

My remarks today are based on a tweet by writer Sarah Hagi: “Lord, grant me the confidence of a mediocre white man”. It made me laugh, it made me angry, it made me lift my hands dramatically to the skies and shout it out loud. And it made me think about the tactics I’ve deployed over the years to become as confident as this man – let’s call him John, because more men called John run FTSE 100 companies than women.

Confidence is not the preserve of men, not even mediocre ones. There are plenty of confident – and mediocre – women, and plenty of men who are neither. But some of us face greater structural barriers to confidence than others, not just gender but colour, class – a host of factors influence the extent to which we are confident.

Often, we are made to feel like we are in part responsible for the barriers we encounter – the old trope that women don’t get paid as much as men because they are just too shy to ask. My words are not intended as another admonishment, that we should simply be confident and everything will be ok. If women feel devalued, it is, by and large, because we *are* devalued; quite literally, as we can see from gender pay reporting. Indeed, many of us are confident, it just doesn’t seem to work for us like it does for John.

Here are six tips to get one over on John:

- 1. Remember you are there for a reason** – the reason you are in your job is, most likely, that you are qualified to do it. You don’t need to ask or thank anyone for letting you get on with it. I always think of a really bright former member of my team. She spent months putting together a roundtable, producing the concept notes, researching the issues, briefing the speakers – but she never even considered sitting at the table alongside the experts. Put yourself at the table!
- 2. Take credit** – it’s almost a cliché to hear about a woman coming up with an idea to no reaction, only to find a man repeating it to general acclaim later on. Repeat yourself. Take credit. In job interviews, make sure you own your successes, and focus on your contribution.
- 3. Do things that make you a bit uncomfortable.** A Hewlett Packard study found that women applied for jobs only when they thought they met 100% of the criteria. For men the threshold was 60%. Go for it. And always ask the first question at events. A Cass Business School study found that when a woman does, the Q&A tends to be more or less gender balanced. Otherwise, men dominate.
- 4. Say no.** Are your peers being asked to do tasks below their pay grade? Are they asked to work late? Say no when you need to. If you’re doing all this stuff because you think you might ultimately get rewarded for it – think again. If you are effectively being devalued now, why would you suddenly be valued more?
- 5. Admit mistakes.** This is harder because it goes beyond emulating the behaviour of the mediocre white man, and it challenges male working cultures where mistakes are seen as weakness, and not normal. You need to judge whether this is appropriate in your environment but confidence in my view is about being able to admit mistakes. A good boss is much more interested in the person who does so in good time, rather than the Johns of this world who don’t take responsibility.
- 6. And finally, challenge male working cultures.** We need to challenge assumptions: a former boss questioned whether I had it in me to make my staff tremble with fear – he eventually accepted that I was able to get the best out of them in different ways, by creating a deep sense of ownership, for example. And we need to challenge ingrained practices that aren’t really about results at all, like presenteeism.

We can adopt the mind-set of the mediocre white man but he will continue to have the edge unless we challenge the structures that keep him there.