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Rail Professional

Women in rail Adeline Ginn



Admired and inspired

Adeline Ginn looks at how women, and men, can boost their levels of self-confidence, and why it matters in the workplace

Few clichés are as factually correct as the idea that women are less confident than men, and it is not just an issue for workplaces with a skewed gender ratio such as rail. The BBC's head of newsgathering, for example, said in June that despite having women in six of its 15 top reporting posts, the broadcaster still finds that some 'very capable' women lack the confidence to apply for the top jobs.

Business is about taking risks, and clearly, taking risks can be daunting. At some point though, we all have to cross our fingers and take a leap to get to where we want to be. According to WISE, that is riskier for one half of the population than the other. Females have a greater level of fear of failure than their male counterparts



A recent study of 16,000 people, two-thirds men, one-third women - as well as their managers, subordinates and peers - found that women actually rated better than men in 12 out of 16 competencies. These included 'takes initiative', 'drives for results' and 'stretches for results', all traditional measures of effective leadership

when it comes to seizing business opportunities. Often, this is due to women questioning their ability to identify, assess and act on an opportunity.

Most women who are in business today began their careers with smaller responsibilities and progressed upwards when their confidence levels matched their capabilities. But why is it, that in an age with role models such as Karen Brady and Angela Merkel, a lot of women are not backing themselves to spearhead many of the important decision-making positions?

Understanding from men
It is not just the problem of women being too sceptical of what they can achieve, it is also that men are not made aware that this issue may be holding back their female talent. A WomenCorporateDirectors Foundation survey has shown that while 52 per cent of women think lacking confidence holds them back - only 18 per cent of men consider that this could even be a problem for their female staff. This is worth mentioning, as men who have

aspiring women in their teams can only offer sufficient guidance and support if they understand that this is an issue that many women face.

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However, for both women and men, self-confidence is critical for business success. If you do not believe in yourself, how can you convince someone else to put their faith in you? Decisions need confidence behind them in order to be executed effectively, efficiently and professionally.

How to boost confidence
The question is, how can women boost their own confidence, and what can companies do to help? Here are some practical steps that anyone can implement to make headway.

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Get out of your comfort zone

It is much easier to remain within the boundaries of where you feel comfortable than it is to face the fear of venturing beyond them. But by limiting yourself to what you already know, you will miss out on professional opportunities, life experiences, and personal growth. This could start with asking a question in a meeting; something that is for its own sake, rather than for a particular result. Begin to set yourself challenges – volunteer for that pitch, approach your boss about that new process, do it once a week, or once a month, and watch yourself grow.

Stop saying sorry

Studies have shown that the way women and men address colleagues when in a position of power differs. Men in a professional environment naturally adopt an authoritative language, whereas women tend not to portray the same confidence. To change this, a few subtle changes are all that is needed. Firstly, using words such as 'I think' and 'I feel' are seen as weak words, they instantly reduce authority. Ellen Petry Leanse, a former executive at Google and Apple recently wrote that the use of 'permission' words such as 'just' convey a subtle message of subordination, she thinks striking these from a phrase almost always

clarifies and strengthens the message.

Boost body language

In a similar way, body language has been proven to impact how authoritative a woman is perceived to be in the workplace or in a boardroom. Deborah Gruenfield from Stanford University believes that women struggle with an inner conflict: likability versus competency. Gruenfield believes that women can overcome this through their body language. There are a number of traits leaders and people in high status jobs have in common. One is the ability to own any given space, they take up room and spreading themselves out. Simple adjustments such as reaching your hand out further when you go for the handshake, standing taller or sitting forward with your arms on the table in a meeting can make all the difference when making first impressions and conveying confidence in a professional setting.

Don't micromanage

Micromanaging dents a team's morale by establishing a tone of mistrust—and it limits employees' ability to grow. With minimal accountability and maximum interference, people are unlikely to trust their own decisions. To avoid this, it is essential for businesses to have an

effective appraisal system in place, which allows both employees and managers to reflect on their behaviour. Micromanagers should be encouraged to think about why they micromanage, the benefits of not micromanaging, and to step back.

Focus on your talents

As an employee you must take a look at yourself and identify your own strengths and areas for improvement. Come to terms with them and develop them because these are what make you yourself and, ultimately, you are your best asset. For businesses, there should be a specific focus on encouraging and investing in people's individual talents, utilising them to their fullest.

It is also important to remember that while lack of confidence is a more widely felt problem for women, it does affect men too. Not everybody's confidence will look the same: businesses should also acknowledge that the 'softer skills' such as negotiation, coaching and nurturing, are crucial to business success and should be viewed as fundamental leadership skills. The more we do that the more likely we will see a wider range of personalities – and women – in managerial positions, and people will feel more confident in possessing such abilities. Adeline Ginn is general counsel at Angel Trains and Founder of Women in Rail

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