shared with the family.
11. Put a congratulatory letter in the employee's file. Copy the employee. Copy their team leader.
12. Affirmation can shape relationships. Coach high-potential subordinates in how to coach. This does two things: (1) it affirms the belief that a significant leadership role lies in their future; and (2) it allows you to build a collaborative relationship with the individual in question.
13. Stop by the successful performer's office unannounced, with a beverage, and spend two minutes affirming their work.
14. Encourage an employee who has made a truly creative contribution to write an article or paper for publication. Work the company's PR department into the equation. Use an external writer if necessary. Apart from the worth of positive



reinforcement to the employee, the company's employment value proposition is significantly enhanced. High-quality self-publishing is worth the time and expense.

- 15.** Stop and shake someone's hand. E-mail? Good, if the individual is in another country, but a poor substitute for seeing a warm smile.
- 16.** The comments about e-mails notwithstanding, the internet has numerous sites with cards, greetings, jingles and the like. When an appropriate comment is added and when used sparingly, these sites can be a vivid and inexpensive way to say, "Job well done."
- 17.** Be interested in what the employee has to say. Put an agenda-free hour aside and invite the employee to share their ideas. Outline that nothing is sacrosanct and anything is possible.
- 18.** Use affirmation to build community. Share market success in real time. For example, make it a tradition that meetings and/or presentations stop briefly while any new customer sales are shared with participants. With mobile phones in every pocket, attendees are remarkably well informed.





- 19.** Go out of your way to make positive comments about the successful individual to their team leader.
- 20.** For truly outstanding performers, give them a blank sheet of paper and ask them to redesign the nature of their contribution. This should embrace responsibility, accountability and even scope. You will find that the opportunity is responded to with enthusiasm and integrity.
- 21.** Ask a young successful employee to mentor a senior executive on the former's area of expertise, for example, AI. Reverse mentoring can be a richly rewarding experience for both parties.
- 22.** Be humble. Recognise the contribution of others in your own success. And don't stick to generalities, be specific regarding the contribution others make. Work positive comments about key individuals into management/public presentations. Even if the individual isn't there, the comments will get back to them.
- 23.** Train everyone on the team in storytelling. Start meetings off with storytelling. Encourage each attendee to spend a few moments identifying a recent success. Have the best stories packaged into a storybook. Send copies to customers and suppliers. Put the best stories on the intranet. Keep the stories up to date.
- 24.** Organize an innovation Olympics. Have employees who have introduced an outstanding level of innovation compete against each other in an organized event. Have a significant prize for the winner. Have innovation shoot-outs between companies within the organization. Make the first prize an all-expenses paid trip to share the value of the innovation with other organizations within the wider group.
- 25.** When a talented employee stumbles, go out of your way to emphasise the power of learning from our mistakes. Share your own learning from less than successful ventures.
- 26.** Have a wall of fame. Take a digital picture of the employee targeted for affirmation and briefly identify why, and how, the employee made a difference. Post both the picture and the comments on the wall of fame. Tear the wall down at the end of each fiscal year and begin again.



- 27.** Celebrate success. Invite the whole team to a barbecue in the car park after work (a more beautiful spot like a park would be even better). Let the team enjoy the time spent together but also let them know specifically what the performance was that merited the event.
- 28.** Let the successful employee follow the company's product or service into the market place. If you make engines for tractors, send the employee to a farm to see how the product is used. If you manufacture software, send the employee to a customer site to see how the product delivers value. If you are a practice leader in a consulting firm and you have a great backroom employee, take them on a sales call. Ask for suggestions about product/service improvements when the individual returns. Involvement beyond their role will not only reinforce the individual's self-esteem, it will build pride in the organization's product and/or service.
- 29.** Periodically set aside part of a team meeting and invite team members to describe what it is that others on the team do that contributes to their success. Time set aside for shared affirmation allows positive emotions to be expressed, reinforces the value of teamwork and sets the context for greater mutual support. It also promotes psychological safety.





