



PLAYBOOK

THE PLAYBOOK · KEYNOTE COMPANION

THE POWER OF NOTHING

THREE MOVES FOR THE UNDERESTIMATED

NORLIZA PAVLAKOS

International keynote speaker · Golden Gavel honouree





You have been underestimated. Now what?

Most leadership advice was written for people who started with something: networks, capital, family stability, a name that opened doors. This is for the rest of us. Three moves, each with a framework, a question and space to write your answer.

01 Reframe

Turn their doubt into your advantage.

02 Redirect

Move through, not around.

03 Anchor

Build the validation no one can take from you.

THIS IS FOR YOU IF YOU ARE

- A woman who keeps being interrupted in the room
- A BIPOC leader who is told they are “not quite ready”
- An LGBTQ+ professional whose work speaks louder than the story they are allowed to tell
- A first-generation leader in rooms no one in their family ever entered
- Anyone who has been told no enough times to wonder if they are the problem

Notice which question you do not want to answer. That is the one to start with.

If you are struggling, please speak with your doctor or your EAP provider, or visit thesupportpages.com.au.



How to use this playbook

START HERE

Read, sit with the question, then write

Each move has its own spread. Read the framing, sit with the question, then write. Write by hand if you printed this, or type directly into the lines. The point is not the format. It is the act of putting your answer somewhere outside your head.

Why writing helps

Research found that students who wrote about stressful experiences showed gains in working memory weeks later and had fewer intrusive thoughts. A thought you have not written down is still a thought your mind has to hold.

FOUR GROUND RULES

- There are no right answers. Only honest ones and dishonest ones.
- If a question makes you uncomfortable, do not skip it. Underline it.
- You do not have to finish in one sitting. The questions will wait.
- When you finish, do not put this on a shelf. Come back to it in a month.



MOVE 01

REFRAME

Turn their doubt into your advantage.

- Treat being underestimated as information, not a verdict
- Stop letting other people's doubt set the agenda
- Replace the story with the facts
- Run the Reality Questions in two minutes



Reframe

UNDERESTIMATION AS STRATEGY

The Activation Effect

Being underestimated is not a setback. It is a position of strategic advantage you have not yet learned to use. The Activation Effect converts the doubt others place on you into clarity, drive and decision-making power. It does not ask you to prove anyone wrong. It asks you to stop letting their doubt set the agenda.

THE QUESTION

What would you have already done, if you had not been waiting to be taken seriously first?

A TWO-MINUTE TOOL FOR SELF-DOUBT

The Reality Questions

When self-doubt hits, the brain reaches for stories. The Reality Questions reach for facts. Run them in under two minutes when imposter syndrome, overthinking or second-guessing show up. They will not silence the doubt. They will move you past it. Ask: what is the story I am telling? What are the facts?

THE QUESTION

When the doubt arrives, what do you have available right now that the doubt is asking you to forget?

YOUR ANSWERS

What would I have already done, if I had not been waiting to be taken seriously?

What do I have available right now that the doubt is asking me to forget?

Reframe: research and notes

THE RESEARCH

Reframe pressure as excitement

People who told themselves “I am excited” before an anxious task, such as public speaking, performed better than those who tried to calm down. Reframing uses the energy rather than fighting it.

Brooks, Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 2014

Distance helps you think clearly

Talking to yourself by name or as “you” under stress helped people see a situation as a challenge rather than a threat, and they gave better speeches and ruminated less afterwards. A small step back makes room for the facts.

Kross et al., Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 2014

Doubt despite evidence has a name

Clance and Imes described high-achieving women who doubt their competence and feel like frauds despite clear evidence of success. Later research extended the idea to men and others. Naming it is the first step to questioning it.

Clance & Imes, Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice, 1978

IF YOU LEAD A TEAM

Model it

Tell your team about a time you were underestimated and what you did next.

Coach it

When someone doubts themselves, ask: what are the facts? Then: what would you do if the doubt were not in the room?

Watch for

Talent overlooked because of who it comes from.
Team members who are interrupted and stop contributing.

MY NOTES

The doubt I carry most often:

The facts I can put against it:

One thing I will do this week:



MOVE 02

REDIRECT

Move through, not around.

-
- Name the obstacle you have been treating as a wall
 - Ask where it might be a turn
 - Choose the smallest action you can take within a day
 - Take it without waiting for approval

Redirect

MOVE THROUGH, NOT AROUND

The Wind and Water Principle

Obstacles do not stop wind. They do not stop water. They redirect them. The pressure stays. The forward motion stays. Only the shape changes. This is about staying adaptive, fluid and forward-moving when you meet barriers that more privileged paths do not include. It is not resilience as endurance. It is resilience as redirection.

THE QUESTION

What obstacle have you been treating as a wall, that might actually be a turn?

THE END OF PERFECTIONISM

The Smallest Viable Action

Confidence is not the prerequisite for movement. Movement is the prerequisite for confidence. The Smallest Viable Action is the antidote to overpreparation, the search for permission and the wait for the perfect moment. It locates the one step you can take right now, with what you have, without anyone's approval.

THE QUESTION

What is the smallest action you could take in the next twenty-four hours that you have been waiting until you felt ready to take?

YOUR ANSWERS

What obstacle have I been treating as a wall that might be a turn?

