

## The Confidence Code - Introduction

# Introduction

There is a quality that sets some people apart. It is hard to define but easy to recognize. With it, you can take on the world; without it, you live stuck at the starting block of your potential.

There's no question that twenty-eight-year-old Susan had plenty of it. Like many of us, though, she was terrified of public speaking. Susan had a lot to say—she just didn't like the spotlight. She confessed to friends that she spent many sleepless nights worrying about upcoming performances, fearful of being ridiculed. Her early speaking efforts weren't great. But she kept at it. Armed with a sheaf of notes and protected by her sensible dresses, she fought her nerves and delivered her controversial message over and over, often to extremely skeptical male audiences. She knew she had to conquer her fear to do her job well. And she did, becoming a very persuasive public speaker indeed.

Susan B. Anthony, the voice of women's suffrage for the United States, worked for fifty years to win women the right to vote. She died in 1906, fourteen years too soon to see what she'd accomplished, but she was never deterred—either by her vulnerabilities, or by the fact that victory was always just out of reach.

Just making the trip to school every day, as a girl in modernday Pakistan, requires that same quality. And then to imagine, as a twelve-year-old, that you can challenge the Taliban by calling for education reform, blogging to the world as schools are blown up around you, absolutely demands it. And it calls for a huge dose of something remarkable to keep going, to keep fighting for a cause, after being pulled off a bus, shot in the head by extremists, and left for dead at fourteen. Malala Yousafzai has courage, to be sure. When the Taliban announced they intended to kill her she barely seemed to blink, saying: "I think of it often and imagine the scene clearly. Even if they come to kill me, I will tell them what they are trying to do is wrong, that education is our basic right."

But she's harnessing something else too, something that fuels her defiance and charts her steady movement forward. Malala nurtures an extraordinary, almost unimaginable belief that she can succeed, even when the odds are stacked, boulderlike, against her.

A century apart, these two women are united by a common faith—a sense that they can achieve what they set out to do. What they share is confidence. It's potent, essential even, and for women, it's in alarmingly short supply.

The elusive nature of confidence has intrigued us for years, ever since we started writing *Womenomics* in 2008. We were busy detailing the positive changes unfolding for women: remarkable data about our value to the bottom line of companies, and the power that gives us to balance our lives and still succeed. But as we talked to women, dozens of them, all accomplished and credentialed, we

kept bumping up against a dark spot that we couldn't quite identify, a force clearly holding us back. Why did the successful investment banker mention to us that she didn't really deserve the big promotion she'd just got? What did it mean when the fast-rising engineer, who'd been a pioneering woman in her industry for decades, told us offhandedly that she wasn't sure she was really the best choice to run her firm's new big project?

In two decades of covering American politics, we have interviewed some of the most influential women in the nation. In our jobs and our lives, we walk among people who you'd assume would brim with confidence. On closer inspection, however, with our new focus, we were surprised to realize the full extent to which the power centers of this nation are zones of female self-doubt. Woman after woman, from lawmakers to CEOs, expressed to us some version of the same inexplicable feeling that they don't fully own their right to rule the top. Too many of the fantastically capable women we met and spoke with seemed to lack a certain boldness, a firm faith in their abilities. And for some powerful women, we discovered, the very subject is uncomfortable, because it might reveal what they believe to be an embarrassing weakness. If *they* are feeling all that, only imagine what it is like for the rest of us.

You know those uneasy sensations: the fear that if you speak out you will sound either stupid or self-aggrandizing; the sense that your success is unexpected and undeserved; the anxiety you have about leaving your comfort zone to try something exciting and hard and possibly risky.

We have often felt the same kind of hesitation ourselves. Comparing notes about confidence levels at the end of a dinner a few years ago, as well as we knew each other, was a revelation. Katty went to a top university, got a good degree, speaks several languages, and yet she has spent her life convinced she just isn't intelligent enough to compete for the most prestigious jobs in journalism. Claire found *that* implausible, laughable really, and yet realized that she too, for years, routinely deferred to the alpha-male journalists around her, assuming that because they were so much louder, so much more certain, that they just knew more. She almost unconsciously believed that they had a right to talk more on television. Were they really just more self-assured?

The questions kept coming. Had we merely stumbled across a few anecdotes here and there, or are women really less confident than men? And what is confidence, anyway? What does it let us do? How critical is it to our well-being? To success? Are we born with it? Can we get more of it? Are we creating it or thwarting it in our kids? Finding answers to these questions was clearly our next project.

We covered more territory than we initially envisioned, because each interview and each answer convinced us that confidence is not only an essential life ingredient, but also unexpectedly complex.

We met with scientists who study the way confidence manifests itself in lab rats and monkeys. We talked to neurologists who suggested that it is rooted in our DNA, and psychologists who told us it is the product of the choices we make. We talked to coaches, of performance and sports, who told us it comes from hard work and practice. We tracked down women who clearly have it, and women who don't so much, to get their take. And we talked to men—bosses, friends, and spouses. Much of what we found is relevant for both sexes; our genetic blueprints aren't wildly different when it comes to confidence. But there is a particular crisis for women.

