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[Re]Discovering You: A Leadership Practice for When you Feel Unqualified

By: Amanda Silver
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Amanda Silver

Most leaders can recall moments when they felt qualified. They were leading a meeting with their team, closing a big sale, or working on a creative project and feeling completely in the zone. The momentum is high. And yet, it's just as easy to recall the opposite: the roadblock that stops you in your tracks, the promotion that falls through, or simply seeing someone younger achieve at a higher level.

Unfortunately, it's easier now than ever to feel this way. We can open LinkedIn or Instagram and consume the highlight reels. Promotions, awards, new titles, "thrilled to share" posts, and big milestones packaged into 150 words with emojis. Suddenly the comparison creeps in. In fact, research on social media suggests these spaces can fuel upward comparison, which can make it feel like evidence that you're falling behind, even when you're doing meaningful work (Appel et al., 2016; Vogel et al., 2014).

One day you walk into work feeling on fire, the next you wonder, "am I really qualified to be here?" This feeling is a signal worth listening to, because it can be an opportunity for growth.

Part of the reason it shows up so often is that we're busy. Not the "I have dinner plans after work" kind of busy—I'm talking calendar-Tetris, decision fatigue, "I'll eat lunch during a Zoom" kind of busy. When life is "go go go," it's easy to slip into autopilot, where you're executing all day but rarely pausing long enough to notice what you're doing well.

There's data behind that sensation. A survey of more than 3,000 adults found that 96% said they were living life on autopilot (Marks & Spencer, 2017). We're like zombies, going through the motions. The more automatic our days become, the less we consciously reflect on our strengths, progress and impact.

That's where [re]discovery comes in: discovering parts of yourself you've never fully claimed, and rediscovering strengths, passion and confidence buried under the busyness. Otherwise, when we forget to reflect and [re]discover, we start to question our qualifications. Not because you're suddenly less qualified, but because your brain has fewer recent "receipts" readily available for when the next challenge presents itself. You're leading, producing, and problem-solving—and still feeling like it's not impressive enough.

It's tempting to undersell yourself.

One of the fastest ways to spot when someone has stopped seeing their value clearly is to hear how they respond to this everyday icebreaker: "Tell me about yourself." This comes up constantly in our careers, whether it's brief introductions, interviews, speaking opportunities or networking events. The answer matters because it shapes how others perceive you and how you perceive yourself.

What I hear most often from smart, accomplished people isn't clarity—it's disclaimers. "I'm still figuring it out." "I don't have that much experience." We're really good at under-selling ourselves. I call this the "blank slate blues," and it's catchy because

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it sounds humble. But underneath, it's a message that says, "I have a lot to learn, and not so much to offer."

The blank slate blues are the result of treating our strengths, experiences, and even relationships as if they have expiration dates. If you led a team two years ago but you're an individual contributor today, you start telling yourself that you're not a leader anymore. If you had a meaningful connection with someone last year but you haven't stayed in touch, you decide that it's too awkward to reach out now.

We decided that if we're not actively using something right now it no longer counts. But strengths don't expire. Experiences don't evaporate. And meaningful connections don't disappear. What fades is our willingness to claim them.

Rejection stings, it's science!

In our careers, we face rejection constantly. From the first job rejection to a layoff, to a pitch that didn't land, or a promotion that went to someone else. Today, we don't always get the dignity of being rejected in person. Rejection looks like automated screenings, AI interviews, or simply being ghosted. David Brooks (2025), author and cultural commentator, has even written about how Gen Z is the most rejected generation.

No matter the frequency or the method, the rejection hurts, and it eats away at our self-esteem. You're not alone in feeling this way. In fact, there's science behind why rejection feels so intense. University of Michigan researchers have shown that recalling experiences of rejection can activate the same brain regions involved in physical pain (Kross et al., 2011). Your brain is processing rejection as a real threat.

But this isn't a doomsday message, there's a silver lining. While you can't control rejection, you can control its meaning. The intensity of the rejection experience comes down to the story you attach to it. A "no" could mean "this wasn't the right fit right now, and it's not personal" or it could mean "I'm a failure." Same event, wildly different

perceptions, and persevering through rejection is the skill of choosing the most useful meaning.

