Academic Paper

Senior leadership transition: how coaching supports challenges to confidence

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Abstract

Research on senior leadership transition acknowledges that it is a challenging process but it does not always look at the impact on the leader's confidence. Confidence in the coaching literature has been given little attention and yet increased confidence for the coaching client is often a key incidental outcome of the coaching process. Using multi-perspective IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis), this article explores the experience of the challenge to confidence for senior leaders during leadership transition, and how coaching supports leaders with confidence at this transition point. Three key findings are presented here: a framework of the experiences of confidence and loss of confidence across four inter-connected areas; the role of the organisation in the confidence of the leader; and how coaching supports confidence at this transition point.

Introduction

The challenges of transitioning to senior leadership roles are well documented in the leadership and coaching literature (e.g. Watkins, 2003; Manderscheid and Ardichvili, 2008; Terblanche, Albertyn, and Van Coller-Peter, 2018a; Terblanche, 2019). These challenges could be thought to have an impact on the leader's confidence, as shown in a study exploring the experiences of leaders as they transitioned into senior roles (Terblanche, Albertyn, and Van Coller-Peter, 2018a). However, this is not always explored empirically in the leadership or coaching literature.

Although there has been an increasingly large body of research on coaching outcomes in recent years, most of the literature closely related to confidence as a specific outcome explores the related concept of self-efficacy (Popper and Lipshitz, 1992; Evers, Browers and Tomic, 2006; Finn, Mason and Bradley, 2007; Baron and Morin, 2009; Moen and Allgood, 2009; Grant, Curtayne and Burton, 2009). These studies are largely quantitative and often used as a measurement of the effectiveness of coaching. They do not explore self-efficacy – or confidence - in and of itself.

Indeed, there are just a handful of qualitative coaching studies which touch on confidence as a coaching outcome but they do not explore it in detail. We therefore do not have an in-depth understanding of confidence, as distinct from self-efficacy, from the perspective of leaders or their coaches. Similarly, there are no studies of confidence as the *main* research interest, except for one recent coaching study which is not conducted in a leadership context (Kane, Lewis and Yarker, 2021).

The lack of knowledge on this topic points to the need for a qualitative study with a focus on confidence and how coaching supports this within the specific context of leadership transition.

Literature Review

The literature search was focused around the three following areas: challenges of leadership transition to understand the potential impact on the leader's confidence (including psychological challenges such as changes to leader identity); confidence in the psychology, sport psychology and leadership literature; and confidence as a specific outcome in the coaching literature.

Challenges of leadership transition for the leader

The transition to leadership is widely shown to be a period of uncertainty and vulnerability for leaders, with many difficult challenges to navigate (Watkins, 2003; Terblanche, Albertyn, and Van Coller-Peter, 2018a; Terblanche, 2019; Wiggins, 2019). One of the challenges that leaders face is the lack of preparation for the transition to a new role (Keller and Meaney, 2018). Another major challenge is considered to be the lack of concrete feedback (Hill, 1992), seen to be rare at this transition point (Conger and Fishel, 2007) but important in helping the adjustment process in transition (Manderscheid and Ardichvili, 2008). A distinguishing feature of the transition to senior leadership noted in the leadership literature is increased visibility and scrutiny (Zaccaro and Klimoski, 2002; Gill, 2017). At this level, leaders often feel most exposed and yet they are expected to demonstrate public confidence (McGill, Clarke and Sheffield, 2019). Anxiety, lack of certainty and stress are also experienced during leadership transition (Wiggins, 2019; Manderscheid and Ardichvili, 2008; Terblanche, Albertyn and Van Coller-Peter, 2018b).

In addition, leadership transition often requires a change to what has defined an individual's professional identity thus far (Hill, 1992; Ashforth and Saks, 1995; Watkins, 2009; Snook, Ibarra and Ramo, 2010) and this can be seen as quite destabilising (Bond and Naughton, 2011). Building on insights from the grief and bereavement literature, leadership research suggests that transitions involve identity loss, (Ibarra,1999; Bridges, 2002; Snook, Ibarra and Ramo, 2010; Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly, 2014). Loss of identity is identified as a key psychological challenge of leadership transition (Terblanche, Albertyn, and Van Coller-Peter, 2018a). What is not clear in the literature is whether the loss and instability of identity inherent in leadership transition might have any impact on the leader's confidence.

