

Playing to your strengths: 60-minute career booster



About this workbook

At everywoman, we deliver a range of innovative products and resources that unlock the potential and talent of women in business globally. Whether you're just starting out, looking to progress your career, or even to build and develop your own enterprise, the everywomanNetwork provides a wealth of personal development resources, advice and inspiration to address the challenges you face at key stages in business. We produce workbooks on topics that matter most to our members and we're constantly listening to your views to give you the tools you need to propel you through your life's work, at a time and place that suits you.

Welcome to our workbook, *Playing to your strengths*: 60-minute career booster

What are your strengths and weaknesses? Perhaps you have been asked this question in a job interview. Is it easy to come up with a list of your strengths and examples to support them? If so, that's a great base from which to start playing to your strengths in order to optimise your performance and become louder and prouder about your achievements — something that research suggests can be challenging for women. Don't worry if you're not so clear on your strengths — this workbook will help you identify them.

You'll notice that we touched on the importance of identifying your strengths, but didn't touch on your weaknesses. While it's true that it's useful to have some self-awareness about the things you're not so good at, research shows that rather than spend time trying to upskill in order to offset the impact of your weaknesses, it's far more beneficial to focus on playing to your strengths.

There are all sorts of benefits of doing so, which we'll uncover in this workbook — higher levels of wellbeing, greater confidence and greater job satisfaction to name just a few. The key benefit at the heart of this workbook is that when women understand their strengths, they can become more adept at playing to those strengths, which in turn gives them much more leverage over their own career trajectory.

This workbook is designed to fit into a lunchbreak, and will give you some insight into why it's so important to identify and play to your strengths, and, importantly, what you can do with that knowledge and in such a way that will solidify your personal brand, and create authentic and comfortable ways for you to sing your own praises.

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

The Self-Promotion Gap

It is a generalisation to say that women tend not to celebrate their own achievements. There will of course be exceptions to the rule; however, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that we are in fact, significantly less likely than men to recognise our successes, and a well-researched gender gap when it comes to self-promotion.

A group of men and women were asked to participate in a maths/science test, then asked to rate their performance. In a sample of men and women who performed equally, women thought they'd performed on average **24%** worse than men thought they had.

Women were also **31%** less likely to say they'd apply for a job that required them to perform well on the test.

Women are **less likely** to report being 'proficient' or 'skilled' in programming languages on their CV.

Women write a **lower expected salary on their job applications than men.**

Women have been found to be **better at advocating for others than for themselves.**

THE COST OF NOT PROMOTING YOURSELF

Underneath this tendency to be less than loud and proud about our achievements, lies a very real economic consequence.

Research shows that modesty costs women upwards of **£350,000** in earning potential by the age of 60.

'Women are less likely than men to negotiate for themselves. [They] often are socialized from an early age not to promote their own interests and to focus instead on the needs of others'.

7% of women vs. **58%** of men negotiated their first job offer. Furthermore, men describe negotiations as 'fun'; and like 'winning a ball game', while women describe negotiations as 'scary'; and like 'going to the dentist'.

WHAT'S STOPPING WOMEN FROM SELF-PROMOTING?

There are many reasons why women might be less inclined to celebrate their achievements and promote themselves to others. The following are just some of the key reasons.

Impostor Syndrome

One study found that 75% of female executives across multiple industries have experienced impostor syndrome at some point in their careers. A common by-product of experiencing impostor syndrome is a reluctance to celebrate professional success.^[i]

As one scholar wrote: 'Instead of acknowledging their accomplishments as achievements that they deserved and earned, women with the impostor syndrome perceive these achievements as overestimations of their gifts and talents.'^[ii]

01



02

Fear of not being good enough

Due to a variety of external factors, 56% of executive women have been afraid that they won't live up to expectations or that people around them will not believe they are as capable as expected.^[i]

Societal pressures and 'waiting to be asked'

03

There is a well-documented pressure for women to be seen as non-aggressive, and not pushy. Whilst research shows that male professionals are associated with competitiveness, self-confidence and a more aggressive approach to workplace situations, women are, by contrast, associated with qualities related to concern for the sympathetic treatment of others. These include being affectionate, helpful, friendly, kind and sympathetic.^[i]

In response to low numbers of women asking for a promotion, bosses at Google sent out emails asking staff to put themselves forward. Each time an email was sent, the rate of applications from women soared, and as a result the number of women who went into more senior positions also climbed. The policy has been cited as an example of the phenomenon whereby women wait to be asked. ^[ii]



SELF - REFLECTION TIME

Spend a few minutes reflecting on each of the following points.

1. To what extent do you celebrate your professional achievements?

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2. How adept are you at promoting your achievements to others?

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3. If you tend to shy away from promoting yourself, what might be some of the reasons for your behaviour?

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Where do your strengths come in?

