Experiences that Increase Confidence in Professional Women

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Introduction

The past few decades have brought notable progress to professional women in the workplace. Today in the United States we have witnessed the rise of CEOs Marissa Mayer (Yahoo), Ursula Burns (Xerox), Indra Nooyi (PepsiCo) and COO Sheryl Sandberg (Facebook). Outside of the corporate arena one can observe the same progress in areas such as politics and sports.

Take a closer look and one will learn that for these prominent women there were doubts as they journeyed to the top. Moreover, their current state of mind in the midst of success is still sometimes disrupted with a certain level of self-doubt. Though random dips in confidence for executive level women may not be so obvious to others, a somewhat deeper level of self-doubt can be apparent and sometimes crippling for many women that have not reached that level, whether they aspire to reach that level of achievement or not. Observing the language, behaviors and decisions of men versus women, it becomes clear that there is some degree of a confidence gap between men and women in the workplace.

Even with the achievements women in the workplace have made to date, data shows the inequities between corporate men and women are significant. A recent study by Leanin.org and McKinsey, *Women in the Workplace: Corporate Pipeline*, reveals that women are still less likely to be promoted than men, resulting in few women entering leadership. The study indicates that women are underrepresented at every level of the

organization (2016). With confidence being a significant factor in perception, professional growth and opportunities for advancement, one's confidence level can have a negative or positive career impact. The combination of the gender bias still being a factor in women's careers along with lower confidence levels presents a formula for slow progress and frustration. The highest of the corporate female achievers, i.e. Burns and Sandberg, have risen despite their doubts. Others, however, may benefit from understanding what types of actions can be pursued to strengthen confidence, and therefore, continuously improve one's professional life.

This document contains a review of literature to begin researching the topic of the experiences that improve the confidence of professional women in the workplace. The topic addresses the problem of professional women feeling less confident than men, and behaving as such, at all levels of the organization, while suffering the impacts of their self-beliefs, in spite of the amount of progress women have made in the workforce. The literature review and the subsequent research seeks to reveal how women are challenged with confidence issues and what is effective in helping them to increase their confidence in the workplace.

Defining Self-Confidence and Related Terms

A broad range of definitions for self-confidence exist among the scholars, as Oney and Oskusoglue-Guven (2015) detail out in their literature critique on confidence.

Amongst the scholars, some also distinguish between the term confidence/self-confidence and self-efficacy.

Merriam Webster's Learner's Dictionary defines **self-confidence** as: "Confidence in one's self and in one's powers and abilities." (Merriam-Webster, 2015). Though confidence and self-confidence are used interchangeably in this document, the definition of self-confidence more accurately describes the topic being explored. Confidence is also referred to using the term **self-efficacy**. Psychologist Albert Bandura describes perceived self-efficacy as "people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce effects" (Bandura, 1994).

Self-efficacy is more consistently described as the positive beliefs about capabilities in a specific area. Outside of academia, self-efficacy is used interchangeably with self-confidence. Also, self-efficacy must exist in some form must exist to have self-confidence in any form. For these reasons, in this document self-efficacy will count as a form of self-confidence.

Another closely related term to self-confidence and self-efficacy is **organization-based self-esteem**. "Organizational-based self-esteem is defined as the degree to which an individual believes him/herself to be capable, significant and worthy as an organizational member" (Pierce and Gardner, 2004). Because this paper

examines self-confidence of women in a professional context, this term will also be used.

One of the relationships between the two concepts of self-esteem and self-confidence can be explained by Gardner & Pierce (1998) who proposed that "high self-esteem individuals are more likely to have stronger self-efficacy than their low self-esteem counterparts. All of these terms, self-confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, organization based self-esteem are relevant and used in this research because are all intertwined to contribute to performance, job satisfaction, and professional behaviors including what professionals, especially women, decide to pursue as well as how they are perceived professionally.

Problem Description

New discussions have surfaced regarding self-confidence as it relates to the confidence gender gap. In interviews with some well-known, accomplished women, the authors of the book, *The Confidence* Code, Katty Kay and Claire Shipman have uncovered that even the most successful and seemingly most confident women we know, are plagued with self-doubt and overall confidence issues. As an example, the book quotes Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg saying, "there are still days I wake up feeling like a fraud, not sure I should be where I am" (Kay & Shipman, 2014). Women have made significant professional advancements over the past decades and today women equal half of our workforce. Moreover, Kay and Shipman found that companies

that have a high percentage of women surpass their completion on all components of profitability (2014).

