

HOW TO COMMUNICATE CONFIDENTLY IN MEETINGS

Workbook: How to communicate confidently in meetings

Meetings. The bane of business life or a real opportunity to make progress? The answer, for many of us, probably lies somewhere in the middle. In the midst of the pandemic, lots of us are spending our days in virtual meetings. And while many of those sessions may be productive, connecting teams and moving along work streams, others may leave us fighting fear or boredom.

Meetings are a business fundamental, but critically we do need to maximise the effectiveness of time spent in them. David Finkel, writing in Inc, directed, 'Only meet to create value'. As humans, we do well when we collaborate and connect, so meetings should be positive, energising occasions. However, as a study by the Center for Creative Leadership found, one of the biggest sources of frustration for business leaders was unnecessary or poorly planned meetings leading to wasted time.

The topic of this workbook divides neatly into two parts: business confidence in general and meeting participation in particular. In a recent webinar poll, our members told us that though they feel confident in some meetings, their confidence levels fluctuate according to the group situation.

By undertaking this workbook, you'll take steps to increase your confidence across the wide range of meetings you're involved in. You'll explore what might be currently limiting your confidence in meetings, and the positive steps you can take to increase your confidence for greater presence and impact. We'd love to know how you get on – email us at karenmax@everywoman.com or tweet us @everywomanuk.

**Max & Karen
and the everywoman team**

Enemies of Confidence

Let's talk about confidence first of all. The good news is that it can be learned. The more you challenge yourself and succeed, the more confident you become. Think back to learning to ride a bicycle as a child. You wanted to do it, like the other guys but it felt big and scary with the potential for accidents and pain. So you watched and you observed how it was done. You recruited help from experienced people and had a go in a safe environment, on grass and with stabilisers. Once that felt too easy, you persuaded someone to take the stabilisers off and set out bravely, making wobbly progress. You got stronger. Before too long, you were taking all that learning for granted and riding confidently along with everyone else.

According to Lucy Ball, whose everywoman webinar tackled this subject, <https://www.everywoman.com/my-development/webinars/communicate-confidently-meetings> some typical enemies of confidence are:

Overthinking: when, instead of concentrating on the conversation, you are listening to the voice in your own head, which may be telling you that you haven't got a useful contribution to make, or that what you're thinking is too simple – generally agonising about your potential contribution. There is something called the 'Mouse in the Meeting Law' which says that if you don't speak up in the first quarter of the meeting, you never will. You know the feeling, you think of something you want to say and your heart starts to pound, your nerves kick in and somehow you don't open your mouth – and the moment passes. Then 10 minutes later, someone else says what you were thinking and everyone says 'wow, yes, that's a great point'. Whereupon you feel awful.

Perfectionism: You have a point to make but you don't.... because you want it to be 100% accurate, supported by data, voiced articulately, etc, etc.

People Pleasing: You don't agree with what others are saying but you don't feel able to voice your own opinion or make a suggestion in case it makes you unpopular or singles you out from the crowd.

Attributing our successes to good luck: instead of to the hard work and experience that back them up.

Attributing our setbacks to our own incompetence: instead of realising that sometimes things are beyond our control.

Inability to move on after a setback: some people agonise when things go wrong and go over and over it in their minds, rather than reflecting upon it at the time, processing what actually happened, learning from it and then letting it go.

To those 'enemies', I would also add **Limiting beliefs**. Unfortunately, women more often suffer from this than men. Research by McKinsey & Co. found that "Of all the forces that hold women back, none are as powerful as entrenched beliefs". These are the doubts that creep in and may reinforce a sense of imposter syndrome which holds us back from aspiring to be our very best. It's important to address this. If you don't believe in yourself, that lack of confidence will come across to others. How can they believe in you if you don't believe in yourself?



EXERCISE

It helps to work out where the limiting beliefs come from. Make a note of what makes you feel less confident or unworthy or demotivated. Identify patterns and work out what you will do to break out of them.

