MANAGEMENT & CAREERS

New Strategies Help Women Build Career Confidence

Brag books, confidence logs are among techniques experts recommend to bolster lacking self-confidence

By Sue Shellenbarger
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One of the most critical career strengths is a belief that can’t be taught—self-confidence. And for many women, it’s in short supply.

A lack of confidence, or the expectation that you can handle tough tasks even if you haven’t done them before, is more common among women than men, studies show, and
it can be a powerful brake on their careers. Amid a growing focus on the problem by researchers and career experts, women are trying new strategies to shore up their belief in themselves.

Confidence takes root in childhood but also can be internalized in adulthood, through experience, hard work or practice. “It requires really paying attention to the small wins and not being so quick to overlook, downplay, dismiss and diminish your accomplishments,” says Aimee Cohen, a Denver career coach and author.

Some 63% of women enter the workforce with the confidence that they can rise to senior management, compared with 75% of men, according to a 2016 survey of 8,400 adults by Bain & Co. and LinkedIn. By mid-career, only 57% of women still feel that way, compared with 66% of men, says Julie Coffman, a Bain partner and lead author of the study.

Women often hesitate to seize opportunities or ask for promotions without bosses’ support, and they tend to shoulder more family-care duties at home, Ms. Coffman says. Other research links women’s lack of confidence to being encouraged during childhood to be compliant and agreeable and to strive for perfection, rather than to compete and take risks.

Kristen Durkin was intimidated when she was recruited in 2014, at age 29, to a product-marketing position at Facebook. Despite her successful eight-year track record as a marketing manager for other companies, she wondered, “Do I deserve to be here?” she says. When she chose at one early meeting to sit on a bench against the wall, the meeting leader asked her to join others on couches at the center of the room. “I was a little embarrassed, but I also really recognized that I was surrounded by allies,” she says.

Ms. Durkin started a “confidence log,” as suggested by a mentor, noting times when she felt most intimidated or most confident. The log, plus input from colleagues, helped her see that she was spending an unnecessary amount of time during presentations justifying her research methods rather than describing her findings. And if certain individuals tended to intimidate her, “I worked on building trusting relationships with them,” she says. Her confidence has risen sharply, but it remains “a work in progress—a muscle that you always have to work on,” says Ms. Durkin, now 32. She was recently promoted to lead a product-marketing team.

Women often assume mastering their jobs will be enough to advance, says Carrie Kerpen, an author, speaker and co-founder of a digital-marketing agency, who told Ms.
Durkin’s story in her new book on career strategies, “Work It.” They also should be asking themselves, “How do I position myself in a way that allows me to look and feel confident?” she says. This includes describing your accomplishments with enthusiasm.

Elizabeth Bacon juggled numerous duties well on a job as an administrator for a nonprofit group in Denver, but received so little feedback that she lost confidence. With coaching from Ms. Cohen, she built ties with a “strong tribe” of friends and mentors inside and outside the nonprofit, who encouraged her to network. She soon advanced to a better job as a director for a regional business-development group.

Ms. Cohen also advised her to start a “brag book”—a journal for saving notes about one’s accomplishments, to aid recall of “rock-star moments,” the career coach says. Ms. Bacon uses a red leather-bound journal with “papers pasted in, sticking out all over the place. It looks like a hot mess,” she says. Nevertheless, on a difficult day, a glance through it lifts her spirits. One entry is a letter from a business owner Ms. Bacon helped, enabling her to keep her company afloat by guiding her to get leadership training: “I never could have done this without you,” the woman wrote. Ms. Bacon recently scored another win—election as board chairman of a public-private partnership supporting Denver-area businesses.

Sherry Hicks-Buckles, a manager at the Hyatt Regency Atlanta hotel, says she began keeping a brag book about a year ago. One entry is an email from a former subordinate, saying “thank you for your support and mentorship ... You are truly an inspiration.” Flipping open the book on a bad day reminds her “why you do what you do, and you are making an impact,” she says.

Women’s lack of self-assurance is often especially visible in meetings where they’re outnumbered by men. They speak up less and are interrupted more often by others who criticize or disagree with them, according to a 2016 study of 470 small-group participants.

Some women remain silent in meetings, waiting for pauses that never come, says executive coach Alexandra Johnston. She advises catching the eye of the meeting
leader and saying his name, which typically causes others to stop and listen, says Dr. Johnston, a vice president in Washington, D.C., with Integrity Communications, a training firm.

Nandini Krishnamurthy, a senior research manager in Johnston, Iowa, for a seed company, says she used to apologize when taking the floor in meetings. She learned from Dr. Johnston to speak more assertively, saying, “That was a great point you made, however, I have a different view,” she says. Ms. Krishnamurthy also advises colleagues to enlist a trusted ally who can intervene if they’re interrupted, and remind others of their point.

Avoid minimizing your role, Dr. Johnston says. One product manager introduced herself in a seminar as overseeing “my little area”—a territory that included all of Europe and South America—then concluded by saying, “and that’s my little story,” she says. And steer clear of other behaviors that suggest a lack of confidence, such as engaging in uptalk—ending sentences in a rising tone as if asking a question.

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