



Managing Yourself



# Overcoming Your Need for Constant Validation at Work

How to strike the right balance between trusting yourself and considering what others think. **by Melody Wilding**

# Overcoming Your Need for Constant Validation at Work

How to strike the right balance between trusting yourself and considering what others think. **by Melody Wilding**

Published on HBR.org / December 08, 2023 / Reprint [H07XD0](#)



DNY59/Getty Images

**My client Simon had earned a reputation** as a kind, collaborative leader that others loved to be around. He was the type who took the time to ask how your family was doing, to check in and make sure your team wasn't overburdened, and to provide mentorship during challenging situations. Employees, regardless of their rank, found Simon easy to talk to and felt that he genuinely cared about their opinions — unlike other directors at the company.

But beneath the personable veneer, Simon grappled with a deep-seated need for approval. For instance, when he'd propose ideas during meetings, instead of confidently driving them forward, Simon would immediately look around the room, gauging reactions. Each nod from a colleague was an affirmation, but a neutral expression or a slight frown was enough to send him into a spiral of doubt. Even when Simon had every reason to trust his expertise, he hesitated to finalize anything without consensus from every single cross-functional partner. While this was framed as seeking input, in reality, it was a search for reassurance, which often delayed decisions for weeks, sometimes months.

The turning point came during a 360-degree feedback session where it was brought to Simon's attention that his hesitancy to provide direct feedback or address issues head-on (for fear of upsetting someone or coming across as harsh) had led to a lack of clear direction and boundaries within his team. While others appreciated Simon's kindness, they craved more decisive leadership. It was a tough pill to swallow, realizing that his well-intentioned efforts were now hampering his effectiveness and the team's success.

As an executive coach to leaders who are more sensitive to others' needs (who I call Sensitive Strivers), I've worked with countless leaders like Simon, whose excessive need for approval and validation hurts them, their teams, and their organizations more broadly. Let me be clear: wanting to feel accepted and valued by others is a natural and healthy desire no matter your rank or title. But when your decision-making, self-esteem, and overall sense of worth become overly dependent on others' perceived opinions — or when you've started compromising your own values and integrity just to gain approval (or avoid disapproval) — things have gone too far.

So how do you strike that “just right” balance of trusting yourself while considering others? Here are some ways to unhook yourself from proverbial gold stars and A-pluses.

### **Do a gut check.**

Amid the busyness of day-to-day work, your responses can become habitual, especially under stress or pressure. A gut check serves as a pause — a pattern interrupter to analyze whether your automatic responses are truly reflective of what’s best for the team and organization, rather than on a desire to be liked. This introspection also helps differentiate between internal drivers (like personal values, ethics, or genuine interest) and external drivers (like the desire for praise, fear of negative judgment, or the need to fit in). Plus, a gut check balances impulses with rational thought. It’s a way of ensuring that your fears don’t overshadow logic and long-term thinking.

The next time you’re faced with a choice, ask yourself: “Am I doing this because I believe it’s the right course of action, or because I want to be seen a certain way?” This can help you differentiate between a genuine desire for humility, diligence, or inclusivity and an excessive need for validation. You can also try deliberately playing devil’s advocate with yourself. Challenge your assumptions by arguing against your own beliefs or decisions as if you were an external critic.

### **Formulate your own opinions first.**

It’s easy to be swayed or influenced by others if you’re not fully anchored in your own viewpoint. You might find yourself agreeing with the most persuasive person in the room, not because you genuinely concur, but because you want to be seen as a team player. So before a meeting or important discussion, dive into the relevant information, mull it over, and come to your own conclusions. Avoid reading others’

feedback or consulting them until you've arrived at your own thoughts on the matter.

Forming your own opinion first isn't about being rigid or stubborn, but rather having clarity about your own convictions. Acknowledging that your viewpoint has merit and is grounded in your unique experiences and knowledge provides a form of self-validation that can reduce the need for external approval. It also allows you to thoughtfully — and consciously — shift your stance based on new information and not on which way the winds of approval happen to be blowing.

### **Try the “so what?” test.**

If you find yourself hesitating over what others will think, challenge your fears head-on with the “so what?” test:

- So what if this decision isn't universally popular?
- So what if it doesn't meet every expectation?
- So what if I have to change course later?

The simple exercise forces you to zoom out and view situations with a more balanced perspective. It shifts your focus from trying to please everyone to what's genuinely important — making authentic, value-driven choices.

Most of the time, you'll find that the worst-case scenarios dreamed up in your head are exaggerated or unfounded. You'll also begin to realize that rejection and setbacks are part of the leadership journey, rather than an indictment on your capabilities. The goal is to shift from avoiding disapproval to learning and growing from it.

### **Give it 24 hours.**

When Simon, the client whose story I described earlier, announced a change that was met with mixed emotions, his first instinct was to run to the executive team and get their approval that he had done the right thing. Instead of acting on impulse, he decided to sleep on it before making any further moves. This waiting period gave him time to calm down and separate constructive criticism from resistance to change.

You can also make it a rule to wait 24 hours before responding to contentious or charged issues. With time, you gain perspective and allow your emotions to settle so you can respond more thoughtfully. Often, you'll find that the immediate need to seek approval or make rapid changes has diminished. If the urge to seek immediate approval is strong, consult with a trusted mentor or peer during this period — but do so to gain perspective, not just to seek validation.

### **Keep promises you make to yourself.**

Keeping small promises you make to yourself — like honoring your basic needs or speaking up when you have an idea — builds self-trust, which, over the long-run, will make you less reliant on external validation. Every time you say you'll do something for yourself and you follow through, you reinforce the belief in your reliability and integrity, which is key to making confident decisions and standing by them.

Start with small, achievable promises. This could be as simple as taking a lunch break to recharge or dedicating time to professional development. The key is to choose commitments that are meaningful-yet-doable given your current bandwidth. If you fail to keep a promise, treat it as data to adjust your approach instead of responding with harsh self-criticism.



Letting go of the need for constant approval at work doesn't mean you have to close off your big heart and stop caring. In fact, the most effective leaders are those who balance empathy and decisiveness, conviction and compassion, and warmth and strength.

*This article was originally published online on December 08, 2023.*



**Melody Wilding**, LMSW is an [executive coach](#) and author of [Trust Yourself: Stop Overthinking and Channel Your Emotions for Success at Work](#). Get a free copy of Chapter One [here](#).