To further consider the relevance of investigating the issues of confidence in women and methods to improve confidence, we can review discoveries in the McKinsey & Company research project. Their research consisted of 60 U.S. corporations, with the majority being Fortune 500 companies or companies comparable in size. Their research report stated that often women end up not progressing - choosing staff positions, getting stuck where they are, or deciding to resign. Of the 325,000 women from the 60 companies studied, only a small fraction of them reach the executive level, vice presidents and up (Barsh, J., & Yee, L., 2012).

Another angle on the importance of exploring the topic of confidence in professional women is presented by Professor Katherine Powell, who explains how self-confidence has various roles pertaining to career and academic development. She notes that self-concept, self-esteem and self-confidence played important roles in career development, suggesting that building confidence and acquiring positive self-esteem is connected to high achievement (Powell, K., 2010). Powell's study supports that self-confidence is critical to executive women in overcoming obstacles in corporations.

Veronica Guerrero's research on *Women and Leadership: Examining the impact of entrepreneurial education on leadership education*, provided an educational program for Self-Employment Training to new entrepreneurs. Her study also reveals the struggle

that women experience with confidence. During this study, participants acknowledged that they experienced challenges with insecurity and self-doubt pertaining to their entrepreneurial pursuits (Guerrero, V. 2008).

The past two decades leaves minimal research or peer-reviewed content on this topic of self-confidence or self-confidence as it relates to professional women. Hall and Hollenbeck agree (2004) that self-confidence has not been a topic of study in academia as of late. However, there's an abundance of content in popular media indicating there is a challenge and people are seeking continued development in this area.

Goal

The goal of this research is to explore successful developmental experience approaches that help improve the self-confidence of professional women to release self-imposed limits and experience a more satisfying career, whether that means continuing to advance or making the most of where they are, or determining and pursuing what they truly want to do professionally and in life.

Approach

This research leverages literature findings and primary research that explored women's confidence challenges, and their experiences that either intentionally or accidently helped to improve their confidence. The research consisted of survey responses from 18 women, ages 23 through 60 in business positions, mid-management and up, and entrepreneurs, to obtain a surface level view of their degree of confidence,

points in life where their confidence has increased or decreased, and what specifically

has helped them to grow their confidence in the workplace, such as coaching, stretch

assignments, roles under effective managers, and training. Interviews were conducted

with the same women to take a deeper view into what their struggles have been, and

how particular experiences helped improve their confidence.

Project Contribution

      Coaches, women professionals, and leaders in organizations will benefit from this

knowledge. Coaches, including myself, will learn more about the different experiences

and approaches that are effective at increasing confidence at work. Additionally, the

research will inform us of the specific challenges that professionals seek to improve or

that accidently improve by way of these experiences, e.g. leadership skills,

interpersonal skills, or general confidence in capabilities and willingness to get outside

of comfort zones.

Literature Review

Training/*Experiential Learning*

For increased skill development, Guerrero's educational program for "nascent" entrepreneurs used activities to help improve skills in public speaking, along with vision board and business plan development (Guerrero, V. 2008). Findings in Guerrero's study showed that the learning experiences in this educational program increased self-awareness and self-confidence. Many of the women felt prepared to broaden their business pursuits following the program (2008).

One question is which of the experiential experiences had the most impact. It would also be valuable to learn how much of what was experienced and learned in this study also pertains to women in business in general, versus women pursuing self-employment and what other types of educational programs or training can also serve to raise the confidence levels of professional women.

Other Training

Training, especially leadership training is often cited as another way that women build their confidence. Leadership training is presented in the KPMG study as one of the effective methods for women to increase confidence (KPMG, 2015).

The McKinsey & Company research prescribes what will facilitate better gender-diversity success, but this report is not designed to address the specific issue of

confidence. It does describe however, why it is important to include and support the

development of capable professional women and what the obstacles are in driving their

growth, and what has worked for the women that have been successful (Barsh, J., Yee,

L., 2012). It would be interesting to determine how companies' efforts to create

gender-diversity and their intentional efforts to support the professional development of

women influence the confidence levels of these women.

<u>Cumulative Experience</u>

General cumulative experience contributes to women's increased confidence as a

professional. Executive women develop and hone their confidence while gaining more

experience (Powell, 2010). Powell's literature, more focused on executive women, gives

an account of why building self-confidence in women is important, and explains some of

factors and barriers to success for these women. Though it also describes differences in

men and women in leadership, suggested behavior changes in the workplace for

women, and provides some examples of activities that led to increased confidence, this

is not a source to find specifics on how women can work to intentionally grow their

confidence for greater success.

However, most agree that various experiences leading to accomplishment contribute

to one's confidence as White's study on Female Executive Self-Efficacy (2006) suggests,

citing performance accomplishments as "the most dependable source of efficacy

expectations because they are based on an individual's personal experiences."

