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Confidence and the Gender Gap: 14 Tips for Women in Tech

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Last year I did a talk for DevTO for International Women’s Day (#IWDTO) on the importance of confidence for closing the gender gap. The talk was well received but short, and I promised to publish my full list of tips that I had originally prepped. Since the talk I have been approached by other women with questions on the same topic, so I’m hoping this list is helpful for others out there — or at least useful for discussion. For those of you who were at IWDTO, sorry it took a year to get this to you!

Yes, Confidence Is An Issue

During the Q&A portion of the IWDTO talk, I was asked why I decided to focus my talk on confidence when women are facing bigger issues. The woman asking the question cited how she’s never been invited to the table, so having confidence doesn’t really matter — there’s simply no forum for her to speak up in. I feel this is often the response whenever confidence is brought up; can self-esteem really solve deep rooted gender gap problems like sexual harassment, pay disparity, stereotypes, and bringing more women into tech? In other words, is confidence really a problem?

My answer is an unequivocal yes. Yes, confidence is a problem, and it can help close the gender gap. Yes, because there is a [tremendous amount of research](https://www.amazon.ca/Happiness-Advantage-Principles-Psychology-Performance/dp/0307591549) showing that confidence fuels success, no matter what you’re working on. Yes, because confidence is something that every person can control, and it beats taking the view of a victim. Yes, because confidence leads to happiness, health, and more fulfilling lives, which better positions women to fight for equality. I’m not saying that confidence will solve every problem, but you’re better off having it than not.

As I answered in the Q&A, I liken the problem to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. If you don’t have food on the table or a roof over your head, you’re not going to care about the gender gap — you’d be worrying about getting any job before looking to get one that has equal opportunities for women. Simply put, women working at organizations at different stages of the “hierarchy” will have different needs. An organization needs to remove sexual harassment and biases to attract and maintain women employees before it can develop pay parity. Then, as more women to begin to work there, it can start developing women into management positions, which is required before the proverbial glass ceiling can be broken.

My plea to other women is to understand that the needs of others are different. In my hierarchy model, confidence may be more useful to those at the top of the pyramid than those at the bottom, but that’s no reason to be down on it. We need to be working on solving the problems at every level of the hierarchy if we’re to succeed. If somebody had come to IWDTO asking why we’re working on gender equality in the Toronto tech scene when there are starving girls out there… what would your response be? How would you feel? Starving girls are presumably a bigger problem than gender equality in the Toronto tech scene, but yet everyone that night was gathered to work on the latter problem. Probably because it is what we’re experiencing, and it is what we’re in a position to solve.

We all have something different and unique to contribute, so let’s be supportive!

The Tips

Ok, so here is the full list of my tips for developing confidence, furthering your career, and hopefully, helping to close the gender gap. Please note that this list is based off what I have commonly encountered in my personal workplace experiences and that 1) it may not be applicable to everyone and 2) may be just as applicable to men as to women.

1. **Don’t apologize if you didn’t do anything wrong.** I’m Canadian and a common stereotype about Canadians is that we’re all nice. When somebody bumps into us on the street, we apologize, even if it’s not our fault. I personally love that type of humble, be good attitude; it shows you’re able to own up to mistakes, and spreads through a butterfly effect. But in the workplace that type of apology is often mis-interpreted. If you say “sorry the project is over budget” or “sorry the report wasn’t delivered on time” just because you feel you could have stepped in or done something more, the problem is that others might actually think the problem was with you, and that you’ve made a gross mistake. It starts a conversation on what you should have done, and how you’re not good enough, even if nothing was wrong in the first place. So use some wise judgement on your apologies, and don’t apologize if you didn’t do anything wrong.
2. **Join the conversation.** Here’s something that I’ve seen play out over and over in my work experiences. A new initiative, let’s call it Project X, is starting, and I walk over to a coworker to talk about it. The conversation generates tons of new ideas, excitement grows, and more people join in the conversation. We start mapping out plans on a whiteboard in an open office area. The next day, a woman on the team will come to me in private and say, “I feel I’ve been excluded from Project X”. And I’ll ask, “How so?”. And they’ll say “Because I wasn’t invited to join in yesterday’s conversation”. And then I’ll explain that save for the one person whom I initially approached, nobody had been invited to join in. The others — who happened to be all men — jumped in on their own. Open workspaces and cultures allow for that, but for whatever reason, even in an open environment, women are looking for permission to join conversations. When I dig deeper it’s usually because women feel it’s not their place, but that attitude doesn’t help. It reinforces the mindset in other people that you don’t belong on that shiny new project. Which brings me to…
3. **Market yourself.** It’s your job to build your own brand and ensure that others in your company know about your contributions, not your boss’. Don’t succumb to what Sheryl Sandburg has aptly named Tiara syndrome; it isn’t realistic to expect that you will be rewarded a tiara simply by doing amazing work. Amazing work that is unseen is perceived to be nothing, and perception is reality. I’ve encountered many women who balk at the idea of marketing themselves because it can feel inauthentic, egotistical, or sly, but it’s all about your approach. Telling coworkers about what you’re working on, especially if it’s relevant to what they’re doing, won’t be seen as a negative, self-serving thing. So give it a shot! The worse that can happen is that you fail, which brings me to…
4. **Fail more often.** When I make mistakes at work it sometimes bothers me so much that I go home and vent to my husband, not so that he can sympathize, but so that he can comfort me and tell me I’m doing ok. What he usually tells me is that I don’t fail enough. It turns out the mistakes I make are less frequent and smaller than the ones he makes, but he’s not half as bothered as I am. The problem with being uncomfortable with failure is that you end up not reaching for opportunities, leaving those opportunities to be snatched up by those who may not be as qualified, simply because they are more comfortable than you are. When I was working at Google, their HR research showed consistently that women who put their hands up for promotions were almost 100% ready, while men were only 80–90% ready, and as a result women were getting promoted later than men. The solution? Failing more often, so that we realize failure is ok, and that we can and should reach for opportunities that challenge us. And you know what helps with failing more often? My next point:

5. **Realize people are thinking about themselves, not you**. One big reason why I’m bothered about failing is that I’m worried about what others think of me. And I’ve heard this from many other women as well; we want to have a solid reputation, the one we deserve based on all the hard work we put in. The key is realizing that mistakes won’t ruin your reputation as badly as you think they will. Why? Because other people aren’t thinking about you! People spend time thinking about themselves. So while you’re spending all day fretting over what the team thinks about you, the other team members are fretting about what you think of them. And the day you’ve become such a big hot shot that everybody on the team is thinking about you, well, you’ve already made it. Stop worrying about what others think!

6. **Act like you belong.** When I was working on the IWDTO talk I had a person from my team put together some questions on the “women in tech” topic to get some inspiration. One of the questions was: “Do you have to act like a man to succeed?” I personally don’t think you should feel like you need to be a man to succeed, but I do feel that you should act like you belong, even if you don’t feel like you do at the moment. For example, if you’re always acting as the team secretary by taking notes and making coffee runs, or acting as the “mom” by baking cookies and giving first aid, people will start treating you like you’re the secretary or mom. If being the secretary or mom is your primary job (those are fine professions), then great, but if you’re a woman in tech with other aspirations, then being treated that way will degrade your confidence further as people ask you to service them when you should be doing something else. So don’t fall into that trap — play the role you want to have!

7. **Use body language**. Did you know that holding a power pose for just 2 minutes can make you more confident? If you haven’t seen it yet, watch Amy Cuddy’s [TED Talk](https://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are?language=en) on body language. Just small tweaks to how your approach your work can have you feeling more confident in no time. Amy’s personal story on “faking it until you make it” is also super inspiring and definitely well worth watching.

8. **Find mentorship.** If you delve into the literature there are plenty of books on how to find mentors. Mentors are great; everybody needs a good coach to help them get to the next level of career development. The problem is that many of us look for mentors the way we’d look for spouses; we want a perfect person, someone who knows our functional area and can commit to a long term relationship. This mentality makes it unduly hard for us to get what we’re really looking for, which is mentorship, not a mentor. We need to stop thinking that coaching comes from just one person in a structured environment, and reach for coaching from people we admire in whatever form we can. When I was at Google, Tara Walpert-Levy came into the office to do a fireside chat one day, and I was so inspired by her that I asked for an hour of her time for career advice. I only had one session with her, but it did me a ton of good. So focus on finding mentorship, not just a mentor.

9. **Learn continuously.** When I worked at eBay I met some amazing people. It’s been 6 years since I left eBay, but I continue to be amazed by the group of colleagues that I had then, because many of them have gone on to hold leadership roles at great companies like Airbnb, Facebook, Shopify, Paypal, and LVMH. Whenever I catch up with these folks throughout the years, the thing that always strikes me is how they’ve all evolved. The reason why they’ve all done so well is that they’ve continuously pushed themselves to learn and to be better, and to embrace change. In this day and age, especially in tech, there is nothing more demoralizing than having skills that have become obsolete, so get out there — [read voraciously](http://www.businessinsider.com/bill-gates-favorite-books-2015-10), network, take some courses, and raise up your hand for some new projects.

