



Self-confidence: a professional quality to be developed

Reinforce one of the pillars of constructive relationships



Didier Avril, série Storytelling

Our sources

This synopsis is based on the publications presented below and on the back page.

Assertiveness and Diversity
Anni Townend, Palgrave, 2007.

Dare: Self-Confidence Therapy
Frédéric Fanget, Odile Jacob, 2003.

Human interaction is the cornerstone of business today, making self-confidence as much a professional as a personal asset. Indeed, confidence is decisive in helping individuals form constructive relationships with others. People need it to adapt to change, to take initiative, to modify their behavior, and to make decisions in an uncertain environment.

However, everyone does not possess this strength in equal quantities. Some people seem to have it all, but have a low opinion of themselves, while others sail through huge setbacks with impressive assurance, bouncing back from failure even stronger, etc.

Yet, the analyzed publications point out that self-confidence can be learned, even by the most self-deprecating souls. They also show that this quality tends to erode over time unless it is actively maintained, by applying a few simple precepts:

- **Appreciate yourself as you are, with your qualities and flaws, your successes and failures.**
- **Dare to take initiatives whose outcome is uncertain, then carefully note your progress and successes as you go along.**
- **Behave as an equal; don't try to dominate others, but don't automatically assume that their opinion is more valid than yours either.**

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1 A quality to be developed

“There are more competent leaders than confident ones,” notes Scott Eblin in his book *The Next Level*. This observation may sound surprising to many. Doesn’t reaching the top prove that a person is competent and valued by others? So why would such an individual continue to harbor self doubts?

In actuality, however, studies show that there is no correlation between a person’s sense of self-worth and his or her intrinsic qualities. Some people

Self-confidence
is less common than
one might think.

with very little going for them in terms of IQ, physical aptitude or interpersonal skills possess an enviable amount of self-assurance. They experience setbacks as difficulties that do not challenge their value as human beings, or their legitimacy to act, make decisions, and express their feelings and desires.

A far larger share of the population lacks confidence, however, and manifests this in different way, e.g. anxiety, difficulty making decisions or taking initiative, self-denigration, timidity, introversion, need for constant approval from others, etc. Sometimes, what looks like arrogance may actually mask a shaky ego. Indeed, people who hide their vulnerability are often domineering and may take foolish risks, as they cannot bear to have their actions and opinions challenged and refuse to acknowledge their own feelings or those of others. This attitude often dissimulates a deep-seated lack of self-confidence.

Self-confidence is a major asset in business where success is increasingly founded upon constructive human interaction, and where people must continuously make decisions in uncertain contexts, adapt to change, and learn to behave in new ways.

Better decisions

The anxiety and emotional upset caused by a poor self-image can lead to poor decisions. Indeed, people who lack confidence tend to exaggerate their chances of failing and the gravity of the consequences if they do fail, and underestimate their ability to cope. A typical example would be a project leader who triple checks every detail of an assignment, even if this causes excessive delays in making critical decisions. Another illustration would be a manager who refuses to reconsider any solution that he or she recommends, because the least objection is perceived as a personal attack.

Confident people, on the other hand, are able to listen to what others have to say and can integrate available information objectively, while reserving the right to form their own opinions and make decisions, even though they realize that they can never be sure of being right.

More constructive interactions

When relating to others, people who lack confidence may react counterproductively. For example, a leader who interprets even mild opposition as a personal affront probably lacks self-assurance and consequently cannot recognize the value of different viewpoints. On the other hand, a leader who never stands up for him or herself is likely to run into trouble one day, when the resulting frustration builds to the boiling point! A poor self-image is thus destructive to collaboration, especially since people who lack confidence tend to isolate themselves to avoid confrontations they find too painful to face.

Conversely, confident people respect themselves and others. Their positive sense of unpretentious self-worth is conducive to constructive interaction. Indeed, assertive people can listen to other opinions while expressing their own, and possess sufficient humility

to have their views challenged without feeling that this challenges their value as human beings. What is more, this attitude is contagious, because others tend to emulate self-assured behavior that is neither passive nor aggressive.