Trigger	Circumstance	Pattern?	Action

It's a good idea, whenever you hear that inner voice that puts you down, to stop and listen to what it is actually saying. Write down the negative thought and spend some time reframing it. Tell yourself 'I am good enough. I can do this' - say it out loud to reinforce it. Tell yourself over and over, especially if you feel nervous or are in a situation you have identified as creating this stress.

So don't succumb to the enemies of confidence. It is essential to increase your visibility if you are going to progress in your career and participating effectively in meetings is a great way to do that, giving you as it does, exposure to all sorts of people of varying seniority. So it's a skill you need to ace but it is worth remembering that confidence is not the absence of vulnerability - many very confident (and senior) people feel nervous in new or challenging situations, so you might as well get used to feeling the nerves and work on knowing how to conquer them.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines confidence as 'the quality of being certain of your abilities', so let's start by reminding ourselves of the abilities we have that apply in meetings.

Where would you grade yourself on this spectrum?

Statement	Where are you on the scale: Grade yourself from 1 (false) to 10 (true)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * I feel nervous when I join a meeting * I understand the meeting topics * I often miss the points people are making * I want to speak up but I daren't * I'm afraid of making a fool of myself in front of everyone * I often think of things others say later * I blush or stammer or otherwise betray my nervousness * Meetings feel like a hostile environment to me * Other..... 	

Great, now we've got the negatives out of the way, let's focus on what we can do to improve your score!

Preparation

The best meetings start on time and the chair expects everyone to come prepared – however formal or informal the context. Personal confidence comes from knowing what is happening, so make sure you prepare thoroughly, well in advance. Start with the knowledge that if you have been invited to the meeting, you are expected to be able to contribute to its success, and preparation will help you to do that.

It may sound really basic but make sure you know the **purpose of the meeting**. Is it intended to explore a situation and throw up ideas? Is it to solve a problem? Is it to monitor whether a project is on track? Knowing the answers to these questions will enable you to work out what kind of contribution you can make by doing your homework in advance.

If there is a formal agenda, read it carefully and make sure you understand each item. If anything is unclear, check what it means. You can always ask the person who will chair the meeting what something means, or if there is no agenda, what outcomes they are looking for. That way, you can do some homework – either put in some desk research or engage your brain. If you had to come up with something relevant to each agenda item, what would it be? It doesn't mean you will speak to each item – just that you have the right frame of mind for the meeting and you know all you can on the topic before it starts.

If there is an item that corresponds with your particular area of expertise or a topic on which you have certain opinions, make a note of the points you'd like to make. When we feel nervous, our bloodstream floods with adrenaline, the fight or flight hormone, and the stress also affects our brain and the ability to remember. So get ahead of it by preparing what you want to say in advance, even going so far as to write it out as speaking notes. In the meeting you may not even need to refer to them but they will be there as backup if you do – and just knowing that will give you confidence.

If you haven't attended a particular regular meeting before, consult someone who has. Ask them how it tends to play out, who else is usually there, how they each participate. Maybe even discuss the agenda and your particular contribution with them beforehand. Anything you can do to make it a less unfamiliar experience will underpin your confidence.

If you know who else will be attending, give a little thought to each person. What do you need to know about them? What is their position on the subject, do they have a particular mindset? Will they be for or against any proposal? What is their personal style?

Finally, and this applies also for virtual meetings, know when and where you need to be and how much time you need to allocate. That will prevent you getting flustered if you can't find the venue or the Zoom invitation and setting aside the time in your diary will prevent distractions.

You can work through this checklist for the next meeting you have coming up:

1. What is the purpose/required outcome?
2. How do you anticipate the meeting will be conducted?
3. What is the subject? Is there a formal agenda you can review?
4. Do you need to research anything, pull together any information or data?
5. Who else will be attending?
6. When and where does it take place?

What might you say?

