LOWER LIGHT LEADERSHIP

Why Do We Default to Self-Doubt So Quickly?

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June 17, 2026 | Leadership & Perspective

Recently, I found myself curious about why it seems so natural for so many people to default to self-doubt when they begin to engage with something meaningful to them. I am not talking about the occasional hesitation that comes when we are facing something new, but the quick internal reflex that shows up when someone is about to take a step that matters. It could be applying for a new role, starting a business, speaking up in a meeting, having a hard conversation, posting an idea publicly, making a decision, or moving toward something they genuinely care about. Before they even have a chance to fully engage with the opportunity, the mind begins offering doubt as if it is wisdom.

What I wanted to understand was why that happens. Why do capable people, many of whom have plenty of evidence that they can learn, adapt, grow, and figure things out, still move so quickly toward thoughts like, “What if I’m not ready?” or “What if I fail?” or “What if this proves I’m not actually capable?” At first, it is tempting to frame this as a confidence issue, but the more I looked through the research, the more I started to see something deeper. Self-doubt is often not simply a lack of belief. It is frequently a protective shortcut.

That was one of the first major lessons that stood out to me. Self-doubt is not always trying to tell the truth. Sometimes it is trying to protect us from pain. It may be trying to protect us from embarrassment, rejection, disappointment, criticism, wasted effort, loss of approval, or the uncomfortable possibility that we will discover a gap between who we want to be and what we are currently able to do. When viewed that way, self-doubt starts to make more sense. It is not necessarily helpful, and it is not necessarily accurate, but it does have a purpose. It is trying to keep us from stepping into something that our mind has interpreted as a threat.

One of the research pieces that helped me see this more clearly was Baumeister and colleagues’ review, “Bad Is Stronger Than Good.” Their argument, broadly speaking, is that negative events, negative feedback, and negative information tend to carry more psychological weight than positive experiences. That idea felt incredibly relevant to self-doubt because most of us do not seem to weigh success and failure evenly. A success may reassure us for a moment, but a failure can feel revealing. A compliment may be appreciated and then forgotten, but a criticism can be replayed for years. A good performance can be explained away as luck, timing, preparation, or the kindness of others, while a poor performance can feel like evidence of something deeper.

That raises an important question. Why does failure often feel more diagnostic than success? A person can have years of evidence that they are capable, thoughtful, resilient, intelligent, creative, or strong, and yet one negative experience can seem to carry more authority than all of that evidence. The more I thought about this, the more I wondered if part of the problem is that we often treat success as temporary reassurance while treating failure as a more permanent statement. Success says, “You made it this time.” Failure says, “This might be who you really are.” That may not be true, but it often feels true, and that feeling can quietly shape the way a person approaches the next meaningful opportunity.

This is where another pattern became important to me. Self-doubt seems to gain a lot of power when a person stops evaluating the task and begins evaluating the self. There is a major difference between asking, “What does this situation require of me?” and asking, “What will this prove about me?” The first question keeps the person engaged with the work. The second question turns the work into a private trial where the outcome becomes evidence of identity, worth, belonging, or safety. At that point, the person is no longer just preparing for a presentation, making a decision, applying for a role, starting a business, or having a conversation. They are standing in front of an internal judgment that says the result will reveal something about who they are.

I think this is one of the places where performance orientation can become dangerous. Performance itself is not the issue. Results matter. Quality matters. Standards matter. Outcomes can give us important information. The problem begins when the outcome becomes tied to the self in a way that feels threatening. If I do well, maybe I am capable. If I do poorly, maybe I am not. If people approve, maybe I belong. If they reject it, maybe I was foolish for trying. Once that link is made, the situation becomes heavier than the situation itself. It is no longer just something to engage with. It becomes something to survive.

Carol Dweck’s research around achievement goals helped clarify this for me. There is a meaningful difference between approaching a challenge with the goal of developing competence and approaching a challenge with the goal of proving competence or avoiding the appearance of incompetence. When the goal is learning, the experience can still be uncomfortable, but the discomfort has a place to go. It can become information, practice, feedback, calibration, or growth. When the goal is proving, the discomfort becomes much more threatening because failure does not simply mean something did not work. It begins to feel like I did not work.