An opportunity to change and grow

An underdeveloped sense of self-worth can be like a prison. People suffering from a poor self-image may become completely paralyzed, fear to take risks or alter any part of their routine. A common reason that employees fail to take initiative, for example, is not a lack of ideas, but rather the feeling that their ideas are worthless. When people doubt in themselves, having even one idea rejected can be enough to confirm their belief that they don’t deserve to make suggestions, given their more or less conscious belief that anything they might propose isn’t worth much. Likewise, many individuals hesitate to test new behaviors or techniques if they are not sure of succeeding, because the idea of failure seems so daunting. Since these same individuals often tend to underestimate their own competence, they find it difficult, if not impossible, to change and grow.

Conversely, people who possess a realistic belief in their own abilities are more willing to venture onto unfamiliar terrain. Confident individuals are in a better position to learn from experience, because they understand that failing does not necessarily make a person “bad.” Self-confidence is thus a great asset, and even a critical pre-requisite for personal growth.

Managers would thus do well to make a conscious effort to improve their own self-confidence and help their colleagues and subordinates to develop theirs. Progress in this area is rapidly reflected in higher team productivity, lower stress and more constructive working relationships.

2 The three pillars of self-confidence

Many psychologists have given a lot of thought to the issue of self-image, specifically because a low self-image is associated with common pathologies such as depression, anxiety, social phobias, etc. These pathologies aside, modern psychology can also be applied to everyday personal development.

Psychologists have proven that self-confidence is composed of several relatively independent components. For example, a person may feel absolutely

Understanding the different components of self-confidence is fundamental.

at ease with some facets, and project a confident image, but lack assurance in other areas and be more vulnerable than he or she appears. These latent gaps may have unexpected consequences, causing people to behave

inappropriately or incomprehensibly, without necessarily understanding why.

Understanding the various components of self-confidence is thus a key prerequisite for growth. Basically, the human sense of self-worth is supported by three pillars (Figure A):

Believe in who you are

The foundation of self-confidence is self-esteem, i.e. the general opinion people have of themselves, regardless of events or what other people may think. Now, this opinion may be more or less positive. Individuals with good self-esteem are better equipped to deal with failure, conflict, doubts and uncertainty and change, because their

fundamental sense of self-worth is not challenged. After getting turned down on an important project, a self-assured manager might gather his or her team together for a debriefing session and to lay out a different plan of attack. *"My project has just been turned down. I am*

very disappointed, because I believed in it, and we have all worked very hard to get it approved. However, some good things have clearly come out of this, and some of my proposals were clearly appreciated. Even so, I was not able to convince them. Next time, I think that I will structure my presentation differently, but keep the introduction, which worked quite well. I would like your views on..." Conversely, a manager with low self-esteem would likely interpret every setback and unpleasant remark as proof of his or her unworthiness, and come out of the same meeting thinking *"Boy, did I mess up that presentation; I'm useless!"*

This does not mean that people should convince themselves they're perfect. Rather, they should assess themselves objectively, without being overly critical or too indulgent. They must believe in themselves as they are, with their qualities and flaws. The foundations of self-esteem are laid in childhood, but the edifice continues to be built throughout life. People can consequently improve their self-confidence

FIGURE A The three pillars of self-confidence

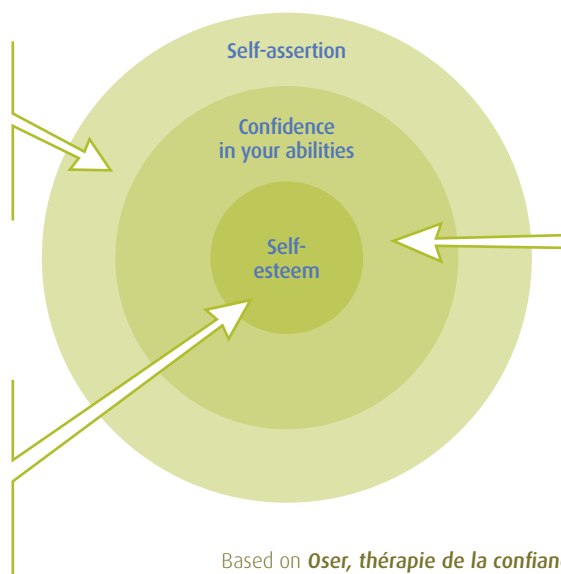
Self-confidence is founded upon three key components, each of which must be continuously developed and maintained, for a lack in any one of these dimensions can generate counterproductive behavior.

Belief that you are worth as much as anyone else, no more, no less

- Do you have trouble expressing what you want?
- Do you put other people's needs before your own?
- Do you constantly seek the approval of others?

