

Confidence to succeed - assertiveness for women

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1. Gender Stereotypes and how they may impact

Women “Take Care,” Men “Take Charge.”

This starts from early years, the images girls see in books, TV and movies. “See Jane” research has shown 18.5% women in cartoons had a job whereas 80% of the men did.

A study in 2016 showed that within the NHS, 80% of the workforce are women but only 27% of Chairs or CEX of NHS trusts are women.

Heidi/Howard Roizen study from Harvard showed a direct correlation of likeability and how people would feel about working for this person. They liked the man but not the woman, even though they were exactly the same, other than a name.

Men overestimate and women underestimate their skills.

What can you do organisationally?

- More rigorous and transparent performance evaluation processes;
- Implementing a series of checks and balances to safeguard against stereotyping;
- Educating managers and executives about the often latent influence of stereotyping and about ways to override automatic tendencies to use stereotyping;
- Showcasing the achievements of women leaders, particularly those in traditionally male-dominated fields.

Women often have a smaller range of acceptable behaviours at work than men. If they are too nice, they are seen as weak or manipulative. If they are too aggressive, they are judged as acting like men or even referred to as bitches.

Think about what images are there within your organisation - look at your web site, the portraits hanging in reception.

2. How you help or hinder your performance

a. Prepare yourself for the voice that will try to stop you. If you know you're about to enter an uncomfortable situation be aware of your "I'm not good enough voice", that voice is waiting to hijack you. You'll be in a stronger position to stop it. Be aware the next time you sense self-doubt creeping in, and then exclude the voice. Do not allow it a say in the matter. Block out the "what ifs." Timothy Gallwey in the Inner Game of Work talks about "awareness is curative".

b. Don't wait for someone to invite you to get involved or share your thoughts. People who doubt themselves often expect an invitation to speak. If you have something to say, say it. Don't overthink it. You have as much right to speak as anyone else. Remind yourself that people will respect you more for sharing your thoughts.

c. Know how you look and sound. If you make use of your voice, facial expressions and hands it will make a huge difference to how you come across to people. You can project confidence by making some small adjustments. Being able to control how you look and sound will boost your confidence and encourage you to speak up.

d. Consider the worst case scenario. Think to yourself – "what's the worst that can happen?" Is it really going to be that bad? If you doubt yourself, your default position will be to expect the worst. Counteract this by trying to think of the last time something catastrophic happened as a result of you doing or saying something. It's unlikely you'll be able to recall such a catastrophe.

e. Stop past failures getting in your way. Squeeze what you can from any failures you've had and then set them aside. Bad memories are often the reason why you stop yourself doing things. You can't expel these experiences from your mind completely but with disciplined thinking, you should be able to put them to the back of your mind so that they don't interfere with your decision making. We are more programmed to recall the negative memories, so this can be challenging.

3. Language of influence and active listening

a. **Avoid using "qualifiers" in your speech** - words that minimise the strength of your message by apologising or minimising what you have to say.

"I'm really sorry. I'm not sure I'm totally comfortable with that. But maybe that's just me, or I don't fully understand it."

Here's the more assertive version of the same statement: *"I'm just not comfortable with that."*

Which one do you think sounds more assertive? Which version do you feel more comfortable using?

b. **Practice your assertiveness statements.** There is actually a formula for constructing an assertiveness statement, and it has three parts:

- 1) What you want them to change (*When you don't call on me during a meeting*)
- 2) How this behaviour affects you (*I never get a chance to speak*)
- 3) How you feel as a result (*I feel marginalised*)

So, putting it all together: "When you don't call on me during a meeting, I never get a chance to speak, and I feel marginalised." Or here's another example: "When you arrive late, I have to wait, and I feel frustrated."

Try it out for yourself, ideally looking the person in the eye, and with a firm, but pleasant tone. You'll be surprised at how quickly you can develop your own assertiveness statement.

c. **Remind yourself why you're justified in acting assertively.** For those of us who are shy, timid, and indirect with our communication, it can be extremely difficult to be assertive. We might consider doing it, and then back down - or only go half way because of how uncomfortable it feels. But remember that being assertive is fully legitimate.

Speak in headlines. When sharing an idea or expressing your thoughts, try to think of the headline you want to communicate in advance and stick to that when relaying your message. This little trick will help you to share your thoughts concisely and clearly, without rambling. It also helps you to make your point with more assertion. Another important point to remember is to be careful not to end a statement with a questioning tone, as that comes across as you having doubt in what you're communicating.

Active Listening Tips

1. **Body language speaks volumes.** Maintain good posture and keep eye contact with whoever you're communicating with as it exudes an overall feeling of confidence both in what you are saying and the person that you are.