Though there has been limited research on self-confidence or self-efficacy as of late, studies from Professor Fred Luthans and the psychologist, Martin Seligman introducing the concept of positive psychology have begun to return attention to the subject of self-confidence and the idea that it can be developed through one's own actions. Tim Hall in his paper *Self-confidence and Leader Performance* (2004) notes that that self-confidence is being recognized as a significant factor in leadership performance that people can develop on their own. Hall (2004) agrees that a successful experience is the most powerful way to increase self-confidence.

<u>Role Models</u>

Role models are also cited in various literature as contributing to women's continued confidence. Lynne Doughtie, CEO of KPMG has acknowledged that role models along the way have given her confidence (Schwartz, T., 2015).

The KPMG Women's Leadership study further validates confidence as a characteristic that women understand as necessary to leadership success and lack of confidence as affecting what is required to enter leadership (KPMG, 2015). In this study, confidence and determination were rated as the top two traits of leaders, though *not* many of those women can say they actually feel confident (2015).

The KPMG study reported that the majority of the participating women believed that role models were important for women's leadership. Key findings showed that "67% of women feel like they need more support building confidence to feel like they

can be leaders," and "67% learned the most important lessons about leadership from other women" (KPMG, 2015).

Further validating the importance of role models for women from an entrepreneurial perspective, Guerrero's study participants expressed that successful business entrepreneur role models were key to their leadership development (Guerrero, V., 2008).

Special Assignments and Aligning with One's Purpose

The article *Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers,* describes an example of a female investment banker that receives the feedback that she lacks "presence." She eventually lands an assignment that forces her to stretch and she ultimately flourished, came out of her shell and became respected in her role. The article presents the idea of how connecting one's work with their larger purpose creates deeper meaning for the work. This leaves room to explore further how the role of new or special assignments and intentionally seeking work that aligns with a woman's strengths and purpose can help grow their confidence (Ibarra, Ely, Kolk, 2013).

Coaching

Louis Baron and Lucie Maron conducted a study to determine the connection between an executive coaching intervention and self-efficacy pertaining to supervisory coaching behaviors. The results indicated a relationship between a higher number of coaching sessions and a greater increase in the manager's self-efficacy beliefs" (Baron

and Morin, 2010).

This could suggest that executive coaching has a positive influence on self-efficacy, therefore, confidence. However, there were other interventions during this study, including classroom seminars and action learning sessions. Also, participants received a varied number of coaching sessions. So, there is a question as to how much coaching was the influence, versus whether the impact was due to the combination of interventions.

Carol-Anne Minski's dissertation on executive coaching and self-efficacy illustrates the ways coaching improves self-efficacy as it pertains to goal setting. Though Minksi's study is approached from the perspective of goal setting, it is relevant because it demonstrates how confidence is gained through coaching to improve self-efficacy in goal-setting. Some of the strategies that were proven to be effective were appreciative inquiry, reviewing past successes, and social experiments in the form of various homework assignments for the coachee (Minski, 2014).

Conclusion

Much literature can be found on women in leadership, and some can be found on topics relating to confidence, but mostly preceding the current decade. There's a wealth of information in main stream media covering confidence, women in the workplace, women in leadership, and even some relating the confidence gender gap. Sources reviewed in this document were particularly efficient in describing the obstacles

of women in leadership, the support they need, and what corporations can do better to

advance women in leadership, and to create and sustain greater gender diversity.

However, there's a gap in research specifically on professional women in general and

the specifics on how they can increase their confidence to experience more

opportunities and success in the workplace.

Key Findings

<u>Levels of Confidence</u>

The survey asked the women to rate their confidence levels from 1 to 5 with one being

not confident and 5 being extremely confident. The confidence levels of the women

participating in the survey ranged from *somewhat confident* to *extremely confident*. The

complete results follow:

Not Confident	0%
Somewhat Confident	17%
Confident	33%
Very Confident	39%
Extremely Confident	11%

Regarding whether or not they have always been confident, 72% of the participants

state that they have *always been confident in some areas, and not so confident in other*

areas. The remaining 28% chose the response that *they have always been confident*.

The majority of the responses are in alignment with the fact that though we view self-

confidence in terms of our general capabilities, in reality, confidence levels still tend to

be situational. It is also situational due to changing roles as revealed in the interviews

for this study. Whenever asked to elaborate on their responses regarding their

confidence level, those women that referred to their current role were struggling with

confidence due to challenges in that specific role, stating that they were previously

more confident in former positions. For example, Alexis, a business owner in

partnership with her husband, struggles because since she is at the top, she does not

receive any feedback. As a former human resources manager, she recalls feeling very

confident. Now, she must rely on only the numbers that indicate if the company is

performing well. But there is no one who grades her performance and she finds it

troublesome to not receive this type of feedback. Karen, a new business consultant

entrepreneur, formerly vice president of diversity and inclusion at a major retail

corporation, struggles with the unfamiliarity of starting and succeeding in her business.