There are three actions you can take to [re]discover yourself so that you're prepared for the next rejection or the next time you feel unqualified: Connect courageously, unleash your strengths, and level up your story. You don't need to reinvent yourself, and you don't need a pep talk. You need perspective and momentum achievable through small, repeatable actions. So how can you regain confidence when rejection hits?

Step 1: Connect Courageously

The first action is connecting courageously, because when the self-doubt gets loud, you need perspective. When you're alone in your head, the comparison and the rejection combine for a perfect storm of doubt. A courageous connection interrupts that loop by bringing in real humans, real paths, and real context.

Anna, a former editor at *College Magazine* was exceptionally talented and creative, but after struggling on the job market, she took a role that didn't leverage her creativity. She felt unsure of her next move.

I encouraged her to reach out to one person a day for an informational interview, or what I call a "DM a Day." Not to ask for a job, but to ask about their career journey, how they got to where they are today.

These conversations changed everything. Anna spoke with an editor at the *Atlantic*, a copywriter at Wayfair, a content manager, a grant writer and more than a dozen people in different corners of the media world. Each conversation led to another. She gained clarity on roles she didn't know existed, learned what skills mattered most, and doors started to open. Anna found a new job that she loves.

A DM a Day is more than a career tactic—it's a leadership lesson. People crave mentorship, but many don't have it, and that gap is real. A Harvard Business Review article on mentorship notes that while more than 75% of professionals want a mentor, only 37% have one (Woolworth, 2019).

If you're thinking, "I don't have time for

networking," it's time to mentally re-label it. This isn't networking. It's leadership development. It's learning faster because you're willing to ask, listen, and build relationships.

A practical way to do this is to treat LinkedIn like a mentor map instead of a job board. Start with an alumni page or an organization you admire, look at real paths, and notice the pivots and stepping-stone roles people took. Your first instinct on a profile should be to scroll down to see how that person got started. Stop browsing and comparing and instead, start learning. There's a big difference in how this approach feels.

A strong DM is short, specific, and about them. It names what you admire, makes a clear ask (15 minutes), and respects their time. Most importantly, there's no need to prove your worth in the first message, because the point isn't to impress, it's to learn.



Step 2: Unleash Your Strengths

The second action is unleashing your strengths, because confidence often returns through motion. On my podcast Find Your Passion Career, I interviewed Sarah who had climbed the ranks at JPMorgan. On paper, she was doing everything right—she was successful and clearly qualified. But what she loved wasn't finance, it was film, storytelling, and creative work.

When Sarah applied for film-related opportunities, she didn't hear back at first, because people only saw her finance experience. The only creative experience she could easily point to was her love of making videos as a kid. So instead of waiting for permission, Sarah knew she had strengths to unleash. She went online and found small film projects where help was needed like one-day shoots and production assistant gigs, nothing glamorous. This was real work with real people where she could apply her existing strengths, her work ethic, organization, analytical thinking and creativity in the direction she was passionate about.

This is where the research on grit can be useful when we interpret it correctly. Angela Duckworth describes grit as perseverance and passion toward long-term goals, not just grinding through challenging work (Duckworth et al., 2007). Hard work without passion, is just drudgery.

For leaders, this has implications for engagement and retention. If someone on your team is high-performing but restless, don't assume they lack commitment. Ask where their strengths feel underused, what kind of impact they want to make, and what would help them feel more "in the zone" at work. It doesn't need to be a perfect passion; but simply help them find a direction that matters to them.

If you're the one needing the reset, try three questions: *What brings you joy? Where do you get in the zone? Where do you want to make impact next?* Your answers don't need to produce one perfect passion; they just need to point you in a direction that feels meaningful. Then choose one small way to unleash your strengths in that direction. You could volunteer for a cross-functional project, join an organization, pitch a new idea for your current

role, mentor someone, or build something small that gives you that opportunity. The goal is not perfection, it's momentum.