The concept of confidence

The concept of confidence is a central concern of this research and the literature search explored how it is understood across the psychology and sport psychology literature, as well as the leadership and coaching literature.

The search terms "confidence" and "coaching" led repeatedly to the term "self-efficacy". Self-efficacy is shown to be a related concept to confidence (McCormick, 2001; Shipman and Mumford, 2011) and it is often even used interchangeably with confidence (Oney and Oksuzoglu-Guven, 2015). Self-efficacy theory, developed by Bandura (1977), defines self-efficacy as a person's belief

in their ability to perform a task in a certain specific area (Popper and Lipshitz, 1992) and it is task specific.

Research in the sport psychology literature has paid attention to defining and understanding confidence or self-efficacy (Hollenbeck and Hall, 2004) and this, building on Bandura's self-efficacy theory, has given us a very helpful conceptualisation of sport confidence and its components. The work of Vealey (1986) and Vealey and Garner-Holman (1988) is instrumental in this with a conceptual framework of nine sources of self-confidence in athletes, including: physical/mental preparation, social support, mastery, demonstration of ability, physical self-presentation, environmental comfort, vicarious experience, situational favourableness, and coach's leadership.

In the leadership literature, although there are studies of leader self-efficacy, which is also seen to be task specific in relation to the task of leading others effectively (e.g. Machida and Schaubroeck, 2011), there has been relatively little research on confidence in leadership (Hollenbeck and Hall, 2004). Confidence has been suggested to be a key positive trait for leaders to possess and as an example of effectiveness (Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991; Goleman, 1998; Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, 2001; Yukl, 2001). Confidence is also shown as being an important quality that impacts on others, for example in convincing followers and in gaining trust (Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991).

Confidence in the coaching literature

In the coaching literature there has been a lack of attention to confidence (Bachkirova, 2004; Hollenbeck and Hall, 2004). No further studies dedicated to the topic of coaching with issues of confidence have been found since these observations were made, with the exception of one recent study (Kane, Lewis and Yarker, 2021) which provides a model for self-confidence for use in executive coaching, though it is not clear how coaching informed the research questions.

Self-efficacy is present in much of the coaching literature in relation to coaching outcomes (Popper and Lipshitz, 1992; Evers, Browers and Tomic, 2006; Finn, Mason and Bradley, 2007; Baron and Morin, 2009; Moen and Allgood, 2009; Grant, Curtayne and Burton, 2009). However, these studies are largely quantitative and they give little attention to self-efficacy itself. This means that little is understood about self-efficacy, other than as a way of measuring a client's ability to achieve goals and therefore showing the effectiveness of the coaching as a return on investment (e.g. Evers, Browers and Tomic, 2006; Baron and Morin, 2009; Grant, Curtayne and Burton, 2009). Self-efficacy in coaching, then, is seen as a way of measuring other concepts and showing the effectiveness of coaching, but what of self-efficacy – or confidence - in and of itself?

A handful of qualitative studies do show confidence as an outcome of coaching, including a very small number within the context of leadership transition. These studies suggest that coaching enables confidence through: bringing back the inner self and being able to take a wider perspective on difficult situations (Lawton-Smith, 2015); increasing the conviction of what was important; articulating thoughts out loud; challenging limiting beliefs; reassurance, and internalising the reassurance (Lancer and Eatough, 2018); use of challenge (Gill, 2017; McGill, Clarke and Sheffield, 2019); the confidential space to enable leaders to off-load (Gill, 2017); as well as positive reinforcement and support from the coach (Jones and Spooner, 2006; Hindmarch, 2009). Confidence has also been seen to be a key benefit of coaching that contributes to improved job performance (Gyllensten and Palmer, 2014), although no detail is given regarding how this was achieved through coaching.