STATEMENT	Makes a statement, offers a fact, idea or opinion
QUESTION	Asks a questions, for example to check understanding
PROPOSE	Makes a proposal, puts forward a potential solution or next step
DISAGREE	Openly disagrees: "I disagree" or "That's not the way i see it"
AGREE	Openly agrees: e.g. a "yes" or "I agree" or "that's right"
CHALLENGE	Challenges or reframes someone else's view or information
BUILD	Extends or develops another's idea
SUMMARISE	Restates or paraphrases previous contributions or discussions
INVITE IN	Actively attempts to involve others
APPRECIATE	Says thank you or praises someone's work or contribution
DIRECT REQUEST	Asks a specific person to do a specific thing
PROCESS POINT	Supports the process of the meeting: e.g. time, agenda, focus

You could use this as a checklist to plan your contribution.

Meeting Conduct

How you handle yourself in the meeting will also develop your confidence over time. Make sure you arrive or log in punctually, having done your homework.

In a face to face meeting, make a point of establishing your presence from the outset. Don't hide behind others getting coffee or go straight to the table. Take the initiative of greeting people and making eye contact, just saying hello and receiving a smile or warm response will settle your own nerves. Introduce yourself to anyone you don't know.

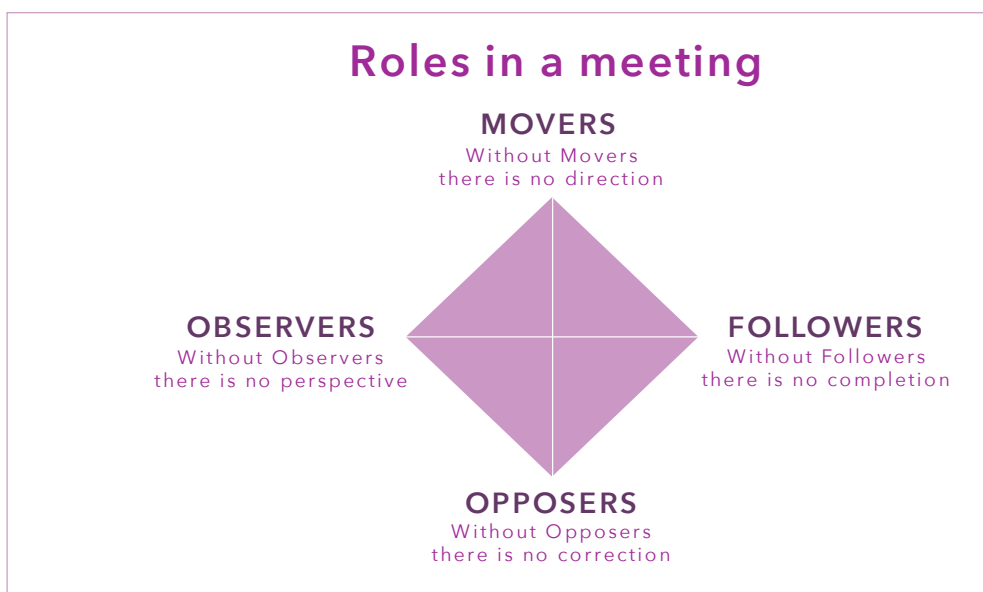
If that seems a bit pushy to you, remember you have been invited for a reason and have as much right as anyone else to be in the room. Others may feel nervous too, so you will actually be helping them. If appropriate, thank the person who invited you for giving you the opportunity to participate. All of this will have the effect of settling you down.

In a virtual meeting, actively greeting people doesn't work very well. Starting the meeting effectively requires everyone to be quiet – even actually on mute – so wait until the first time you speak and introduce yourself then, if you don't know everyone. The biggest threat to the success of a virtual meeting is passivity, or if everyone adopts the role of observer.

Your key task throughout is to listen carefully and pay attention to the speakers. Listening is a skill many of us are pretty poor at. Not for nothing did the writer Fran Lebowitz joke "The opposite of talking isn't listening. The opposite of talking is waiting."

