



ARTICLE 19: Women and self-confidence re-framed

In Harvard Business Review (HBR), November 2011 Jill Flynn, Kathryn Heath, and Mary Davis Holt of Flynn Heath Holt Leadership (FHHL) published an [article](#) describing four ways women stunt their own careers, unintentionally.

It had resonance and dissonance for many who contributed to the subsequent online conversation; and I found myself oscillating between those polarities. I haven't read their book - *'Break your own Rules: How to change the patterns of thinking that block women's paths to power'* - so I am presuming that their article distils the key points of their book. I noticed and was disturbed by a critical assumption in how they have framed their research.

The fundamental proposition in their article appears to be that women need to show up more like men in order to be seen, heard and validated as leaders.

This doesn't sit right for me and so I decided to pick up the thread from the article – self-confidence – and champion a different view of self-confidence which I believe is more relevant, realistic and true to the talents of women and more efficacious in handling the challenges of our time.

What does Self-confidence look like?

From their research, these three women refer to men's criticism of women:

The primary criticism men have about their female colleagues is that the women they work with seem to exhibit low self-confidence

This very viewpoint starts from a position that it is what men think that is important. Given that it is mostly men in decision-making positions, what they are actually saying is: women don't get on because of how men are interpreting some of those women's behaviours. They conclude women to be less self-assured/ self-confident because they are:

- overly modest – don't promote their own achievements
- not asking - to be considered for the job
- blending in – not courting attention
- remaining silent – not thrusting over other voices to be heard

In other words, behaviours opposite to those mentioned above, are valued more and judged as 'self-confidence'. The corollary from this research is that women who self-promote, put themselves forward, court attention and thrust over other voices will get on. Is this the world we want to live in? Is this the answer? Not so according to [Leslie Pratch's](#) article in the subsequent HBR Journal/ blog. She explains that when women demonstrate these so-called self-confident behaviours, they actually get judged differently than if men display them. In short, it appears that women are judged differently against the same rule book; and in the process are de-valued. This eloquently blows into the water the conclusions of Flynn, Heath and Holt.

Flynn, Heath and Holt appear to not be questioning the assumptions at play. What if we became curious about what the leadership landscape is showing us? What if **we assume that how women show up is actually pointing to something of global significance CRITICAL to our future survival?**

What if we can be, and be seen to be, AS confident about 'NOT knowing' as 'knowing' and have this valued and recognised as THE core leadership capability?

The Gift of NOT Knowing

Flynn, Heath and Holt's research also suggests

'that women themselves feel less self-assured at work than men'.

Feeling confident or self-assured is often tied to believing that we have expert knowledge and/or skill; and what comes with this, is a sense that we know what could and should be done. We believe this 'knowing' will get us the results we want or that it will keep us safe - and so we feel confident in the midst of others who may know less or be less skilled than we consider ourselves to be.

However, when we begin to view the world through the lenses of complexity sciences, we come to see and understand that there is nothing that can truly be predicted or assured. I suggest that women tend to be better at recognizing (consciously or unconsciously) this inherent uncertainty and unpredictability of life – and so when we say we 'don't know' or are 'not sure', we are possibly more closely attuned to the realities and complexities at play. In this context, what becomes far more important – is having the self-confidence that we CAN navigate through that uncertainty by bringing together the views and perspectives of others in the mix and facilitating more integrative approaches to resolving complex dilemmas.

I remember early on in my career, I felt so scared about almost everything – I simply couldn't find the firm ground of certainty on which to stand. My response to my own terror about the prospect of 'getting it wrong/ looking stupid/being sacked...' led me to begin to gather the divergent views and perspectives of others; drawing on their knowledge and insights. Whilst, for me, this approach started out as a self-protective strategy, slowly I began to realise that better options emerged and, more importantly for me at that time, I found I could stand more confidently to defend our chosen way forward when challenged by others who had a



different, often unilateral view. In short I came to trust the efficacy of an integrative solution over my single-perspective choices; and I came to have faith in my learned, emergent capacity to facilitate and draw out the next steps.

This cuts against the dominant conventional position which holds that good leaders know (or should know) the destination; are the best decision-makers and should show up exuding that self-confidence. Old paradigms value certainty over the capacity to sit with and work with the unknown. Old paradigm thinking has created the world-in-crisis in which we now find ourselves.

From a complexity perspective I suggest that it is a wise, resourceful, resilient person who recognises that nothing is certain; whose confidence does not rest on their current expertise but on their capacity to be OK with uncertainty, to adapt to changing circumstances, to be curious about what it is they don't know and who can ride with that uncertainty until their enquiry reveals the next most helpful steps to take.

Navigating complex scenarios depends on an adaptive capacity which is supported by an ability to deal with ambiguity and uncertainty by facilitating deeper dialogue amongst diverse voices. Women who have not succumbed to male impersonation as a tactic to 'rise up in the world' tend to do this better. They are more communal and have used their communal capacity to support getting things done **with** others rather than through or by others. Critically, this capacity grows ownership, responsibility and accountability along the way – which typically in turn, can result in myriad additional benefits, efficiencies and process improvements. The problem is how frequently this sophisticated capability goes UNrecognised.

Perhaps this is, in part, down to the fact that we ourselves have not recognised this capability for what it truly is? Perhaps when we can powerfully and confidently champion and articulate this capacity, we may begin to shift the current limiting paradigm around what sort of self-confidence is most vital in co-creating a sustainable future:

Confidence that comes from current knowledge and certainty

OR

Confidence that comes with the power of 'not-knowing' and the curiosity to learn and discover new ways together?

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