What Role Does Confidence Play in Success?
by Rowena Crosbie

How confident are you? When has your confidence been shaken? What role has confidence played in your life?

Tero International is a research-based corporate training company. For more than two decades, Tero has earned a distinguished reputation as a leader in helping business professionals build the interpersonal skills that account for 85% of professional success. Skills like communication, leadership, cross-cultural competence, negotiations, selling and executive presence are Tero specialties.

Why would the founder of Tero, a company focused on skill-building, contemplate the role confidence plays in success?

To understand that, we need to start at the beginning. Shortly after I founded Tero in 1993 a close friend, who is also a marketing expert, made a casual remark that would ultimately change the way I thought about my work.

She told me that I wasn't selling training programs. I was selling confidence.

My analytical approach to virtually everything shot back at her "We don't do that type of training. Tero provides a serious research-based approach to skill development". To hammer my point further, I added "Pumping people up is what those fluffy training companies do".

My sharp retort ended the conversation. But a seed was planted that would take more than 25 years to grow into the mature theory that was the result of a research project at Tero we called The Confidence Project. The theory and model is presented here.

Why did I so confidently dismiss her claim that we were selling confidence?

I was recalling the self-esteem movement that gained momentum in the 1980s. Parents and schools alike, seeing merit in young people recognizing how special they were began delivering effusive praise for participation rather than recognition for performance. Hype around promoting self-confidence without evidence of performance or progress was troubling to me. It was little wonder that the suggestion that my serious company was selling confidence didn't settle well.

Low ——————— Confidence ——————— High

Confidence was and is commonly thought to lie on a continuum from low to high. While there are variations in the models proffered, most posit a familiar Goldilocks theme. Too little confidence leads to insecurity or low self-esteem. Too much is arrogance or narcissism. Healthy self-confidence breeds success. Like the Goldilocks tale itself, there is considerably more to the story to unpack.

With The Confidence Project, we hoped to accomplish three things.

1. To show where skills intersect confidence to predict success.

2. To dispel the notion that high confidence breeds success and low confidence is a recipe for failure.

3. To provide a user-friendly model to accurately gauge growth and reveal blind spots.

A Chicken and Egg Question

Does confidence lead to success? Does success lead to confidence?

In 1969, Theodore Levitt published what might be the most famous marketing quote of all time in his book *The Marketing Mode: Pathways to Corporate Growth*. People don't want to buy a quarter-inch drill. They want a quarter-inch hole. Levitt credits the quote to Leo McGivena.

While I can appreciate the causal relationship between a quarter-inch drill and a quarter-inch hole, I failed to see how a similar analogy about skill-building and confidence related to our work at Tero.

I had seen thousands of people in Tero workshops at various places on the confidence continuum. Some were nearly paralyzed with fear at the prospect of us running a video camera on them as worked on their skill development. At the other end of the continuum, there were many who came to class confident in their abilities and anxious to demonstrate their skills. Most people fell somewhere between the two extremes.

If we were selling confidence, certainly the people who already possessed high confidence wouldn't need us. That wasn't true. Every Tero trainer knows that high confidence wasn't necessarily predictive of high skills. In fact, our experience revealed that high confidence was often predictive of a skill deficiency.

We knew these people were in for a difficult learning curve they hadn't anticipated. It was the classic problem of not knowing what you don't know. We'd seen the pattern hundreds of times. Their confidence would be shaken after they experienced the intensive skill-based training and then watched videos of their benchmark performance. They would wrestle with the hard realization that their skills weren't as awesome as they thought they were. We weren't building their confidence. Quite the opposite. We were knocking it down.

What about those who lacked confidence? It was often well-founded. They also lacked skills. But not always. It was a puzzle.

