



Bridging the gender gap in confidence

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Abstract Underconfidence among women can reduce their career aspirations and thwart advancement in whatever career they choose. For managers seeking to retain and promote capable women, we recommend addressing the gender gap in confidence to increase the effectiveness of women in the current workforce as employees and leaders and thereby attract the best new hires among women seeking opportunity. Based on a wide range of research and the broad experience of the authors, we discuss useful approaches—include helping women learn how to be more self-confident through classes and webinars—but also discouraging practices such as equating low confidence with low competence. The entire organization can benefit when its practices recognize the need for and payoff from reducing the confidence gap between women and men.

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1. Enabling organizations to create more female success stories

Here comes another chicken-and-egg issue. Managers want to see the best female job candidates accept the offer from their firm over others and then to stay with their organization. Toward that goal, those managers recognize that having successful women

already in the organization matters greatly. But to have successful women already in the organization appears to require having hired and retained the best female job candidates over a long period of time; thus the poultry analogy.

In this article, we use a research framework and our own consulting experiences to help managers out of that loop by enabling their organizations to create more female success stories among their current employees. Doing so involves a two-part process. The first is to recognize at least one characteristic that can hold women in a workforce back from success: low work-related self-confidence relative to the confidence level of men. The second is

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to tailor organizational practices so that women are less disadvantaged by that characteristic, via direct confidence-building efforts and by adopting the mindset throughout the organization that equating confidence with competence may be misguided.

2. Causes and consequences of a confidence gap

We begin by making two points. One is that the confidence gap exists and is likely to be the rule rather than the exception in any organization. The second point is that this gap harms the forward progress of an organization by depriving its management of potential leadership talent. Since a better understanding of the causes and consequences of the confidence gap offers a sensible starting point to closing that gap, we begin with these two issues before offering recommendations.

2.1. Causes: Culture, aspirations, a salary gap, and questionable payoff

The overall idea that women are less confident than men appears cross-culturally and is empirically verified. [Bleidorn et al. \(2016\)](#) used the internet to sample nearly 1 million individuals in 48 nations, asking them to rate their degree of agreement with the statement: “I see myself as someone who has high self-esteem.” In each culture, without exception, the average response from men significantly exceeded the average response from women.

This lower self-esteem can lead to lower aspirations in the workplace. Our experience in two career centers over the years matches the findings of [Dickerson and Taylor \(2000\)](#): that women decline to apply for a job or for a promotion if they believe they lack any of the listed qualifications, while their male counterparts predictably step forward if they possess even a few of the skills that match the listed requirements. Also, many women find themselves in lower status and lower paying jobs compared to men, in part because they thought that such jobs would be all they could get ([Cohen & Swim, 1995](#); [Ehrlinger & Dunning, 2003](#); [Kay & Shipman, 2014b](#)). A 2017 report of nationwide averages for expected salary upon graduation shows that male business students expected to earn \$60,541 and females from the same schools expected to earn \$54,923 (Universum, personal communication, student study, 2017).

That difference—more than 9%—becomes reality; the salary gap between men and women has been

demonstrated extensively ([American Association of University Women, 2018](#)). Subsequently, the salary discrepancy increases over time with percentage raises and promotions on a smaller initial base salary, communicating to women that they are, literally, worth less than men and widening the gap in work-related self-confidence.

Therese [Huston \(2016\)](#), a cognitive psychologist, offered another explanation for an aspiration gap that is confidence related: the understanding by women that others look down on them for any self-promotion. Research strongly suggests that women who self-advocate ([Wade, 2001](#)) or self-promote ([Eagly & Karau, 2002](#); [Rudman & Fairchild, 2004](#)) face workplace backlash for not behaving with the stereotypically expected modesty. Women may perceive such backlash as more costly than the opportunities foregone by not negotiating for higher salaries or for failure to promote one’s accomplishments to others. [Eagly and Koenig \(2014\)](#) reported one study finding that women who spoke tentatively in controversial situations were more likely than confident women to persuade men of their position. In other words, women may perceive that in the workplace, confidence does not pay off.

2.2. Consequences: Underutilized employees and poorer hiring prospects

This range of causes for a confidence gap suggests that it may be so common as to go unnoticed, but the gap has negative consequences for employers. As noted at the outset of this discussion, a difference in recognition for women in an organization when compared to men can discourage discerning women who are considering employment with a firm eager to hire them. However, other negative consequences exist as well, preventing organizations from fully utilizing the talents of the women who may be passed over for leadership roles based on criteria related not to competence, but to confidence.

Research clarifies why underconfidence can hold women back from career advancement. Individuals who exhibit high levels of self-confidence are thought to be more competent and hence are accorded higher status and power in organizations ([Anderson, Brion, Moore, & Kennedy, 2012](#); [Anderson & Kilduff, 2009](#); [Carli, LaFleur, & Loeber, 1995](#)), increasing the likelihood of promotion and other career-advancing opportunities.

[Martin and Phillips \(2017, p. 31\)](#) defined confidence as the “belief that one can accomplish a number of goals.” They then argued that it “drives the attainment of status, signals competence, and increases an individual’s power in groups” (2017, p. 31). Explaining

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