

Mind your CONFIDENCE GAP



Almost all of us have something we don't feel confident about – whether it's going for a promotion or public speaking. And each pinprick of low self-esteem holds us back, especially in the workplace. Women have the education and ability to shatter the glass ceiling – so why do most senior positions at work still go to men? It's bad for women and the economy, as companies miss out on 50% of the UK's business talent. Writer Linda Kelsey reveals how she found the chutzpah to succeed – and, with our expert advice, so can you

When I was a girl I excelled at school, passing my 11-plus at the age of nine and going to university when I'd just turned 17. You might assume I was a confident kid, possibly scoring high on the precocious/obnoxious scale. The fact that, by the time I was 32, I was editor of *Cosmopolitan*, the most famous and successful young women's magazine of its day, would probably confirm that notion. But you would be so, so wrong.

Just ask my teachers, my parents or my peers. For although I achieved results, I might have won the award for the girl least likely to succeed. I never put up my hand in class. If a teacher picked on me to

answer a question, I would flush bright red and could barely get a word out as the boys guffawed. I genuinely believed I would fail every exam I ever took. When, in my early days in journalism, I was sent to do an interview for the first time, I got so tongue-tied that the much-older-actress concerned told me off and declared that if I didn't get on with asking her some questions she was going to end the interview.

What got me through – and propelled me to the top of my profession – was masses of hard work, some wonderful women bosses who recognised and rewarded my talents, and a slow-growing realisation that not only did I have opinions and ideas, but they counted for something. I discovered a quiet determination to overcome self-doubt by taking on whatever challenges were put



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my way, despite the anxiety and sleepless nights. I did not start out with confidence, but slowly, very slowly, I acquired it.

When I meet educated young women today, they seem incredibly confident and articulate compared to how I felt back then. They outperform boys at school, and female undergraduate numbers are growing at a faster rate than male university students – yet there remains a huge disparity in overall levels of male and female confidence. Women are not getting to the very top in anything like the numbers that their early academic attainments might predict.

Despite the huge advances that have been made in the workplace, research suggests that women today are impeded by the very same stumbling blocks that I slowly overcame – obstacles that now, as then, trouble men far less. It starts in the playground, with girls hanging back to let the more confident boys have a go on the slide first, and ends up in work meetings with the men hogging the limelight while the women politely wait their turn.

If confidence is the belief in your ability to succeed, a lack of confidence, conversely, will hold you back from even trying. I realised early on that in order to succeed you have to act – to do something and to be seen to be doing something. So at work I volunteered to take on tasks I wasn't sure I could satisfactorily complete – I never said no.

For example, at one point my boss, knowing I'd been to Italian evening classes, suggested I go to Milan for a few days each month as adviser on the launch of the Italian edition of the magazine. I said I'd love to, although I did not mention that my Italian stretched no further than ordering a tricolore salad and a bottle of Frascati in my local trattoria. Because I said yes, and went, I discovered that my Italian colleagues spoke far better English than I did Italian, so I could advise them without difficulty. If I'd admitted how pathetic my Italian really was I'd never have got the opportunity to prove myself. Women tend to under rather than over-estimate their skills and preparedness to do a job. I took a risk; it paid off.

Public speaking of any sort was – and remains – a cause for high anxiety for me. But whether you're involved in the PTA or running your own business, today it's a vital skill. When I was in my late 20s, I had to be interviewed live on radio about an issue relating to a story in the magazine

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I was working on. 'So what are you going to say?' asked my boyfriend at the time, a successful and super-confident barrister. 'I've no idea,' I replied, 'because I don't know what they're going to ask and I'm so nervous I'm trying to block it out of my mind.' He read me the riot act and told me that it was the equivalent of him going into court without having read his brief.

I rushed home and prepared what I was going to say, and rehearsed over and over how to weave my points into my answers even if they weren't a direct response to the questions asked. The performance fell short of Oscar-winning, but was better than I expected. I've been on radio and TV dozens of times since, made countless speeches and performed in public debates. Preparation doesn't give me super-confidence – I'm always nervous – but I have just enough confidence to know I won't make a complete fool of myself.

One of the things that really lets women down in the workplace – and betrays their lack of confidence – is their attitude to money. Feminism taught me that no equal pay act was going to resolve the disparities between male and female pay if women didn't step up and stop being embarrassed

to put a proper monetary value on their services. Early in my career, I heard that a particular company, offering a senior-ish job at a good salary, received no female applicants. So as an experiment it re-advertised the same job for less money and the female applicants poured in. This struck me with such force that I vowed

never to be a wimp about money again. There is nearly always room for negotiation. Not so much when you start out, perhaps, but as you climb the ladder you'll be left way behind the boys if you don't, like Oliver, dare to ask for more. The worst that can happen is you won't get it, but no one will lose their respect for you if you put up a good case. For several years, Professor Marilyn Davidson at the Manchester Business School has been asking her students what they expect to earn, and what they deserve to earn, five years after graduation.

On average, she reports, women come up with a figure

that's 20% less than the men. Asking for what you deserve is a measure of confidence. Getting what you deserve will bolster it still further.

I believe that, for women, confidence ebbs and flows throughout the life cycle. This is something that needs addressing. Academically confident girls who give up

sport and become focused on their appearance and body shape in adolescence begin to question their confidence in other areas. Motherhood and time away from the workplace can rob women of confidence in their ability to perform all their roles equally well. Aiming for perfect – rather than good enough – while juggling responsibilities, they end up believing they don't have the skills to progress at work, and transmit that lack of confidence to those in charge. If they work part time they see themselves as offering less and expect less, instead of having the confidence to explain the value and experience that they do offer. The menopause, with its concomitant emotional and physical side-effects, can sap confidence in all areas of a woman's life.