What about the people in the middle of the confidence continuum? We found a range of competency in the target skills that varied as much as confidence levels with no obvious correlation.
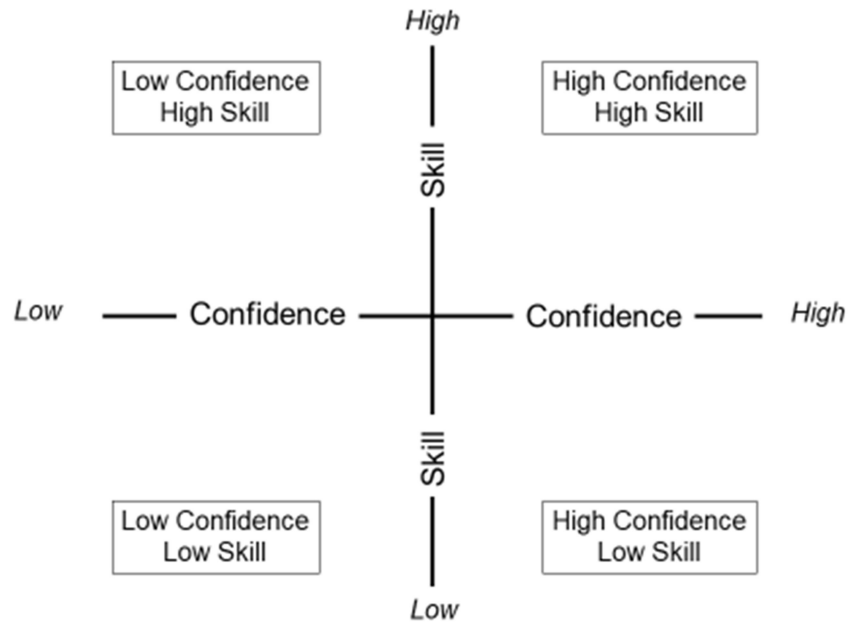
That doesn't even account for the large number of people whose behavior betrayed their actual confidence level. Some acted confident when they weren't. For others, self-deprecating comments turned out to be a not-so-cleverly-disguised attempt to conceal a strong sense of self-confidence.

Did the acquisition of skills lead to confidence in the same way that the quarter-inch drill, leads to the outcome of a quarter-inch hole?

At the same time I was contemplating this dilemma, I also wrestled with the over-simplification of the confidence continuum. We like things to be simple. We like clear answers. "It depends" is a frustrating response for most of us to hear. We want one right answer that we can depend on in a wide variety of situations.

The reality is that few problems in life have only one solution. Few questions have only one answer. The confidence problem was like that. It was more complex. It had another dimension.

When we intersect the confidence continuum with a skill continuum, we see a model that begins to explain the patterns we were seeing in the humans we worked with at Tero.

High

Skill

| Low Confidence High Skill | High Confidence High Skill |

Low —— Confidence ———————— Confidence —— High

Skill

| Low Confidence Low Skill | High Confidence Low Skill |

Low

In the bottom left corner of the model we find people with low confidence and low skills. For them, the acquisition of skills often translates directly to the acquisition of confidence. But not always.

In the top left corner of the model we see low confidence and high skills. That's a different problem. Why doesn't the person acknowledge or own their skills and performance? Did Tero training take someone from the bottom left to the top left? Or did they arrive to us in the top left corner? Will training help them develop confidence?

In the top right corner of the model we see high confidence and high skills. These people are skilled plus they are confident in their abilities.

In the bottom right we see high confidence and low skill. These individuals may have a good sense of self-esteem but the relationship to competency or skills is illusory.

It is important to point out that we don't plot whole people into a quadrant of this model. We plot data points in a context. It's a scatter gram. Where we fall on the model depends on the situation.

When I'm on the golf course, I'm in the bottom left corner. Low confidence and low skills. When I'm delivering a presentation on a topic I know well, I'm in the top right corner. High confidence and high skill. What about situations where I was filled with trepidation and performed well? That's an example of the top left corner. I can also think of occasions when I've been humbled after a spectacular fail at something I was confident I was good at yet the results fell short of expectations.

Self-Awareness and Well-Founded Confidence

A leader may feel high confidence and high skill in delegating a task to a long-time trusted employee. The same leader may feel low confidence and low skill when delegating a similar task to a new employee. The activity of delegating may be the same yet the context is different enough that the placement on the model changes.

A supervisor may feel low confidence when delivering corrective feedback to an employee and may be surprised to discover their high skills were effective and led to a good outcome. A technical expert may feel high confidence delivering a presentation. When the outcome falls short of goals, instead of realizing their own low skills in the task, they may place the blame on something external to themselves such as the audience or the environment.

These are workplace examples of all four parts of our model.

