

# CRACKING THE **CONFIDENCE** CODE

by GRACE KILLELEA

One of the greatest barriers for women is our reticence to raise our hands, ask for what we want and be noticed. This lack of confidence appears as a weakness. It makes women seem less comfortable with risk taking and decisiveness, both of which are critical competencies for senior leaders.

Right now many people are asking why women have a crisis of confidence. My reply is that it's not as important for a woman in the workforce today crack the code or to know "why" she lacks confidence; it's much more critical to provide her with the tools to course correct. It is not too late to learn the skills to make you appear more confident even if all the internal factors are not addressed. Some people call this "faking it 'til you make it." I say, "Suit up, show up and start where you are." The appearance of confidence is as beneficial as actually feeling confident.

I do believe we should look at root causes for the broader purpose of helping to make this shift for younger girls, our daughters and grand-daughters. Recognizing and shifting from negative self-talk at a young age is very beneficial.

In addition, so are having more realistic conversations about girls who are seen as "bossy" when girls feel such tremendous pressure to be liked.

Girls give up a tremendous amount of their power when they use the mirror put up by society about body image and worth. There are many opportunities for us to help change this. But for the woman in the workforce today, a

better use of her time is to start to connect her "competence to her confidence" and to turn on her own power switch.

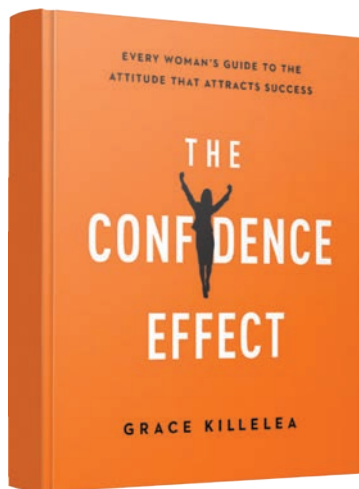
Working hard and being smart is table stakes. It's not enough to keep doing what you are doing and hoping that someone will notice you. We have to be seen as more than someone who produces results. We must be seen as powerful and with potential to do more.



The Center for Talent Integration did a fantastic study on the elements of “executive presence,” an often-used term with a meaning very few truly understand. In talent management discussions you will hear executive leaders say that a woman leader needs to improve her “executive presence.” Yet this is rarely discussed in performance reviews or feedback with direct reports.

The study highlights that many senior executives perceive “executive presence” with “gravitas” or how we handle ourselves in every type of situation — good and bad. According to the study, at the heart of “gravitas” is confidence; the ability to “stand over your own power.” A woman who can stand her ground in the face of disagreement is considered confident.

Another skill of a confident leader is speaking up and not always waiting one’s turn. In her Ted Talk, Sheryl Sandberg discussed how women in a group will hold up their hand to ask a question while a man will just make his comments, illustrating how this can be seen as less confident and less powerful. She admitted to being surprised herself when she didn’t call on the women who had their hands raised



Grace Killelea, author of “The Confidence Effect: Every Woman’s Guide to the Attitude That Attracts Success”.

but acknowledged the men who just spoke up.

There is an enormous physical component to the perception of confidence. How we walk, talk, stand, move and respond to others dictates if others see us as confident. Dr. Amy Cuddy from Harvard University has one of the most popular and impactful Ted Talks of 2013. A social psychologist who studies power and a professor at one of the most competitive business schools, Cuddy and her research partners discovered some startling facts. A two-minute “power pose” (think of how Wonder Woman stands, hands on hips, feet spread apart, head up, eyes forward) has an immediate and significant shift on our brain chemistry. It affects our testosterone and cortisol levels. Their studies showed that people who do a two-minute power pose prior to an interview had better results than low-power posers. Low-power posers are folded in, arms and legs crossed, hunched in a chair. To quote Dr. Cuddy, “Our bodies change our mind, our mind changes our behavior and our behavior changes outcomes.”

You can’t power pose in front of your boss or peers (but it’s great behind closed doors) but women can certainly walk taller, make eye contact and take up more physical space. If you stand in the shadows, you will never be seen.

In one of my recent programs, one of our participants started every sentence with, “I’m sorry to bother you but...” apology. The ability to take accountability is a critical leadership competence, but it is not powerful to be “sorry” for everything. Learning to choose our words, to speak with more distinction is important. More and more research discusses the women who speak with an “uptick” to their sentences. This is not just a young woman’s challenge. Women who don’t think about their tone and tenor when they speak can be seen as indecisive and unsure.

Another example where language can diminish confidence is when a woman doesn’t simply say “thank you” when she is praised. We can be dismissive of our own power when someone compliments us on a job well done and we say, “I just got lucky,” or “Anybody could have done this.” Learning to just say “thank you” is a very powerful tool for women.

Confidence can be learned and while it is being learned it can be played. We can reprogram ourselves to show up differently almost immediately. Having the awareness that competence and confidence need to be connected really can shift how women are perceived in the workforce. Getting on the radar screens of hiring managers, talent leaders and senior executives by exhibiting more confidence is one of the ways women will start to take on more and more senior roles in organizations. **W**

*Grace Killelea is founder and CEO of Half The Sky Leadership Institute, a program that develops high potential women and builds critical leadership skills. She is a former Fortune 50 company SVP of Talent, a skilled executive coach and sought after keynote speaker. Killelea is also author of the highly anticipated title, “The Confidence Effect: Every Woman’s Guide to the Attitude That Attracts Success.” Connect with her on the Web at [www.thegkcgroup.com](http://www.thegkcgroup.com) and [www.halftheskyleadership.com](http://www.halftheskyleadership.com), on Twitter @GraceKillelea and on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/GraceKillelea](http://www.facebook.com/GraceKillelea).*