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Meet the MasterMinds: Rosabeth Moss Kanter on *Confidence*

Rosabeth Moss Kanter is a business leader, consultant, and expert on strategy, innovation, and leadership for change. She's the Ernest L. Arbuckle Professor of Business Administration at the Harvard Business School, and the bestselling author of sixteen books, including her latest, ***Confidence: How Winning Streaks and Losing Streaks Begin and End***.

Professor Kanter is in the top ten on the list of the "50 most influential business thinkers in the world," and she's on the lists of the "100 most important women in America" and the "50 most powerful women in the world." She's also the co-founder of Goodmeasures, Inc., and a sought-after speaker.

MCNews got Professor Kanter's views on how the intangible attribute we call confidence can make the difference between winning and losing.

MCNews: Do you think confidence is a mindset?

Kanter: Well, confidence is certainly mental, but it's not a mindset in the sense that it's always present. Confidence is a situational expectation—an expectation of a positive outcome. And that expectation leads to all kinds of investments in making that outcome come true.

Because of confidence people put in the effort. They invest financial and other resources. Instead of giving up, they stay in the game longer and, therefore, have more chances to succeed. But it's not necessarily rooted in people's character. Some people may be more likely to develop confidence than others, but it's definitely a response to specific situations.

MCNews: What's the difference between confidence that you can accomplish something and wishful thinking?

Kanter: Wishful thinking is to imagine success without doing the work to make it happen. Confidence has to stand on a firm foundation. The three cornerstones of that foundation are accountability, collaboration, and initiative.

Accountability means you've examined the facts and your own abilities; you've worked hard to improve your abilities so you know you can take responsibility in a given situation and be accountable for performance. Collaboration means that you support and are supported by the people around you. And initiative translates to an action you can take with the sense that you're in control of it.

Confidence is the solid placement of everything it takes to do the work and make that work successful. That's why pep talks aren't effective unless they are based on real evidence. While we all like to hear positive words, a pep talk without evidence is empty and people see right through it.

MCNews: So how should a leader handle pep talks?

Kanter: The best leaders are, first of all, very good at giving people the real facts—which means spelling out the things that don't work as well as the things that do work. But when they cheer people on, the best leaders show concrete examples of the capabilities necessary for success.

MCNews: In consulting, incremental lack of success on a project can lead to a downward spiral. What would you suggest to reverse a downward spiral?

Kanter: A large part of this new book is about turnarounds. First, let me make a general comment about them: never underestimate the power of positive feelings. If you can express something positive, it goes a very long way.

Consultants need to understand that a downward spiral is a losing streak. They need to be on the lookout for the symptoms of that, which show up in specific behaviors. You have to diagnose the symptoms because it's easy for people to slip into those behaviors without quite noticing it.

Focus people's energy on a goal they can achieve—a small, concrete win that they can actually achieve in the short term. That often shifts the energy right away. Also, if you have any control over the conditions under which people work, invest in upgrading those conditions.

In a losing streak, people feel abandoned. They doubt themselves, they certainly mistrust leaders, and they have no energy. So, if you can, show people that they're worth something to the organization by improving their environment.

I've seen this in companies, schools, and sports teams. In 2002, the struggling Montreal Expos got a new manager, who created a winning season for the team. They had no money and terrible conditions. But he shifted what little there was to player services.

Shift resources to the people who are delivering the service. I saw a school principal get buildings fixed up right away. Nobody works well in rundown facilities. Moods often reflect physical surroundings, in part because they're in your face all the time.

Not that I believe the physical environment is everything. People can be highly productive in nearly any setting if they care about the work, are well led, and have a tremendous sense of teamwork. But if morale is shot and behavior is bad, find a way to lift spirits.

MCNews: Do behaviors have to change to turn around a losing streak?

Kanter: Yes. Leaders must cut off the bad behaviors, and not permit complaining, whining, or blaming somebody else. It takes strong leadership to bring people out of a losing streak. Without that, the bad behaviors make the streak worse.

A leader must reorient people to focus on what their own responsibility is for a situation and on developing a joint solution.

