

# Collective confidence

Shared belief can power extraordinary achievement, and leaders of any team can harness it if they know how

Writing André Martin

In the summer of 2004, an unassuming soccer team from Greece captivated the world by achieving the seemingly impossible. Against all odds, the Greek national team, ranked 35th globally, lifted the UEFA European Championship trophy. Along the way, they defeated formidable opponents like France, the Czech Republic, and host nation Portugal.

Greece approached every game with a fearless and determined mentality. As underdogs, they thrived under pressure, showing resilience and belief even against heavily favored teams. This mental strength allowed them to hold off strong opposition and seize critical moments.

With no superstar players, limited resources, and a tactical approach that initially drew skepticism, Greece's victory wasn't just about strategy or luck. It was a masterclass in the power of the coaches, captains, and players to build collective confidence – a concept that can accelerate performance among any group, team, or collective.

## What is collective confidence?

Collective confidence is the extraordinary, shared belief that a group, team, or collective holds in their capability to achieve greatness by working together – often exceeding the sum of their individual abilities and defying external expectations. The concept is rooted in social psychologist Albert

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Bandura's theory of collective efficacy, which has been widely studied across various domains, including education, sports and business.

When a team truly believes in its collective ability to succeed, remarkable outcomes follow. Research demonstrates that teams with strong collective confidence outperform their peers over the long term. They are more motivated, work together more effectively, and demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity that keeps them experiencing forward momentum, often against great odds. Teams and groups with high collective confidence will often:

- ◊ set more ambitious goals and take more calculated risks
- ◊ persist through obstacles with heightened determination





- ◊ communicate and collaborate more effectively by quickly and consistently utilizing shared knowledge
- ◊ outperform teams with lower collective confidence, even when individual skill levels are comparable.

The lesson is clear. When a group collectively believes in its ability to achieve, its chances of success increase, sometimes exponentially. More importantly, there is a science behind building collective confidence that leaders of any team can use to increase performance.

#### **The science of building collective confidence**

Collective confidence doesn't emerge spontaneously, though that is how it seems to the onlooker. Curating collective confidence is the act

**Curating collective confidence is the act of a world-class team leader**

of a world-class team leader who creates it through intentional design and consistent reinforcement. Social psychology research, including my own, has identified a motivational cycle that fuels collective confidence. Certain key inputs – such as positive past performance, shared training, and flexible leadership – lay the groundwork for this belief. As confidence grows, it leads to tangible outcomes like improved performance and group cohesion, which, in turn, reinforce the inputs that sparked the cycle.

The cyclical nature of this process creates a powerful psychological feedback loop. Teams that experience even small victories can build momentum, with each success feeding their collective confidence and enhancing their ability to tackle greater challenges. The interplay between inputs and outcomes underscores the importance of investing in the right foundations. ►

We often misattribute collective confidence, deeming it a direct result of past performance success alone. Across contexts, we have become accustomed to overinflating the importance of a winning streak on future outcomes. Yes, past success is important, but it is only one of a number of inputs that create higher levels of collective confidence.

### Inputs that drive collective confidence

Several foundational factors that influence a team's ability to develop and sustain collective confidence can be influenced or directly controlled by the team leader.

#### 1 Positive past performance

Success, even in unrelated or low-stakes tasks, strengthens a group's belief in its ability to succeed in future endeavors. For example, if a soccer team excels in a tug-of-war competition, the camaraderie and teamwork developed in that setting can translate to better on-field performance. The important thing is the feeling of success, regardless of the context or activity within which that success takes place.

**Leader pro tip** *Early in the team's life cycle, provide an activity or project where it can have success. Multiple experiences of success can create the possibility of further success with more complex challenges and in more uncertain environments. The key here is that the task is both complex enough (meaning it requires real effort) and meaningful to the team (success matters).*

#### 2 Self confidence

The confidence of each team member contributes to the group's overall belief in its abilities. When individuals trust their skills, have had individual success, and feel a part of the team, they are more likely to perform effectively and contribute meaningfully.

**Leader pro tip** *Reinforce individual actions and accomplishments with great frequency. Offer constructive feedback and recognition of personal achievements whenever they arise. The engine of personal accomplishment is vital to accelerating collective confidence.*

#### 3 Contributory confidence

This lesser-studied but crucial factor refers to an individual's belief in their ability to contribute effectively to the team's goals. If members doubt their role's value or how their skills, knowledge, and ways of working fit into the collective, it can erode the collective's confidence.

