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The Four Traits of Confidence: Growth Mindset, Courage, Grit and Self-Compassion

By Amy Kosterlitz

The actress Mae West, known for her sass and savvy, once declared, “A dame who knows the ropes isn’t likely to get tied up.” How true! I love this quote because it sets the stage for my goal in this article: to show women attorneys some of “the ropes” about developing confidence and to inspire them to become bolder.

My decades of experience in law practice and coaching attorneys have shown that genuine self-confidence is critical for success and satisfaction in the legal profession. Yet many attorneys, and women in particular, don’t begin their careers brimming with confidence. The good news is that confidence can be learned.

My commitment to helping women attorneys improve their confidence comes from my own struggle with lack of confidence when I began law practice in 1980. More than thirty years later, my sense of urgency has only increased, as too many highly capable women still leave the legal profession because they believe they lack “the right stuff” to succeed. While gender discrimination and inflexible work policies also present barriers to women’s advancement, this article focuses on how women can build the self-assurance necessary to be more effective and fulfilled in the practice of law.

The Need for a Practical Approach to Developing Confidence

Confidence can be defined as “the belief that one can accomplish what she sets out to do,” and it is demonstrated by taking action towards goals, despite obstacles. Although this definition is simple, finding confidence is not always easy.

Books such as *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg and *The Confidence Code* by Katty Kay and Claire Shipman confirm that confidence is key for career success. Yet their advice to “lean in” or “be tougher” can be daunting when you don’t know how. As my coaching clients put it, “I know I need to develop a thicker skin, but I haven’t a clue how” or “I’m tired of being told to lean in when I feel like I’m already leaning so far I’ll fall over—what can I do?”

My approach is to break confidence down into four key behavioral traits and then to provide strategies for developing them. My paradigm of four confidence traits builds on the ABA’s “Grit Project,” with its focus on “grit” and “growth mindset,” and adds two other essential traits.

The Importance of Confidence to Success and Satisfaction

When you ask people what it takes to be successful in a career, many would say that it takes a lot of talent, hard work, and perhaps some luck. Not so, it turns out! The consensus among the experts is that confidence trumps competence as the key trait for career success, (assuming a basic threshold of competence).

The research cited in *The Confidence Code* shows that when people think they're good at something and radiate confidence, regardless of how good they actually are, they display verbal and nonverbal behavior that favorably influences people-- expansive body language, lower vocal tone, speaking often, and making eye contact. This ability to impress others is correlated with career success and explains why confident, but less competent, employees are often promoted over their more able peers.

But, wait, couldn't projecting confidence when you lack competence lead to over-confidence and bad results? Certainly overconfidence can be a liability if you "puff up" and can't deliver. But apparently a little overconfidence is a good thing. It's only when the gap between confidence and competence grows too big that it becomes a problem.

Confidence is also key to increasing one's enjoyment of work. Confidence contributes to positive feelings of self-possession, autonomy, and control. Confidence also helps with the assertiveness to ask for improvements in one's job situation and to pursue career opportunities.

The Confidence Gap for Women

Even highly accomplished women demonstrate a "confidence gap" when compared to their male counterparts. *The Confidence Code* cites as an example Christine Lagarde, head of the International Monetary Fund, who acknowledges that despite her success, she still struggles with self-doubt. *Lean In* author and Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg admits to feeling the "imposter syndrome," saying "there are still days I wake up feeling like a fraud, not sure I should be where I am."

Some commonly cited manifestations of women's lack of confidence are not speaking up in meetings, not taking credit for achievements, not volunteering for challenging assignments, and not asking for promotions or raises. Obviously this can present problems for women attorneys who want to be leaders, principals, or rainmakers.

Theories abound for why women often lack confidence and assertiveness. Literature on gender and behavior points to many factors, including the limiting effect posed by gender stereotypes of women as "nurturing" rather than "tough;" the female tendency to value relationships over competition and to be "people-pleasers," rather than assertive; and early socialization, where girls lack the "rough and tumble" of playground behavior and hence lack experience with competition and resilience. This literature also recognizes that women face a challenging "double bind." If they don't assert themselves, they're seen as inadequate. If they do, they're seen as pushy.