Karen explains her confidence level rating:

> "… because this is still a recent transition for me. Even just consulting in general.
>
> The nature of the work I'm doing is very different for a big portion."

When asked if she would have rated her confidence level differently in her former roles

she replied:

> "It may have been very similar. The difference is I knew exactly what I was
>
> doing. Where I didn't feel confident was in support and relationships. I probably
>
> would have given it a 3 if I was [there]. Compare employee to a business owner.
>
> I was very confident being an employee. I knew I was following rules. I was
>
> being assessed on how well I was meeting a particular goal. Every area was
>
> broken into several categories, communication, etc. I always had ratings in
>
> different areas. I was also adequately trained and had the appropriate level of
>
> staff development and the degree. As a business owner, there has been no base.

If I don't create the staff development, I don't get it. Plus, there were several

people performing the same role. As a business owner, I'm isolated. I didn't

come from a family owning a business. I'm in an uncharted territory. Actually

having to feel my way through each area. I have to seek my own training. If I'm

not conscious of my environment…"

Cheryl, a former marketing professional turned coach has similar thinking, explaining:

"I think it's because in coaching I feel that I'm still relatively new at it. I feel like

there are so many more people out there who know so much more than I do. I

would say it's from that. It's hard for me to not apply it to a specific situation if you

are talking about confidence in the workplace."

"I've worked places where I feel like I have it all under control and I know so much

more than most of the people. I have worked other places where I think people are

so much smarter than me and so much more experienced that I feel lost. So, it's

really very situational for me."

The findings regarding whether or not the women have always felt confident are in

line with the responses regarding the survey question of how much their confidence has

increased over time. The majority of the women have experienced an increase in

confidence over time, ranging from a slight to a significant increase. The interview

discussions will further reveal how cumulative experiences have increased their

confidence throughout their careers.

Areas of Struggle

Participants were asked to select the confidence areas where the struggle the most, selecting all that apply. Though many of those areas were selected, such as presenting, leading, interpersonal skills, the area with the highest percentage was interactions with certain leaders and personalities, 73.33%.

Karen Interpersonal skills

"I'm an introvert, so I often don't feel very confident because I know I'm not like super social. I worry that people will draw conclusion about me because I'm not that friendly."

Interactions with certain personalities or leaders

"I have a hard time with people that don't act human. People that don't have empathy. I don't suffer fools lightly. I don't have a whole lot of tolerance for stupidity or people who are mean. I'm very no nonsense about it. I really don't' want to deal with you if you are not nice, respectful or not very smart or strategic. To be successful you have to learn to navigate through certain personalities, even if they do rub you the wrong way. I'm getting better, but it takes a lot of energy."

"I often feel judged – I'm intuitive, so I tend to sense when I'm not clicking or gelling with someone. So when I sense that, my confidence goes down. When there's a client and it seems like our business relationship is not where it needs to be then it does impact my confidence."

Contributions to Increased Confidence Professionally

Survey respondents were asked what experiences do they recall as having contributed to a feeling of increased confidence professionally. Out of nine possibilities, with participants selecting each that applied, the most popular areas selected were:

Pursuing and opportunity that pushed me outside of my comfort zone	81%
Working under a strong leader that supported and nurtured my development	69%
A stretch work assignment	56%

Many of the women still benefitted from training, role models coaching, mentors, volunteer experiences, leadership development. Gardner and Pierce (2004) concluded that organization-based self-esteem are based in one's work and organizational experiences. They explain that as self-expression and personal control increases, individuals accept positive experiences as relating to themselves, leading to an impact on their organization-based self-esteem (Gardner & Pierce, 2004). Furthermore, individuals that can relate the success to themselves tend to experience a gain in self-efficacy, eventually leading to organization-based self-esteem (Gardner & Pierce, 2004).

A study by Riordan et al (2001) concluded that organization-based self-esteem increases with the degree organizations offer role models, accepts and respects newcomer's values," the greater they perceive their organization-based self-esteem (Gardner & Pierce, 2004).

The link between positive work experiences and confidence is also revealed in White's study on *Female Executive Self-Efficacy* (2006), which cites performance accomplishments as "the most dependable source of efficacy expectations because they are based on an individual's personal experiences."