What is evident in all these studies is that, although they show us that confidence is an outcome of coaching, and some consider *how* coaching helps with confidence, none of these studies look at confidence as the main research interest. Our understanding of what confidence is, how it is experienced, and how coaching supports confidence is therefore limited.

Methodology

This study is situated within a constructivist epistemology (Crotty, 2015) with meaning-making being of central interest to constructivists (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), alongside an interpretivist research philosophy (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015). Interpretivism reflects the distinctiveness of humans and focuses on the *understanding* of human behaviour (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Schwandt, 1994).

The aim of this investigation was to understand the first-person lived experiences (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) of challenges to confidence and the support of coaching; therefore the phenomenological methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) seemed the most natural choice of methodology. IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of personal lived experience, the meaning of experience to participants and how participants make sense of that experience (Smith, 2011). IPA is informed by three theoretical principles: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith, 2011).

In order to obtain two different perspectives on the phenomenon – from the leaders and the coaches working with leaders - this study used multi-perspective IPA. Using multi-perspective IPA raises some important questions such as whether a focus group is consistent with IPA and its idiographic commitment and whether it allows participants to discuss their individual experiences. I paid attention to these questions by ensuring that I drew out personal experiences in sufficient detail within the group discussion. I also analysed the data at both the individual and the group level (Tomkins and Eatough, 2010; Smith, 2004), using the guide for IPA and multiple focus groups suggested by Love, Vetere and Davis (2020).

Research design

The research comprised two stages. Stage one used semi-structured interviews with eight senior leaders (six women, two men, across a range of nationalities and working in financial services, professional services and higher education). Stage two included a focus group with four experienced executive coaches.

Senior leader and coach participants were chosen via purposive sampling. Leaders recruited for this study had: transitioned during the previous 12-24 months to a senior leadership role; experienced executive coaching during this transition; had discussions in their coaching about challenges to confidence. Executive coaches had 10+ years' coaching experience; were accredited by a professional body or equivalent evidence of their quality; were used to working with senior leaders in transition and with challenges to confidence. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and online and were audio recorded. The research adhered to strict ethical procedures reviewed by the University Research Ethics Committee.

Data analysis followed an adaptation of the six-stage process for IPA used by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), along with that recommended for using IPA with focus groups by Love, Vetere and Davis (2020). All interviews were transcribed. Each interview was listened to several times for familiarity. There followed five rounds of coding, with deeper interpretation and re-organisation of themes taking place during the writing up of findings. A number of super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes were generated. Quality standards for qualitative research were taken into consideration with a particular focus on Smith's criteria for evaluating quality in IPA (Smith, 2011) and the four quality indicators of good IPA (Nizza, Farr and Smith, 2021).

Findings and discussion

Three super-ordinate themes arose from the data. Many of the sub-ordinate themes are present within each super-ordinate theme and therefore inter-connect, as will be seen throughout the presentation of the findings.

Figure 1: A table of the super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes

Super-ordinate themes	Sub-ordinate themes
Confidence and aspects of it	- Physical manifestation: space, height vs. crushed, small - Being in control (of self and emotions) - Sense of ease, naturalness and authenticity - Being able to be open and show vulnerabilities - Having clarity about direction/expectations/priorities
Challenges to confidence (individual and organisation)	- Feeling of not achieving/having impact - Not being able to challenge - Not being prepared - Not feeling in control - Moving out of comfort zone - Unknown territory - Lack of clarity about expectations - Lack of empowerment - Lack of feedback and affirmation - Lack of support from seniors and peers - Loneliness and difference - Not being able to show feelings and pretence/acting as a result
Coaching and confidence	- Normalising challenges - Support - Feedback and affirmation - Staying in/regaining control - Helping to see different perspectives - Strategies to move forward - Understanding the self - Space to reflect and talk out loud - Safe space to share vulnerabilities - Exploring and owning leadership identity

The findings will be presented and discussed as follows: an understanding of confidence; the role of the organisation in the confidence of leaders; and the role of coaching in supporting confidence.