Step 3: Level Up Your Story

The third action is level up your story, because often, we're watering down our story. Dan was my editor in chief at *College Magazine*. He recruited and mentored our team of editors. He led team meetings, gave thoughtful feedback, taught social media tactics, and drove results. He even wrote an article that went viral with over 25,000 shares. The team looked up to him.

Unfortunately, at one point, Dan faced a lot of career rejection. He kept getting interviews, but he wasn't getting offers, and his confidence took a hit. When we practiced a mock interview, I asked him an easy warm-up question: "Tell me about your time at College Magazine." But Dan answered in one dull sentence: "I oversaw a team and selected articles that would get published on the site." It was technically true, yet it erased everything interesting about his impressive leadership journey.

Here's what you need to remember: a day in your life may not feel exciting to you, but it is to someone who's never lived a day in your life. When you're bored with your own story, you minimize it. Leveling up your story doesn't mean exaggerating. It means expanding. It means naming the challenge, the action you took, and the outcome you drove. It means swapping "I'm a ____" for "I care about ____, so I built/led/created ____, and here's what changed." The next time you're tempted to simply state your title, try sharing your why, why you do what you do. Then tell the stories of the times your strengths shined in your work.

Leveling up your story matters in obvious moments like interviews and promotions, but it also matters in everyday leadership. Your story is how you build trust. It's how your team understands what you value and why you lead the way you do.

Confidence is a ladder, not a light switch.

One reason people feel discouraged is that they expect confidence to return all at once. They think, "Once I get the offer/promotion/validation, I'll feel confident." Confidence doesn't work like this. Instead, it's like a ladder, building one rung at a time.

One connection can remind you that it's a journey, and you're not alone. One small project can help you remember what you're good at. One leveled-up story can help you communicate your value in a way that feels true. Over time, those rungs add up, and you start believing in yourself again because you're stacking proof, not waiting for a confidence lightning bolt.

This is also why [re]discovering yourself isn't about becoming someone new. It's about remembering what's already there and giving it attention and an opportunity to grow.

You can even turn the three actions into a practical practice for the people you mentor. Start by listening for "blank slate blues" language. Notice how often the people you lead say "just," "only," "kind of," or "I'm not sure this is helpful, but..." This language seems harmless at first, but over time, it's minimizing impact. When you hear the blues, encourage them to level up—name a challenge, their actions, and the impact without any disclaimers.

[Re]discovery isn't a dramatic makeover. It's a return to what's true: your strengths, your experience, your relationships, and your story. The next time you feel unqualified, instead of spiraling or doom scrolling, come back to these three actions and regain control.

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People First, Always: The Heart of Leadership

By: Stephanie Conners, President and CEO, BayCare Health Systems



Stephanie Conners

Leadership does not begin with a title, a corner office, or a seat at the boardroom table. For me, it began at a hospital bedside, usually long before the sun came up, helping patients feel just a little steadier, safer, or more hopeful than they did the day before. My journey from nursing assistant to the CEO of the largest academic health system serving West Central Florida was never something I planned. Instead, it was shaped, every step of the way, by a deep desire to make a meaningful impact on the lives of others—a value that still guides me today.

The path wasn't linear. It wasn't predictable. But it reinforced a truth I carry with me: **leadership is not something granted to you. It's something you grow into—day by day, choice by choice, challenge by challenge.**

As leaders, we often talk about strategy, systems, and scale. Yet the most profound lessons I've learned about leadership didn't come from board meetings or organizational charts. They came from listening to patients' fears, learning from frontline teams, and observing how people show up when the stakes are highest. Those experiences form the foundation of my leadership philosophy today—one that is participatory, transparent, intentionally human-centered, and anchored in purpose.

In the spirit of the University of Tampa's TECO Energy Center for Leadership Speaker Series, which brings together leaders to share the challenges that shaped them and the lessons they wish to pass on, I offer my reflections on what it truly means to grow as a leader in a world that demands resilience, empathy, and courage more than ever before.