<u>Strong Leaders and Stretch Assignments</u>

According to Mark Horowszowski in a career planning article in Harvard Business Review, stretch assignments develop skills and confidence and are a proven way to advance one's career (2015). Also supporting the concept of stretch assignments and allowing employees to make mistakes is a message in *The Work of Leadership*, stating "Self-confidence comes from success, experience, and the organization's environment. The leader's most important role is to instill confidence in people. They must dare to take risks and responsibility. You must back them up if they make mistakes." (Heisfetz & Laurie, 2002) Kim, a young human resources specialist and business owner has been fortunate to work with such a leader:

Kim

"One of my old bosses, was one of the best bosses I had – was big on professional development. She wants you to grow as an individual even if it takes you outside of her department. She was very bold in developing my confidence at work. She was very helpful in letting me know not to be afraid to take risk and take chances because you learn from those experiences. My mom has also been very instrumental. Don't back down, don't let people take advantage of you. Just being put in unfamiliar situations at work. When building

my own business, that was new to me. I know some things; I know how to do

research. I'm not where I want to be, but a lot further than I was. And now

people seek me because I've done a good job."

Kim's experience is reflective of thoughts shared by McCall and Lombardo in the

book Lessons of Experience. They confirm that meeting challenges in early work

experiences and being allowed to make mistakes contributes to self-confidence of

professionals that eventually become leaders.

Briana, financial advisor (strong leader and mentor experience)

"I haven't had a lot of good managers. I had one good manager. She always

tried to help me out. She would give me assignments to help me. Hey, this will

be a challenge. She was actually thinking of it. That was the only mentorship I

ever had."

Karen (strong leader experience)

Regarding a strong leader, "… he gave me the space to figure it out. He was not

breathing down my neck. He just gave me the room I needed to learn, make

decisions. He did not micromanage. The vocabulary he used with me was always

positive, encouraging. And he backed that up financially. He would give me the

budget resources I needed. I had one person reporting to me; I eventually had

eight. He gave me the people resources I need as well as the budget. He gave

me the time and space."

Gardner & Pierce (2004) found support from Elloy and Randolph (1997) on this concept that Kim experienced with her leader, explaining that leaders that allow "followers to exercise self-direction and self-control, and provide the follower with the opportunity to exercise competence and experiences success," would contribute to OBSE.

Kay and Shipman also conclude through their research that "nothing builds confidence like taking action, especially when the action involves risk and failure" (2014). Remaining in one's comfort zone does not facilitate confidence and growth.

Ashkay Malik describes an additional factor contributing toward confidence, being what Bandura (1997) has termed as *verbal persuasion*. Individuals use verbal persuasion to convince others that they are capable of succeeding in something specific. Leaders use verbal persuasion best through the Pygmalion effect which is based on the idea that believing something to be true can make it true (Malik, 2013).

This confidence in our capabilities has also been called *social persuasion*, still referring to "what others tell us" (Hall, 2004). Similar to the experience of many of the women interviewed for this research on confidence in professional women, Hall tells the story of an executive whose boss assigned him a project he felt was beyond his actual experience and capabilities. The now executive was doubtful, but his boss encouraged him and insisted that he was capable and expressed his belief in his ability to do the

job. The executive now sees his former boss's confidence in him as key in starting his successful career (2004).

This tactic of verbal or social persuasion is reflected by one study participant, Cheryl, who described different experiences where she was pushed out of her comfort zone, but was given genuine encouragement that she could do the job. One instance was when a former boss surprisingly asked her to teach at a college. She explained to him that she didn't have any teaching experience. He told her she didn't need any teaching experience and expressed his confidence in her ability to do the job. She was terrified. But she then said, "I was able to step into the role and be very comfortable with it."

Tina, a former senior learning manager, now business owner had a similar experience. She describes suddenly being faced with a new role with many challenges. "The leader told her "we are giving you this position because of these reasons and we think you will be able to do this." I worked really, really hard, but was not successful. We talked about what was holding me back and holding the team back. It was because I wasn't letting them fail. My confidence was damaged, but I stayed with it. It was helping me see what it could be and what I could be in the role. I got so much more skill. Those two things helped my confidence. I know I'm much more equipped now. When you know you are capable of doing more things, it makes you feel more qualified for more. More confidence that I can be a player at many

different layers of the organization. Having that exposure, it paints a clearer picture

of what is possible."

Stretch Assignments and Pushed Out of Comfort Zone

As another advocate of individuals taking risks to develop, in Hall's research on

stretch assignments he recommends that individuals put themselves in situations that

stretch their capabilities (2004). Diane, a study participant for this research document,

is a career professor who suddenly found herself in a CEO position at a non-profit

organization. After entering the role already feeling not prepared or equipped, she was

faced with the company's poor financial performance at the end of her first year that

she had to explain to board of directors. Leveraging her experience and skills in

thorough research, analytical thinking, and presentation preparation, she survived the

situation, closing the board meeting feeling capable and competent. Starting a job

feeling completely out of her realm, then surviving what she envisioned would be an

awful situation, ended up being the most significant confidence booster of her life.