2. **Be present.** Being physically there doesn't always mean you're present and in the moment. Demonstrate that you're completely in the moment by fearlessly listening, acknowledging cues in a conversation, and asking for clarification when you need it. Don't be afraid to ask questions. It shows you're unafraid to both acknowledge you didn't understand something and get the insight you need.
3. **Say sorry.** There's nothing that exudes more confidence than being honest in your mistakes or mishaps. Acknowledging when you've made a mistake demonstrates your self-assurance and your willingness to learn from it.
4. **Welcome the uncomfortable.** Don't skirt around issues — address difficult conversations head on and don't misdirect blame. Being real and down-to-earth in how you confront an issue will lead to a lot of supporters and is a true demonstration of self-assurance.

4. How to ensure you are heard

a. **Make sure you are invited.** Ensure that you're in attendance to the important meetings that involve you, your department, and your job — just being there is often half the battle. If you're being excluded from meetings, then take it up with the organisers or whoever is in charge and make your voice heard. Be clear with your requests, but always do it in a professional manner. If you're still being unheard and ignored, then it may be an issue that needs to be taken up more formally.

b. **Be prepared.** As with many things in life, preparation is key. Knowing who will be in attendance, what will be discussed, and what is the expected outcome for each meeting will help you start on the right foot. If you have time before an important meeting, consider having a pre-meeting to go over some of your talking points with a couple of trusted colleagues. It's also a good idea to jot down your questions, concerns, talking points, etc. before heading into the meeting so that you don't forget them once the meeting and opinions have commenced.

c. **Don't be afraid to chime in (interrupt).** If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Just because you're at a meeting and speaking, doesn't necessarily mean you're being heard. If you feel as though you're being overlooked or not heard, then don't be afraid to voice your opinion a second or third time. It helps to have someone at the meeting who is willing to support you and acknowledge and validate your input. Be confident, not defensive, with your input.

Even if you have to fake it to make it, being confident enough to “lean in” at meetings and speak up will have a huge impact for you. Don't get defensive if you're ignored or shunned for lending your opinions, because these things happen, regardless if you're male or female. If you have to present your input from a different angle, then take a few minutes to strategise and deliver - always be confident and persistent, and never be defensive.

Think about the amplification strategy that the Obama White House female staffers implemented - When a woman made a key point, other women would repeat it, giving credit to its author. This forced the men in the room to recognise the contribution — and denied them the chance to claim the idea as their own. In Obama's second term, the gender split amongst his top aides became much more even and half of the departments in the White House were headed by women.

d. **Speak Strongly** Sometimes your tone of voice can discourage interruptions in the first place. Notice your tone and avoid those tentative-sounding words and phrases, and don't let your voice drop toward the end of your sentences. The idea is to send a message to your listeners that what you're saying is important and deserves their attention.

e. **Don't take interruptions personally**

Yes, getting interrupted is rude and but even while you acknowledge that, try not to take those interjections personally – or at least try not to show you do. Stay

composed and professional when you pick up your train of thought. Be assertive and stay focused on your message.

f. Keep Talking Don't give way when you're interrupted. You can keep talking, and intensify your voice if you have to, creating a virtual voiceover effect. That may feel impolite – but remember that you're not talking over them, they're talking over you. Since you were already speaking when the interrupter jumped in, you have the conversational "right of way." So go ahead and finish your thought. Whoever interrupted you needs to know you have the strength to carry on. And others in the room will be more likely to respect you for it.

g. Say you would like to finish If you find the other person just keeps talking over you, pause and say you'd like to finish. Calmly interject, "*Ken, I wasn't quite finished*" or try a firm, "*Hold on.*" You might even raise your hand, palm facing the interrupter, to show you'd like them to wait their turn.

You can do all that respectfully without apologising; don't say, "*I'm sorry, but I'd like to finish*" or even "*please let me finish*" – which gives the subtle impression that you're asking permission. The words may sound sharp in your head, but if you use the right tone, you'll come across authoritative but unruffled. You can even memorise the phrase you like best to keep on hand for these situations.

h. Stay in the conversation Let's say, despite your best efforts, your interrupter claims the stage. Once that person finishes, come back into the discussion and show you're still on top of it. Comment on the other person's views, expand upon them, and make it clear you're a team player, no matter what behaviour others display. You want to show that you haven't been affected by the interruption. Instead, you're actually building upon the interruption, taking it into account in order to push the conversation forward. Interruptions are unpleasant and can be damaging, particularly for professional women. But in the process of discouraging them, you can use those occasions to shine.

5. Assertive Delivery of Feedback

Why we avoid feedback

- Fear that it will harm the working relationship
- Not making the time to prepare and deliver great feedback

Common feedback mistakes

- Wrong frame of mind
- Focus on the past, not the future – ‘why did you do that?’
- Failing to explain why the behaviour matters

Four steps to great feedback with E2C2

E for Evidence – what has the person done?

E for Effect – what are the effects on you, them or the organisation?

C for Continue – what do you want them to continue doing?