1. An understanding of confidence within the context of the transition to senior leadership

Four themes emerged from the descriptions of the experiences of confidence. This understanding of confidence is very different to that of the dominant concept of self-efficacy used in most coaching research. As opposed to self-efficacy, this understanding of confidence is not related to any aspects of task, such as achievement, mastery or demonstration of ability. Instead, the experiences of confidence were as follows:

A feeling of ease and energy; remaining in control (primarily of emotions); having clarity; and being able to be vulnerable.

The experiences of loss of confidence, shown as the opposite of each of these, were even more prevalent in the findings and these were described as:

Exhaustion and energy depletion; loss of control of emotions; lack of clarity and an experience of "stuckness"; the inability to show vulnerability.

Each of these will be described and discussed below.

Confidence as ease and energy; loss of confidence as effort and energy depletion

It was striking how nearly all participants used the language and imagery of ease and energy to describe confidence. The sense of ease when describing a moment of confidence early in her transition is suggested by one participant:

> *It's almost like everything just felt… it just seemed obvious, and I remember sitting there and thinking 'they're all scratching their heads and this seems quite simple to me'.* (Faahima)

With the description of confidence as ease also comes a sense of energy and movement, and there is a real physical manifestation to confidence when participants describe it with references such as "*I feel like I'm flying*" (Faahima) or the confidence experienced following coaching:

> *I feel about 10 feet tall when I come out of those coaching sessions…* (Susie)

However, the opposite of ease, the notions of effort and energy depletion, were more commonly experienced by participants who described their experiences of loss of confidence at this transition point:

> *So, when that kind of sort of start of that lack of confidence kicked in…everything started to feel like an effort and a battle*. (Faahima)

Participants also suggested that the effort and energy required in this transition made it difficult to be natural, in part due to the perceived requirement to act and perform, which was experienced by many of the leaders:

> *…always feeling that you've got to be on it and using up lots of energy because you're kind of always having to be on show and perform.* (Tina)

This understanding of ease and naturalness in relation to confidence, and the opposite experiences of energy depletion and effort, suggests that further work could be done to understand how being able to act naturally, or authentically, gives the leader confidence. This will be discussed further below in relation to emotional control.

Confidence as control; loss of confidence as loss of control

Many of the participants referred to the experience of lack of control, and loss of confidence as a result, during the early part of the transition. They described primarily their efforts to stay in control of their emotions, described by one leader as the need to keep emotions "*on a level*". The coaches shared an implicit assumption about the need to keep emotions in control as a sign of confidence, summarised by one coach:

> *I'd use the word grounded… there's a calmness to it… there's an evenness to their emotionality which is more supple, less brittle.* (Coach Donald)

However, the pressure of staying in control by keeping emotions inside is significant, experienced by many of the leaders and described here by one participant:

> *…so I could feel it kind of like getting up to my head and kind of like this explosion of emotions that I couldn't let out because that is not appropriate in the workplace.* (Irene)

The threat that loss of control poses to her confidence is described as follows:

> *…so I think it was undermining my confidence…. it made me feel like I didn't have control over that and so that's what's undermining my confidence in my management of myself in that role.*

(Irene)

These findings concur with the leadership literature where emotional control is shown to be linked to self-confidence, with the suggestion that self-confidence helps leaders to remain even-tempered and composed (Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991) and that it is a component of most emotional intelligence theories used as a measure of the perception of leader effectiveness (Lewis, 2000). However, these findings also suggest that sustaining emotional control actually has a cost to the leader in terms of exhaustion through careful control, with exhaustion itself denoting loss of confidence throughout this study. The leadership literature does not recognise this complex process, although the exertion of energy required in displaying expected emotions has been explored (Brotheridge and Lee, 2002; Weiss, Razinskas, Backmann and Hoegl, 2018).

This study also surfaces the tension between expected emotional displays and the ease of authenticity as a senior leader and shows a clear relationship between authenticity and confidence. The findings suggest that leaders felt confident when they were (not frequently) able to be authentic rather than acting and performing. An understanding of how authenticity, at least in terms of emotional congruence, impacts the leader's confidence, adds to the paucity of what we know about the *effect* of authentic leadership *on leaders themselves*, described as being "poorly understood" (Weiss *et al.*, 2018, p.309).

