

# Confidence

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March 11, 2009

*“The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today.”*

*April 12, 1945, Franklin Roosevelt’s final statement to the American people prior to his death.  
Prepared for the 1945 Jefferson Day Celebration (Undelivered)*

The financial downdrafts of the last six months have battered design professionals and their firms along with the rest of the economy. Markets have disappeared. Clients have gone out of business or significantly cut back operations. Projects have been put on hold or terminated. And financial credit has been cut or restricted. Worse, these problems have been layered on top of an already challenging industry environment where fundamental project delivery and business models have been called into question.

Uncertainty is increasing. How much farther could we slide? Are we close to the bottom? When will the economy start to recover? How robust will that recovery be? What will our world look like when we emerge from this downturn? And, in the meantime, what should firms do?

The temptation is to hunker down, husband our resources, and wait to see what happens. We could make the case that design professionals, like everyone else, are victims of the downturn, blame circumstances for our situation, and wait for someone else to solve the problem for us. Unfortunately, that posture almost certainly makes matters worse. In fact, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in her recent book *Confidence: How Winning Streaks And Losing Streaks Begin And End*, suggests that such actions are often hallmarks of teams or organizations taking the first turn into often-irreversible death spirals.<sup>i</sup>

But there is another path. According to Kanter, winning teams act with confidence in the face of adversity. They take responsibility and own all their results, learn from setbacks, share information, and maintain the disciplined practices that were at the heart of previous successes. They strengthen relationships and emphasize collaboration. And, winning teams promote initiative-taking by reassuring people that what they do can make a real difference, and that they have what it takes to stay the course under pressure.

As my colleague David Aitken notes, “Beliefs drive behavior.” With confidence, defined as a sense of optimism, self-assurance, courage and calm determination, winning teams can -- and do -- rise above difficult circumstances and behave in ways that perpetuate their success.

At this time of crisis, as we struggle to regain our footing, it is vital for design professionals to act with confidence, not only for the benefit of their firms, but also for the benefit of society. Design professionals are uniquely suited to play a key leadership role in the recovery, mobilizing people to face and tackle a set of significant adaptive challenges.

This is our time.

The recent Federal stimulus plan funds significant new efforts to develop renewable energy sources and to rebuild infrastructure. However, the funding in each of these areas is only a partial step toward solving the deeper mega-problems within which they are nested.

- The \$94 billion stimulus budget for green energy is only a fraction of the funding necessary to make renewable energy sources a significant factor in our energy portfolio. We also know that renewable energy is only one aspect of a much larger sustainability challenge and that the highest leverage opportunities will be found within the context of the whole system, not by sub-optimizing around the parts.

- The roughly \$100 billion of spending on infrastructure is, again, only a down payment on an infrastructure deficit that is rapidly approaching \$2 trillion. Beyond that, this budget will barely move the gage measuring progress toward building a 21<sup>st</sup> century infrastructure<sup>ii</sup> essential to support the U.S. economy in an increasingly competitive world.

Solving these mega-problems demands initiative, innovative thinking, and leadership beyond the federal stimulus. These are the entrepreneurial qualities that the legendary engineers, architects, and landscape architects exhibited when presented with the blank canvas of a young America waiting to rise at the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The canals and waterworks, the railroads and bridges, the parks and skyscrapers – wonders unheard of previously -- rose in the wake of their energy and vision. We stand again at such a moment in history.

If we believe in ourselves and the value that we offer as stewards of our professional domains we will move forward, in the face of these challenges. Design professionals can provide more bang for each buck spent by transforming project delivery processes. They can expand funds available by bringing new private financing to the table. Professionals can pioneer the next generations of green building and infrastructure designs. Engineers and architects can co-develop, with manufacturers, new materials and pre-fabrication methods that both lower project costs and reduce carbon footprints. And, designers can create new solutions that make quantum leaps forward in the quality and performance of energy technologies, buildings, and infrastructure. In fact, professionals are already active in many of these areas.

The green economy promises to be the “mother of all markets” according to Thomas Friedman in his recent book, *Flat, Hot, And Crowded*. Add to that the scope and scale of work involved with creating a 21<sup>st</sup> Century infrastructure for a sustainable future, and opportunities for entrepreneurial initiative become practically unlimited.

It is time to choose. Will design professionals give in to what has become a dependent mindset, wait for government to award us our share of the stimulus package, and leave it to someone else to lead us out of our difficulties? Or, will we seize the mantle of leadership and act with vision, confidence, and an entrepreneurial spirit? If we choose to lead, we can create substantial value for society and cement a more robust future for our firms and professions. Moreover, this leadership will also model, for the larger public, the beliefs and behaviors central to reversing the current downward economic spiral.

*I would appreciate your feedback about this essay. Please send your thoughts or comments to: [kyle@kylevdavy.com](mailto:kyle@kylevdavy.com)*

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<sup>i</sup> Rosabeth Moss Kanter's book, *Confidence: How Winning Streaks And Losing Streaks Begin And End* documents her findings from a study of winning and losing sports teams and business organizations. It is a richly illustrated resource leaders can use to guide their actions either maintaining winning streak or reversing a slide into losing.

<sup>ii</sup> Here I would define infrastructure broadly to not only include transportation and utilities, but also schools, institutional facilities, other forms of urban and green infrastructure.