Leadership doesn't begin the day someone hands you a title. It starts much earlier, often in unexpected places, long before you realize you're being shaped into the kind of person others will someday look to for direction. For me, it started at the bedside. I was a nursing assistant working full-

time while earning my degree, learning not just how to care for patients but how to listen, be present, and stay calm when people were at their most vulnerable. Those early mornings and long nights offered lessons that would follow me throughout my career and eventually into the role I never imagined for myself: CEO of the largest academic health system serving West Central Florida.

When I reflect on that journey, from the nursing unit to the boardroom, I realize the throughline was never ambition. It was purpose. It was the belief that the best leaders are the ones who stay close to the work and even closer to the people doing it. The bedside changes you. It teaches you that leadership isn't about authority or hierarchy; it's about how you show up. It's about the tone you set in the small moments, the example you offer when no one is watching, and the compassion you extend when there's nothing to gain from it. Those are the lessons that informed every step I took as I moved into leadership roles, eventually becoming one of the youngest chief nursing officers in the country and later serving in senior executive roles across major health systems.

By the time I arrived at BayCare as its president and CEO, I wasn't thinking about the size of the system or the scope of the responsibility. I was thinking about the people—the caregivers I'd soon meet, the patients whose stories I hadn't yet heard, and the community I'd uprooted my family to join. Accepting the role meant embracing something new and unfamiliar, not because it was the next rung on a career ladder but because it allowed me to serve on a scale that aligned with my values. It meant continuing a mission rooted deeply in improving the health of all we serve with compassionate, community-owned care.

Stepping into a new community and a complex health system reinforced for me how essential it is for leaders to stay grounded. I've always believed

in standing shoulder to shoulder with teams, not leading from a distance. Health care, more than almost any other field, demands that leaders remain connected to the people doing the work. When I visit our hospitals, it's impossible not to feel profound admiration for the clinical teams, environmental service workers, food service staff, transporters, technicians, and countless others who give of themselves every single day. Their example is what inspires my leadership. Their resilience is what motivates me. Their honesty is what keeps me anchored.

Culture isn't built through memos or slogans. It's built through presence. It's built through listening. It's built when leaders create space for people to use their voices and know they will be heard. Leaders who grow understand that empowerment is not about giving people power—they already have it. It's about removing obstacles so that power can be used to its fullest. In health care especially, where workforce shortages and burnout have tested the limits of even the most committed caregivers, creating that space is not optional. It is the work.

Throughout my career, I've learned that leadership is most visible when things are most difficult. Regulatory shifts, rapid industry changes, hurricanes and natural disasters—these are not hypotheticals for health care leaders; they are certainties. Navigating such challenges requires a combination of steadiness and humility. It means running toward the problem, not away from it, and showing your teams through your actions that no crisis is faced alone. It means understanding that collaboration isn't a buzzword—it's the only way through. Clinical teams, administrative leaders, and support staff must be aligned in purpose, each valued for their contribution, none elevated

above the others. When leaders approach crisis with clarity and empathy, the entire organization becomes stronger.

But leadership is not defined solely by how we respond to crisis. It is equally defined by our commitment to developing others. I was fortunate to be mentored by extraordinary leaders throughout my career, including those who believed in me long before I believed in myself. The impact of those relationships stays with me. It is why I am committed to mentoring others, especially women and those from underrepresented backgrounds who may not always see themselves represented in executive roles. Leadership is not about pulling the ladder up behind you; it's about extending it so far that others feel confident climbing it. It's about recognizing that people's paths are often nontraditional and that greatness sometimes lies in places others overlook. Everyone deserves a runway to succeed.

Philanthropy, too, has shaped how I lead—not just as a personal value but as a leadership imperative. To give back is to acknowledge the people and communities who shaped you. It is to invest in potential wherever you find it. It is to understand that lifting others is not charity; it is legacy.

As I've grown as a leader, I've come to believe deeply that leadership is never about titles. Titles may grant authority, but they do not grant respect.



They do not guarantee impact. True leadership is measured by integrity, compassion, and the desire to make a meaningful difference. It's about being driven not by ambition but by purpose. It's about making decisions grounded in values, even when they come with personal or professional cost.