30. Listening is just about the best form of affirmation that there is. Following a successful breakthrough, ask the individual in question to share specifically, and in depth, how it came about. Listen with intensity. Listen in the way you have always wanted to be listened to. Share the narrative with others.
31. Ask an especially successful executive to teach a class on the topic they excel in. If the organization doesn't have such a class and even if you only run it once ... create one. Be there! Cameo the organization's talent. Make the first speaker the executive in charge of succession planning.
32. Keep your promises both specific **and implied**. More often than not trust is about the little things. Start meetings on time. End on time. Be on time. Call people back. Treat everyone on the team the same. Be open to feedback. When people trust you, they will be more willing to accept the affirmative statement as coming from someone who cares. Affirmation from someone who cares makes a difference. Affirmation that is seen as self-serving breeds resentment.
33. If you lead a large sales force, and the sales representatives have company vehicles, try this one. Buy five upgraded vehicles (the regular vehicle with a bigger engine, leather seats and a great sound system, for example). Beg, borrow or buy customised number plates. Allocate the upgraded cars to the top five sales reps for a year.
34. Confront employees who don't pull their weight. Nothing frustrates talented employees more than having to support those who lack commitment. Nothing affirms a winning attitude more strongly than being part of a team where everyone is playing to win.
35. Reinforce the sight lines between results and opportunity. Follow up outstanding performance with a career discussion. Co-create with the employee a career development plan. Make the plan happen.
36. High-potential employees are special. They challenge the status quo, push the strategic envelope and are early adopters of technology. If you have only an hour a week to spend on coaching, invest that time with a high-potential employee. If circumstances limit your opportunity to provide affirmation, spend that time with a high-potential employee. The ROI of the time spent is without comparison. Even more impactful, when you catch your most talented employees doing it right, turn the opportunity into a teaching moment. Affirmation + learning creates a memorable experience.



- 37.** Unceremoniously throw out a performance appraisal process that informs the majority of the workforce that they are “average,” “competent” or “meet expectations.” Imagery that reinforces a middle-of-the-road mindset, when combined with language that sucks the vitality out of the organization, represents the best thing the competition has going for it. It is also pretty tough to coach someone to be “more average.” What’s wrong with telling those who met the agreed goals that they were “successful”?
- 38.** Follow Susan Scott’s method for setting up affirmations, what she calls “fierce conversations.”³ Step one: the leader must speak candidly and be willing to show vulnerability. Step two: create an environment where it is safe to discuss the “non-discussable.” Step three: interrogate reality (in its many guises). Step four: positively reinforce the action of those with the courage to initiate such conversations. Step five: act.
- 39.** Allocate a small number of parking spaces next to the main entrance of the building for those who have delivered a special result. Award the spaces for a relatively short period of time. The real value lies in the visibility of the affirmation.



2 Susan Scott, *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life One Conversation at a Time* (New York: Viking Press, 2002).



40. Advance the salary deadline. Give an outstanding employee the agreed salary increase a month early. Be warned, you will probably have to successfully arm wrestle every single member of the salary administration team to make this happen.
41. Hand the employee an article or a book that in some way reflects the employee's contribution. Better still, use Post-it Notes to highlight passages that coincide with how and where the employee excels. It doesn't have to be a business book/article.
42. Reward consistently outstanding front-line employees by awarding additional levels of job security, for example, they can only be laid off with an extended notice period. Keep the cadre of such employees to less than one-third of the workforce. While you're at it, overturn the notion that people resist change. What people really resist is ineffective leadership. Leaders must lead!
43. Reaffirm the value of having a maverick on the team. Encourage creative and respectful disagreement. Affirm those who challenge the status quo. If everyone on the team agrees, you don't need to replace some of them. If the team doesn't have a maverick, allocate the role to the most knowledgeable person (on the topic in question). However, be warned, there is a distinct difference between a maverick and a whiner. The former not only pushes back, they have ideas about the way things should be. Introduce those who habitually complain to the harsh reality of the job market.
44. Organize a write-up of the employee's contribution in the company's newsletter or on its intranet site. Whenever possible, include a photograph.
45. Take an unexpected opportunity – bumping into a team member at the coffee station for example – to give positive feedback.
46. Show your respect for the employee's ability by asking for their opinion on issues that are outside the scope of their of responsibilities.
47. With the right person, and delivered in the right way, humour can be a powerful way to reinforce the positive – but, be careful! Different cultures see humour in very different ways.
48. Make positive comments to a third party; know that the comments will get back to the individual.