10. **Drop one-sided career thinking.** When I was still an undergraduate student at the University of Waterloo, I ran a technology conference called CUTC. One year, we had Helene Armitage in as a [keynote](http://www.itbusiness.ca/news/undergraduate-conference-lets-students-see-it-up-close/1819), and I was super excited to meet a woman who had broken the glass ceiling to become a VP of technology at IBM. When her keynote ended and Q&A started, there was an unusally long line up of students wanting to ask questions. I wanted to ask something too but couldn’t think of anything beyond asking her career related questions, which I was too shy to ask in public, so I stayed out of it (I was very reserved back then). But I listened to every question with rapt attention, and started noticing that other people were asking career questions as well, mostly girls. The guys on the other hand were asking about the industry and tech in general — IBM’s latest technologies, where Helene thinks IBM is going, and what industry trends to watch out for. And in the years since then, I’ve noticed a similar phenomenon, which I have now dubbed the “one-sided career thinking”. Developing a career isn’t just about developing yourself, it’s also about developing the product, industry, or company that you’re a part of. But many women focus on the the self development part only. At my 1:1s at work, women ask me how to be good at their jobs, while men ask me about company strategy and specific projects. On LinkedIn, women reach out to me for career advice, while men reach out regarding partnerships, sales opportunities, or to talk shop. So what do I tell the women? They need to drop this one-sided blindness and start thinking about building something of lasting value — be it a new product or business or website — and the career stuff will come along with it. If you stick to building a career for a career’s sake…well, what’s the point in that? But of course, it’s your choice. Which brings me to…

11. **Don’t feel guilty about your choices.** According to research, gender equality makes for better lives — gender balanced corporate boards lead to better run companies, gender balanced governments lead better countries, the list goes on. But just because we want to push for gender equality in general doesn’t mean that you personally need to feel pressured to have a high achieving career. I have plenty of friends who are stay-at-home moms, a role that obviously contributes to general betterment of lives, but the movement for gender equality often makes moms feel guilty for their choice to stay at home. Not everyone can or should be pushing the envelope. Know what you want to achieve in life and go for it! This article may be heavily focused on confidence in a work environment, but confidence really is something we need to address even outside of work. Be confident in your life decisions.

12. **Done is better than perfect.** Watch this [TED talk](http://ed.ted.com/featured/16DCJILa) by Reshma Saujani. As a society we are teaching our boys to be brave and our girls to be perfect and we’re not doing ourselves any favors. In the workplace, this training translates into women spending more hours making work product perfect while men simply deliver work product when it’s done, allowing men to gain quicker feedback and more opportunities. If you’re falling into this perfection trap, try to let go of the need to get a 100% grade on all that you do, and know that 80% is not only enough, in many cases it’s actually better. The extra time to gain the extra 20% isn’t going to give you much return and is better invested somewhere else.

13. **Participate in your company’s hiring process**. How do we get more women into tech companies? Turns out that if tech companies with open positions have women actively involved in the hiring process (doing interviews, presenting at recruiting events, etc), then [more women will get recruited](http://www.businessinsider.com/google-hiring-data-reveals-two-things-women-can-do-to-get-hired-and-promoted-more-2012-8). And the more women we have in the tech workforce, the more support there’ll be to help each other in confidence and other issues. Things that you can work on if you’re involved in hiring: combat [inappropriate questions](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/women-job-interview-candidates-more-than-three-times-as-likely-to-answer-awkward-or-illegal-a6797561.html), and make job postings [more inclusive](https://www.fastcompany.com/3044094/strong-female-lead/how-changing-one-word-in-job-descriptions-can-lead-to-more-diverse-candid).

14. **Define cool**. In the early days of my career, my colleagues would make fun of me for being a SQL wiz (I could write very complex queries). I was typecast as being a nerd, and it wasn’t flattery. The underlying message to me was that women shouldn’t be tech-inclined, that’s it’s uncool and unfeminine. This typecasting, I’ve learned, isn’t uncommon. So it’s up to us to change what’s defined as cool! I am proud to be a nerd. In the end, I responded to my colleagues by buying this shirt and wearing around the office, and they never made fun of me again.

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Resources

I assume that you’ve already read [Sheryl Sandberg’s Lean In](http://www.amazon.com/Lean-Women-Work-Will-Lead/dp/0385349947/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1457820460&sr=8-1&keywords=leanin), but if you haven’t yet, read it! I’ve already mentioned many of these above, but the list below is the summary of my favourites. What are yours?

* Amy Cuddy’s [TED Talk](https://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are?language=en) on Body Language. Did you know that holding a power pose for just 2 minutes can make you more confident? Amy’s personal story is also super inspiring.
* Katty Kay and Claire Shipman’s article on [The Confidence Gap](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/05/the-confidence-gap/359815/) and also their two books, [Womenomics and The Confidence Code](http://theconfidencecode.com/books/). Katty and Claire cite a lot of research that make confidence building extremely actionable.
* Shawn Achor’s [The Happiness Advantage](http://www.amazon.com/Happiness-Advantage-Principles-Psychology-Performance/). Shawn shows that the conventional wisdom of “if I work hard and become successful then I’ll be happy” is wrong. Confidence and positive thinking fuel success, not the other way around.
* Carol Dweck’s [Mindset](https://www.amazon.ca/Mindset-Psychology-Carol-S-Dweck/dp/0345472322). Success is about a having a growth, not fixed, mindset. Applies to parenting as well as to business.
* Stephen Covey’s [7 Habits of Highly Effective People](http://www.amazon.com/7-Habits-Highly-Effective-People/dp/0935721800). Just a classic!

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