I've often said that at the end of my life, I hope to be remembered as a great mom, a great wife, and someone who improved the lives of tens of thousands of people—someone whose compassion remained at the center of every decision. That hope keeps me accountable every day. It pushes me to reflect not just on what I accomplished but how I accomplished it. Did I listen enough? Did I lift others? Did I stay true to my values? Did I make someone's path a little smoother?

For those beginning their own leadership journey, whether in health care or any other field, my advice is simple: **be resilient**. The world changes quickly, and you must be willing to change with it—not passively, but purposefully. **Lead with compassion**, always. Some will call it soft; it is anything but. Compassion requires strength, vulnerability, and courage. **Nurture the fire in your belly**—the thing that drives you, sustains you, and reminds you why you started this work in the first place. And above all, **hold tight to your values**. Skills can be taught. Technology will evolve. Circumstances will change. But your values—your integrity, your purpose, your belief in doing what is right—those are what define you as a leader.

When you look in the mirror at the end of each day, only you know whether you brought your best self to work that day. If you can say yes—if you've lived in alignment with your purpose—then you can move forward with pride, knowing you left something meaningful behind. As I remind myself often, each of us walks a unique path, and the measure of our leadership is not found in accolades but in impact. At the end of our time, we will all be able to look back and know that the world is better because of our compassion, our courage, and our commitment to leading with heart.

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The Doors and Walls of Leadership

By: Bella L. Galperin, Senior Associate Director/TECO Energy Center for Leadership; Dana Professor, Management

In today's complex business environment, leadership requires more than technical skills and outward displays of authority. Leaders must look beyond surface-level metrics and focus on the internal dynamics that truly drive performance. During my recent conference travel to Morocco, I was struck by how its understated exteriors and beautifully crafted inner courtyard mirror the principles of effective leadership. By looking through this architectural lens, we can better understand what it means to lead from the inside out.

In Morocco, doors are intentionally designed to protect what matters most. Their understated exteriors are not a lack of ambition or creativity; they are a deliberate expression of humility, restraint, respect, and care for the inner life of the home. Behind these doors lie courtyards filled with light, intricate craftsmanship, and spaces designed for connection, reflection, and well-being. The message is clear: true value does not need to announce itself.

Much like Moroccan architecture, effective leadership: (1) embraces humility and respect; (2) prioritizes what happens inside: a positive internal culture, and (3) balances the preservation of core values with the need for adaptation.

Embrace Humility and Respect

Traditional doors, particularly those in the historic medinas¹ of Marrakesh and Fez, two main cities in Morocco, often feature a distinctive "door within a door" design known as a wicket door or *khokha*. The large opening (the main section) are only opened for significant events, moving large furniture or livestock, such as donkeys or mules. The small opening (the wicket) is primarily used for daily foot traffic. Its smaller size and lower height requires family and visitors to bow their heads and encourages them to crouch as a gesture of humility (Abury Foundation, 2024).

In fast-moving environments, humility remains a differentiator. Leaders who acknowledge limits, listen actively, and invite contribution are more likely to build trust and make better decisions. Key research findings stand out:

- A meta-analysis of 212 studies links humble leadership with higher follower satisfaction and greater participative decision-making (Chandler et al., 2023).
- Across 298 employees and 70 teams, humble leader behavior boosted individual performance via organization-based self-esteem and strengthened team performance via team potency (Liu et al., 2021).

- Humble leadership has been framed as a modern "superpower" that prioritizes service over ego and collaboration over command (Gutmann, 2025).

By focusing more on service rather ego and collaboration over command, leaders can inspire extraordinary outcomes. One must remember that sometimes the quietest voice is one that listens, reflects, and empowers others, the most powerful of all.

Yet humility is only the beginning. Once a leader creates the posture to listen and learn, the real work occurs inside the organization within its culture, relationships, and daily practices.

Prioritize Internal Culture

Moroccan architecture often centers around the riad, a traditional home designed with a central courtyard that serves as a peaceful interior retreat. While the exterior doors and walls are often simple and discreet, stepping inside reveals a carefully crafted sanctuary filled with beauty, calm, and intention. This inward-facing structure highlights the cultural importance of privacy, reflection, and comfort (Art Travel Morocco, 2026).

