

SUCCESS COMES FROM AFFIRMING YOUR POTENTIAL

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ARTWORK FROM LEFT: Max Sansing, "A Constant Reminder," 2018;
"Right," 2016

When you see how underrepresented African-Americans are in current leadership roles, it can be easy to get discouraged about their prospects for leadership advancement. Despite a rise in the number of black college and university graduates, just 8% of managers and under 4% of CEOs are black. In the Fortune 500 companies there are currently only three black chief executives, down from a high of 12 in 2002.

We, however, are not discouraged. In the course of our research, we have met myriad African-American leaders who, despite being underestimated, underappreciated, and underresourced, have prospered and achieved

incredible success. How do they do it?

Our research suggests that success in the face of systemic discrimination often begins with affirming one's own potential. When people believe in their ability to grow, they make decisions that reflect this conviction, such as investing in their potential, focusing on their unique strengths, and discovering new paths to success and fulfillment that align with their core values and leadership goals.

Here, we offer a set of self-affirmations developed from interviews and surveys we have conducted with African-American professionals, as well as from our analysis of research on black leadership and career paths. The practice of self-affirmation has broad benefits, not just in helping people to develop a healthy self-identity but also to limit the detrimental effects of identity threats like negative stereotyping and overt discrimination. For this Big Idea project, we created self-affirmations to use as an antidote to the unique struggles too many African-Americans face in a number of situations: when they have their leadership authority or expertise questioned; when they struggle to represent their most authentic self; or when they want to clear pathways for others to make racial progress. We tested these affirmations for validity among a group of approximately 150 African-American professionals across all career stages and found that they indeed reflected people's experiences, fears, and successes. We also asked HBR readers to share which affirmations most resonate with their work experiences (a selection of responses is captured in the video below).



▶ **PLAY** 1:45

We hope you'll draw on these affirmations as a reminder of your extraordinary potential, particularly in those moments in which you find your leadership authority challenged by others, when you've begun to doubt your ability to advance, or when you wonder whether the trade-offs have been worth it. We hope they will propel you to lead and contribute in uniquely valuable ways to your workplace, industry, and community.

BLACK LEADERSHIP SELF-AFFIRMATIONS

Ideally, you will begin to develop your leadership vision early in your career, sometimes even before your first job. At this stage, you are responsible for building the core capabilities that will help you grow in the future. Here are some affirmations that can help.

In the early stage of my career, I envision myself becoming a leader.

- I build a robust sense of self that strengthens me.
- I critically question and reject negative stereotypes and society's lowered expectations of black leaders.
- I embrace my unique strengths and cultural resources. I bring new perspectives and ideas that have value and are specific to my experience.
- Like everyone else, I will fail sometimes. This is not because of my race, and my failures do not reflect on my race as a whole. Because I understand this, I use every failure as an opportunity to learn, grow, and develop my resiliency.
- The workplace is not perfect, and neither are my colleagues. At times, I experience painful bias, but I do not let these microaggressions limit my career. Instead of shutting down or quitting, I choose to seek the support of my colleagues in making my workplace more inclusive.
- I develop the credibility, networks, and capabilities to thrive by aligning my skills and my cultural resources — my connections and my background — with strategic opportunities for my company and career.

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The middle part of your career is important for expanding your expertise beyond your areas of specialization and gaining visibility to assume leadership roles. We hope that you have already experienced some success as an individual contributor and can shift your attention from yourself to your expanding leadership capabilities. During this stage, you may question the “why” (your purpose and desired impact), the “what”

(your cultural, value, and skill-based fit), and the “how” (your tactics) for leadership development and advancement. Here are some affirmations that can help.

In the middle stage of my career, I am positioned to grow into greater leadership roles.

- I recognize that as my core strengths and talents increase, I can be a stronger contributor in my organization. I draw on these attributes to position myself for increased responsibility and greater visibility and impact.
- I proactively cultivate vibrant networks — both existing and new — in which my peers and mentors support my growth. I know I can't necessarily rely on existing networks to provide me with everything I need to grow and develop; too often, marginalized people are excluded from these places. While I do participate in existing networks if possible, I also construct my own spaces where I can draw support while I learn and grow.
- Sometimes, even when I am in a position of authority, my authority is challenged or contested. I choose to not let this make me feel less secure in my leadership. I learn from feedback and others' perceptions, but I do not let them limit my leadership potential.
- When the path forward isn't obvious, I carve my own path. I have deep ingenuity and know I am capable of building inclusive and high-performing organizations in which I can flourish.
- At times I question whether I have to choose between my career success and my authentic self. I want to be able to wear my hair and clothes in a manner that I feel is professionally authentic, discuss my personal interests and commitments with my colleagues and supervisors, and honor my

unique background and experiences. For the sake of my health, I make choices that promote my ability to be authentic at work — whether that is expressing myself through my appearance or my language — and I am accountable for those decisions. This is the paradox of authenticity. I embrace this with courage.

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In the late stage of your career, you may shift your focus from personal development to developing others. You have achieved a considerable measure of success in certain areas, and these affirmations can help you consider how to maximize your impact.

In the late stage of my career, I use my leadership, power, and influence for good.

- I face the same challenges as other leaders when it comes to fighting biases, ethical breaches, and abuses of power. At the same time, because of my race, I am held to higher standards and face greater scrutiny. I continue to uphold my integrity by being mindful of my decisions about how I lead, and I use my powers to uplift others.
- My power and influence give me the opportunity to design and implement more inclusive leadership practices, regardless of my job title or formal responsibilities. I use this opportunity to clear the pathway to leadership for others.
- I willingly pass on experience, knowledge, and credibility to expand

opportunities for the rising generation. In so doing, my legacy is strengthened.

- I seek out people on the margins of the organization and find more ways to both include them in conversations and bring their names to meetings in which they might not otherwise have been mentioned. It is my personal responsibility to make open, public commitments to developing these future leaders.

FINDING THE SPACE TO SUPPORT YOUR GROWTH

The work outlined above is designed to help aspiring and accomplished black leaders navigate their experiences in the workplace. Many of the affirmations are about shaping the context of your career and responding strategically to bias, microaggressions, and authenticity struggles. This is hard work.

Here is our final affirmation for black leaders across all career stages.

I find space — space to be nourished, space to explore, and space to flourish.

Even if you have access and opportunity, you are still facing systemic challenges in the workforce. The advancement of black men and women in senior leadership positions is stagnating. Today there are only three black CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, compared to the peak of 12 in 2002. And not one is a woman. It's easy to understand, then, why black MBAs are generally less satisfied in their careers than their nonblack

counterparts. We say this starkly because it underlines why space is so important: There are many places where the soil for professional growth is rocky rather than fertile.

When this happens, it is important to seek physical spaces that are conducive to your growth, including at historically black colleges and universities, race-inclusive leadership development programs, black churches and civic engagement organizations, and same-race peer-mentoring programs.

These spaces may be difficult to find. But your commitment to invest in your own growth and development can help guide you to supportive opportunities to learn, fail, try again, and grow stronger.

Even in places where the soil is rocky, remember that it is not your responsibility to grow there. People of all races across your organization are responsible for improving the environment. Look for people who are forging cross-race alliances, providing significant line or general management experiences, creating opportunities for global assignments, or enabling mentorship and sponsorship that provide candid feedback and positioning.

This last affirmation is extremely important: While our model puts you — the leader — at the center, we don't want you to feel alone in the weight of what you want to accomplish. Across the country, there are millions of us working alongside you, because we, too, believe in our collective

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