When you speak, try and be concise, be courteous to anyone who has raised a point before you and be quiet when you have finished. Don't be afraid of a momentary silence. It will feel much longer to you than to others in the meeting who will be digesting what you have said.

There are a number of different roles in meetings which all contribute to the overall success, as shown in this dialogue model by psychologist David Kantor. As you study it, ask yourself, which is your strength? Each position is equally valid.



Credit: David Kantor
www.kantorinstitute.com

Don't get involved in any side conversations with others while someone else is speaking, not even on chat in a virtual meeting, if you can possibly avoid it. However passionate you may feel about your opinion, don't interrupt, close down or ignore another's contribution. And don't be tempted to defend your position or attack someone else's. None of these things are good meeting etiquette and will get you noticed for the wrong reasons.

When the meeting is over, commit to any action you have been asked to take or that you have decided on your own initiative.

If it's an actual meeting, take a moment to say goodbye to people and comment on their contribution if appropriate. In a virtual meeting, at least make sure you wave and smile as you close down your screen. Just because we're not face to face much these days does not mean we should not extend the usual courtesies. In fact, it may even matter more.

Meeting Confidence: 7 tips



When it comes to your physical presence, whether in a meeting or any other situation, no-one puts it better than the social psychologist Amy Cuddy, who once said, when talking about body language, that ‘every aspect of a person is speaking’.

Her TED talk where she describes the ‘power pose’ and talks about what that means in terms of confidence, has been viewed thousands of times.

She says, “These postural things that I talk about are not just power posing like wonder woman but just holding yourself, holding your body in a way that’s open and proud and confident and poised, signals to your brain that you are not in a threatening situation.”

She also makes a point that is pertinent to meetings:

“...you work on becoming present when you are interacting with people who are working for you, being able to hear them without a sense of threat, to go into those meetings with confidence and not arrogance. All of these are qualities of presence that allow you to not only have constructive conversation but to really build trust with people. Your presence is signalling to them, “I’m interested in what you had to say. I’m engaged and I’m going to make sure I understand what you are saying before I respond.””

Communication Skills

Meetings require us to maximise our communication skills of speaking, listening and reading body language; and to engage our emotional intelligence to stay calm, summon confidence, manage objections and build relationships.

Speaking

The best way to get better at speaking in any public situation is to challenge yourself to do it and then prepare so that you can succeed.

It's also helpful to find low risk opportunities to practice – at a departmental shout-out perhaps, when you know all the people and you will have a broadly supportive audience.

If there is a regular meeting you attend at which someone else usually does the speaking, discuss with them whether you can take over all or part of the presentation next time. You will be familiar with the circumstances and although you may feel nervous, having backup will give you the confidence to have a go.

There may even be something outside work where you can practice, such as joining the board of a charity or a committee at your children's school.



EXERCISE

List here the opportunities you might take:

Once you have set up the opportunity, the next steps are to do your homework and practice.

Think what your contribution will be, the context in which you are delivering it and the 'audience' you are delivering it to. Will they be open to your point or likely to contradict it?

What questions might they ask? Prepare to answer those points too.

Then employ the services of your bathroom mirror – or at least one where you can be on your own. Practice out loud what you are going to say. There is no substitute for knowing what you look and sound like. Slow your speech down a little so that you are speaking clearly. The first few times will feel a bit odd but soon you will get used to the sound of your own voice and know that you can deliver your point confidently.

Try it out with a trusted buddy. Get them to oppose or contradict you, so you can think on your feet.

Before the real meeting, channel Amy Cuddy. Stand up straight, put your shoulders back, open up your chest... these things really work. Then stride into the meeting, knowing it is your right to be there and that you have good points to make.

When the moment comes, make your contribution. You probably won't want to go first until your confidence builds but make sure you are not the mouse in the meeting either. If it's a spontaneous contribution, make a note of what you want to say during the conversation, especially if there is more than one point. If it's the type of meeting where you raise your hand actually or virtually, do it – then you can't get out of it when the chair comes round to you. (Use the time to breathe in and out slowly!)

