

# Women in Leadership: Building Confidence

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Anju had worked hard to earn a leadership role within her company. But despite her achievements, she struggled to make her voice heard among the executive team, which was mostly made up of men.

She had lots of innovative ideas but lacked the confidence to present them effectively – when she spoke, she came across as uncertain, often starting her contributions with “I think that” or “I feel like” and ending them with comments like “does that make sense?” This didn't go unnoticed, and the team began to doubt her suggestions, further silencing her voice in important discussions.

This inability to influence, especially when she knew the team was about to make the wrong decision, was frustrating. Things took a turn when her boss, noticing her reluctance, sat her down and told her that in order to get ahead, she'd need to be more assertive.

Taking this feedback to heart, Anju sought the guidance of the only female member of the executive team, hoping to find a mentor in her. This senior colleague, understanding the unique challenges faced by women in leadership, agreed to act as Anju's mentor.

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Through her mentorship, Anju learned important lessons about valuing her own ideas, the importance of speaking up, and how to contribute to business discussions with confidence. She was encouraged to share her thoughts with conviction, ensuring her voice was heard and respected. This newfound strength was not built overnight but through consistent practice and the supportive guidance of her mentor, Anju's confidence grew and grew.

As time passed, Anju's contributions began to positively shape the team's decisions. Her ideas, once overlooked, now led to strategies that really benefited the company. Eventually, the very team that had intimidated her became her peers, as she was invited to join the executive team, a testament to her growth and the pivotal role confidence plays in leadership.

Anju's journey from a hesitant leader to a confident executive shows how mentorship and self-belief can transform challenges into stepping stones for success. It's a story that reminds us all that to lead effectively, you must first believe in your own voice.

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In the professional world, confidence is a major barrier for many women, often blocking their path to leadership roles and hindering their performance once they're in high-up positions. In fact, in 2022, the Harvard Business Review interviewed 36 women leaders and found that 33 of them – that's almost 92 per cent – said that a lack of confidence had been a major barrier to progressing in their careers. Thirty men were also interviewed, and not a single one mentioned confidence as a factor that was holding them back. [1]

Without believing in themselves, women might miss the opportunities to advance or excel in leadership. Today's session, "Women in Leadership – Building Confidence," addresses these critical issues head-on.

We'll explore why confidence is crucial and how impostor syndrome can undermine it. More importantly, we'll provide practical, actionable strategies to help women overcome these hurdles, building a foundation of self-belief that can propel them to success and enable them to lead with confidence and conviction.

### **So, what is impostor syndrome?**

There's a lot of talk these days about how many women who are leading teams and projects feel like they're not quite up to the job, even when they're doing brilliantly. This feeling, known as impostor syndrome, along with a bit of a confidence wobble, can really stand in the way of women getting those top jobs or excelling when they already have them. [2] It's a bit of a pickle because the more you doubt yourself, the more others might too, especially in executive teams.

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Impostor Syndrome isn't just a buzzword – it's a psychological phenomenon where individuals doubt their accomplishments, no matter how successful they've been in their careers. They are often worried about being exposed as a fraud – just waiting for others to figure out what they don't know what they're doing.

This syndrome disproportionately affects women leaders, who may feel undeserving of their positions [3]. The root of impostor syndrome often lies in the complex interplay between societal expectations, personal insecurities, and the false belief that one's success is due to luck rather than skill, effort, or qualifications. It's a shadow that can follow even the most accomplished women.

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## **Crisis of Confidence and Its Impact on Women in Leadership**

Sometimes, who society thinks should be a leader can make it even tougher for women to feel confident in going for those leadership roles. Plus, there's this tricky situation where folks might not automatically trust women's leadership as much, which isn't fair and adds to the whole confidence thing.

But, the good news is that with the right support, like mentoring and networking, and by women backing themselves a bit more, there's a lot that can be done to overcome these obstacles.

The crisis of confidence among women leaders often manifests as a relentless pursuit of perfection, highlighted by societal pressures and stereotypes. This pressure to be perfect can be damaging, leading to overthinking, overworking, and the inevitable feeling of never being enough.

It's a cycle that affects not only personal well-being but also professional growth, as women may hesitate to take on new challenges or assert their ideas, fearing judgment or failure. This crisis stunts leadership potential and contributes to the underrepresentation of women in top roles.

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So now that we know all about the problem – impostor syndrome in women leadership, the crisis of confidence – what can we do to fix it, or at least to make things better in our own careers to support the women in leadership positions at the organisations where we work?

First, acknowledge impostor syndrome. Recognise that feeling like an impostor is common among high achievers. Understand it's a sign of your conscientiousness, not incompetence.

Next, have open conversations about this stuff. Share your experiences with peers or mentors. You'll find that many share your feelings, which can normalise them and boost your confidence. Knowing you're not alone always helps.

Set realistic goals. Cut yourself some slack once in a while! Aim for progress, not perfection. Celebrate small victories and understand that every step forward is a win.

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Next, and this is a big one – seek mentorship! A mentor who has faced similar challenges can provide invaluable guidance and reassurance and can help coach you through situations you may find uncomfortable, like presenting to the board or executive team.

Try to make a change in your workplace and promote collaborative learning. Encourage a culture where sharing and learning from failures and successes is valued.

And finally, empower yourself and your colleagues through education. Support and participate in programmes that focus on overcoming impostor syndrome and building leadership skills.

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The path to leadership is neither straight nor clear of obstacles, especially for women. However, understanding the nature of these obstacles, particularly impostor syndrome and the crisis of confidence, is the first step towards overcoming them.

Let today be the beginning of a transformative phase in your leadership journey. Embrace the strategies we've discussed, seek support when needed, and remember your contributions are valuable and necessary.

As we wrap up, reflect on your achievements, set your sights on new horizons, and walk the path of leadership with confidence and resilience. Together, we can forge a future where women leaders not only thrive but also pave the way for the next generation.

[1] How Confidence Is Weaponized Against Women, Darren T. Baker and Juliet Bourke (2022)  
<https://hbr.org/2022/10/how-confidence-is-weaponized-against-women>

[2] Are Women Leaders Facing a Crisis of Confidence?, Kanina Blanchard (2024)  
<https://www.ivey.uwo.ca/impact/read/2024/03/are-women-leaders-facing-a-crisis-in-confidence/>

[3] The Imposter Syndrome: A Gender Neutral Phenomenon or a Women-only Issue? Diane Shawe (2023)  
<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/imposter-syndrome-gender-neutral-phenomenon-women-only-diane-shawe/>