In addition to the obstacles posed by women's own self-limiting beliefs and gender stereotypes, the demeaning behaviors directed towards women can negatively affect women's confidence. Recent research by Dr. Arin Reeves documents and labels those behaviors: The pervasive interruption of women by men in meetings is "manterruption." Men explaining to women things that we already

know is “mansplaining.” Men taking credit for women’s ideas is “bro-propritation.” See *Yellow Paper Series: Mansplaining, Interruption and Bropropriation; Gender Bias and the Pervasive Interruption of Women* (Nextions Original Research 4/2015). These labels underscore the challenges women face in the workplace. Hopefully, with greater awareness of these negative behaviors, things will change and we can call the transformation a “man-i-cure.”

The Four Traits of Confidence

Trait 1: Growth Mindset—the belief that with effort you can succeed.

“Growth mindset” is a term coined by Dr. Carol Dweck, a psychologist whose research demonstrates that a person’s mindset about her abilities is the critical factor in success. In her book, *Mindset*, Dweck suggests that people have either a “fixed mindset”—a belief that intelligence is immutable— or a “growth mindset”—faith in their ability to succeed through effort.

In an experiment, Dweck found that women graduate students with a growth mindset performed better in math and science courses than did those with a fixed mindset. Many of the students with the fixed mindset dropped out, convinced that they didn’t have what it took to succeed. Those with a growth mindset assumed that they just needed to put in more effort. By doing so, they achieved academic success. Dweck’s research demonstrates the power of a growth mindset to help people achieve positive outcomes.

Trait 2: Courage—the “heart” to take action to achieve your goals.

Courage enables action, even in the face of fear and self-doubt. Courage comes from the French word “coeur” meaning “heart.” Courage is having the “heart” to take risks. Psychologist Dr. Brene Brown, in her TED talk on the Power of Vulnerability and her book, *Daring Greatly*, describes courage as acting “whole-heartedly.” Brown explains that courage is not being “macho,” but the willingness to put yourself out there for who you are, and to risk vulnerability and failure. People often think of courage as being strong, but courage is what allows us to do things even when we don’t feel strong.

Executive coach Tara Mohr, in her book *Playing Big*, discusses how we experience and label fear. She describes many talented women who have big goals like starting a business, but who hang back because of fear and self-doubt. Mohr posits that we can increase confidence by distinguishing between bad and good fear. Bad fear is the over-reactive, irrational fear that stems from imagined worst-case scenarios—for example, that you’ll say something stupid and get fired. Good fear is the excited form of fear when we rise to a challenge or inhabit a larger space than we used to—it’s “good scary.” The more we can ignore the “bad,” over-reactive fear, and embrace the “good” fear by reframing that fear as excitement, the easier it will be to have the courage to rise to challenges and take action.

Trait 3: Grit—the ability to persevere when the going gets tough.

“Grit” is defined by psychologist Dr. Angela Lee Duckworth in her TED talk as “passion and perseverance for very long-term goals.” Duckworth’s interest in grit began when she taught middle-school math and noticed that the brainiest students were often outperformed by the students

who studied harder. As a graduate student, her research confirmed that grit outranked talent as the best predictor of success.

Duckworth explains that grit not only involves hard work, but persistence over time—viewing your career as a marathon rather than a sprint. Grit is not about “grinding away” at things, but working hard over time because of a passion and with a purpose.

Interestingly, the literature on grit notes that passion doesn’t always precede grit. So, for example, you may not love playing an instrument when you first take it up, or you may not be a great lawyer from day one. Most of us don’t like to do things that we’re not good at. But once you have practiced enough, you may find aspects of practicing law that you feel passionate about, and this passion will act as fuel to make you want to become even better.

Trait 4: Self-Compassion—handling your missteps with kindness.

Self-compassion is being kind to yourself when you fail or make mistakes. Psychologist Dr. Kristin Neff, in her book, *Self-Compassion*, notes the benefits of comforting yourself when you “mess up” and the downside of ignoring your pain with a “stiff upper lip” mentality. She shows how judging yourself harshly for missteps adds self-inflicted misery to an already difficult situation. Neff suggests that people practice self-compassion by talking to themselves in the same kind way they would to a friend or a child who faces a tough situation. A simple example of exercising self-compassion is acknowledging to yourself that “this is really difficult for me right now” and asking “how can I comfort or care for myself in this moment?”