Coach Joel Garfinkle says "Champion yourself by acknowledging that what you bring to the table is as valid as any other contribution."

Listening

Listening is much more than just hearing what someone says. It requires you to absorb, watch and learn as you do so. Absorbing means actually paying attention to what the other person is saying – to the words they use, the tone in which they deliver it, the body language that accompanies it and even to develop an awareness of what is not being said – in other words, what is being left out. It's about being attuned to your own reaction to what you are hearing. How does it make you feel? Does it resonate with you? Do you understand what they mean or would it be helpful to seek clarification?

We're generally not very good at listening at the best of times and probably least of all in virtual meetings, where the opportunity to lose the thread is greater than ever. If you think you can just glance at that text or quickly respond to an email without impairing your ability to focus, think again. You might believe you can multi-task but research shows it can take an average of 25 minutes to regain your focus after even a minor distraction.

If you want to improve your listening skills, try this exercise with a buddy:

Ask them to tell you about their last holiday. They should speak for about 5 minutes and your task is to listen as carefully as you can without taking any notes. When they have finished, summarise what they have said and check with them how accurate it is.

You will probably find that this is more challenging than it sounds here. That is because it is a very human trait to listen on a quite superficial level. Your inner voice will be joining in. 'Oh Santorini... It's ages since I went to the Greek Islands. Wonder when we'll be able to go again.... Oh, she just mentioned her favourite taverna. Did she say it was in the town or on the beach? Never mind.... Oh no, now I've missed the next point.' And so it goes on.

You can also try it out on a podcast too. Listen for five minutes, afterwards make a note of the key points and then play it back to check your accuracy.

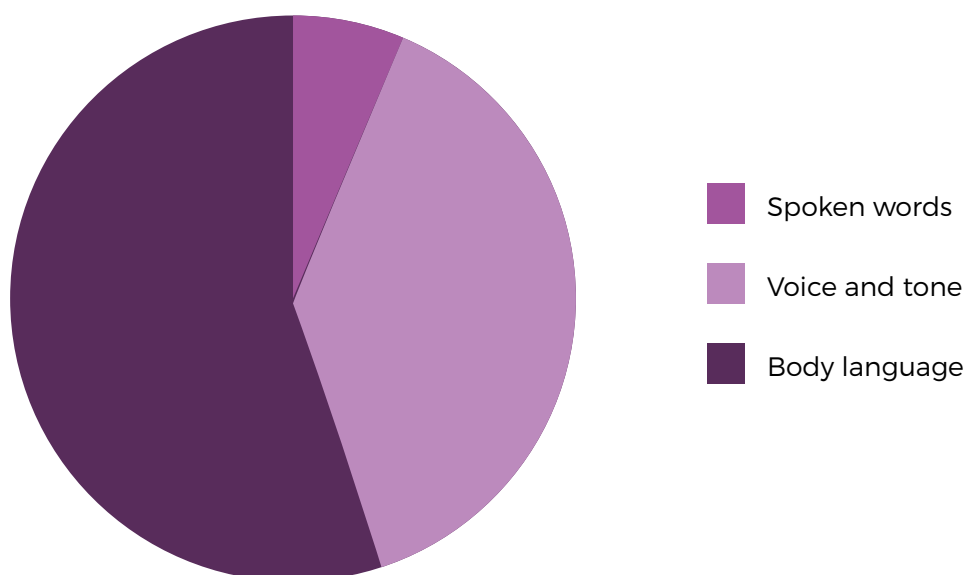
At least in a meeting you can take a note of what someone is saying and refer back to it!

Don't forget that if someone is making a point that does not make sense to you, it is perfectly okay to ask them to clarify it. It's odds on that you won't be the only person in the room who did not understand, so you'll be doing the other participants a favour too.

