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## What Is Holding Women Back?

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We have all felt that gut wrenching feeling that comes with walking into a room of executives awaiting your presentation; or the one that puts you off approaching your line manager to discuss a promotion. Fear is not uncommon in business. Business is about taking risks, and 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, this is much easier for one half of the population than the other. Its study found that females have a greater level of fear of failure than their male counterparts when it comes to seizing business opportunities. Often, this is due to women questioning their ability to identify, assess and act on an opportunity.

The International Labour Organization found that the number of women in senior and middle management positions around the world has increased over the last 20 years, but women are still under-represented in top management. Yes, it can be argued that there are still not enough flexible options for women higher up the career ladder, and that there is an emotional tug between a woman's home and work life. But there is also a wider issue at hand.

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Most women who are in business today began their careers with smaller responsibilities and progressed upwards when their confidence levels matched their capabilities. Studies believe this is because most women don't naturally dispose themselves to higher positions in the same way men do. 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?

It's not just the problem of women being too sceptical of what they can achieve; it's also that men haven't been sceptical enough to understand this. A Women Corp Survey has shown that whilst 51.7% of women think lacking confidence holds them back - only 17.9% of men consider that this could even be a problem. 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.

### Fighting back

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 on 12 out of 16 competencies. These included "takes initiative," "drives for results" and "stretches for results," all traditional measures of effective leadership.

However, for both women and men, self-confidence is the most critical for business success. If you don't 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.

But as much as many of us may like to - you can't eradicate self doubt overnight. It is a long process that involves facing up to insecurities and changing approaches. You must take a look at yourself and identify your own strengths and weaknesses, come to terms with them and develop them because these are what make you yourself and, ultimately, you are your best asset. Then build your own self-confidence by taking little steps out of your comfort zone and doing things that challenge and scare you. When I founded Women in Rail, I had no idea how people in the industry would react. I was opening myself to criticism, but I remained true to myself and put my fears aside. It was the right thing to do because the reaction was overwhelmingly positive; it is now a big part of my life that puts a special spring in my step and helps other women in the industry too.

The only thing holding women back is living inside our heads - it's time to banish those demons.

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