At Tero, we believe that happiness or satisfaction in all aspects of life occurs when the level of confidence we have is similarly correlated with our skills to handle the task or relationship at hand. This sweet spot is depicted with teal shading in our model.
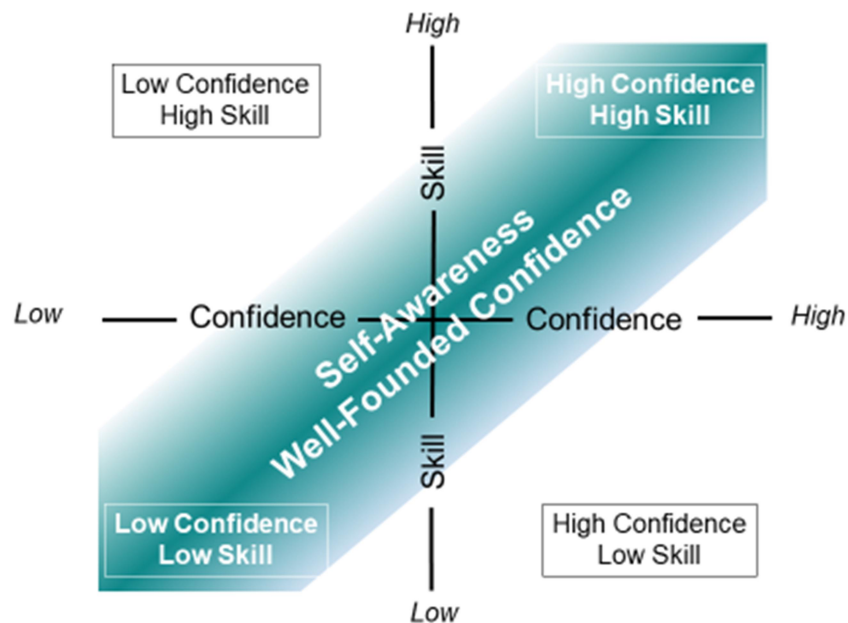
It is probably obvious why high confidence and high skill leads to satisfaction.

But why are we happy in the low confidence, low skill quadrant? Because there is alignment. There is congruence. If I need to do something that I'm not skilled in and I'm confident that I'm not skilled, that level of self-awareness will likely lead me to find a creative solution rather than launch into the activity blindly and experience failure.

I may choose to acquire skills. I may choose to say "no" to a project. I may delegate the activity to someone who is skilled. In this quadrant, no apologies are necessary. I'm not pretending to myself or others.

We have labeled the shaded part of the model Self-awareness and Well-founded Confidence.

Self-awareness allows us to recognize our strengths and weaknesses so we can make good choices in life. The concept of knowing self is nothing new in the pursuit of personal growth and happiness. It is widely acknowledged that self-awareness is essential for success. At Tero, we believe self-awareness is also essential to confidence that is well-founded.

People who are self-aware rarely make excuses or fix blame outside themselves.

An Ideal Learning Environment

Nearly three decades of experience at Tero has revealed several interesting things about how people approach their own learning.

Those who possess high confidence and high skills are typically eager learners. These people, although both confident and skilled, recognize that there is always more to learn. As long as the training isn't too rudimentary, they approach the experience with healthy interest and curiosity.

When learning something new, it is easy to get overwhelmed and hard to keep track of what is going on. Everything has heightened importance. Things don't slow down until you start to get some level of mastery over a skill. For those in the top right quadrant, nuances are easier to absorb since everything isn't new. Additionally, they often apply their high confidence and high skills to mentoring or developing others.

There is a downside of top right quadrant. It's called the false consensus effect. Some people perform so adeptly that they assume the same is true of others. This can lead to unreasonable expectations of others and relationship difficulties.

Those on the other end of our self-awareness zone, in the low confidence, low skill quadrant are faced with a choice. Do they want to acquire the skills? If the answer is no, engaging them can be a challenge. For these people, they need to see value and be convinced about why they should embark on a learning journey. Additionally, rapport building and the ability of trainers to create a safe learning environment are essential.

For those in the bottom left quadrant who choose to acquire skills, they typically approach learning with some nervousness due to a combination of low confidence and low skills. They are cautiously eager to learn. For this group, the acquisition of skills is often accompanied by increased confidence. They may have been lacking confidence because they were lacking skills. As skills improve, confidence follows.

Changes in our lives often prompt the need for new skills. Some changes are voluntary such as a accepting a new job, starting a family or making a physical move. Some changes are involuntary such as an economic recession, a pandemic or the death of a loved one. All require us to reskill to be successful in the new situation.