- 49. Make sure the team's value proposition is well understood. Give those who excel the first opportunity to deliver the next level of value in the market place. Give high performers the first crack at a new customer.
- 50. Think of a time when you received meaningful affirmation, when someone you respect reinforced your doing it right – how did it make you feel? Pass it on!

*“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said,
people will forget what you did, but people will
never forget how you made them feel.”*

– Maya Angelou





Rules for affirmation?

Not many, but what guidelines there are tend to be important:

- Affirmation must be *authentic, accurate, meaningful* and *well deserved*. Anything less and the leader is stepping into the murky waters of manipulation.
- Affirmation must be *specific*.
- Affirmation must *describe the overt behaviour* (that which is observable) and not the drift into comments about the individual (their presumed beliefs; assumptions about attitude; conjecture around why the individual acted in a certain way). The rule: affirm performance and not personality.
- Affirmation, by definition, should *focus on the positive*. With that in mind, affirmation should reinforce and point to the behaviour you want ... not congratulate someone on the cessation of behaviour you don't want. When a habitually poor time-keeper has turned the corner, for example, the feedback should reinforce the merits of being on time and not extol the virtues of not being late. When someone has overcome the tendency to overspeak while someone else is speaking, the feedback should emphasise the quality of the individual's new communication skills and not dwell on giving praise for giving up a dysfunctional habit.
- Affirmation must *fit the occasion*. Gushing praise for a small, albeit successful, act makes it tough to appropriately reinforce a major breakthrough.
- Affirmation that *surprises* the employee creates far greater impact than an established action that can be anticipated.

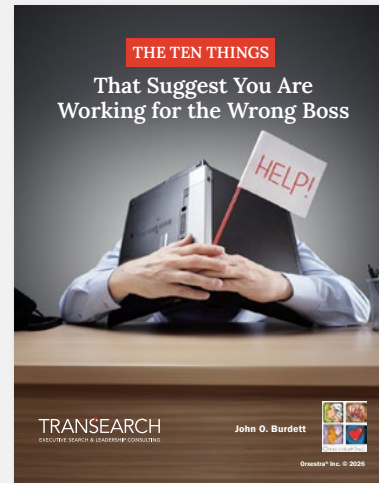
"I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set it free."

– Michelangelo

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John O. Burdett

*“Catch ’em
doing it right.”*

- John O. Burdett

JOHN O. BURDETT has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He continues to work on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world’s largest corporations.

In 2019, his work with ABB’s top 240 executives received a major international award for the most innovative leadership development initiative of that year. His ongoing partnership with TRANSEARCH International means that his proprietary work on talent acquisition, in any one year, successfully supports many hundreds of top leadership appointments on six continents.

He has written extensively on executive coaching and was awarded international coach of the year by the Finnish Institute of International Trade. Business graduates at the University of Texas indicated that his material on coaching was the single most valuable learning source they took away from their undergraduate degree. He has also coached numerous executive teams

around the world in how to coach. He currently coaches a select group of CEOs.

Apart from a range of corporate leadership workshops, he has taught at business schools on both sides of the Atlantic. His work on the MBA program at the University of Toronto received a teaching excellence award. John holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

In addition to numerous business articles and twice being awarded article of the year by MCB publications, John has published 16 books on leadership, talent management, coaching and organization culture. A number of them bestsellers. His most recent book is a fully revised version of his international bestselling book on executive integration: *Without Breaking Stride*. To download his current business articles go to www.transearch.com/orxestra/downloads