Mentorship

In her book *Lean In*, Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg explains that both mentorship

and sponsorship are critical for career advancement. However, she also notes that it

has been easier for men to find and maintain these sponsor relationships. Men are

much more likely than women to have sponsors and those men tend to be more

satisfied with their career progression. Therefore, women must proactively seek

mentors and sponsors (Sandberg, 2013). She does admit that mentorship really begins

with an individual doing the work to excel first so that the mentor actually notices and

naturally selects the mentee. Briana and Karen in the examples noted earlier in this

study were fortunate enough to find a mentorship within their managers, who

happened to be strong, positive leaders.

Coaching

Though most women did not mention coaching as one of their most significant

contributions toward building their confidence, a percentage of the participants did

select coaching as one of the developmental factors. Daniel Goleman (2002), author of

Primal Leadership asserts that "Coaching boost not just employees' capabilities but also

their self-confidence, helping them function both more autonomously and at a higher

performance level."

Experiences Outside of Work

The survey asked what experiences outside of work contributed to their increase in

confidence. The experience areas selected the most were:

Unforeseen experience or challenge I was forced to overcome	78%
Opportunity I pursued that pushed me outside of my comfort zone	72%
Spiritual Development	67%

Kennedy, consultant (*opportunity outside of comfort zone*)

> "Living and working in a foreign country for three years. Choreographer for club
>
> med for three years. This was before internet. The way I was able to
>
> communicate best with my family was by fax. I wasn't so much under my family
>
> influence … that helped me develop on my own. That experience really helped
>
> me in who I am. That, as an adult really probably had the biggest impact on me
>
> going this direction in my life. Because I really learned to stand for myself. I
>
> learned two foreign languages, met people from all over the world. It was just
>
> an amazing experience for me."

Tina (*unforeseen experience/challenge*)

> "When I was 15, I developed rheumatoid arthritis and couldn't play sports
>
> anymore. It actually helped my confidence, because I was able to find other
>
> interests that I wasn't' the best at, like photography. But I enjoy it and the fact
>
> that I enjoy it makes it worthwhile. It's about seeing the world from a different
>
> point of view and the more perspectives you have the more confidence you
>
> have. If you can enter activities with a joy just to be there, you have already
>
> won. If you are in there and you are all stressed out, your mind isn't' there. It
>
> really opens up your mind to other perspectives. Just being there gives you that
>
> exposure. Just having the experience — that increases confidence."

Briana (unforeseen challenge)

> "I hit rock bottom when I hit 22. I graduated and there were no jobs. I worked
>
> construction. I had a cancer issues. Had a series of surgeries. I wanted to still
>
> contribute, but after each of the surgeries I couldn't do much. I cleaned houses
>
> for a year. That was a rock bottom experience. That was transformative. Right
>
> before I started my masters I was in Utah. They thought I was sitting in class
>
> with my husband to get out of the house. They could not believe I was getting a
>
> masters. I was 27. They tried to set me up."

<u>Spirituality</u>

A number of women participating in the survey indicated that spirituality can be

credited for their continued development in confidence. A study by Magda Permut

indicated that increases in spirituality are related to increases in self-esteem (Permut,

2013). The study also revealed that increased spiritual awareness may have a positive

influence on self-esteem as it connects with coping with stress, fewer depression

symptoms, positive health behaviors and the ability to cope through adversity. As

mentioned previously self-esteem and self-confidence are not the same, but related,

therefore the connection to spirituality is relevant.

For Kim, a number of challenging, unforeseen life events forced her out of her

comfort zone and into a spiritual awareness that began to build her confidence:

> "I was having a quarter-life crisis at turning 25. I was living at home, working
>
> part-time. It was a dead end job. And I broke up with a boyfriend. …Ok I'm
>
> supposed to have my life together by now. I was going to church, learning to be

patient with where I am. **He** [God] wants me to be content with where I am. When I came to terms with where I was, that's when things changed for me. I got a job making twice as much, and a new boyfriend. I built faith and trust in where God was going to place me and learning patience. It taught me patience and to trust God and that He will do for me what He said He would do for me."

Alexia explains the influence of spirituality on her confidence and managing her work days:

"Meditation helps me to stay grounded through the day and helps me to focus. Understanding as a leader there will always be fires to fight. Prayer and meditation. Going to the gym. Taking a 10-minute nap. Knowing that I am not working for man, I am working for God. This is so much bigger than me. It allows me to stay out of being a people pleaser. Giving me the confidence to say no. I don't get offended. Staying grounded through regular attendance at church. Spiritual development."