Belief that you are worthy and interesting

- Do you focus on your negative side?
- When people compliment your qualities, do you think "That's normal?," i.e. the strict minimum?
- Do you generally feel that others are "better than you?"



Belief in your own competence

- Do you often think you "will never make it?"
- Do you tend to procrastinate; do you often become "paralyzed?"
- Do you avoid responsibility?
- Do you have trouble "selling yourself?"

Based on Oser, *thérapie de la confiance en soi* [Dare: Self-Confidence Therapy], Frédéric Fanget, Odile Jacob, 2003, and *Avoir confiance en soi* [Possessing self confidence], Sarah Famery, Les Editions d'Organisation, 2000.

by learning to see themselves differently and to interpret events in a more positive light.

Believe in what you can do

Belief in one's abilities is the second pillar of self-confidence; i.e. a willingness to tackle new things outside of one's comfort zone. Self-assured individuals dare to take risks, even after they have stumbled, and have a greater potential for development than those who do not possess this quality. This is not the same thing as arrogance, however, because people with healthy self-assurance have a fairly realistic view of their capabilities and limitations. For example, an assertive manager might react as follows when asked to take on a highly innovative assignment, "OK, I agree to take this on. I've never done it before, but some aspects are similar to another project I managed. I think I can make it work. On the other hand, there is a point relative to which I fear I might not be competent. Can we think about how I

might get some help in that area?" A manager with low self-esteem, on the other hand, would likely have a very different reaction, given his or her natural self-doubts. Such a person would hesitate to step up, avoid taking responsibility, procrastinate in making decisions, etc., and would probably respond, "I don't know. I've never done anything like this before. I'll have to give it more thought. Do you really think I have a shot at making this work? There are some aspects that seem pretty shaky to me here..."

Confidence in one's abilities is built or lost with experience. People who were raised in a nurturing and encouraging environment are more likely to have positive self-esteem, but this skill can also be acquired and developed later in life.

Believe that you are worth as much as anyone else

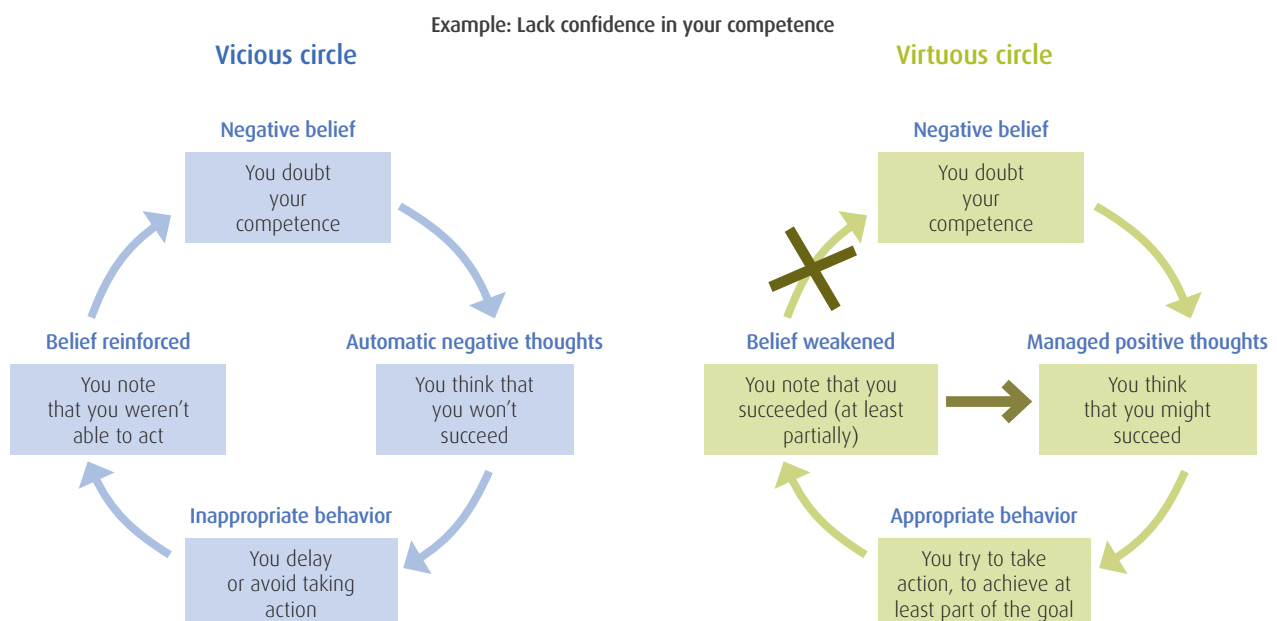
Finally, people must feel confident to establish mutually respectful relationships. What is known as assertiveness,