Here's a personal example. I own a home at Lake of the Ozarks in Missouri. When my husband and I bought the home, we also acquired a large cruiser to enjoy the lake. It is a Formula 40 PC. With the swim platform, it is 44 feet in length, boasts two large Volvo diesel engines, has more than a dozen batteries and is tricked out with impressive technology. The tragedy of my husband's unexpected passing in 2016 disrupted my world. With that change came decisions about how I was going to live my life in new circumstances that I didn't want and never chose.

One decision was related to the Formula cruiser. As a first mate, I was in the top right quadrant of our model. High confidence and high skill. However, now in the role of Captain, I was low confidence and low skill. I was acutely aware of how little I knew about this extraordinary equipment and was intimidated by its size and technology. Should I sell the boat? Should I learn to captain it? Should l leave the driving to someone else?

I decided to learn. It was a challenging learning curve that involved formal training, self-study, practice, trial, error, coaching and feedback. There was also the need to overcome feelings of insecurity and confront a limiting belief system. Captaining a large boat is a stereotypical male role. While friends and family supported me, more than a few of them quietly wondered if I would be successful – likely because they bought into that stereotype. I'm embarrassed to admit that at the same time I am a proud feminist, I also held that bias.

I'm delighted that I now confidently and competently captain the cruiser and assign first mate tasks to others, many of whom are nervous about learning their new responsibilities. Even take-offs and landings are now simple for me in a variety of conditions. I recognize that I still have more to learn and each year add to my knowledge. I especially enjoy the reactions I get from other boaters who are visibly surprised to see a female at the helm of this large boat.

The zone of self-awareness and well-founded confidence is an ideal learning environment when we are reskilling in the face of change. We are self-aware enough to know what our strengths and weaknesses are. Our confidence is well-founded. The result is happiness and success in our activities and our relationships. When we find ourselves with a realistic self-appraisal we are more likely to bring out the best in ourselves and be available to others.

Thomas Jefferson once said "The wise know their weakness too well to assume infallibility: and he who knows most, knows best how little he knows."

Imposter Syndrome

The parts of the model that aren't shaded in teal are identified with "red flags". It isn't a catastrophe to find some data points in this part of the model as it is a dynamic model and people are a constant work-in progress. It merely points to incongruence between confidence and skills that must be resolved if happiness and success are to thrive long-term. None of us reside in only

one place on the model. The red flags are simply a wake-up call for us. When we are unhappy or when we fail, this model might provide some insight to underlying cause.
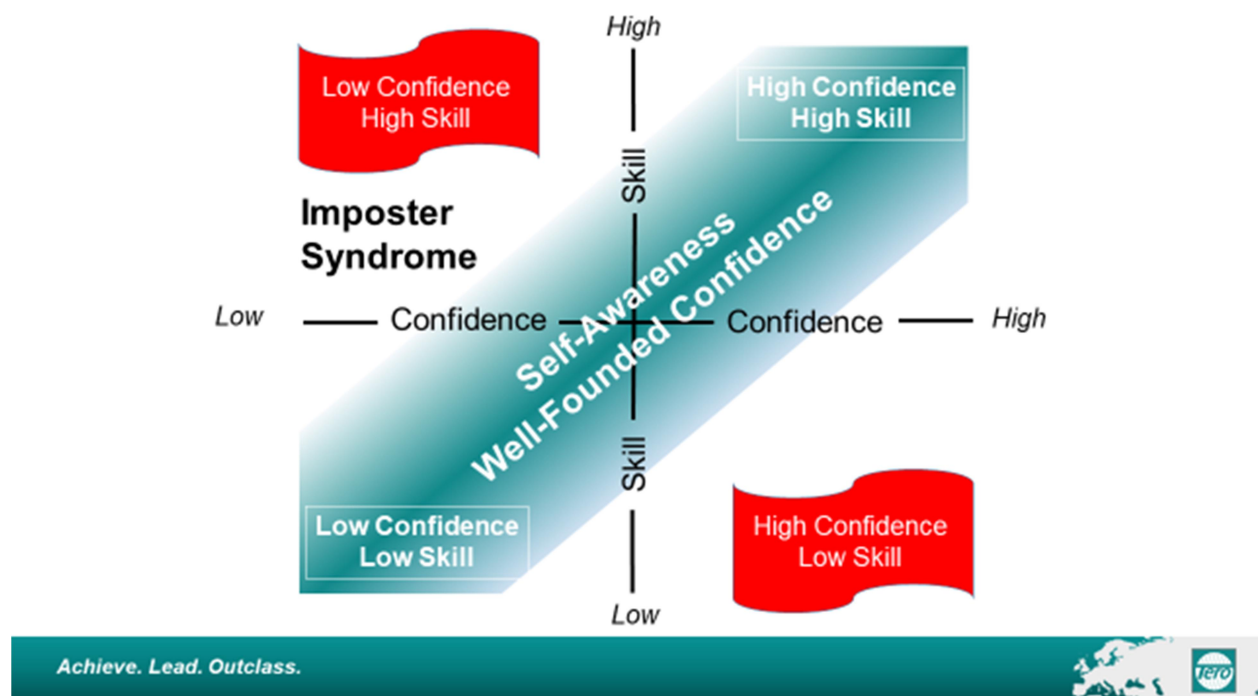
The Low Confidence High Skills part of our model is labeled as Imposter Syndrome which is a psychological term. To be clear, we are using the term only to be descriptive and not as an attempt to diagnose. A certain amount of self-doubt is normal and not evidence of mental illness. However, those who do suffer from pervasive imposter phenomenon across many aspects of their life may need therapeutic intervention.