The smallest action I will take in the next 24 hours is:

Redirect: research and notes

THE RESEARCH

Confidence follows action

The strongest source of belief in your own ability is succeeding at the task itself. People gain confidence by doing, not by waiting to feel ready.

Bandura, Psychological Review, 1977

Small wins add up

Breaking a large problem into small, achievable wins builds momentum and makes the next step easier to take.

Weick, American Psychologist, 1984

Flexibility protects wellbeing

Being able to shift your approach as situations change, while staying true to your values, is a core part of psychological health. Many mental health problems involve difficulty doing this.

Kashdan & Rottenberg, Clinical Psychology Review, 2010

IF YOU LEAD A TEAM

Model it

Take one visible small step on a stalled project this week and tell the team what you did.

Coach it

Ask: what is the smallest step you could take by tomorrow? Remove one approval it needs.

Watch for

Approval loops that slow reversible work. "Not ready yet" used as a reason to wait.

MY NOTES

The wall I have been staring at:

How it could be a turn:

The smallest step, and when I will take it:



MOVE 03

ANCHOR

Build the validation no one can take from you.

- Name what you are building
- Ask: would I still build it if no one validated it?
- Write the answer as a promise
- Sign it, and return to it in a month



Anchor



YOUR IDENTITY ANCHOR

The Promise Test

Underestimated leaders are often missing the external validation that anchors people more easily affirmed by the world. The Promise Test builds that anchor internally, where it cannot be taken from you. It is a personal commitment tool that connects you to your purpose when the world doubts you, when the room dismisses you, when the moment asks you to shrink.

THE QUESTION

If no one ever validated what you are building, would you still build it?



WRITE IT, SIGN IT

A promise to yourself

Write the move you chose. Write what you will do this week because of it. Sign it and date it. The signature is for you, not for anyone else. Then return in a month.

THE QUESTION

Which of the three moves do you most need right now, and what would change if you used it this week?



YOUR ANSWERS

What I am building, whether or not anyone validates it:

The move I need most right now:

Anchor: research and notes



THE RESEARCH

Your values steady you under threat

Brief exercises in which people reflect on what matters most to them can reduce defensiveness under threat and have improved outcomes over time, including for people facing stereotypes or doubt.

Cohen & Sherman, Annual Review of Psychology, 2014

Self-chosen goals last

Goals driven by your own values, rather than by approval or pressure, are linked to better wellbeing and performance.

Deci & Ryan, Psychological Inquiry, 2000

Specific goals outperform vague ones

Specific, challenging goals lead to better performance than being told to “do your best”. A written promise with a date is specific.

Locke & Latham, American Psychologist, 2002



IF YOU LEAD A TEAM

Model it

State your own purpose in one sentence, and say what you would build even if no one noticed.

Coach it

Ask team members what they would build regardless of recognition. Then recognise it anyway.

Watch for

Team members who only act once they are validated. Praise given unevenly across the team.



MY NOTES

My promise, in one sentence:

What I will do this week because of it:

I will come back to this on (date):

A promise to yourself.

THE MOVE I CHOSE

WHAT I WILL DO THIS WEEK BECAUSE OF IT

SIGNATURE

DATE

AFTER THE QUESTIONS

The point was never the answer.

Go back through what you wrote. Notice the move you skimmed past: that is the one your life is asking you to take seriously. Notice the answer you wrote too quickly: that is the question you have not finished answering.

The research behind the moves

INTRO AND MOVE 01 · REFRAME

Brooks, A. W. (2014). Get excited: Reappraising pre-performance anxiety as excitement. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 143(3), 1144–1158.

pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24364682

Kross, E., Bruehlman-Senecal, E., Park, J., et al. (2014). Self-talk as a regulatory mechanism: How you do it matters. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106(2), 304–324.

doi.org/10.1037/a0035173

Clance, P. R., & Imes, S. A. (1978). The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, 15(3), 241–247.

doi.org/10.1037/h0086006

Klein, K., & Boals, A. (2001). Expressive writing can increase working memory capacity. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 130, 520–533.

[fds.duke.edu \(record\)](https://fds.duke.edu/record)

MOVE 02 · REDIRECT

Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84(2), 191–215.

psycnet.apa.org/journals/rev/84/2/191

Weick, K. E. (1984). Small wins: Redefining the scale of social problems. *American Psychologist*, 39(1), 40–49.

[homepages.se.edu \(full text\)](https://homepages.se.edu/full_text)

Kashdan, T. B., & Rottenberg, J. (2010). Psychological flexibility as a fundamental aspect of health. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 30(7), 865–878.

doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2010.03.001

MOVE 03 · ANCHOR

Cohen, G. L., & Sherman, D. K. (2014). The psychology of change: Self-affirmation and social psychological intervention. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 65, 333–371.

[labs.psych.ucsb.edu \(record\)](https://labs.psych.ucsb.edu/record)

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268.

[selfdeterminationtheory.org \(full text\)](https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/full_text)

Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (2002). Building a practically useful theory of goal setting and task motivation: A 35-year odyssey. *American Psychologist*, 57(9), 705–717.

doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.57.9.705

Links open the paper or its record. Findings are summarised for a leadership audience. Individual results vary, and this playbook is not a substitute for professional advice.



IF THIS LANDED

Bring this conversation to your stage.

The Power of Nothing is one of three signature keynotes Norliza delivers to leadership teams, conferences and corporate audiences worldwide.

CHECK AVAILABILITY

events@norliza.com