or self-affirmation, is effectively a key to building balanced and constructive human interactions. Assertive people do not try to dominate others, nor do they remain exclusively in the shadows. An assertive employee for example, might react as follows if he or she feels that a colleague is asking too much: "I understand you need help. But to help you prepare for this meeting properly, I would have to take the time to study the project more fully and discuss it with you in detail, which would take three or four hours. I'm sorry I can't help you, but given my current workload, I simply can't spare the time. I'd be delighted to help you out another time." A less assertive individual, however, would tend to put the needs of others first and might respond, "I can't refuse the poor guy; he'd never forgive me." Or he or she might feel that the opinion of others automatically takes precedence, e.g. "He says that this project is more important than the one I'm working on, so I'd better help him."

Self-assertiveness is an inborn attitude that can erode as a person

FIGURE B A vicious circle to be reversed

The lack of self-confidence elicits behavior that in turn erodes self-confidence even further. This phenomenon must be actively combated by triggering a virtuous circle. Initial small steps boost confidence and help you undertake more significant steps that in turn increase your confidence in yourself.



experiences interpersonal failures or major conflicts to which he or she responds poorly. It is possible and important to practice and reinforce this skill on a regular basis, while being careful to remain on equal footing with others.

3 A quality that can be developed

Low self-confidence is particularly insidious because people can get locked into a vicious circle, i.e. *"I don't believe I can carry out this project successfully, so I don't volunteer to undertake it. As a result, I don't get entrusted with it, and I conclude that this proves my incompetence!"*

People can learn to be more confident by combating this phenomenon actively and triggering a virtuous circle (Figure B). To do this, they must make a conscious choice to work on this aspect of their personality, by becoming conscious of the impact of a poor self-image and obliging themselves to think in ways that may initially seem artificial, but will gradually

become more natural as they observe the positive effects of the new mindset. Receiving objective support from a trusted confidante can also facilitate this process.

► Learn to appreciate yourself as you are

The best way for people to improve poor self-esteem is to decide consciously to change their self-image. First, they must become conscious of the fact that they tend to underestimate their abilities, and that they may

People can take active steps to raise their self-esteem.

be using this attitude as a crutch, since it provides a good excuse not to take risks, make efforts, confront others, etc.

People can gradually change their self-image by verifying certain points every time a negative thought about themselves comes to mind (Figure C). This verification demonstrates that

their discomfort is often linked to the way they are experiencing a given situation, rather than the situation itself. Gradually, they will come to realize that more positive interpretations are possible, and their self-image will improve.

Refrain from making general negative self-judgments

Beware of drawing global conclusions from one detail. People who have trouble appreciating themselves generally tend to exaggerate the negative and minimize the positive. Someone who feels they were ridiculous in a meeting should seek to understand why they think they were ridiculous. Could other moments of the meeting have led to the opposite conclusion? What exactly was ridiculous? Is it certain that everyone else in attendance also thought the same thing? People must learn to refrain from challenging their value as human beings. They must realize that they may act and behave in ways that aren't ideal, but this doesn't make them intrinsically "bad."

FIGURE C Learn to appreciate yourself as you are

Beware of general value judgments that tend to undermine your self-esteem. E.g. *"I did badly in this negotiation; this shows what a bad person I am."* Faced with this type of spontaneous reaction, cultivate four reflexes:

Analyze

Don't draw hasty conclusions from a single factor. Break down what happened in order to realize that you probably did poorly on some aspects, but well on others.

Take a step back

Put your self-expectations into perspective. Be aware that perfectionism can be motivating, but also destructive.

See yourself objectively

Try to see yourself more "objectively." Is the situation really as critical as you seem to think? Is a given failure really all your fault? Learn to be as tolerant of your own failings as others would be.

Think positively

Replace negative thoughts with more positive and constructive thoughts, e.g. *"I messed up this negotiation, but I have done better on other occasions. The next time, I'll know what to do better."*

Stop trying to be perfect

Another esteem-building technique is to draw a portrait of the “ideal” individual, and put this image into perspective. Does anyone possess all of these qualities? Would it be possible to feel esteem for a person possessing just some of these qualities, or who never demonstrates any of them all of the time? People must force themselves to be as demanding and tolerant of themselves as they are with others.