**Leader pro tip** *Assign tasks that align with individuals' strengths and ensure that every team*

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*member has early opportunities to demonstrate their value to the team. Regularly affirm the importance of diverse contributions to the group's success, point out why each team member is a part of the collective, and celebrate the uniqueness they bring.*

#### 4 Vicarious experiences

Observing the success of other teams provides a road map for what's possible, offering both inspiration and actionable insights. When we experience greatness, it can help us find our own formula for success.

**Leader pro tip** *Facilitate exposure to high-performing teams through case studies, guest speakers or collaborations. Debrief these experiences with the team to identify practices that could be adapted to your context and current state.*

#### 5 Shared learning and training

Learning as a group ensures that knowledge, skills and strategies are uniformly distributed, fostering trust in the collective's ability to tackle challenges. There is an informal and organic collective library that is built when training happens together, creating a more fluid and powerful way to uncover information, skills, and ways of working quickly.

**Leader pro tip** *Prioritize team-wide training sessions and workshops. Structure these sessions around real-world scenarios to build practical skills and strengthen group cohesion. Ensure that every member knows what knowledge, skills and abilities sit where.*

#### 6 Shared leadership

In most successful teams, especially those that are more self-directed, there is a shared leadership that is created over time. The reality is that teams, groups and collectives have different leadership needs at different times in their evolution. Sometimes we need a cheerleader and other times we need someone who will step in to break up a disagreement or make a call. The more that leadership can remain fluid and shared, with responsibilities shifting based on the needs of the tasks at hand, the more collective confidence will be produced as the team or group seeks to sustain performance.

**Leader pro tip** *Rotate leadership roles to align with expertise or project phases. Encourage open dialogue about leadership needs and allow team members to nominate themselves or others for specific tasks.*

#### The outputs of collective confidence

When collective confidence takes root, teams experience a cascade of positive outcomes that





are essential for long-term success. Four crucial outcomes, often elusive in traditional approaches to high-performance teaming, stand out.

The first is increased motivation. Teams with high collective efficacy show greater commitment to shared objectives by willingly investing time, energy, and effort – even in the face of setbacks.

The second is persistence in solving problems. Collective confidence builds resilience, allowing teams to navigate obstacles and recover from failures quickly, often leading to innovative solutions for complex challenges.

Third, collectively confident teams achieve improved performance and better results. Their belief in their capabilities drives them to set more ambitious goals and pursue them with determination.

Lastly, collective confidence strengthens group dynamics by promoting cohesion, trust and open communication, creating an environment where collaboration thrives and lasting success becomes possible.

### Lessons from sports, business, and beyond

The Greek national football team's 2004 victory is a striking example of collective confidence in action. Despite lacking star players, the team's belief in its tactical approach, bolstered by shared leadership and past successes, enabled it to

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outperform far more talented opponents. In the corporate world, collective confidence has been a cornerstone of success for stand out companies like Pixar Animation.

For Pixar, anything less than a blockbuster hit is considered a failure. Producing blockbusters means embracing uncertainty, taking enormous risks by telling stories that audiences haven't seen before.

The key to embracing this uncertainty is building the capability to recover when a big risk inevitably fails – and supporting a robust and resilient team rests on working effectively together. Pixar accomplishes this by ensuring every voice is heard, betting on creative people and 'getting out of the way,' and utilizing "leadership duos" to provide the right leadership at the right time.

Another standout example is Cirque du Soleil. While it has grown tremendously over the decades, the company still seeks to operate with the agility, creativity and confidence of a young, small organization.

It accomplishes this by giving its creative teams permission to test the edge of what is possible, demanding that the best ideas rise to the top no matter where they come from, and ensuring that new members train and learn together – since new recruits often come from individual performance environments.

Even in education, collective confidence can transform outcomes. Schools that invest in team-based professional development for teachers see higher student performance. When educators collaborate, train together, and share leadership, their collective belief in their ability to drive student success grows – and the results speak for themselves.

### Fuel for extraordinary success

The power of a group lies not just in the skills of its individual members, but in the shared belief that they can achieve greatness together. Collective confidence is the fuel that drives teams to outperform expectations, persist through adversity, and innovate in the face of challenges.

Whether in sports, business, or any other domain, the principles of collective confidence are universal. By investing in the right inputs – such as shared learning, contributory confidence, and flexible leadership – leaders can unlock extraordinary potential in their teams. And as success breeds confidence, the cycle of achievement becomes self-sustaining.

In a world where collaboration is increasingly critical, collective confidence isn't just a nice-to-have, it's a strategic imperative. The question isn't whether you can afford to build it – it's whether you can afford not to. ●