In our model, Imposter Syndrome has been chosen as the label because it is a phrase many people know and commonly use to describe their own feelings of phoniness in a situation. When someone feels out of place in a meeting with people they admire or second-guesses themselves on tasks they've performed well in the past, that's a potential flag pointing to this quadrant. When an individual feels like they need to prove repeated high levels of competence in every possible aspect of a new role before applying for a position, that's another flag.

Individuals in this quadrant may experience heightened anxiety about taking credit for their abilities. When something goes well, they may attribute it to external factors such as luck or favorable circumstances. When something goes wrong, they may attribute the failure to internal personal traits. People who are unsure of themselves often confuse others which can lead to negative consequences to job performance and job satisfaction.

Our research at Tero has revealed that individuals in this quadrant often need to experience repeated success, in a variety of situations, to overcome their feelings of insecurity. Skills training is less important than specific feedback and intensive practice with existing skills.

The common refrain "fake it til you make it" was probably intended for these individuals. They possess necessary skills but lack confidence. By pushing forward and projecting a level of confidence they don't actually feel, in time their successful accomplishments may lead to well-founded confidence.

Illusory Superiority

The bottom right corner of our model is another example of a misalignment between confidence and skill. We're titling this quadrant Illusory Superiority. Once again, we have chosen a term from psychology to describe this quadrant. It is not intended to diagnose but merely to describe. The inability of people to recognize their low skills is also known as the Dunning-Kruger Effect.
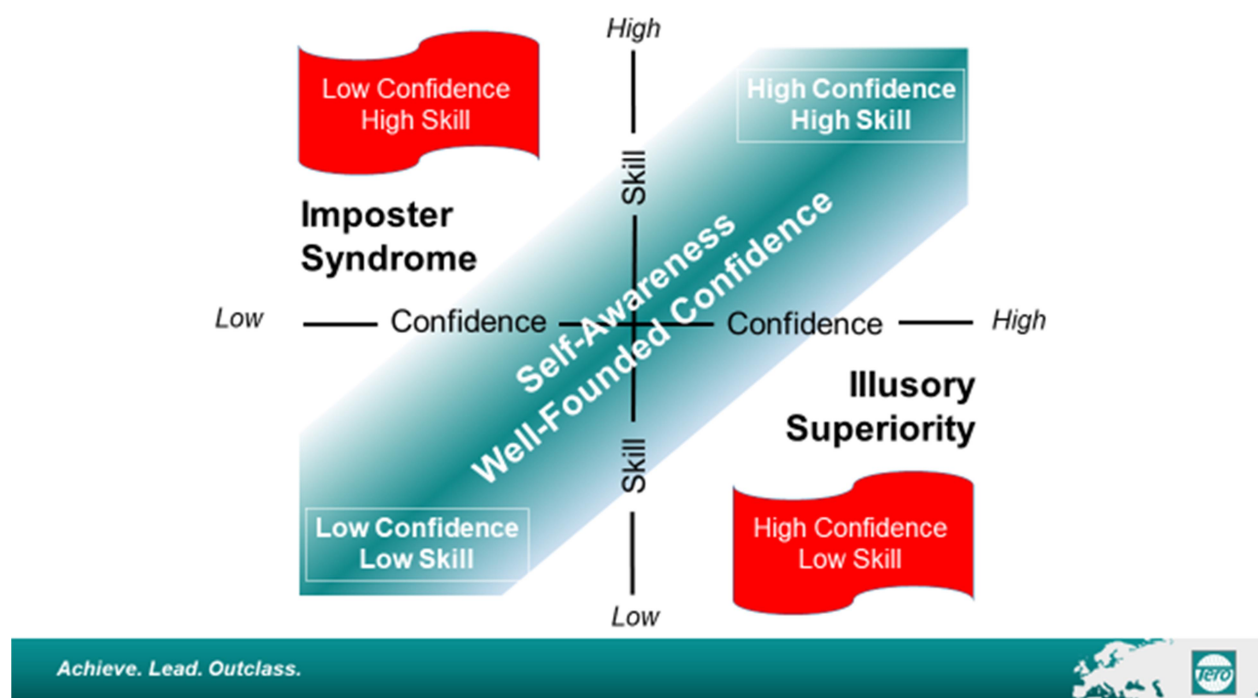
At Tero, we have discovered that people with high confidence who harbor illusions of competence tend to continue to do so even during periods of major change where few things are the same as they used to be. Feedback that normally leads to positive behavior change, fails to lead people in this quadrant to accurate self-insight. Lacking skills and being unaware of it is a major blind spot.