For years, we women have kept our heads down and played by the rules. We have made undeniable progress. Yet we still haven't reached the heights we know we are capable of scaling. Some misguided bigots suggest women aren't competent. (Personally, we haven't found many incompetent women.) Others say children change our priorities, and, yes, there is some truth in this claim. Our maternal instincts do indeed create a complicated emotional tug between our home and work lives that, at least for now, just doesn't exist as fiercely for most men. Many commentators point to cultural and institutional barriers aligned against us. There's truth in that too, but all of these reasons are missing something more profound—our lack of self-belief.

We see it everywhere: Bright women with ideas to contribute who don't raise their hands in meetings. Passionate women who would make excellent leaders, but don't feel comfortable asking for votes or raising campaign money. Conscientious mothers who'd rather someone else become president of the PTA while they work behind the scenes. Why is it that women sound less sure of ourselves when we know we are right than men sound when they think they could be wrong?

Our complicated relationship with confidence is more pronounced in the workplace, in our public pursuits. But it can spill over to our home lives, undermining the very areas in which we have traditionally felt surer of ourselves. Think about it. You'd love to give a thoughtful toast at your best friend's birthday party, but even the prospect of speaking in front of thirty people makes you start to sweat—so you mutter a few words, keep it very short, and nurse a dissatisfied feeling that you haven't done her justice. You always wished you'd run for class president in college, but asking other people to vote for you, well, it just seemed so arrogant. Your brother-in-law is so annoying with his sexist views, but you're worried that if you stand up to him in front of everyone you'll come across as strident, and, anyway, he always seems so on top of his facts. Imagine all the things over the years you wish you had said or done or tried—but didn't because something held you back. Chances are, that something was a lack of confidence. Without it we are mired in unfulfilled desires, running excuses around in our heads, until we are paralyzed. It can be exhausting, frustrating, and

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depressing. Whether you work or you don't, whether you want the top job or the part-time job—wouldn't it just be great to slough off the anxiety and the fretting about all the things you'd love to try but don't trust yourself to do?

In the most basic terms, what we need to do is start acting and risking and failing, and stop mumbling and apologizing and prevaricating. It isn't that women don't have the ability to succeed; it's that we don't seem to believe we *can* succeed, and that stops us from even trying. Women are so keen to get everything just right that we are terrified of getting something wrong. But, if we don't take risks, we'll never reach the next level.

The thoroughly accomplished twenty-first-century woman should spend less time worrying about whether she's competent enough and more time focused on self-belief and action. Competence she has plenty of.

The *Economist* magazine recently called female economic empowerment the most profound social change of our times. Women in the United States now get more college and graduate degrees than men do. We run some of the greatest companies. There are seventeen female heads of state around the world. We control more than 80 percent of U.S. consumer spending and, by 2018, wives will outearn husbands in the United States. Now comprising half of the workforce, women are closing the gap in middle management. Our competence and ability to excel have never been more obvious. Those who follow society's shifting values with a precision lens see a world moving in a female direction.

And yet.

At the top, our numbers are still small and barely increasing. On all levels, our talents are not being fully realized. We believe we're stalling because, all too often, women don't see, can't even envision, what's possible.

"When a man, imagining his future career, looks in the mirror, he sees a senator staring back. A woman would never be so presumptuous." That disarmingly simple observation from Marie Wilson, a veteran of women's political movements, was in many ways the launchpad for this exploration. It rang so true to us because it perfectly encapsulates both our reticence and our insecurity. And we'd add to it. Even when we *are* senators or CEOs or top performers of some sort, we don't recognize ourselves and our triumphs in the mirror. Women who have reached admirable heights have not always erased the nagging feeling that they might be unmasked as incompetent pretenders. And rather than diminishing with success, that feeling often grows the higher we climb.

A year before her book *Lean In* was published, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg told us "there are still days I wake up feeling like a fraud, not sure I should be where I am." Likewise the two of us spent years attributing our own success to luck, or, like Blanche Du-

Bois, to the kindness of strangers. And we weren't being deliberately self-deprecating—we actually *believed* it. After all, how could we possibly have deserved to get to where we'd gotten?

Often women's self-assurance dwindles in more prosaic patterns. Peggy McIntosh, a sociologist at Wellesley College who has written extensively on what is aptly called the fraud syndrome, vividly remembers a conference she attended: "Seventeen women in a row spoke during the plenary session, and all seventeen started their remarks with some sort of apology or disclaimer. 'I just have one point to make,' or 'I've never thought about this very much' or 'I really don't know whether this is accurate.' And it was a women's *leadership* conference!"

The data is pretty grim. Compared with men, we don't consider ourselves ready for promotions, we predict we'll do worse on tests, we flat out tell researchers in big numbers that we just don't feel confident at our jobs.