For me, with a few blips here and there, confidence has built slowly but surely over the six decades of my life. I am thrilled to discover I'm now more confident than I have ever been... at work, in the classroom (as a mature student), at social gatherings. Confidence needs to kick in earlier if women are to make it into the big league.

Many women experience what is known as 'impostor syndrome'. Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg said recently: 'There are still days I wake up feeling like a fraud, not sure I should be where I am.' But no one can be 100% confident 100% of the time. One big difference between confident women and confident men is that women are willing to admit to wobbling every now and then. In the brave new world of female confidence we're aiming for, I believe that's no bad thing.

'Asking for the pay you deserve is a measure of confidence. Getting what you deserve will bolster it still further'

FORGET THE GLASS CEILING...

... it's far more complex than that. A recent report referred to a glass obstacle course, rather than the traditional ceiling, with countless hoops women must jump through to secure senior positions. These are just some of them:

◆ Sexist cycle

The lack of female role models at senior levels exacerbates the perception among women that it's unlikely they will ever make it to the top. The UK is in the bottom five economies when it comes to female chief executives, with only

four in the whole list of FTSE 100 companies.

◆ Attainment vs potential

Research shows that, while men are promoted for their potential with their past mistakes overlooked, women are promoted for what they've already

achieved, and any imperfections on their CV won't be forgotten.

◆ Not as likely to give it a go

Men overestimate their ability while women underestimate theirs; women are therefore less likely even to attempt the task.

◆ Appearance vs ability

A survey by the Girl Guides Association found that 87% of young women felt they were judged on what they looked like, rather than what they can do.

◆ The brain

Many neurological

studies show that the shape of a woman's brain and the way hormones are excreted mean she is more likely to worry more, to be less emotionally resilient, to cling to negative experiences and to be less focused on winning and demonstrating power.



THE GH REPORT

YOUR CONFIDENCE BUILDING TOOL KIT



think about the current job, or one step ahead – they don't have a long-term goal. Men do. You can only get somewhere by knowing where you're going.'

7 Get a sponsor

'Women are over-mentored but under-sponsored – and there's a very important difference. A mentor might provide encouragement and advice, but a sponsor will speak up for you in public, put you forward for new opportunities, and stand by you. Research shows that half of women with a sponsor will ask for a

rise – and that, at a senior level, men are 50% more likely to have a sponsor than women. In the 1980s, I asked to meet with two men who subsequently became my sponsors – one of them was Tony Blair, and the other Gordon Brown.'

8 Move on

'Women tend to be more loyal to their organisations than men, but often, to get a more senior role, you have to move.'

9 Build emotional resilience

'Don't try to protect your daughters – when they fall over, they have to be able to pick themselves up and keep going. They need to know that talent isn't enough, because nothing comes on its own. And make sure they get a Summer job that boosts their confidence in dealing with people.'

10 Feel the fear, and refuse to give in

'However horrible it is to speak up, to be strong, it's much better than living in paralysing fear. Change happens because you make it happen. There is no natural evolution towards equality – you get equality because you fight for it, you stand up for it, and you make it happen.' □

CONFIDENCE = EMPOWERMENT!

Margaret McDonagh is a woman of the week on empowering.hearst.co.uk, as part of our parent company's new digital brand, Hearst Empowering Women. It's a new website that celebrates the lives, aspirations and achievements of British women, with inspirational stories, thought-provoking advice, and the opportunity to attend events relevant to your life.

The good news is this problem definitely has a solution. And luckily for us, Margaret McDonagh, the first female General Secretary of the Labour Party, has made it her mission to change things for us – and our daughters. If anyone can do it, she can: she was instrumental in winning two elections and managed to keep the male-dominated unions on-side. Now a life peer, she has founded a game-changing organisation called The Pipeline, which offers training to prepare women for executive leadership. She highlights 10 ways to boost your confidence – and your professional profile...

1 Speak up early

'If your fear is speaking up, force yourself to do it. If you make a bit of a mess of it, do it again. If you're going to a big meeting, plan to say something early on – don't wait until the end, because the fear will increase. And find a buddy you agree with – you can support his or her point, and he or she can speak up to support yours.'

2 Know yourself

'Don't just say: I'm not confident. There will be some areas of your life where you feel self-assured, and others less so, so make a list of all the skills you need, and rate your confidence level from one to 10. Where you get a low score, you can look for those qualities in your team. Remember: caution, which may be perceived as a lack of confidence, has been shown to be beneficial to organisations. Studies of hedge funds show that those run by women outperform those run by men. Perhaps if there were more women bankers, the credit crunch would have been a different story.'

3 Build your brand

'The latest expert thinking is that

developing your personal brand is key to moving up in an organisation. It's about how you stand, how you behave in meetings, how you manage your boss, and knowing what you do well. Women find it hard to define in themselves, and don't know they need to – but it is crucial.'

4 Ask for feedback

'New research shows that senior managers are much less likely to feed back to a woman – they might think, unreasonably, that she'll cry. Men are taken to one side for a quiet word and given the chance to learn from their mistakes. So just ask!'

5 Create your own opportunities

'It doesn't matter if you're not just starting out, you can still reinvent yourself. If you can't change jobs, start volunteering – become a magistrate or a school governor, teach kids sport, do an Open University degree – anything to build confidence.'

6 Think far ahead

'All the research shows that when young women start out, they tend only to