That distinction matters deeply in leadership, coaching, and personal growth. If I am trying to prove my worth, then I will naturally become more guarded, more reactive, more attached to outcomes, and more likely to avoid anything that may expose weakness. But if I am trying to develop capacity, then the same moment can be approached differently. I may still care about doing well. I may still feel nervous. I may still want a good result. But the result is no longer the final judge of who I am. It becomes information I can use.

Albert Bandura's work on self-efficacy added another layer to this for me. Self-efficacy is not simply general confidence. It is a person's belief that they can act effectively in a specific situation. That belief is shaped by experience, by what a person has successfully done before, by what they have seen others do, by what others have spoken into them, and by how they interpret their own emotional and physical state. This matters because it means people do not usually develop deep self-belief just because someone tells them to believe in themselves. They begin to believe differently when they have credible evidence that they can engage, adapt, recover, and handle what comes.

That is why empty reassurance often does not reach the deeper issue. Telling someone, "You've got this," can be nice, but it may not be enough if their internal prediction is, "If this goes badly, it will mean something painful about me." The deeper work is helping the person slow down enough to see the prediction underneath the doubt. What are they afraid this outcome would mean? What evidence are they giving too much weight to? What evidence are they discounting? What are they doing to stay safe? How well is that safety strategy actually serving what they want?

This is where I began to see why coaching is so advantageous, and why developing coaching skills as a leader is such a tremendous strength. Coaching creates space between the event and the conclusion. Something happens, or something meaningful is about to happen, and the old reflex may say, "This could prove I am not enough." A coaching conversation can slow that down and ask, "Is that true, or is that the meaning your mind has attached to the moment?" The old reflex may say, "Avoid this so you can stay safe." Coaching can ask, "Is avoidance actually serving what you want?" The old reflex may say, "You need certainty before you move." Coaching can ask, "What is the next aligned step with the clarity you already have?"

That space matters because many people are not simply responding to the present moment. They are responding to the prediction they have attached to the present moment. If the prediction is that failure will expose them, rejection will diminish them, uncertainty will overwhelm them, or discomfort means they are not ready, then self-doubt makes perfect sense. It is protecting them from the meaning they have assigned to the experience. The work is not to shame the doubt. The work is to understand it, examine it, and decide whether it deserves to lead.

A leader with coaching skills can help someone do that. Instead of only managing the external performance, they can help someone examine the internal relationship they have with the work. They can help someone separate what happened from what they are making it mean. They can help someone see that discomfort is not always danger, uncertainty is not always incapability, feedback is not always condemnation, and a poor result is not the same thing as a poor identity. That does not mean lowering standards or removing accountability. In many cases, it is exactly what helps people rise to a higher level of accountability because they are no longer spending so much energy protecting themselves from the meaning of the work.

The more I studied this, the more I began to see that self-trust is not built by proving we will always get the outcome right. It is strengthened when we experience ourselves staying present, honest, and engaged even when the outcome is uncertain. That distinction matters because self-trust cannot be dependent on perfect performance. If it is, then we are right back in the same loop, waiting for enough success to finally feel safe enough to try. But real self-trust seems to grow when we learn that we can take a step, face discomfort, receive feedback, adjust, repair, and keep moving without abandoning ourselves in the process.

Maybe that is one of the most important shifts coaching can help create. Instead of treating every meaningful attempt as a verdict on who we are, we can begin treating those moments as opportunities to build capacity, gain awareness, practice courage, refine skill, and gather information. That does not make the moment easy, but it does make it useful. It changes the question from, “What will this prove about me?” to “What can this teach me, build in me, or reveal to me that I can use?”

That is a very different way to engage with meaningful things. It does not require us to ignore risk, deny fear, or pretend outcomes do not matter. It simply keeps the outcome from becoming the judge of the self. And that, to me, is one of the great advantages of coaching, leadership, and self-leadership. They help us interrupt the reflexive pathway of self-doubt long enough to choose a more enabling orientation. Not one based on proving our worth, but one based on becoming more fully capable of living, leading, and acting in alignment with what matters.

References

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