Body Language

Professor Albert Mehrabian developed a model which indicates how much of communication is non-verbal and it shows that only 7 percent of a message is actually the spoken word.

Communication Factors



The rest of the message is made up of the tone of voice and physical body language. Think of a simple word like 'okay' and how many things it can convey. Spoken in a bright and cheerful tone it indicates agreement, enthusiasm and energy. Spoken in a slow, drawn out monotone it can indicate doubt, disagreement or an as yet unspoken question.

This is where confidence comes in. When someone speaks confidently and with energy, it commands the attention of the listener and conveys much more than the words alone.

Physical body language does the same. Think of that person in the office who uses a tone that suggests you should already know what is being said – often leaning back in the chair, legs stretched out... The message that comes across is arrogance, condescension, even aggression, whatever the actual words.

Our faces have evolved over time to be fantastically effective communication tools. You can convey more in the lift of an eyebrow than with words.

Look out for the nuances of the communication – not just the folded arms that may mean “I disagree and you won't change my mind” but the more subtle points being made, possibly unconsciously. Body language experts are detectives, looking all the time for clues to behaviour, thoughts and feelings, so that they can tune into them. Does this person really mean what they are saying? Are they confident? Does their body language give away something they are not saying?

Because meetings can be lengthy and tedious even at the best of times, people sometimes act inappropriately. This also happens when the conversation is not going their way. They may get aggressive, calling people out on things to ease their frustration or playing politics. This can range from eyerolling or yawning to whispered asides or vocal commentary.

You will want to employ emotional intelligence to deal with this. If someone attacks you rather than what you are saying, stand up for yourself. Having done your homework you will be able to answer the points they make. If the chair doesn't step in, seek support from others in the room, for example by asking someone else what they think.

Writer Sir Antony Jay said that a good chair will encourage the clash of ideas in a meeting but not the clash of personalities. “A good meeting is not a series of dialogues between individual members and the chair. It should be a crossflow of discussion and debate, with the chairman occasionally guiding, mediating, probing, stimulating, and summarising, but mostly letting the others thrash ideas out.”

Emotional Intelligence or EQ, is about recognising and managing your own emotions; knowing what triggers certain reactions in you and being able to deal with that in the moment. It is also about recognising emotions in others and being able to handle relationships. These skills come into play throughout meetings.

The skills of influence are also very important. How do you motivate others to support your initiatives and adopt your ideas?

- Cultivate personal connections
- Listen before you try to persuade people to see your point of view
- Control your own body language
- Pay attention to how your communication is being received

As writer and lecturer Rebecca Knight says in the Harvard Business Review: “You can increase your influence on a particular issue by authentically framing it as a benefit to the people you want on your side. Consider each stakeholder’s needs, perspectives, and temperaments.” She quotes Nick Morgan, author of Power Cues. “Do your homework to find out what they need to hear and what will capture their attention. For each person, “make sure you’re answering the question, ‘What’s in it for me?’”

There are other common traps in meetings which you will do well to avoid.

Some common traps

The undermining preface	The waffling tail-off	Questioning intonation
Letting yourself be interrupted	Being put off by body language	Assuming you’re wrong

Don’t undermine your own position by using ‘minimising’ language. Avoid phrases like “It’s just my opinion, but...” or ‘I’m not sure if I’ve understood this right, but...’ Be straightforward. Say ‘Here’s what I’m thinking...’ or ‘Let me tell you how I see it...’ Your comments are as valid as anyone else’s.

Coach Joel Garfinkle says, “Don’t give your power away.” He describes how it’s common in meetings to defer to a boss, others higher up in the organisation, or someone that intimidates you. In the process, however, you may be giving away your power. “Learn to leverage these great opportunities. Use them to shine by sharing who you are and revealing yourself as an impact player in the organisation. Most senior people will take notice when someone stands firm in their own strength, and that will grow your influence.”