MCNews: Do you think it takes longer to come out of a losing streak than to get into one?

Kanter: It can, yes, because the momentum is running against you and the negative behaviors reinforce each other.

A great danger in a losing streak is that people lose respect for each other. There's so much negativity being spread around that people look at each other as losers. And they're afraid they're going to be labeled as losers too.

But even the "worst" people have strengths. Leaders have to find those strengths, highlight them, publicize them, talk about them, and make clear that there is a basis on which people can respect one another. Then, figure out a way to make that combination of people work well by using the strengths of some to compensate for the weaknesses of others.

Instead of giving everybody exactly the same thing to do, think about your talent mix, and communicate and publicize strengths so that they rebuild respect. Great leaders expect people to respect each other. And that's not just respect in the sense of politeness, but respect in the sense that everyone believes there are really good people around them.

You need that respect for people to listen to each other's ideas, join each other's project teams, go to each other for help—all the positive behaviors that make it possible for an organization to accomplish its goals. This is critical when an organization needs innovation. You need a culture of respect to come up with new products or new ideas.

MCNews: Most of us have seen projects that look like train wrecks about to happen. How do you know whether or not it's really a failure in process?

Kanter: Early in my career I developed what I call Kanter's Law: Everything can look like a failure in the middle.

The first thing to do when something isn't working well is to say we must still be the middle of whatever it is. That's very helpful and reflects reality. I have based many a consulting engagement on almost nothing but that.

I've helped groups with major strategic initiatives for companies. Everybody gets very excited at the beginning of these big efforts, thinking, we're going to be in a new product, new business, or new facility, or whatever it is. In the midst of that excitement, I would say, now we're going to do some planning for when it all goes wrong.

We're going to plan for the things that could derail this effort. People will resist doing this because, after all, it's a downer after all of that positive energy.

But if you get groups working on that, they not only get very imaginative about the things that could go wrong—including nuclear war—they also feel stronger because they've anticipated the worst. The next question is, now that you see what could possibly go wrong, what do you do to be ready for it?

That's mostly about the accountability cornerstone of confidence. You face the worst and know you can come out of it. The groups that do the best job of weathering adversity bounce back because they've prepared for it in advance. That gives them confidence that they can handle anything.

If you go through really tough hurdles while getting ready for a project, you feel that there's nothing that could happen later that would be as bad. That really helps you get through the

middle of a project, particularly when the middle is not just frustrating and requires rethinking your plan, but is a genuine disaster.

MCNews: What message should a leader send about how disaster planning contributes to winning?

Kanter: The difference between winners and losers is not that winners win all the time or are ahead all the time—they're not. They're often behind, but they bounce back quickly and they don't lose twice in a row. Those who are not prepared for the difficult middles, who don't have a culture of confidence, are likely to panic.

Panic literally means losing your head. When you act emotionally rather than rationally, it's even more likely that things will fall apart. You really need rational thinking to overcome unexpected obstacles.

MCNews: On the flip side, when an organization is on a positive trajectory, how can leaders maintain the momentum and the confidence?

Kanter: Encourage leadership everywhere in the organization. Encourage more people to take more responsibility and step up as leaders. That way you get more ideas, more innovation, and more ways to improve on already good performance.

Second, keep stretching your goals because there is always more to be done. Celebrate success, but at the same time go on to the next challenge. Of course these days, the next challenge is already around the corner, so you don't have to artificially impose it.

But the more leadership gets spread, the more people will feel that they can contribute, tackle projects, and innovate. Then, you are more likely to have a dynamic organization—one that doesn't stand still.

MCNews: Last question. What are you reading these days?

Kanter: I'm dipping in and out of an eclectic mix of books. For relaxation, I'm reading a Sara Paretsky V.I. Warshawski novel. I'm sitting here with a pile of books on the new science—physics and mysteries of the universe. I love that stuff. And I've got a whole bunch of biographies and histories.

MCNews: Thanks for your time.

Find out more about Professor Kanter, her books and services at <http://www.changetoolkit.com> and <http://www.goodmeasure.com>.