Leadership mirrors this concept. Just as the riad's true beauty lies beyond the exterior door, the real strength of an organization is found within its internal culture. Leaders who intentionally cultivate trust, shared values, and psychological safety create an internal "courtyard" where employees feel comfortable sharing ideas, collaborating, and taking thoughtful risks. Research suggests that organizational culture is a company's most powerful advantage, particularly during challenging economic conditions, because it aligns teams and strengthens performance (Laker, 2021).



Bella Galperin, Ph.D.



Doors of Marrakech, Morocco.
Photos by Bella L. Galperin

¹ A medina in Morocco is the historic, walled, and often medieval, central city or quarter. These "cities" or "towns" are narrow, pedestrian-only streets which house traditional homes (riads), souks (markets), mosques, and artisans.

By building a supportive internal environment, leaders foster stability, creativity, and long-term engagement. When employees feel safe and valued, they are more likely to contribute meaningfully, innovate, and support organizational goals. Like the hidden courtyards behind Moroccan doors and walls, an organization's greatest strength is often found in the internal environment leaders intentionally design and protect.

Balance the Preservation of Core Values with the Need for Adaptation

Moroccan architecture blends Berber (Amazigh)², Islamic, and European influences, integrating time-tested materials with modern techniques. Berber architecture in Morocco is described as “one of the most authentic and enduring expressions of the country's cultural and environmental identity” which uses primarily earth, adobe bricks, stone, and wood, appropriate to the Moroccan climate (Art Travel Morocco, 2025). Second, there is a strong Islamic influence in Morocco architecture seen with the introduction of geometric patterns and colorful zellij (ceramic-tile mosaic). Finally, aspects of European (namely, Spanish and French) architecture are seen in Moroccan architecture including the white stucco facades, red-tiled roof, and large windows. This fusion mirrors organizations that protect their heritage while adapting to new realities including technology shifts, market dynamics, and stakeholder expectations.

In practice, leaders must clarify and communicate a diverse set of guiding values, then align decisions, structures, and incentives to those values. The core values are the basic pillars of an organization which strongly holds the organization together and are central to its culture. The strength of an organizational culture is especially seen in mergers and acquisitions. When not properly managed, distinct organizational cultures may clash due to a misalignment of values and norms. It's especially important to create and implement a strategy to successfully blend cultures.

A recent *Forbes* article outlines the importance for leaders to truly understand their organizational culture, especially in today's uncertain and rapidly environment filled with burnout, resource

constraints, and other challenges (Lawrence, 2025). While leaders recognize the importance of organizational culture in steering performance, several leaders have difficulty in truly understanding their culture and implementing effective change when required.

Cultural changes in organizations are typically challenging. According to a study by McKinsey & Company, 70% of organizational transformations fail. While several factors may contribute to the failure rate, the primary reason for failure is the



Beautiful riad in a medina, Marrakech, Morocco.
Photos by Bella L. Galperin

human element. Leaders need to provide all their employees with a convincing reason to adopt the change efforts; participation and co-creation is also needed from employees to address the organizational culture. Investing in an aligned company culture yields significant returns. Studies have shown that employees who feel connected to their company's culture are four times more likely to be engaged at work and almost six times more likely to recommend their workplace to others.

When leaders root themselves in enduring values

while adapting thoughtfully to new realities, they create organizations that are both resilient and forward looking, much like Morocco's blend of tradition and innovation.

Conclusion

Just as Moroccan doors reveal little about the vibrant courtyards within, effective leadership is measured not only by outward displays of authority but by the inner life of an organization, including the relationships, values, and culture that quietly sustain its people. True leadership strength comes from humility and the creation of environments where individuals feel safe, respected, and empowered to contribute. When leaders focus inward by cultivating trust, honoring core values, and adapting with insight, they build organizations that are resilient rather than reactive. Ultimately, the real beauty and power of leadership, much like Moroccan architecture, is found not at the entrance but in the thriving community nurtured behind the walls.

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2 The Berbers, also known as the Amazighs, are a distinct ethnic group indigenous to North Africa.

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