Confidence as clarity; loss of confidence as loss of clarity

Confidence is described by most participants as having clarity, defined as clarity of direction, purpose and the ability to know what to do in the role.

Rather than experiencing clarity, however, the leaders experienced more frequently a feeling "*of stuckness*" (a word used by both leaders and coaches) early in the transition, exemplified by one coach describing her leader clients:

> …*and it was that stuckness that they really brought. Just, 'I just don't know which way to go'.* (Coach Renée)

This experience is described by one of the leaders who contrasts this transition to her previous transition:

> *Whereas in this role I just could not find what I needed, I didn't know where to go for what I needed…I did not know where to start…I just remember…still feeling stuck… I felt literally like I had wellies like stuck in mud and I just couldn't, every time I got one foot out it was like I just got stuck again.* (Faahima)

There were repeated references throughout to the difficulty of the "*unknown*" and the lack of "*template*".

Several of the coaches linked clarity with confidence and clarity will be discussed later in this article in relation to coaching.

Confidence as vulnerability; loss of confidence as inability to show vulnerability

Confidence was described by most of the leader and coach participants as being able to show vulnerability. Several examples were given of the link between confidence and vulnerability, as exemplified by one of the coaches describing how his leader clients are more able to:

> *Ask more questions, they can be more curious, they can be more vulnerable. Confidence in itself being able to say, 'I don't know the answer to this'.* (Coach Donald)

Yet in reality none of these leaders felt that they could show vulnerability. One participant describes the risk of emotional exposure as something which might "*derail*" her (Tina) and another refers to the potential repercussions of showing others the "*chink in that armour*" (of not knowing the answer) such that she felt "*exposed, scared, crushed*" (Faahima).

Vulnerability was defined as being: able to ask for feedback; able to stop acting and pretending to be the all-knowing leader; honest about self-doubts and loss of confidence rather than putting on a façade; able to admit to experiences of loneliness as a senior leader; authentic with emotions without needing to control them - as felt expected of them as a senior leader by others. Instead, the leaders experienced the pressure of pretence and acting in order to mitigate the sense of risk and exposure that showing vulnerability entailed and this was experienced as inauthentic, took energy and was exhausting for the leaders and directly impacted their confidence.

Perhaps it is no surprise that these leaders felt unable to show vulnerability when we consider that the portrayal of leaders in the leadership literature is often as superhumans or heroes, with the leader expected to know everything and to be more courageous than anyone else (Yukl, 2010). It is as if the leaders in this study do not feel that the notion of post-heroic leadership (Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2010), which includes not seeing leaders as flawless heroes and allowing for more vulnerability in leadership (Fletcher, 2004; Ancona, Malone, Orlikowski, Senge, 2007), is possible or acceptable. The findings of this research align with the quest to humanise leadership, supporting the argument that more emphasis should be put on leaders' inner conflicts and highlighting the emotional underpinnings of leaders' "tensions, contradictions and paradoxes" (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2015, p.12). Furthermore, this study raises questions about what organisations can do to create an environment of psychological safety, such that leaders can take interpersonal risk in sharing their vulnerabilities (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson and Lei, 2014) and, as shown in this study, helping to feel more confident by doing so.

2. The role of the organisation in the confidence of leaders

A significant part of the challenge to confidence for new senior leaders stemmed from what the organisation was *not* doing and participants described how this challenged their confidence. Alongside a lack of psychological safety, as discussed in relation to vulnerability, three key areas emerged as lacking from the organisation: feedback; support; and help with preparation for the transition.

The role of the organisation in relation to the leader's confidence allows us to explore another dimension impacting confidence beyond that of it being purely the concern of the individual. The three main areas identified as lacking from the organisation – those of feedback, support and help with preparation – align with what are known to be key sources of self-efficacy in self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977), and in sport confidence theory (Vealey and Garner-Holman, 1998).

Feedback

The leaders in this study received little positive feedback when they needed it the most. Several participants described the positive impact of receiving rare affirming feedback on their confidence, for example one participant described a moment when the HR Director gave her a "*super confidence boost*" through her feedback (Irene). She suggested that most senior leaders are "*inhibited in asking for feedback*" and feel that "*at this level I should know*".