Neff explains that self-compassion is not synonymous with coddling oneself or making excuses. Rather it is an ability to accept difficulty and to comfort oneself in the face of failure or criticism. But we’re not taught to offer ourselves compassion when we fail. Instead, we’re taught to deal with ourselves harshly—to tell ourselves to “buck up.” In our efforts to drive ourselves towards success, our harsh inner critics make our struggles more painful.

Another advantage of self-compassion is that it decreases our sufferings when our failings make us feel isolated and inadequate. If we recognize that personal inadequacy and suffering are part of the shared human experience, we can be less judgmental and ashamed about our personal failings.

Strategies for Developing the Four Confidence Traits

Muster a Growth Mindset

- Assume that you’re capable. Have faith that with effort you can succeed. Recall the children’s book about “the little engine that could” saying “I think I can, I think I can....”
- Don’t let perfectionism or fear of failure keep you from trying something new or difficult. Attaining mastery of a new skill often requires the risk of failure—a process known as “failing forward.”

Channel Courage

- Decide to embrace action even when you're scared. "Feel the fear and do it anyway." Use a mantra, such as Nike's slogan, "just do it," or visualize a powerful image like "your inner warrior."
- Practice courage by exhibiting confident behavior. "Fake it until you make it." Find role models and try to act as they might in a difficult situation.
- Use confident body language and speech patterns. Dr. Amy Cuddy, a psychologist, explains in her TED talk how striking power poses can help one feel more confident and project confidence to others.

Grow Grit

- Increase your ability to persevere by tapping into passion and purpose. Envision important goals and the rewards of making the effort to achieve them.
- View criticism as valuable information, not a referendum on your self-worth. Use criticism to grow rather than wilt.
- Keep perspective, and don't blow failure out of proportion. Mindfulness practices and meditation can be good ways of calming down and regaining perspective.

Study Self-Compassion

- Rather than beating yourself up for mistakes, practice treating yourself with the same kindness you would offer to a friend or a child in a difficult situation.
- Recognize and curtail negative self-talk and recriminations, which increase suffering. Listen to the nurturing voice of your "inner mentor," rather than the harsh voice of your "inner critic."
- Gain perspective by remembering that humans are fallible, and others make mistakes, too. Allow yourself to "join the human race."

How Firms and Organizations Can Help Women Attorneys Develop Confidence

It's not enough for employers to ask women attorneys to "lean in" and learn the traits of confidence. Organizations need to meet them halfway by supporting the development of these traits.

The motivation for organizations to do this is twofold. First, by helping women become confident, they will better retain women lawyers and plug the "leaky pipeline." Second, the research shows that having women in leadership positions positively impacts the bottom line. *See Memo to Corporate America, More Women Leaders Means a Better Bottom Line*, by Bryce Covert, Forbes Magazine (2012).

Here are some ways I've found that law firms and other legal organizations can support the development of confidence.

1. Create a “growth mindset” culture, supportive of confidence development

When I coach women attorneys on confidence and leadership, I always seek to involve their organizations in creating a supportive culture. Organizations need to find opportunities for women attorneys to practice more confident behaviors in safe settings and support them through the trial-and-error process of learning.

2. Educate lawyers about the importance of confidence and the obstacles women face

Education about the confidence challenges women face is critical to helping women attorneys overcome obstacles. Many supervisors don't know enough about this to help women attorneys who are struggling. It's also crucial to educate newer women attorneys about the importance of confidence and how to develop it.

3. Provide role models, mentors and coaches who support women in developing confidence

Firms have gotten better at providing mentors, but mentoring rarely focuses on confidence development. It can help to provide a mentor who has faced and overcome similar obstacles. Leadership coaching can also help women grow their confidence and leadership abilities.

Conclusion

By learning the “ropes” of confidence, women attorneys can be happier and more successful in what Mae West might have called “the legal rodeo.” Confidence can be learned, and there are effective strategies for overcoming self-doubt and fear. While your fears may not completely disappear, confidence can allow you to be bold in spite of them. So venture forth, be growth-y and gritty, have courage and compassion. The sky's the limit.

Amy Kosterlitz, J.D., P.C.C., is a coach, consultant, and facilitator in Seattle, WA. This article is based on her May, 2015 speech to the ABA Women Rainmakers Section in Seattle, co-sponsored by the ABA's Grit Project.