Put simply, when we play to our strengths, we are more able to be our best selves. And that, in turn, makes it much easier for us to stand up and be counted. In fact, when we play to our strengths, we are not only more likely to be noticed for our hard work and all that we achieve; we're also more likely to be happier and feel a greater sense of wellbeing.

“The more you praise and celebrate your life, the more there is in life to celebrate.”

Oprah Winfrey

Employees who use strengths daily are six times more engaged in their work.

Teams who use their strengths daily are 12.5% more productive.

52% of employees who use their strengths for three hours a day are less stressed than their counterparts.

Leaders who use their strengths are more confident, energetic, and more likely to achieve their goals.

WHAT ARE STRENGTHS?

This might seem like a strange question, but it can often be quite difficult to identify our own strengths. Strengths are your natural abilities — the things you're good at that others might reflect back to you. For the simple reason that they come quite naturally to you, it may be quite difficult to identify and articulate your strengths — but it's essential that you do.

Another way to think about your strengths is to identify the particular ways of behaving, thinking or feeling that enables optimal performance that is both authentic and energising.

Optimal performance is a term in positive psychology which refers to that state of doing something you're really good at when you start to feel like you're in the 'flow' or the 'zone'. Time goes really fast and you're enjoying yourself. That's what it feels like when you're using your strengths. You feel energised.

DISCOVER YOUR STRENGTHS

The VIA institute on Character has created a very handy tool to allow you to quickly and easily identify your core strengths.



The Via Classifications of 24 Character Strengths

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|------------------------|---|---|---|--|--|
| <h3>Wisdom</h3> | CREATIVITY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clever Original & Adaptive Problem Solver | CURIOSITY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interested Explores new things Open to new ideas | JUDGEMENT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Critical thinker Thinks things through Open-minded | LOVE OF LEARNING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Masters new skills & topics Systematically adds to knowledge | PERSPECTIVE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wise Provides wise counsel Takes the big picture view |
| <h3>Courage</h3> | BRAVERY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shows valour Doesn't shrink from fear Speaks up for what's right | PERSEVERANCE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Persistent Industrious Finishes what one starts | HONESTY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Authentic Trustworthy Sincere | ZEST <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enthusiastic Energetic Doesn't do things half-heartedly |  |
| <h3>Humanity</h3> | LOVE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Warm and genuine Values close relationships | KINDNESS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generous Nurturing Caring Compassionate Altruistic | SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aware of the motives and feelings of self/others Knows what makes others tick  | | |
| <h3>Justice</h3> | TEAMWORK <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Team player Socially responsible Loyal | FAIRNESS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Just Doesn't let feelings bias decisions about others | LEADERSHIP <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizes group activities Encourages a group to get things done  | | |
| <h3>Temperance</h3> | FORGIVENESS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Merciful Accepts others' shortcomings Gives people a second chance | HUMILITY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Modest Lets one's accomplishments speak for themselves | PRUDENCE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Careful Cautious Doesn't take undue risks | SELF REGULATION <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-controlled Disciplined Manages impulses and emotions | |
| <h3>Transcendence</h3> | APPRECIATION OF BEAUTY AND EXCELLENCE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feels awe and wonder in beauty Inspired by goodness of others | SPIRITUALITY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Searches for meaning Feels a sense of purpose Senses a relationship with the sacred | GRATITUDE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thankful for the good Expresses thanks Feels blessed | HOPE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Optimistic Future-minded Future-orientated | HUMOUR <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Playful Brings smiles to others Lighthearted |



EXERCISE

1. Circle the five characteristics that resonate most with you.
2. Come up with a concrete example of that strength in action for you — when did you last use it; how did you feel in that moment?
3. If you are struggling to identify your strengths using the above graphic, you can take the free questionnaire on www.viacharacter.org. The test takes around 15 minutes and will generate a personalised report.
4. It might be helpful to partner up for the purposes of strength spotting. If you have a colleague or a small team that could benefit from this exercise, it works like this:

In pairs, one person speaks for five minutes, then the other person listens and takes notes. Then you swap roles. The person speaking describes a time when they were at their best. Create a narrative with a beginning, a middle and an end, describing the experience and how it made you feel authentic and proud. The other person then reflects back to the partner or wider group the strengths that the narrator was using. Compare this with your own strengths list. Any surprises?
5. If you have completed exercise 4 with a partner, spend some time afterwards reflecting on the story you told, how you told it, and how the other person received your story.

‘You learn about yourself and develop a keener sense of self-awareness by paying more attention to the stories you tell and how you tell them. This is critical as women advance into leadership roles as their self-talk and narrative about what it means to be a good leader and whether they qualify, can influence how they behave and are perceived as leaders. In some cases, women may sabotage themselves from succeeding based on the stories they tell themselves, which come from the social contexts in which they grew up and currently live and work.’

Playing to your strengths

You've identified your core strengths; now it's time to think about how this knowledge can help you forge ahead in your career.