There were women who reported confidence development through volunteer experiences that were also spiritual experiences. Theresa, a sales manager was asked to be the president of a women's organization at her church. She would be in charge of roles and responsibilities and helping families. There were serious events that had to be handled such as supporting the children whose parents had just died in a car accident. She described this as definitely a faith building and confidence building experience. She

described it as "One of the most confidence building experience I have had my whole

life. It required confidence in myself because it was a position that I wasn't prepared

for. "

Cheryl accepted a volunteer experience that she also considers a spiritual experience:

"It's funny. I was asked to be on adult education and women's bible study at

church. Both times it surprised me because I hadn't done either one of those things.

People observed certain traits and characteristics they thought would be helpful in

that role. I really wasn't that comfortable in that role, but I stepped into that role

and it was a fabulous experience. It was women from all different ethnic and

educational backgrounds. Older people learn from the younger people. It turned out

to be a really wonderful growth experience. It was definitely a spiritual experience.

It was fascinating to be with a group of women that you might not have chosen

each other as friends, because you might not have that much in common, but as it

turned out we did."

Kennedy contributes her growth in confidence to this unique and significant spiritual

experience:

"I was raised as a Christian and then something happened to me in the church when

I was 14 or 15 that really had me question Christianity. San Francisco was my first

experience of being exposed to other religions and having the opportunity to be

educate. I would seek out having conversations with Buddhist and Hindus. It had

me really exploring and I went to Thailand and China. I just really explored other

people's faith. And I got exposed to Mormon's and their faith and their belief and

read the book of Mormons. I started reading the Koran, but I didn't read all of the

Koran. I did a lot of reading on Buddhist philosophies. All of that strengthens my

faith in God. Carved out time to explore them while I was there. Being in Thailand,

sitting in a Buddhist temple all day watching people come and go was amazing."

Experiences with Most Impact

Both the data and the interview discussions align with the understanding that self-

confidence develops over time with various life experiences. White's study (2006) notes

the same as she states that "efficaciousness develops gradually through life

experiences… It is by doing and succeeding that the individual builds the skills, coping

strategies and tasks knowledge necessary for proficient performance." In answering the

open-ended survey question *What experience has had the most impact on your*

increased confidence? there were a wide range of responses, but there were still some

commonalities:

Briana, financial advisor

"Whenever I'm in any other job, investment is the highest point you can reach,

and [at] Goldman [Sachs] higher, so I get a lot of respect [from having worked

at Goldman Sachs]. These little guys will try to talk down to you – like "oh you

are a lady; how come you are not home making babies?" There are people with

truly more experience than me – I can ride that for the rest of my life."

Jill, partner at an accounting firm

"Honestly my confidence has been built over time. There have been many items

that have helped increased this over time. Each one playing an important role in

building my confidence. Pursuing different experiences and opportunities, with

the right level of support, guidance, and coaching have helped tremendously.

Each success has continued to improve my confidence, and being able to

recognize that a failure is truly a learning opportunity."

Elaine, former foreign service professional turned business owner and executive coach

"Living overseas. What's changed my life, as far as dealing with people and

culture —once you have lived in someone else's country, you are so humbled.

I've always respected the country I lived, wherever I was…whatever was in front

of me, but when you live day to day in another country that is not yours, you

gain, I gained such a - not only an insight of who I am as an American, as a

woman, being rom New Jersey, not only everything I identify myself with,

building my own sense of self – but it gives you such incredible depth of

perspective on humanity. In Jakarta I lived in a full service residential building

full of ex-patriots and wealthy people and right outside my door were people

making the five dollars a day, one dollar a day. And when you see that

dichotomy day in and day out — when there's not such a strong middle class, it

changes your perspective on so many things — poverty, people, humanity, how

other countries deal with this. When there is an absence of a robust middle class

it just gives you an incredible perspective. And what I thought was important to

me maybe before, is not so much now. It changes you. It changes your

understanding of self and others in ways that – far beyond taking a vacation to a foreign country. You are living their life. You are living their day to day. You are seeing what they see. It's a remarkable experience. I stand in front of you today more confident today because of the foreign service."

Briana

Whenever I'm in any other job, investment is the highest point you can reach, and Goldman higher, so I get a lot of respect [from having worked at Goldman]. These little guys will try to talk down to you –like oh you are a lady; how come you are not home making babies? There are people with truly more experience than me – I can ride that for the rest of my life.

