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Rachel Farley, "Female Leadership: How women overcome limiting thoughts and build self-confidence to propel themselves into leadership positions"

Female leadership:

How women overcome limiting thoughts and build the self-confidence to propel themselves into leadership positions

Rachel Farley

In 2011, the Institute of Leadership and Management in the UK conducted a survey in which they found that around half of the women in their study reported feelings of self-doubt about their performance and careers. Only one third of male subjects responded the same way.

My hypothesis is that there would be a higher level of female representation in senior management in UK organizations if women were coached to increase their self-confidence by identifying and overcoming their limiting thoughts. Whilst limited female representation in leadership is a result of many societal and organisation factors, women's self-confidence and limiting thoughts are the focus of this essay.

I have drawn on multiple sources, including observations from my 11 year career in executive search, working with my female coaching clients, interviews conducted with female leaders, and my personal experiences of limiting thoughts. This essay illustrates how women in leadership positions have managed their limiting thoughts, and provides coaching tools that can be utilised to improve self-confidence.

Self-confidence can be defined as a feeling of trust in one's abilities, qualities and judgment. These feelings encourage an individual to take the positive actions that are a prerequisite of successful outcomes. However, self-confidence can be eroded by limiting thought patterns. These can prevent women from taking risks, seeking new challenges, envisioning their careers and fulfilling their career potential.

The main thesis of *The Confidence Code* is that career success is correlated more closely with confidence than competence¹. The writers demonstrate that confidence is what psychologists call volitional², i.e. under our control. The best way of exercising this control is through personal development work such as coaching. Ideally, this coaching process starts early on in a woman's career, setting a strong foundation from which a woman can grow her self-confidence. Having a better understanding of typical limiting thoughts at a young age can help women mitigate them sooner. Tim Gallwey describes this as³ "the Inner Game, played against internal mental and emotional obstacles for the reward of knowledge and expression of one's true potential".

I have concluded from my research that the following limiting thoughts are the most prevalent in women: reduced expectations, dwelling on perceived failures, and reluctance in self-promotion. I shall illustrate these three themes with observations taken whilst coaching female clients.

Women's reduced expectations for their career

Women can hold a self-limiting vision of what is possible for their career. This leads to reduced levels of expectations for themselves compared with men, particularly with regard to financial

¹ *The Confidence Code: The Science and Art of Self Assurance – What Women Should Know* (2015) Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, Harper Collins.

² Volition or will is the cognitive process by which an individual decides on and commits to a particular course of action. It is defined as purposeful striving and is one of the primary human psychological functions.

³ W. Timothy Gallwey (1974/1986) *The Inner Game of Tennis*, Pan Books/Macmillan, London

compensation⁴. Two of my coaching clients, Hazel and Kimberley can identify with this.⁵

Hazel was promoted to MD UK after our third coaching session. The promotion was a total surprise. It was her boss that had recognised Hazel's potential and asked her to step into her new role. It made me reflect on our coaching sessions and wonder whether we could have gone further in pushing the boundaries of what she could achieve, rather than focussing purely on how she could optimise her existing position as divisional Director. What I do know is that Hazel felt that the coaching sessions had allowed her to open up her thinking and truly explore the right course of action. This was recognised by Hazel's boss who told me how quickly she was developing during the coaching.

Kim, another client of mine, had originally planned to work towards being a CEO. However, after four months of coaching work on her life purpose, Kim realised she had been holding back on her dreams and actually wanted to become an entrepreneur. Through the coaching she realised that her fear of public speaking had reduced her overall level of confidence. Since this time she has launched an app-based product that aids professional women in optimising their sleep and energy levels.

Dwelling on perceived career failures and future potential mistakes

Women can have a propensity to dwell on their own perceived failures and catastrophise about future scenarios. This can stop them from having the courage to take the career risks necessary to achieve their objectives. Jenny shared her experience of this.

Although Jenny held the position of European MD in a large pharmaceutical company, for many years she was haunted by voices saying she would fail. Over the years, through coaching and self-coaching, Jenny learnt to manage her limiting thoughts. Rather than letting them take over, she learnt to work with them, negotiating with them to find solutions that reduced her fear to move forwards. My interview with Jenny helped me develop Tool 2 (detailed below) which seeks to negotiate and interact with the voices, rather than ignoring or fighting with them.