The fake it til you make it advice that can be helpful for individuals suffering from imposter syndrome can be counter-productive when those in the illusory superiority quadrant embrace it. Since they already possess confidence, their faking isn't about projecting confidence. It is about faking competence they don't possess. The illusion may pay dividends in the short run but it can be a catastrophic career limiter in the long run as the results of their work don't measure up.

When does someone fall into this quadrant?

Consider the all-too-common scenario of a highly-skilled technical professional with a track-record of proven success being asked to operate differently due to a promotion to a leadership role or in response to a change in the business. With a past history of success and a reputation as a go-to person they refuse to recognize their skill deficiency in the new situation and defiantly cling to behaviors that are ineffective in the new context. As a result, they blame others or point to external factors as the explanation for failures. This can continue for an extended period of time until an epic fail or a crisis precipitates a hard look internally or results in a separation.

Leaders are cautioned not to label others too quickly as residing in this quadrant without first carrying out an accurate self-appraisal of themselves. When leaders don't provide the opportunity for the acquisition of new skills and knowledge before assigning a new task or offering a promotion to a new role, they are equally culpable in the spectacular fails.

Another occasion we see this quadrant is when the skills required appear easy but are actually quite complex. The skills we specialize in at Tero appear easy to the untrained eye. Just like everyone seems to have a simple solution to solve a major world problem or they have a book in them, which they plan to write when they find time, most everyone tends to underestimate the skill involved in activities like leadership, cross-cultural competence, listening and communication. We see this pattern, not only in workshop participants but also in aspiring future Tero trainers who offer up their wisdom on how well they could perform in a situation that they have never experienced and know very little about.

At Tero, we have found this red flag so difficult to overcome that when we see evidence of it, before engaging in an executive coaching relationship, we ask our client to seriously question if they want to make the significant investment of time and resources required. The solution does not lie merely in skill building. Although that's part of it.

From our experience, creating considerable discomfort for the individual is also needed. This is essential to start the person on a path to self-insight. It involves intentionally breaking down self-confidence.

If that isn't enough, there is yet another major challenge related to this quadrant. Society rewards the confident. Even if the confidence is misplaced. From grade school to the boardroom, we admire and elevate the confident individual frequently overlooking skill and knowledge shortcomings. Too often we fail to accurately distinguish who is competent from those who only appear to be competent.