Part of the problem is we can't make sense of the rules. Women have long believed that if we just work harder and don't cause any bother, our natural talents will shine through and be rewarded. But then we have watched as the men around us get promoted over us and paid more, too. We know, deep down, they are no more capable than we are; indeed, often they are less so, but they project a level of comfort with themselves that gets them noticed and rewarded. That comfort, that self-assurance—it's confidence, or at least their version of it. More often than not, the way confidence manifests itself in men is wholly unappealing and downright foreign to women. Most women aren't comfortable dominating conversations, throwing their weight around in a conference room, interrupting others, or touting their achievements. Some of us have tried these tactics over the years, only to find that it just isn't our style.

We should pause and say that we know when we talk about women en masse we are oversimplifying. Some women have already cracked this code and others, of course, won't always recognize themselves in these pages. We are far from monolithic as a gender. The subject is important enough to most women—women of every personality type, ethnic and religious background and income level, that we hope you will forgive our choice to occasionally generalize rather than constantly qualify. We're determined to cast deep and wide, because the subject merits it.

The stakes are too high to give up on finding confidence just because the prevailing masculine model might not fit, or the reality looks foreboding. There are too many opportunities we are missing out on. As we dissected academic papers and reviewed interview transcripts we decided that what we need is a blueprint for confidence, a confidence code, if you will, that will get women headed in the right direction.

Consider women like our friend Vanessa, who is a very successful fundraiser for a nonprofit organization. Recently, she was called

in by the president of her organization for an annual review. She'd raised a lot of money for the group and assumed she was heading in for a serious pat on the back. Instead, he gave her a reality check. Yes, she'd done well bringing in funds, but if she ever wanted to be a senior leader in the organization, she needed to start making decisions. "It doesn't matter if they're right," he told her. "Your team just needs to know you can make a call and stick to it." Vanessa couldn't believe what she was hearing. *It doesn't matter if they're right?* That was simply anathema to her.

Yet Vanessa recognized the truth in what her boss had said. She was so focused on being perfect, and absolutely right, that she held back from making decisions, particularly decisions that needed to be made fast. Like so many women, Vanessa is a perfectionist, but that quest for perfection and those fourteen-hour workdays weren't what her group really needed. And moreover, her habits stopped her from taking the decisive action that was required.

If you ask scientists and academics, as we did, how optimism is defined, you'll get a fairly consistent answer. The same goes for happiness and many other basic psychological qualities; they've been dissected and examined so often and for so long that we now have a wealth of practical advice about cultivating these attributes in ourselves and in others. But the same doesn't hold, we discovered, for confidence. It is altogether a more enigmatic quality, and what we learned about it is not at all what we expected when we set out to discover its nature.

For one thing, there's a difference between bravado and confidence. We also came to see that confidence isn't all in your mind, and it isn't generated by exercises to boost self-esteem, either. Perhaps most striking of all, we found that success correlates more closely with confidence than it does with competence. Yes, there is evidence that confidence is *more important* than ability when it comes to getting ahead. This came as particularly unsettling news to us, having spent our own lives striving toward competence. Another disturbing finding is that some of us are simply born with more confidence than others. It is, it turns out, partly genetic. We did our own genetic tests to see how we stack up. We'll share them with you later, but suffice it to say that we were surprised by the results. And we discovered that male and female brains do indeed work differently in ways that affect our self-assurance. Yes, that fact is controversial. Yes, it's also true.

Confidence is only part science, however. The other part is art. And how people live their lives ends up having a surprisingly big impact on their original confidence framework. The newest research shows that we can literally change our brains in ways that affect our thoughts and behavior at any age. And so, fortunately, a substantial part of the confidence code is what psychologists call *volitional*: our choice. With diligent effort, we can all choose to expand our confidence. But we will get there only if we stop trying to be perfect and

start being prepared to fail.

What the scientists call *plasticity*, we call *hope*. If you work at it, you can indeed make your brain structure more confidence-prone. One thing we know about women is that we're never afraid of hard work.

As reporters, we've been lucky enough to explore the power corridors of the world looking for stories, and we've seen the possibilities that confidence gives a person. We notice how some people aim high, simply assuming they will succeed, while others spend the same time and energy thinking of dozens of reasons why they can't. As mothers, we've watched the impact confidence has on our children. We see the kids who are liberated to say and do and risk, learning as they go, and stockpiling lessons for the future. And we see the youngsters who hold themselves back, fearful of some unformed, undeserved consequence.

And as women, particularly thanks to this project, we have both *felt* the life-changing impact of confidence, in our professional and our personal lives. Indeed we've discovered that accomplishment is not its most meaningful measure. There's a singular sense of fulfillment you get from simply having it and putting it to good use.

One scientist we interviewed described her occasional brushes with confidence in particularly resonant terms: "I feel a spectacular kind of lock-and-key relationship with the world," she told us. "I can achieve. And I'm connected." Life on confidence can be a remarkable thing.



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