Participants suggested that it was not appropriate to be asking for feedback as a senior leader, despite yearning for it, and that asking for feedback was a sign of weakness and lack of confidence. The feedback that leaders sought was as simple as informal feedback confirming that they were on the right track, rather than more formal appraisal or 360-degree feedback. One participant described how he just wanted to hear the *"confirmation that things I'm doing here are well-received"* (Fredrik).

Negative feedback is given more frequently than positive feedback and this is particularly challenging to the leader's confidence, in particular that the critical feedback is delivered in a way which is unfiltered with little concern for how it is received and with an expectation that the leader can cope, as described by one participant:

> *People just think by definition you can and ought to be able to take it… you have to accept that it goes with the territory that you're up there…for people to have a pop at…"* (Tina)

The impact of receiving critical feedback from a manager is described by several participants as "*crushing*", the opposite of the space and height that confidence signifies in this study.

The link between feedback and confidence supports research on the importance of feedback for a leader's self-efficacy (Machida and Schaubroeck, 2011). However, these findings also suggest that organisations make the assumption that regular feedback is not necessary for senior leaders and that there is a discrepancy around feedback at this level: the leaders crave feedback, but they feel that asking for feedback will be seen by others as a sign of weakness and lack of confidence; and yet it is also suggested that being able to ask for feedback in fact signifies confidence. The relationship between confidence and the perceived vulnerability in asking for feedback merits further attention in the leadership literature. It suggests that the organisation could do more to help the leader to be able to feel less vulnerable in seeking feedback, or at least do more to create a feedback culture by enhancing the quality of feedback (London and Smither, 2002).

Support

Many of the participants felt a lack of support, in particular of close colleagues, and described how this challenged their confidence. This also included the unfiltered critical feedback from senior colleagues and the absence of affirming feedback.

When describing confidence at the end of the interview one participant included support as one of the key elements:

> *And then you can ride the wave and the ups and downs I think through support and reflexivity and feedback. (*Irene*)*

Two participants experienced solid support and described how this helped their confidence: for one the unsolicited support of a mentor throughout the transition and for another a body of support which she had deliberately built around her in anticipation of the need for it in her transition.

In this study, the support that is most needed for the leader and their confidence is emotional rather than structural, i.e., support from people rather than organisational structures or impersonal resources and information (Martin, 2015). The importance of support to the leaders' confidence is not a surprise when we consider that, in relation to leader self-efficacy, support from "supervisors, peers, significant others, and followers" is seen as "crucial to leader development" (Machida and Schaubroeck, 2011, p.465). However, other than in a doctoral thesis where the support from a core group of individuals for a newly transitioned leader was shown to boost confidence (Wiggins, 2019), the relationship between support and confidence has not been given attention in the leadership literature.

Preparation

The lack of preparation for the transition was one of the challenges to confidence for many of the leaders, despite their requests to the organisation for help, such as with time or handover sessions with their managers or predecessors. The realisation of the need for preparation and the resulting impact is described by one participant:

…but for me the unknown was, was… so… I didn't realise how much I would have needed a bit more information/preparation before the role. (Irene)

Helping the leader with preparation was not seen to be important by others in the organisation and something that was almost laughed off as not necessary.

The importance of preparation to the leaders' confidence has not been given previous attention, even if global leaders are shown to feel unprepared for their new roles (Keller and Meaney, 2018). The hands-off attitude of organisations in the preparation for transition is a finding in a doctoral study (Wiggins, 2019) and the lack of role clarity shown to be one of the key challenges for newly transitioned leaders which contributes "disproportionality to the anxiety experienced by participants" (Terblanche, Albertyn, and Van Coller-Peter, 2018a, p.5-8).

3. The role of coaching in supporting confidence in senior leadership transition

Through exploring confidence as the main focus of the study, the findings bring a rich understanding of how coaching supports confidence within the context of senior leadership transition. This is shown to be through: the safe space of coaching; gaining clarity (including of leader identity); and feedback and support.

