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Three Soft Skills Women Entrepreneurs Need to Succeed

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Strong communication, effective networking and resilience after rejection can help women entrepreneurs build confidence and create more opportunities.

Nearly two centuries ago, Barbe-Nicole Ponsardin Clicquot, of the now-venerable Veuve Clicquot champagne company, found herself widowed at age 27 with a small child. With little experience and lots of self-doubt, the shy widow took over her husband's small wine brokerage business – and ultimately transformed it into France's most iconic and profitable champagne brand. Unwilling to be bound by contemporary gender stereotypes that were as rigid as the whale-bone corsets that confined women's bodies at the time, Clicquot weathered financial and business setbacks in a time of social and economic upheaval in post-revolutionary France. She somehow found the confidence that helped her think creatively, take risks in moments when others counseled caution, trust her instincts, and ultimately ensure she was never limited to arbitrary choices.

Today even the most accomplished female entrepreneurs – trade diplomats, peace envoys, top attorneys, financiers and others with whom we work – struggle to have Clicquot's boldness. When confronting challenges, they often focus too much on making imperfect choices rather than pursuing strategically created options. Sometimes these options involve risk, which requires confidence they don't have.

In our work with women entrepreneurs, we've observed that empowered, confident women excel in three "soft skills" that many women fail to develop when they pursue the technical and business knowledge that helps them shape their careers. Those three skills are **communicating effectively, networking** and **handling rejection**. This article looks at how women can build those skills in themselves.

The empowerment equation

Self-confidence + soft-skills = the art of believing you can succeed by accessing skills that ensure you will.

A key part of our mission is helping women, across sectors and at all levels, to overcome professional challenges or obstacles. It continues to surprise us just how many senior women, when we gather them together for a workshop, or for one of our women's focus groups in Geneva and Muscat, will admit to lacking confidence in certain situations. These scenarios can feed a sense of personal failure caused by receiving damaging or negative feedback, handling rejection (pitches, promotions, publications) or not communicating effectively. But what really is going on when self-confidence, (trust in one's abilities, qualities and judgement) falters? Is it confidence in one's technical abilities or something more profound?

It is clear to us that this self-confidence deficit has its foundations in those three under-developed soft skills. Indeed, research conducted by Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation, and Stanford Research Center cite soft skills as being linked to 85% of career successes, while only 15% of that success is attributed to technical expertise ("*The Real Skills Gap,*" National Soft Skills Association). Soft skills are the foundations of professional and personal empowerment - a toolkit of resilience, problem-solving, emotional intelligence and strong interpersonal and communication skills. Women, however, are prone to focus on their mastery of technical skills to the detriment of their soft skills. Underdeveloped soft skills can make a woman reluctant to move out of her comfort zone to grasp new opportunities. And a rejection or damaging feedback can spur a spiraling cycle of demoralizing self-doubt.

The 3 Critical Soft Skills

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Here is a closer look at those three top soft skills that help entrepreneurial women achieve the business objectives that are critical to their success, and how to build them.

Communicating authoritatively

Strong communication skills are the foundation of success, and the lack of them can hold women back. Research conducted by the UK group RADA in Business (2016) shows that women are 68% more likely than men to say they never feel comfortable when expressing themselves in a work environment, and that the most challenging work environments are large group meetings and board meetings (RADA 9). Communication skills should be the mainstay in your soft skills toolkit, and if you invest in nothing else this year, an investment in developing and enhancing how you communicate will impact everything else you do. Begin by recognizing that you need to adapt your communication style depending on whether you are trying to inform or to persuade and influence. For your critical conversations you need to follow three steps:

Be clear on the messages/ideas you want to get across.

Have you questioned yourself on what you are really trying to tell the "audience" -- be it investor, client or board member? And have you thought about what's in it for them? In other words, remember it is your responsibility to ensure that anyone listening to you can quickly and easily understand what you are saying, and recognize why they should be listening to you.

Deliver your thoughts with impact so that your message is remembered.

How do we achieve impact? Two things will determine your impact: how you deliver what you have to say and how you have structured what you want to say. You can learn and continue to enhance these skills. Which tennis star would ignore practicing his or her basic stroke? Don't ignore the fundamentals of preparing and practicing when it comes to communication. When structuring, ensure you are message-driven and keep your points clear and concise.

Finally, master the art of slowing down the speed with which you deliver your ideas.

This can be achieved by pausing and ensuring people can keep up with you. Remember: under pressure, many people deliver too many ideas, too quickly. You should also maintain eye contact as you make your points. If you do nothing else, delivering with a measured pace and focused eye contact will enhance the confidence and authority with which you come across.