People tend to let their voice fade when they’ve made their point. Avoid the waffling tail-off or repetition of what you’ve said already. As we said before, don’t be afraid of silence. People are considering what you’ve said.

Another thing to avoid is the questioning intonation – speaking a statement as a question by letting your voice rise at the end of the sentence. People will hear it as diffidence and think you lack confidence in the point you are making.

Don't let yourself be interrupted. It is a fact that women tend to be interrupted more than men but not in every circumstance, so find a way that works for you to hold the floor. You can say, perfectly politely, 'Excuse me, I haven't finished...' or 'May I finish my point?'. Equally, don't let others' body language put you off your stride. If it isn't telling you something you need to know, ignore it.

Joel Garfinkle also says: "When someone else speaks up at a meeting and your view is contrary, don't automatically think that you are wrong and they are right. When you give someone else's ideas greater importance than your own, it may be because you don't believe that your thoughts are worthy of sharing. That's simply not true. Your experiences, thoughts, and opinions are not only valid and worthwhile, but may prove to be exactly what other people need to hear."

Good endings are as important as good beginnings. Whatever the tone of the meeting, end your own participation on a good note. If you're face to face, say goodbye to everyone as you depart, making a point of seeking out anyone with whom you've disagreed, making eye contact and smilingly taking your leave. If it's virtual, leave smiling – many people also wave these days!

Be sure to do whatever you have committed to doing, to follow up as necessary and to report back if that is required. Don't be the person who has to be chased – if there's an unavoidable delay, make sure the chair and other appropriate participants know when you expect to be able to deliver and why the delay has come about.

And finally, in meetings as in so many other things, a positive mindset can make all the difference. In her Ted talk, Carol Dweck talks about 'the power of yet', by which she means the power of believing you can improve. She doesn't believe people fail, just that they haven't succeeded yet.

Let's apply that to meetings:

FIXED MINDSET	GROWTH MINDSET
Confidence in meetings is genetic	Confidence in meetings can be learned
Effort is fruitless	Effort leads to mastery
I need to look good in every meeting	Every meeting is an opportunity to learn
Avoid challenging meetings	Embrace challenging meetings
If you have a setback, give up	If you have a setback, learn and persist
Critical feedback hurts so avoid it	Critical feedback helps me learn to seek it
Short-term sense of achievement	Longer-term, bigger sense of purpose

With thanks to Carol Dweck

Commit to action



EXERCISE

I will build my confidence by:

GOAL You may want to break this down into 'bite-sized chunks' that are more achievable steps than one major leap	DEADLINE When will you complete each action? Be realistic!	RESULT What will the change look like? How will you or others know when it is achieved?

In my next meeting, I commit to...

How to communicate confidently in meetings

Further resources

[Carol Dweck: The power of believing you can improve](#)

[Amy Cuddy: Your body language may shape who you are](#)

Books

Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges, by Amy Cuddy

Reading the Room, by David Kantor

everywomanNetwork resources

Webinar: [How to communicate confidently in meetings](#)

Webinar: [Boardroom presence – how to have more impact in meetings, even if you're an introvert](#)

Article: [Successful meetings – it's all in the preparation](#)

Article: [Successful meetings – making yourself more visible](#)

everywoman workbook team

Pippa Isbell, everywomanExpert

Kate Farrow, Director of Learning

Jo Cardow, Marketing Director

Any topics you'd like to see on the everywomanNetwork? We'd love to hear from you:

contact@everywoman.com

Copyright

© 2020 Everywoman Ltd. All rights reserved worldwide. This publication is protected by law, and all rights are reserved, including resale rights: no part of this publication may be reproduced and you are not allowed to make copies and distribute or sell this workbook to anyone else. You may only use it if you are a member of the everywomanNetwork and have downloaded it from www.everywoman.com. No responsibility for loss caused to any individual or organisation acting or refraining from action as a result of the material in this publication can be accepted by Everywoman Ltd or the authors/experts.