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What's holding women back? Crises of confidence in the workplace

By Danielle Littlejohn on 12/11/2023 | Updated on 20/11/2023



Photo by Mizuno K via Pexels

Research suggests that women often underestimate their abilities when men almost never do and that this lack of confidence can hold capable, talented women back from promotion. Public sector training expert Dani Littlejohn

explores women's confidence in the workplace, touching on imposter syndrome, gender bias, and the professional impact of childbirth

"According to a study by the National Bureau of Economic Research, close to 80% of women struggle with low self-esteem and shy away from self-advocacy at work. In other words, four in five women may be held back in their career advancement by a lack of confidence and visibility."

– Forbes Council post, 8 March 2022

As a professional woman, I have been aware of the conversation around female confidence at work and in asserting themselves, firstly in the meeting room and secondly for promotions, for a number of years. And about how they are out-shone, out-shouted or out-pitched by their male counterparts. In this article I wish to explore some of the literature I have found around this as well as some of my own experiences and observations.

I remember having a conversation with a friend of mine some 25 years ago. She was (and still is) a rare breed of high-level female executive who was looking to support and mentor women as they made their way in the banking world. She had unavoidably noticed the chasm between the sexes and the glass ceiling she felt she had fought against and rightly deemed it quite unnecessary and unfair.

She had told me that she was very clear from a reasonably young age that she was not looking to raise a family of her own, which, I remember thinking at the time, allowed her to run 'with the big boys' and was relatively unusual for the time.

Looking at the literature on this topic, Katty Kay and Claire Shipman assert in their article *The Confidence Gap* that in the US more women than men earn degrees and make up half the workforce. In the UK, women also make up half the workforce and there are more and more female managers on both sides of the pond. Yet few would deny there is still a glass ceiling and a lack of balance in the top leading roles.

Jane Benston comments on her web page *Find your place as a woman in leadership* that "Over and over again studies have found that men overestimate their abilities and performance, and women underestimate both... while their performance is of equal quality." And Jack Zenger refers to a study by Hewlett Packard, which found that women only applied for a promotion when they believed they met 100% of the qualifications listed for the job, whereas men were happy to apply when they thought they met 60% of the job requirements.

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Reading Zenger's *The Confidence Gap In Men And Women: Why It Matters And How To Overcome It* on the Forbes website, we are reminded of Amelia Earhart, who was one of the first female pilots and certainly one of the most notable. If we consider what made her stand out so much, she apparently took her first flight in December 1920 and decided then that she would be a pilot. She was not the first woman in aviation but was certainly the most written about, possibly because she came from wealth and so had the opportunity to become a pilot independently of war or comment. Aviation was, as were many professions at the time, a very male-dominated area, but

Eckhart had the confidence and courage to go after what she wanted, and the belief that she could achieve things even if perhaps, she could not. This is probably the key factor that stood her apart.

Imposter syndrome

Imposter syndrome is a well-documented fear that we are not worthy or not able to live up to our promises and expectations, and perhaps that previous successes were in part due to luck rather than to our personal abilities and professional competences, expertise and experience.

It is not that men do not suffer from this kind of crisis of confidence, but it is certainly far more common in women. Interestingly, Zenger Folkman's research shows that "as women's experience increases over time, so does their confidence". Indeed, he found that by the time women are in their 60s and beyond, female confidence appears to outstrip that of men. But while that may be both promising and interesting, it also vividly highlights the potential of significant lost opportunities in their early years, often because of fear and lack of confidence.

Furthermore, as Emily Hu points out, "[women are]... more likely to experience imposter syndrome if we don't see many examples of people who look like us or share our background who are clearly succeeding in our field". This means that the context of women not being in senior roles becomes self-reinforcing, due to the perception among other women that they do not have the right skills to succeed in this particular professional context, and they are therefore less likely to be able to do so.

There are a number of arguments one could make as to why this is the case, and I will explore some of these below.

Gender bias

There is certainly evidence of men feeling more confident, or giving the impression of it, when it comes to promotion, and at managers and employers (even female managers) seeing men as having higher potential despite performance rates, as can be seen in a video titled 'The Gender Promotion Gap' by Kelly Shue, professor of finance at Yale School of Finance. Shue comments that it seems as if women are held to a higher performance expectation as they rise up the ladder. And as far as wages go, women seem to have a lower representation and so more of a wage gap compared to men on this ascendance.

Younger women, as we frequently see from our knowledge of societies in the (all too recent) past, have, for various reasons, been easier to persuade, control and intimidate than men. This is reinforced by gender stereotypes which mean, for example, that the same language or behaviours used or exhibited by a man are received or described very differently to when exhibited by a woman. A competitive strain in a man is usually accepted as ambitious, while the same behaviour in a woman is often seen and described as back-stabbing and heartless.

The language used to describe a range of personality traits both in and outside work is also telling. When did you last hear of an extroverted man being described as "bubbly", for example? This is something that has been pointed out more and more frequently by celebrities in recent years, but we have just a few years ago, and in many cases, still is. The language that we use to describe traits in men and women at work and beyond reflects deeper prevailing attitudes, stereotypes and judgements.

Fear of women leaving for childbirth

Kelly Shue notes in her short video on the subject that, even if managers do worry that female employees may not offer the same longevity and dependability in roles, statistically women are more likely to stick with an organisation than men. I thought this statistic was rather interesting, especially as on the surface it may seem like a logical assumption that a higher proportion of women would leave their roles to start a family.

In reality, in most families, both partners need to work nowadays and so one might assume that extended maternity absence lasting for years would not be particularly common. Also, in many countries, there is much better provision of paternity rights than in the past, although these tend to be envisaged by policymakers as short term rather than longer term absences from work. But perceptions and subconscious biases can be very entrenched, so that even if figures show that women are more likely to stick with an employer than men, the attitude can still be prevalent that men are less likely to leave for whatever reason. (Men moving to outside roles more than women might also be an indication that they are more confident in applying for jobs externally, for reasons already touched on).

The impact of childbirth and returning to an organisation afterwards

This is more of a personal observation of female friends, colleagues and clients returning to work after maternity leave. Frequently, in these situations, I notice women tend to feel particularly incapable of slipping back into the work persona after months of 'baby and me'. They can themselves feel like imposters, be self-deprecating and feel challenged. Women returning to work in this situation can also often feel like they have been left behind and overtaken by the people they had been managing before they left. Anyone would acknowledge that it takes time to get back into the swing of things at work, but I have been struck by how emotionally challenging many women have found it. So, despite women moving back into their former roles and organisations, that does not make the return any easier or less frustrating.

The civil service and the public sector more widely have far better reputations than some sectors in the private realm for applying the spirit and letter of the law in terms of maternity support and rights. But the personal experience of returning can be very hard to deal with, without suffering a loss of confidence in a context in which you are already potentially in deficit.

Dani Littlejohn works as an associate trainer with Global Government Forum, presenting seminars on a range of personal development skills.

Global Government Forum is running the seminars Women into Leadership I and Women into Leadership II on 30 January and 20 February 2024 respectively.

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About Danielle Littlejohn

Danielle Littlejohn provides a range of professional development courses as part of Global Government Forum's training portfolio. Courses she runs include Delivering Results at Work – Essential Success Skills for New Managers, Creating and Growing a Productive Team – Interviewer Skills and Breaking Through the Glass Ceiling.



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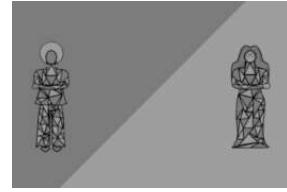


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