Reluctance to ask for what they want

Women can be more reluctant than men to articulate key strengths and successes, and to ask for what they want. KPMG uncovered that 1 in 4 working women report that not asking for what they want held them back from advancing their career.⁶ This is a challenge Penelope experienced and overcame.

Penelope, a successful UK based Finance Director originally from a more conservative country, was reluctant to ask for what she wanted because to her, as a woman, it didn't seem acceptable. Over a period of months we worked together in a coaching partnership and she finally asked for a promotion. She mentioned that our coaching partnership had allowed her to realise that asking for something was 'ok', and she was comfortable with the possible failure that might follow. It emerged that there was a significant intercultural aspect to this situation. Penelope felt considerable uncertainty as to whether a woman being direct and asking for things would be considered appropriate and acceptable.

The next section presents three models selected from a set of ten that I have developed for

⁴ Research from a study by Dr Chris Dawson, Senior Lecturer in Business Economics, Bath University. "If low female expectations in terms of pay is fuelled by a pessimistic outlook, then even without discrimination and progression-related issues, women will continue to underestimate themselves and continue to inadvertently accept pay inequality."

⁵ All names have been changed.

⁶ KPMG's Women's Leadership Study, "Moving Women Forward into Leadership Roles", <https://home.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/ph/pdf/ThoughtLeadershipPublications/KPMGWomensLeadershipStudy.pdf>

professional women keen to build their self-confidence. They can be used in coaching sessions or for self-coaching. This online 'tool box' covers all angles of building self-confidence. The idea is that this tool box is constantly updated with new ideas, models and community support. Women can use these tools throughout their careers, providing them with on-going support.

Tool 1 – Finding a sponsor, mentor or coach

It is clear from my research that working with a sponsor, mentor or coach can help women envision how 'big' their career can be. They need to work with a partner to explore what 'big' means to them, and how they can drive their career to achieve this vision.

Tool 2 – Working with Self 1 and Self 2

As Tim Gallwey shared in *The Inner Game of Tennis*, it is important to become comfortable with the two dimensions of self; Self 1 being the critical voice ('Gremlin') and Self 2 being the real self that is not held back by self-doubt. Becoming more familiar with the Gremlin and understanding what gives it the licence to be there is essential. From there it is possible to mitigate its negative effects. As Dr Steve Peter notes in *The Chimp Paradox*, "If you can recognize these Gremlins then you can remove them." Self 2 can then take over and allow the individual to live life to its full potential.

Tool 3 - Career visualisation

Working with a coach using visualisation and NLP allows one to envisage what you would be feeling, doing and experiencing if you were living to your full potential, with no self doubt about your ability or the possibilities available to you. In *NLP at Work*, Sue Knight states that⁷ "You can spend your life being busy. But if deep down you don't believe you can succeed, then no amount of work is going to make a difference. If, however, you believe you can succeed no matter what the situation, then you are likely to act in a way that will lead to success."

The future – Virtual Reality Self-Confidence Retreat Experience

In the future, I envisage a virtual reality application designed to guide women through a coaching experience covering all of the topics associated with building self-confidence and visualising their future. Informed by continuous feedback (possibly via biofeedback wearables), the app would guide its users through a variety of safe or challenging situations as appropriate.

To enhance this experience, women would be encouraged to go away for a couple of days into an environment that provides them with peace and inspiration, allowing them to explore their different personas and identities in different virtual situations, in a physical setting free from any prior psychological baggage.

In summary, if organisations want a higher percentage of women at executive level, it is vital that women have awareness of their confidence levels, and proactively manage them. Whilst women need to take ownership of this process, it is also crucial that their organisations support them in this endeavour when required⁸. I will be using my research for coaching purposes; it will also inform me when asking potential corporate clients whether they are aware of the issues discussed in this essay, and how they are supporting their women on this topic. My objective is to provide coaching to their emerging female leaders with a view to tangibly successful outcomes – more women being promoted and retained in their organisations.

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⁷ Knight, S. (2013) *NLP at Work*, 3rd edn., Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

⁸ KPMG found that 53% of women indicate that receiving praise most influences their perception of themselves in the workplace, over and above pay rises and promotions.