Self-Appraisal

As you reflect on our model, do you find that most activities you engage in fall comfortably in the Self-Awareness and Well-Founded Confidence Zone? Or does your self-appraisal reveal some red flags? Could you be wrong?
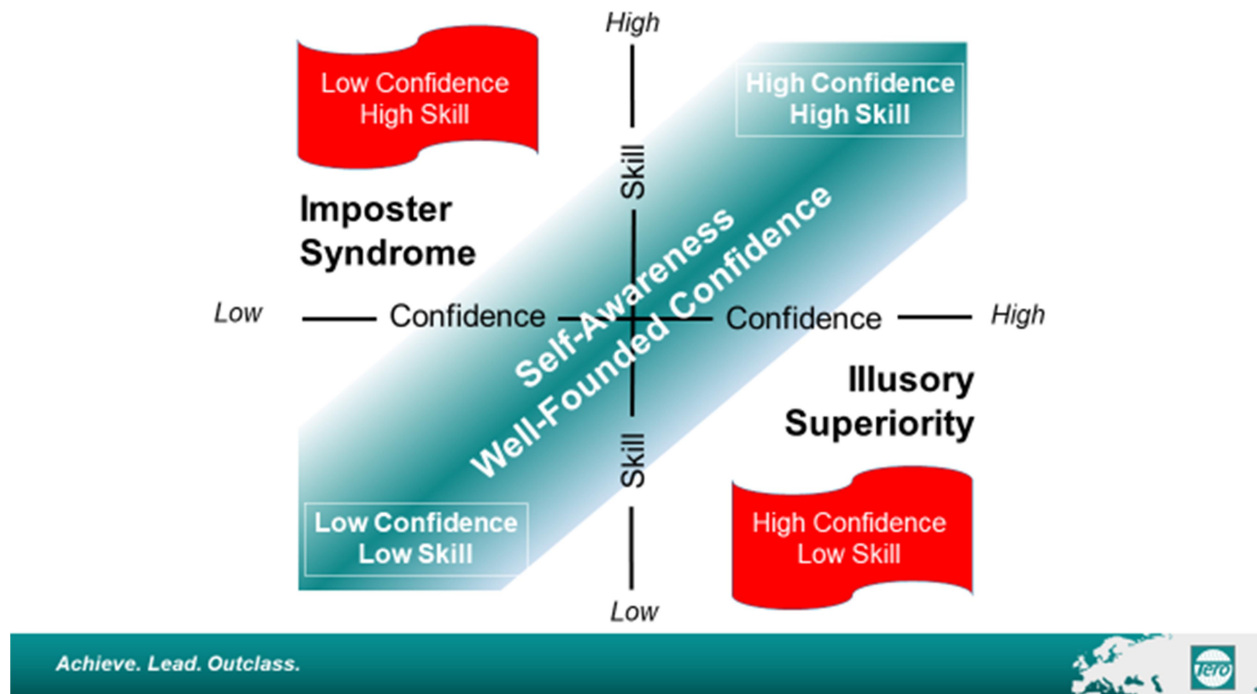
Are you a good driver?

Nearly three quarters of us consider ourselves better-than-average drivers. Which is a mathematical impossibility. This is further confounded by the fact that more than 90% of crashes involve human errors. This example of illusory superiority may be the single most important reason why autonomous vehicles are slow to gain acceptance.

This may also be an underlying reason why diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives have failed to gain traction on a large scale despite decades of dedicated efforts by massive numbers of people and despite facts and data that clearly provide evidence of wide-spread systemic discrimination. In the same way large numbers of people overestimate their driving skills, large numbers of people also overestimate how they treat others. Seeing ourselves as respectful people with good intentions, many of us confidently dismiss any feedback that suggests we are treating people differently based on characteristics like race or gender. That makes us blind to evidence of the disparate impact of our behaviors. In other words the unintended negative consequences on an individual or group escape our notice. Most diversity training will continue to focus only on superficial topics like highly-visible cultural differences until we reconcile the incongruence between our self-confidence and our lack of skills around difference.

Self-appraisal is indeed a challenge. In addition to skills-training, at Tero much of our time and effort is directed to challenging the mindsets, deeply-held beliefs and the biases people hold that hold them back. In business, as in life, the thing we need to master most is ourselves.

If you agree it's hard to self-diagnose, how good are you at appraising others?

Eight Tips

Here are eight tips to convert the insights of our model into actionable behaviors. I invite you to consider each of these tips to improve your own self-awareness and bring out the best in others.

1. How confident are you in your ideas? In a meeting people rarely say, I'm 50% confident in my idea. They say things like I think we should take this action and defend it as if it were the best option. This limits their openness to new ideas or new information that may lead to a better idea. The next time you're proposing something, assign a confidence rating.