Networking effectively

As an entrepreneur, connections are the essence of successful business development. Networking is a skill that must be mastered because it opens up an invaluable community of like-minded entrepreneurs, whether we are talking about opportunities for financial/business collaboration with potential partners or making critical contacts within the industry. And while some might say that networking is not a soft skill, the qualities you need to be an effective networker are most definitely soft skills: empathy, emotional intelligence, active listening, effective communication, to name but a few. While many of us avoid networking because we find it superficial, intimidating or uncomfortable, women are excellent and natural networkers because of their ability to build and nurture relationships. Here are a few tips that can help you to build your own authentic style and overcome your reluctance to attend a networking event.

Be prepared to talk about you.

Being able to convey a clear and interesting story is essential because at some point you will be asked, "so what do you do?" Too many people go to events ill-prepared to answer this question. You have an excellent story to tell, so make sure it is interesting, engaging but, above all, brief. Rehearse before attending the event so that you can articulate clearly and naturally.

Listen actively.

Networking events can be impersonal and alienating. You don't know what to say to complete strangers? Start by listening actively to those who are speaking to gain snippets of information and insights into their work or needs. Tune into anecdotes and play them back at a later part of the conversation. People are always delighted that someone has listened to what they said. Listening actively will also enable you to launch conversations that are relevant and useful. It will convey your authenticity and help you to be remembered for all the best reasons.

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Volunteer your help.

Don't use networking purely as a pitch for business. The entrepreneurial sector is a vibrant and growing one so networking is an excellent way for you to gather research around your industry. It can also provide insights where your own expertise could be welcome - whether a contribution to an article or speaking at a conference. As an expert in your entrepreneurial field, not only will you have the pleasure of working with your peers, but you will also create new relationships in the process. When you are feeling anxious about networking, helping someone else might just be your salvation!

The golden rule of follow-up

If you have promised an introduction, information or anything else to new contacts that you have made at a networking event, follow up as soon as possible. Delivering what you promised will consolidate your reputation for authenticity and credibility, and help to build those important new relationships.

Rejection: the dreaded "no thank you" moment

As an entrepreneur you are very likely to experience rejection – from an investor, a client, vendor or even a partner. We often take rejection personally because it can make us feel humiliated and exposed, or, at the other end of the scale, a failure. Rejection can cause us to ruminate endlessly on aspects of the negative experience, thus further eroding self-belief. Research shows that women are arch ruminators and the habit can impact professional growth and development (Helgesen and Goldsmith 169). Ruminating occurs when we revisit a negative experience, such as a failed pitch, badly received presentation, or lost business opportunity, and re-live its worst moments, trying to come to terms with it, yet failing to move on. Well, it is possible to call time on this habit! Begin by examining the rejection in terms of things you need to do better. You can start by following three simple steps.

Don't take rejection personally.

It is rarely personal, so remember that the anger, resentment or hurt you might be feeling need to be kept in perspective. Talking with a trusted advisor can help with this, so that you can then take the first steps in rebuilding confidence by learning from your mistakes.

Rationally evaluate the experience that led to the "no thank you" moment.

Once the hurt and disappointment have diminished, force yourself to track the entire sequence of events that led to "no thank you." You will obtain clarity on defining moments in the experience. What did or didn't work? Was there a danger sign/red flag that you missed? Take rejection as a positive moment in your entrepreneurial journey. Ask for feedback, so that you can gain insights into where you were perceived to be weaker than competitors. This can only make you stronger and more competitive the next time you pitch to that audience.

Be like Barbe-Nicole Clicquot: Move on, and up

Consider how Barbe-Nicole Clicquot recovered from an unexpected business rejection. In 1810, the Emperor Napoleon awarded the contract to supply champagne for his glitzy wedding to Marie-Louise, Archduchess of Austria, to her male rival in the champagne business, Memmie Jacquesson (Mazzeo 86). This was a major blow because Napoleon's patronage would have been invaluable for a woman launching herself as the sole proprietor of a champagne business. From this moment on, Barbe-Nicole set out to find other options -- or more particularly, other emperors. She dispatched agents to seek new markets in Europe for her brand. By exploiting supply issues in Russia, thanks to the Franco-Russian war and embargo on French imports, she was able to cultivate a frenzied market for her champagne in St. Petersburg. By 1815, the Tsar himself declared that Veuve Clicquot was the only French champagne he would ever drink (115). It's an inspiring anecdote to reflect on when you are struggling to rise beyond a rejection.

Conclusion

If you recognize in yourself any of the behaviors or situations explored in this article, then take a moment to quietly reflect on what you need to change in order to move ahead. What might be holding you back? As Madame Clicquot did, start to approach challenges in terms of creating options rather than making choices. As an entrepreneur, much of your success will depend on being able to persuasively present your brand to investors. It is important not to overlook the power of a strong communication repertoire to enhance this success. Nurture your confidence and authority by recognizing that new soft skills can always be acquired,

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and practice makes perfect.

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Advice, Best Practices and Inspiration for Women Entrepreneurs(https://eiexchange.com/women)

Additional search terms: women, feminism, female founders, women business owners, glass ceiling, sexual discrimination, sexual harassment, bias, opportunity, empowerment

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