C for Change – what do you want them to change? Make sure people commit to doing the right things

Continuing the feedback conversation

1. Do you **agree**?
2. What needs to **happen** for you to be able to do this?

Have a discussion to identify the reasons why the person is under performing. Is it:

- Lack of skill
- Lack of motivation
- Lack of clarity about objectives
- Lack of resources
- Personal or health issues

3. What **action** are you going to take?

Make sure you get the other person to say what they are going to do. It's not enough for you to summarise the discussion. Depending on the issue, it may be useful to make an informal written record too.

6. Goal setting so your people are completely clear what is expected of them

Use OPERA to agree clear objectives

Objective

What is your objective?

Parameters

How would you know that you had achieved this objective?

Effects

Why is this a worthwhile objective? How does this relate to the overall purpose of the team, department, organisation? What are the consequences of failure?

Resources

What resources do you need to achieve this objective?

- Money, information, equipment, access to people, skills
- Time

Accountability

By when will you have achieved this objective?

Any milestones along the way?

To whom are you accountable for the achievement of this objective?

You can use OPERA to delegate specific tasks, to clarify bigger projects, or simply to clarify what you expect the person to do.

You can also use OPERA to challenge people who give you work, by asking them about parameters, effects, resources and accountability.

7. Staying positive in challenging situations

Sometimes you feel like you're in over your head. Perhaps you got a big promotion or are leading a new, high-profile initiative but you worry that you don't have the right skills or experience to succeed. Are there strategies you can use to jolt your confidence? How do you "fake it 'til you make it"? And are there risks to that approach?

What the Experts Say

Feeling anxious about a new professional challenge is natural. In fact, imposter syndrome — the creeping fear that others will discover you aren't as capable, or creative as they think you are — is very common. Most people feel like a fraud from time to time, Amy J.C. Cuddy, a professor at Harvard Business School and the author of *Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges* has studied what you can do about it.

Her findings suggest the key to developing yourself is "to trick yourself out of the state of self-doubt." Faking it 'til you make it is not about pretending to have skills you don't, it's about pretending to yourself that you're confident so you can work hard and get the job done. Your challenge is to work out how you come across as credible, how you convey your competency to others, and how you communicate your ideas in an authentic way.

Here are some ways to go about it.

Frame it as an opportunity The more you focus on what's scary about the new team you're leading or the project you're steering, the more intimidated you'll feel. Instead, "frame the challenge not as a threat but as an opportunity to do something new and different. "Don't think, 'Oh no, I feel anxious.' Think, 'This is exciting.'"

Think incrementally Rather than setting a grand objective, make small, incremental improvements in your performance. Think of these steps as "the opposite of a New Year's resolution," she says. For instance, you might say to yourself, "In today's meeting, I'm going to make sure everyone on the team feels heard." Or, "At this networking session, I am going to make two new connections."

Watch and learn When you're developing your personal management style, you should observe how others lead. Watch how these people influence others, use humour, and come across as charismatic and self-assured. Also take note of their verbal tactics — when they use silence, how they pose questions, and how they intervene. Pay attention and then try to emulate what they are doing in a way that is authentic to you.

Be bold in your body language One surefire way to come across as self-confident when you're feeling insecure is to use "body language that makes you feel bold and victorious," says Cuddy. Your aim is to make "yourself feel more powerful psychologically." Take long strides. Sit up straight. Walk with your chest

held high. And don't slouch. When you "carry yourself in a way that conveys power, poise, and healthy pride," you feel more self-assured and others perceive you that way. "You feel less guarded, more optimistic, more focused on goals, and more likely to take a stand," she says.

Heed red flags If you're so overwhelmed that every day nearly brings on a panic attack, faking it may be inadvisable. The goal is to step outside of your comfort zone, not to set yourself up for failure or a breakdown. So if you have deep-seated concerns that the challenge you're being presented with is too much too soon, or is unrealistic given the time frame and resources at your disposal, it's important to speak up.

Principles to Remember

DO:

- Create goals based on making small, incremental improvements in your performance.
- Jolt your confidence with bold and expansive body language.
- Observe how your role models comport themselves in various professional situations. Seek ways to incorporate their strategies and tactics into your leadership repertoire.

DON'T:

- Beat yourself up for feeling like an imposter — feeling nervous about a professional challenge is natural.
- Be overly daunted or scared by the challenge at hand. Consider it an opportunity to do something new and different.
- Fake confidence if you have legitimate concerns that the challenge you're being asked to take on is not feasible. If it's too much, say so.

According to Cuddy, all it takes is 2 minutes to change your thoughts by moving your body. When you stand or sit confidently, you have an open stance, shoulders back, chin up, and good eye contact with your audience. If you do this for 2 minutes, you will become more confident. Smiling for 2 minutes makes you happier, even holding a pen sideways in your teeth can make you happier, more confident. People who feign confidence and self-esteem begin feeling better about themselves with this simple strategy.