Observe yourself “objectively”

A self-critical individual should think to him or herself, *“What do other people say or think about me? What would other people do if they were in my shoes? Would they be less harsh in their judgment than I am with myself?”* Listening to what other people have to say can also provide valuable input. Certainly, everyone has someone—a colleague, a boss, a mentor, a team member—whose judgment and sincerity he or she values, and who can be counted upon to give honest feedback on subjects of concern.

Replace your inner critic with a benevolent voice

Automatic thoughts must be carefully monitored, because negative

thinking can be extremely destructive. For instance, when faced with a difficult subject in a meeting, a person with low self-esteem and lacking confidence might think, *“I don’t belong in this meeting; it’s over my head.”* Because negative thoughts can trigger inappropriate behavior such as withdrawal, for example, they must be identified and managed, in order to replace them with more positive thoughts, e.g. *“This subject is interesting; I’m learning a lot.”* Although this approach might seem artificial at first, positive thinking will gradually become a reflex.

► Dare to take initiative

People who lack confidence in their abilities must force themselves to try new things in order to realize that they are more competent than they originally thought (Figure D). However, a few important principles must be followed for this to work:

Set attainable objectives

People who tend to become paralyzed, procrastinate or hesitate to decide should begin with baby steps. An individual who has trouble speaking in public, for example, could start with an attainable objective, such as making a presentation to his or her team. After getting through this presentation

without the world coming to an end, he or she will then be better equipped to do the same in a client setting. It is important for people who are just getting started to avoid biting off more than they can chew, however. Hinging their sense of self-worth on their ability

People who doubt their abilities must learn to take risks and note their successes.

to carry out an assignment that is too ambitious can be disastrous. They must incorporate the right to make mistakes into their objectives, rather than put all their eggs in one basket.

List your assets

Before launching into costly initiatives, people must take the time to inventory the qualities that could be useful to them and ban thoughts like, *“I’ll never make it.”* Asking others for support can also be a good idea. A trustworthy confidante can help them form a realistic view of their abilities and offer needed encouragement.

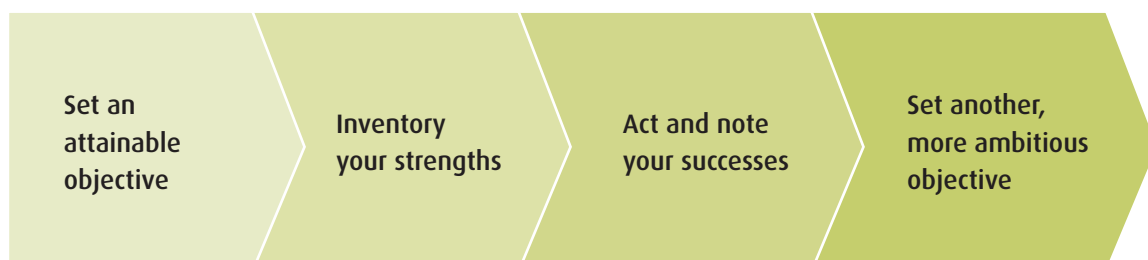
Get started and note progress

To improve self-confidence through action, people must learn to assess their progress and put their accomplishments into perspective. It is critical

FIGURE D Dare to take action

The best way to address a lack of confidence in your abilities is to take initiative, and realize that you are more competent than you originally thought.

A step-by-step approach is recommended to avoid setting yourself up for failure, which would unfortunately reinforce the negative belief in your incompetence.



to avoid the classic trap of taking full responsibility for failure (*"It's my fault"*) and undervaluing accomplishments (*"It was easy"*). Celebrating success is very important!

► Assert yourself with others

Self-confidence is a prerequisite for building efficient and productive professional relationships. People who lack confidence tend to feel easily slighted by others and react with a flight or fight reflex.

The following tips are instrumental in developing a more assertive attitude:

Express yourself affirmatively

With practice, it is possible for people to learn that they have just as much right to express their opinions as to listen to the views of others. They must therefore regularly practice expressing their needs, saying what bothers them, daring to say no, without seeking to

dominate others, but also without placing themselves in a position of inferiority. **Figure E** offers several suggestions on how to do this effectively.