2. How do you receive recognition? If someone compliments you and you respond by saying "it's just my job", "it was nothing", or giving all the credit to others, that may be evidence of Imposter Syndrome in our model. That may not seem like a major problem but it is, especially for leaders. In our leadership work at Tero, we've discovered that people who don't know how to receive compliments rarely give them. If you're a leader or aspire to leadership, train yourself to say "thank you" when someone recognizes your work.

3. How you process successes and failures tells a lot about where your red flags might fall. Are you inclined to internalize success and externalize failure? That means you take credit for successes and point to external factors to explain failures. That's a flag indicating possible illusory superiority. It's been said that we learn more from failure than from success. That's true. It's because we tend to analyze failures and learn from them. If you succeed right away, you have no way to gauge if you're highly skilled or if the success was due to some external factor. Learn to analyze successes as closely as you do failures.

4. Coaching or training is essential to mastery. Even your favorite professional athletes had some lessons. When you're providing training, ensure it is designed for people to experience success and failure with new skills. Don't fall into the traps of economizing on time or seeking to provide a fun experience as your top priorities. Short, motivational sessions may be inspiring and uplifting but they fail to result in behavior change. Reflect on the most significant learning experiences you've had. They pushed you out of your comfort zone and probably involved stress.

5. Don't just talk about changes happening. Too much information in an experience-free environment is dangerous. Look for opportunities to provide individuals with real world experiences as they are acquiring new skills.

6. No one is so naturally gifted that they can just deliver top performance every time without feedback. Reliable feedback, not opinions, pushes you out of your comfort zone, your illusions and your excuses. It forces you to face reality as it is and not as you want it to be or as you think you deserve it to be. Seek out feedback for yourself and provide it generously and compassionately to those who look to you for leadership.

7. Avoid the common mistake of relating one experience to another. If someone is successful swimming laps in a pool, they may be surprised to find that swimming in the ocean is not the

same thing and they still have some learning to do. Pause and evaluate each new situation to determine if a different set of skills is needed.

8. In addition to providing skills training devote time to challenging mindsets, deeply held beliefs, stereotypes and biases. It's often been said that before you can solve a problem, you first have to acknowledge you have one.   Model and teach self-awareness.

Final Thoughts

We like simplicity. We like easy answers. We like models that can be applied across a wide range of scenarios. As good a model as we believe it to be, the Tero model doesn't directly speak to a number of other factors that play an important role in success and failure. Here are four of them.

1. Ethics. We've been talking a lot about confidence in this article. What about the confidence game? The con artist who is able to get us to believe things we shouldn't believe, trust things we shouldn't trust, do things we shouldn't do and buy things we shouldn't buy? At Tero, we are keenly aware that the con, at its core, is an unethical use of the skills we specialize in. Confidence and interpersonal skills like persuasion, communication, empathy, listening and leadership can be misused for wrongdoings. The ethics, values and intent of an individual or organization are important factors that are covered extensively in other bodies of research and should be weighed heavily in decision-making.

2. Motivation. Do you like what you're doing? There are things we are good at that we don't like. When we do them too much our performance suffers. Additionally, we've all seen highly motivated people out-perform more technically skilled people. At Tero we have a model that maps human motivation and the role it plays in success. The model presented here doesn't attempt to do that.

3. Circumstances. Factors like lack or presence of privilege, residence, national origin, family background, language spoken, affiliations and academic opportunities all play a pivotal role in success and failure. Research shows that members of relatively high social class tend to be more overconfident than those with lower social rank. Since research also suggests that overconfidence can confer social advantages and make individuals appear more competent in the eyes of others than they are, there is a corresponding impact on success.

4. Biases. Widely held stereotypes and biases play a huge role in success and failure. Mounds of credible research reveals that the experiences of people vary greatly depending upon many factors including gender, race, generation, disability, religion, sexual orientation, personality, height and physical attractiveness. Diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in organizations and in general society are attempting to address this. For now, biases consciously and unconsciously held continue to perpetuate existing hierarchies that impact success.

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Rowena Crosbie is founder and president of Tero International, Inc. and co-author of *Your Invisible Toolbox: The Technological Ups and Interpersonal Downs of the Millennial Generation.*