

THE BIG

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Confidence is crucial at work and women often find it hardest to shine, write **CATHERINE FOX** and **JANE SOUTHWARD**.

GO BACK AND RE-ENTER THE room. You have dropped your head. Remember to look straight ahead, and stay relaxed. Do you know what else you can do better? Barbara Robertson is in her element – teaching 15 legal minds how to walk and talk with confidence.

Your voice, she says, should leave the mouth and follow an arc to the ceiling before dropping to the back of the room, with clarity and gravitas. The key is to “honour your punctuation”, which Robertson soon explains means using shorter sentences and making time to pause at every full stop. When it comes to looking confident, she says, practice is the key. It involves freeing your neck, balancing your head and lengthening your spine so your body is strong yet relaxed.

A lot of the physical work is based on the Alexander technique as we are urged to “claim your space”.

The session, supported by the Continuing Professional Development team at the Law Society of NSW, feels uncomfortable. We take it in turns walking into the room with our shoulders wide, our spines long and our heads up. Later, in the three-hour session, we practise public speaking. Some are asked to walk around the room visualising they are kicking sand along a beach, others have to lie upside down and look at the ceiling to overcome their nerves.

Within an hour we are each other’s critics – offering feedback to other participants. It’s incredibly powerful and, in watching each other improve, we develop our own confidence.

Behaving with low confidence doesn’t always mean women lack belief in their own skills, says Robertson, who has been running communication skills for women workshops for law firms for 12 years. It’s often clear, she says, that the

majority attending her sessions are quite assured of their abilities and skills.

“That’s the part of the package they have got. Technically they have got these skills,” she explains. “It’s more about showing them how to get around the covert attitudes. Especially in law, I’m not sure whether women are lacking in confidence or they’ve had it knocked out of them because the behaviour patterns of men are so strong.

“It’s an historical pattern and it’s been well engrained. It’s all about the rules of a man’s world, which ends up dominating. What some women lawyers do is mimic the physiology of men, to get recognition and show they are strong. I tell them they don’t have to do that. That’s the breakthrough for them.”

Claims that women are lacking in confidence, particularly in the workplace, triggered a lively debate on this perennial topic a few months ago. A book was released, *The Confidence Code: The Science and Art of Self-Assurance – What Women Should Know*, by US journalists Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, providing research documenting a female deficit in this crucial quality.

“There is a particular crisis for women – a vast confidence gap that separates the sexes,” the authors argue. “Compared with men, women don’t consider themselves as ready for promotions, they predict they’ll do worse on tests, and they generally underestimate their abilities. This disparity stems from factors ranging from upbringing to biology.”

Confidence, the authors claim, has just as much to do with success as competence, and women are missing a trick in the climb up the corporate ladder if they don’t get better at playing the game. But while many agree there is a gap, the jury is out on whether this

is simply a case for more assertiveness training or a sharper focus on changing the environments that help create the deficit in the first place.

Kathryn Fagg, director and former senior executive at BlueScope and Linfox, says she has noticed differences in the way men and women approach their careers. Sometimes, lack of confidence or a feeling they are not up to a new role hampers women in a very tangible way. It is particularly important for women to take risks and seek out opportunities for growth – even if they don’t feel quite ready, she says.

Among the points raised by Kay and Shipman, Fagg notes, was the fact women tend to think they need to meet 100 per cent of the criteria for a role, whereas men are comfortable with just 50 per cent.

“Guess who is more likely to get promoted?” she asks.

Apart from adjusting individual behaviour, the confidence gap can be addressed by women reaching out to help and sponsor other women, according to Fagg, and role models make a big impact.

“It is important that men and women can see people who are doing well and are enjoying themselves in their career,” she says. Assessing and changing the way corporate environments operate is also needed. “There is no doubt that women are looking for a more inclusive culture in which they have confidence that their style and way of doing things will be valued,” Fagg says.



While a growing body of research shows how a lack of confidence emerges in women's decisions and actions, the reasons and remedies are not straightforward. Inflexible corporate environments and practices, rather than just individual behaviour, may be the main culprits.

Robertson says many women find they are ignored or that their ideas are picked up by others without recognition, and they get poor feedback in performance appraisals when it comes to areas such as leadership qualities (and confidence levels).

There is a sense of relief from many of the women when they realise they don't need to act tough and can identify their own approach to confidence and credibility, Robertson says.

"The most powerful thing you can do is be still," she says. "Closing your lips between sentences can make people seem more deliberate and confident."

The danger with addressing a confidence deficit is to avoid going from one extreme to the other. Hubris is not the answer for women, as it is every bit as damaging as low confidence: in fact it's not so long ago that over-confidence was being blamed for the global financial crisis.

Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick, a former partner at a top-tier firm, says women don't appear to have an innate problem with confidence when they are students.

"When women are doing their degrees and even getting their first jobs they certainly seem to have enough confidence," Broderick says.

"But the dynamics and practices in some workplaces can have an impact on women's careers. When you are not part of the dominant group in an organisation, particularly over time, you will necessarily feel less confident about what you do and where you can get to." Many professional women are working in male-dominated workplaces where success is measured against a traditional



From top: Barbara Robertson, Kathryn Fagg, Elizabeth Broderick and Carolyn Dickason.

set of norms and behaviours. In the majority of these environments, confident behaviour is still defined by a narrow and stereotypically alpha male version – the classic chest-thumping, assertive and loud personality.

The good news is the culture of many firms is shifting and differences in confidence levels are less marked between the genders now than in the past, according to consultants working in the sector. Carolyn Dickason, regional director with recruitment firm Hays, says her legal consultants are mostly former lawyers and they do not observe much difference between male and female candidates these days.

"I do think things have shifted, even since five or eight years ago," Dickason says. "People have been given more tools to express their abilities and more opportunities, and there are more female partners. I have to say when we are interviewing for top-tier firms there's hardly a difference between men and women and they focus on the same things."

Confidence in the workplace can be affected by a range of factors, and may be contingent on circumstances and even different phases in your career, Dickason says.

"There can be peaks and troughs in your confidence. Women returning from maternity leave can experience a drop in confidence, but women will talk about this more than men. It's very rare to hear a man speak about this."

Besides, overt confidence is not always the right quality for some jobs. "If you look at a transactional role like M&A you want the candidate to be assertive, but in family law the qualities would be different."

That said, confidence should not be perceived as arrogance, and a top woman in the law who is confident can run the risk of being labelled aggressive, she says.

"What we find when we are interviewing candidates is that some women will give more examples and a man will take it as a given that we know they were the lead lawyer on the case or the outcomes were amazing, whereas women will press that point and they will be perceived as aggressive or arrogant." **LSJ**