The safe space of coaching

The "*safe space*" of coaching was critically important in allowing the leader to explore, share, and alleviate, their experiences of vulnerability and more so because they didn't feel able to do this within their organisation. This is illustrated by one participant using the metaphor of war to describe her life in the organisation in contrast to the safety of the coaching space:

… momentary kind of reprieve…like I could go into the little trench with her, batten down the hatches and breathe for a few minutes. (Faahima)

The safe space was created in part by having the coach alongside in support. The leaders also described how this allowed them to share the weight of their responsibility in a way which was also not possible within the organisation, thereby helping them to reduce the experience of loneliness.

This finding builds on previous coaching research which highlights how the safe space is part of the supportive element of coaching (McGill, Clarke and Sheffield, 2019; Gill, 2017; Ladegard and Gjerde, 2014; Wales, 2002). Within the context of leadership transition specifically, the safe space has been shown to enable leaders to talk openly and honestly (McGill, Clarke and Sheffield, 2019) and to express anxiety and self-doubt in relation to the intense pressure of high expectations and scrutiny in the new senior role (Gill, 2017). The safe space of coaching merits further exploration in relation to both vulnerability and confidence.

Finding clarity

In addition to the description of clarity as one of the key areas of confidence, enabling clarity through the coaching was also shown to help confidence. There were several ways in which this was achieved: by being able to talk things through; working out priorities; the use of certain coaching tools to enable clarity through self-awareness; helping the leaders to regain clarity of purpose and direction; and gaining clarity on and then being able to take ownership of leader identity.

Clarity through exploring the new leader identity is also seen to bring a sense of ownership, and the confidence that this brings to the leader is described below by one of the coaches using the language of energy and movement which signifies confidence throughout this study:

> *…it was about owning, 'no hang on this is the leader that I want to be, I can create this'. And then once they realised it was up to them to create it and then suddenly there was that real excitement and energy burst because they could become the leaders that suited them, not what other people wanted from them.* (Coach Renée)

Part of the process that helps the leader to gain clarity and to take ownership of their leader identity is that of uncovering old stories about the self and assimilating them into the new identity. Coach Donald describes this as a process of being able to "*embrace what they actively or…at least subconsciously rejected/closed down…*". He further elaborates on the impact of being able to take ownership of this identity with the opposition of "*effort*" (in contrast to energy signifying confidence in this study) and "*hide*" and then "*release*":

> *As soon as he was able to own that and the power in that young self and bring that into who he was, suddenly he not only seemed more powerful, he felt more powerful too, and there was a sense of the amount of effort that was going to try to hide who he was but was released more fully into who he is. (Coach Donald)*

This brings new understanding to the body of leadership literature on leader identity development (e.g. Ashforth, 2001; Ibarra and Barbalescu, 2010; DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Miscenko, Günter and Day, 2017) and the smaller body of coaching literature on this topic (e.g. Reynolds, 2011; Skinner, 2020; Bennett, 2021), none of which consider confidence.

These findings suggest that helping the client to find clarity is important for their confidence. Whilst finding clarity is implicit in many of the coaching techniques and models, in particular with the focus on coaching goals and outcomes, its relationship with confidence has not been explored. Although the coaching competency frameworks (both EMCC and ICF) refer explicitly to clarity in terms of language used, there is no mention of enabling clarity in other ways for the client and how this may benefit them; the findings of this research suggest that this is an area which could be further developed.

Feedback and support

In contrast to the lack of feedback and support found in their organisation and the resulting impact on their confidence, these leaders described how the feedback and support provided by the coaching gave them confidence.

The feedback in coaching that gave the leaders confidence was the more "informal" affirming feedback such as a reminder of what the leader had achieved:

> *Well done, look how far you've come!*. (Susie)

Or a simple affirming:

> *You're doing really well*. (Tina)

In the coaching literature, the use of affirming feedback from the coach in the confidence-building process has been given only brief attention; for example, Jones and Spooner (2006) found that high achievers needed and expected constant positive reinforcement from their coach; Grant, Curtayne and Burton (2009) noted the impact of a 360-degree feedback process in relation to increased confidence for the leader; and Popper and Lipshitz (1992) outlined the importance of feedback from the coach in increasing self-efficacy. Use of affirming feedback is only indicated as a core coaching competency by the ICF, with the expectation of the coach who "celebrates client successes and capabilities for future growth" (ICF, 2021 www.coachingfederation.org.uk) but this is not detailed further.