Evidence of the Confidence Gap

One hundred percent of the women interviewed have observed evidence of a confidence gap at work between men and women – some more than others, especially depending on their role and their industry. Here are some examples of why they believe the confidence gap exists.

Alexis

"I rarely interview women that are extremely comfortable talking about salary up front. Men are extremely aggressive when it comes to salary. I have run into men that on the first interview that have said "I have a family to take care of." A man will go into the first interview and be very clear that there are boundaries and let you know what their non-negotiables are right away. Women tend to be very passive in job interviews. To the point that it is almost dangerous. They

don't sell themselves appropriately. Employers end up paying less for women and getting more."

Cheryl

"I observed it more when I was younger than I have in recent years. Though I will say men are much less likely to admit that they don't know something. I've known a couple of women who are like that. Women are less likely to take on something they haven't done and they seem to have bigger fear of failure."

Kennedy

"I do think there is a gap. Even though my daughter is six generations of only children women and all of us are super strong women; we are definitely a matriarchal family. Our families have not been about the men in our lives. Even with me growing up that way, there was still a time I was dating [him] and he choked me and I remember trying to rationalize it being my fault and not wanting to blame him and not wanting to end the relationship because I had pushed him there. There is still something that is fed into us to do that. And as confident as I am I still went there, but not for a long time. But that emotional space following all that, that's where I was. Luckily I had people that helped me get out of that space and supporting me in getting out of the relationship. There was still me rationalizing it being my fault. There was still this space where I was making it my fault."

Kim

"I just did some research on this. Women aren't always presented the same

opportunity for training and development – aren't always aware of the resources.

Men are more inclined for self-promotion. Women think that putting your head

down and working means more. There's a difference in how we express our

confidence. Men are more boastful and women are more modest. Men aren't

held to the same standards."

Conclusion

There are no contradictions between any of the literature reviewed and the findings

from surveys and interviews for this study. However, there is room for further research

on the specifics between the relationship of many of the factors that can contribute to

increased confidence for professional women, including, but not limited to volunteer

experiences, spirituality, and coaching.

The experiences described by the participants in this study indicate why it's

important for women to develop and demonstrate increased confidence in the

workplace. Though a percentage of women did select training, leadership development,

and role models as factors contributing to their confidence, these were not the most

impactful of their experiences. The study confirms the accomplishments and failures

through cumulative work and life experiences that push us outside of our comfort zone

have the most significant impact on building confidence. This conclusion concurs with

finding cited from, White, Hall, as well as Kay and Shipman, that taking action, pursuing

experiences, is the most effective method of building confidence. These experiences

seem to be most effective when we have no previous experience in the area and no reason of our own to predict success, meaning there is a certain degree of risk involved.

Within the contribution to increased confidence, the stretch assignments and opportunities outside of one's comfort zone often overlap with and exist because of a strong leader who also serves as that role model and mentor. The attributes of this type of leader allow them to provide the insight, encouragement, support and strategy to facilitate increased confidence and future success in their employees.

The study participants' stories of their volunteer experiences and the link to their improved confidence are in alignment with the literature cited such as Horoszowski's Harvard Business Review article. Though there's a lack of scholarly content on the link between volunteer experiences and confidence, the observations from Gardner and Pierce that individuals who can attribute certain experiences of success do gain self-confidence offer some explanation as to why these volunteer experiences were effective for the survey respondents.

Life experiences, those unexpected hardships as well as the meaningful volunteer activities that women pursue and how they practice spirituality invariably ends up contributing to women's self-confidence, spilling over into their confidence and performance in the workplace. This is not to say that these experiences only work for

women. But with the confidence gap that is observed between men and women at work, it is simply important to note what is most effective in supporting self-confidence so that professional women, leaders and coaches can have that knowledge and proactively leverage it to improve women's individual confidence for the benefit of their careers.

Recommendations

Coaches especially can remember to dig deep to guide the client into recalling experiences where they were challenged but successful or surviving and draw out the specifics of how that occurred. This is not new to coaching, but often clients have trouble thinking of a situation they can apply. This research encourages belief that everyone has some experience to leverage.

Leaders in the workplace can not only help professionals draw upon past experiences, but be observant of their strengths in preparation to offer new challenges and opportunities that enable growth and increased confidence. However, the leaders must be careful to create a safe environment for making mistakes and taking risks.

Professional women must take charge of their own professional development, not waiting for opportunities and training to be offered. They must find advocates and mentors, seek new opportunities that will stretch them, and continuously pursue and accept opportunities that will push them out of their comfort zone. As self-doubt can always resurface, they must remember to draw upon those past professional and

personal life experiences to build and re-discover the confidence to move forward and

continue to achieve.

Note: Names of participants were changed for confidentiality.

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