Develop interest in others and their feelings

A classic symptom of low self-confidence is "sticking to the facts." Indeed, cold, hard facts are reassuring, but represent only a partial view of reality. Although perhaps a bit frightening

Confidence in one's interpersonal skills requires self-respect and respect for others.

at first, learning to express feelings and showing interest in others is important, e.g. *"I must say that I'm upset, and I have the impression that you are too. Could you tell me what's going on?"* With time, this approach helps people to acquire greater understanding of their own emotions and those of others, and consider them as a factor among others to

be taken into account in building relationships, without unwittingly allowing them to obstruct the relationship.

Respect different points of view

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that different points of view are perfectly legitimate. Differences of opinion must not be seen as an affront, but rather be discussed openly, making it easier for everyone to express their respective points of view.



Far from being a personality trait or a by-product of success, self-confidence is an extremely valuable quality in business. This quality can be developed and must be constantly maintained and reinforced.

FIGURE E Express yourself affirmatively

Confidence in your ability to form constructive interpersonal relationships can be reinforced by practicing your assertive communication skills.

Put yourself in a positive state of mind	Recognizing the value of the other person will help you avoid the trap of trying to dominate him or her, or allowing yourself to be unduly swayed by his or her point of view.
Clearly express what you want	Speak in the first person and be precise.
Be attentive and show that you understand the feelings of others	Listen to the other person's point of view, and try to understand his or her constraints sincerely, without necessarily adopting his or her point of view. Listen to the other person's feelings, even if you find this uncomfortable.
Also express your feelings	The other person will understand your point of view and your reactions better if you dare to share your feelings openly. E.g.: "I'm really embarrassed to ask you this, but..."
Conclude on a positive note	E.g.: "Thanks for listening to me."

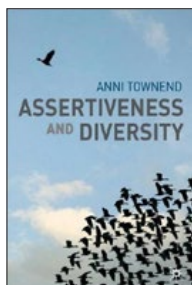
Based on *Assertiveness and Diversity*, Anni Townend, Palgrave, 2007, and *Oser, thérapie de la confiance en soi* [Dare: Self-Confidence Therapy], Frédéric Fanget, Odile Jacob, 2003.

Our selection

To find the best ideas on this subject, we recommend the following publications:

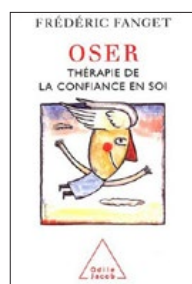
Assertiveness and Diversity

Anni Townend, Palgrave, 2007.



Written by a psychologist, coach and consultant, this book underlines the critical importance of self-confidence in the business world, especially given today's focus on diversity. Respecting others while respecting oneself is the key to constructive relationships—what the author labels "I'm OK, you're OK." Based on this observation, she uses effective although sometimes extremely detailed examples to illustrate the various situations that managers often face, and to offer numerous suggestions on how to deal with them assertively. This is a book that invites managers to reconsider how they function professionally.

Oser – Thérapie de la confiance en soi



[*Dare: Self-Confidence Therapy*], Frédéric Fanget, Odile Jacob, 2003.

Drafted by psychiatrist and a psychologist, this book proposes an approach inspired by behavioral and cognitive therapies to improve self-confidence. Written in a simple, unpretentious style, and illustrated with numerous examples taken from daily life gathered in the course of the author's consultations, the book is very easy to read while delving beyond the merely superficial. While it is essentially designed for individuals seeking to boost their self-confidence in day-to-day situations, the described approach could easily be transposed to the business world.

Further readings

To explore this topic further:

- **Emotional Intelligence**
Daniel Goleman, Robert Laffont, 1997.
(Book and Manageris synopsis 52a)
Become aware of the key importance of an often misunderstood form of intelligence.
- **Courage, an essential leadership quality**
(Managers synopsis 136b)
The various forms of courage necessary to exercise effective leadership.
- **Managing your stress**
(Managers synopsis 121a)
Understand your stress better to manage the consequences.
- **Le manager à l'écoute**
[The attentive manager], Yves Blanc, Dunod, 2002. (Book and Manageris synopsis 113a)
Improve your ability to listen.
- **Clear Leadership**
Gervase R. Bushe, Davies-Black, 2001.
(Book and Manageris synopsis 97a)
- Master communication more effectively to avoid misunderstandings.

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28, rue des Petites Écuries
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Tel.: +33 (0)1 53 24 39 39
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