Support in coaching is described in several ways. Firstly, in terms of taking away the loneliness of senior leadership through being able to share the weight of responsibility experienced as a senior leader, as described by one participant:

> It*'s almost like you've just kind of shared a weight because you can't tell, there's not somebody in the firm that I can tell everything to.* (Susie)

Support in coaching is also described as having the coach there alongside, suggested by several participants with reference to their coach just being "there". The final element of support in coaching is the use of normalising, described by one participant here:

> *…and helping accept that it's bound to feel difficult, and it's bound to feel overwhelming and that's okay [because] I'm a normal human being, not a freak or someone that's incompetent."* (Tina)

Although the link between the support of the coach and confidence is indicated in some of the coaching literature (e.g. Jones and Spooner, 2006; Hindmarch, 2009), this study makes this explicit, as well as providing understanding of what support in coaching means. This understanding – at least within this context – is helpful when we consider that the only reference to support in a coaching competency framework is in relation to the coach needing to demonstrate "empathy and genuine support for the client" (EMCC, 2020).

Limitations and potential future research

This was a multi-perspective study which included the perspectives of senior leaders in transition and of executive coaches. However, the perspectives of those within the organisation working closely with the transitioning senior leaders is missing and so future research might usefully include these.

Inevitably when using IPA the researcher brings foreknowledge and assumptions to the process, although this was addressed through noting and questioning assumptions and interpretations in a reflexive journal; checking interpretation with participants; and peer coding.

Finally, this study focused on a small sample and, although there is a temptation to generalise the findings, I have aimed for theoretical transferability rather than generalisability (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

Throughout this article, several areas have been highlighted as warranting further attention in future research in relation to confidence across the coaching and leadership fields. These include: the importance of the relationship between authenticity and confidence; vulnerability and confidence (including the safe space in coaching); and clarity in coaching and confidence.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to develop a multi-perspective understanding of challenges to confidence experienced by leaders during the transition to senior leadership and to explore how coaching supports leaders with these challenges. By conducting a qualitative study which focuses on confidence as the main focus of the study, it has been possible to provide a rich and multi-faceted understanding of the experiences of confidence and loss of confidence for leaders within the context of the transition to senior leadership, across four inter-connected areas: ease and energy; control; clarity and vulnerability. This has been drawn together in a circular framework, set out below in Figure 2. Whilst I have attempted in this study to gain some more clarity on the experiences of such a complex concept as confidence, the findings also reiterate the complexity of

the concept. This is exemplified in this framework, deliberately configured as a circle where no one area of confidence remains distinct and many of them inter-connect. However, the specificity in this detailed understanding of confidence is important because it potentially allows us to be able to work with confidence more productively, both in coaching and also in organisational leadership development.
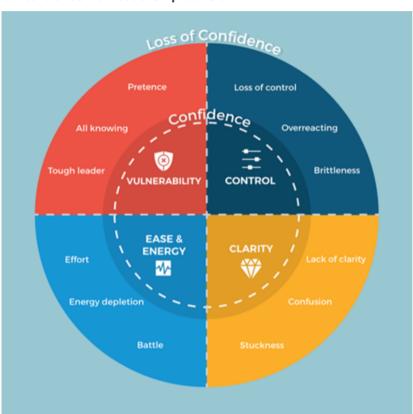
Figure 2: A framework of the experiences of confidence and loss of confidence within the context of senior leadership transition

In summary, confidence is understood as a concept which is distinct from self-efficacy, though sharing three of its key sources: those of feedback, support and preparation. The role of the organisation is shown to impact confidence through the lack of feedback, support, preparation and psychological safety. Coaching plays an invaluable role in supporting confidence, in particular through: the safe space; helping the leader to find clarity; enabling clarity and ownership of leader identity; and through feedback and support.

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