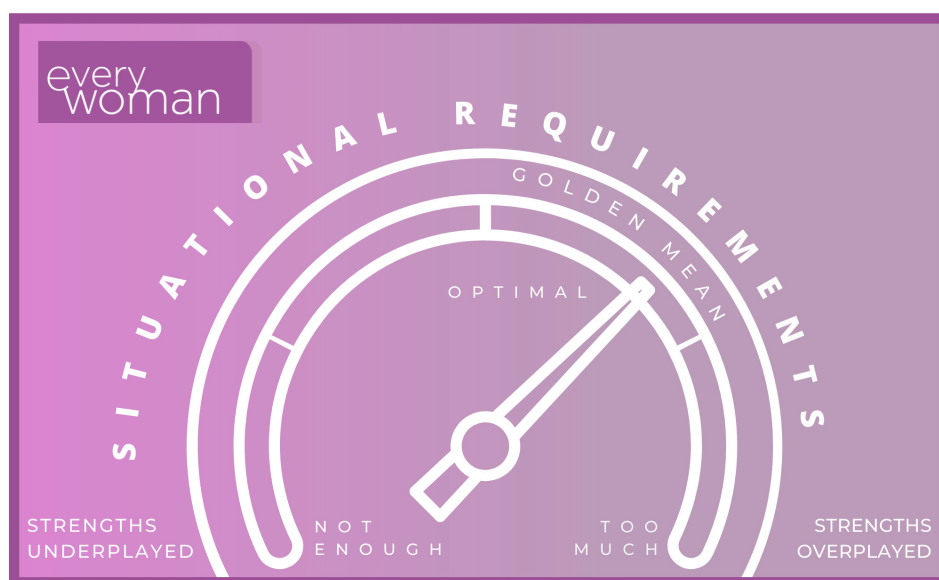
Playing to your strengths can:

- Make you feel happier
- Enable higher self-esteem
- Increase confidence
- Boost energy levels
- Build resilience
- Reduce stress
- Help you achieve goals
- Help you learn faster
- Keep you more engaged

Source: Strengths Profile.xviii

THE PERFORMANCE CURVE

When we think about playing to our strengths, it's important that we are mindful of the performance curve. As you can see, there is a point on this curve where we are in optimal performance — at roughly three-quarters of the way along the curve. This is the golden mean; the sweet spot where we can really say we're at optimal performance as a result of playing to our strengths. Strengths-based leaders are self-empowered leaders; they are energetic and confident.



This curve is important, because when overplayed, a strength can actually become a weakness. And when underplayed, strengths either aren't recognised or just not utilised. This is when people tend to become most disengaged from their work.

CASE STUDY

Jemima is a middle manager with ambitions to become a leader. She has identified one of her core strengths as empathy — a key quality of a leader. But she is overplaying this strength. Within her team, she has taken on a ‘rescuer’ role, trying to personally solve every little problem for her team members. The outcome: her teammates feel disempowered because Jemima is taking decisions out of their hands — and taking on their work. This in turn results in Jemima feeling overstretched and overworked. Her colleagues become demotivated and she becomes more and more stressed. Her strength became a weakness. Furthermore, her team members become more and more out of touch with what their own strengths are.



EXERCISE

Can you think of any times when the strengths you have identified actually became a weakness — either because you over- or underplayed them?

SELF-PROMOTING IN A WAY THAT FEELS GOOD FOR YOU

One of the keys to becoming adept at promoting yourself within your organisation is to find a way of doing so that feels authentic, natural and achievable for you.

Below are some examples of ways that you could start to outwardly celebrate your achievements. Highlight any that feel possible to you. Come up with an example of how you could put each idea into play. Note it down in the blank box next to each idea.

FOCUS ON YOUR IMPACT

How can you help others see the value in what you do?

Your thoughts...

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.....

‘WE’ NOT ‘ME’

How can you celebrate your team’s success?

Your thoughts...

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.....

BECOME A THOUGHT LEADER

How can you share your opinions more widely, giving others insight into your contributions?

Your thoughts...

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.....

RAISE YOUR HAND

What projects can you take on that will play to your strengths?

Your thoughts...

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.....

FOCUS ON YOUR PASSIONS

How can you help others see what really drives you?

Your thoughts...

.....
.....

Next Steps



EXERCISE

1. Summarise what you have discovered about your core strengths.

2. What are some of the ways that you can use these strengths for optimal performance?

3. Once you have achieved optimal performance through playing to your strengths, how can you become more adept at celebrating your achievements? What will you do and by when?

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Further resources

[Understanding your strengths in 9 simple steps](#)

[How to blow your own trumpet at work — in a way that feels good](#)

[6 steps to beating imposter syndrome](#)

[Quiz: What's your workplace superpower?](#)

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Any topics you'd like to see on the everywomanNetwork?

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