

Self-awareness and Personal Impact

“Knowing others is wisdom, knowing yourself is enlightenment” – Lao Tzu

Traditionally, girls are generally raised to be polite, friendly and to share, whilst boys are generally socialised to be competitive, challenging and independent. These traits show up not only in the games children play but also often continue in the workplace. In business, men and women are often viewed more favourably if they conform to typical ‘male’ and ‘female’ behaviours, so women in business often need to manage others’ expectations and deal with possible stereotyping.

This module includes a number of tips to help you become more self-aware and impactful when interacting with others.

Communication and behaviour

Your impact is something that should be managed at all times, not just at special events. Often, it is the daily unplanned interactions that are equally important as meetings or presentations and you should avoid being caught off guard. You never know the opportunities that will be lost if your first impression is poor. On average, it takes fourteen positive impressions to overcome an initial negative impact.

How you show up affects others perceptions of you. If you are prepared, punctual and well presented, this will create an aura of professionalism and you will be taken more seriously. Your judgement and opinions are more likely to be respected and listened to and people are more likely to do business with you. Appearances do matter and looking the part is vital. Being appropriately turned out is especially important for women, where dress codes are less clearly defined than for men.

When asked about yourself and your business, speak accurately and positively about your position and your achievements. Messages from childhood around playing nicely and being modest can show up in business. Make sure you take the credit for your successes and accept genuine compliments about yourself and your work.

To be credible, you need to come across as being at ease with yourself. This requires all three key communication tools to be used in harmony:

- *Words – Choose your words carefully. Avoid the trap of sounding unsure when attempting to be humble or modest. Use “I will do” rather than “I’ll try to”. If you don’t sound like you believe you can do something, how will anyone else have faith in you?*
- *Voice – Pay attention to the tone, pitch, pace and volume of your voice. Remember to breathe regularly in a controlled way to avoid appearing nervous.*
- *Body language – Focus on maintaining a positive yet relaxed posture to project confidence and professionalism. Keep an open posture with hands away from your face and aim to eliminate any habits, e.g. fiddling with your pen, which might convey uncertainty.*

Another key to communicating effectively is to keep in control of your emotions. Stay professional at all times and don’t take things personally. Men usually can have a serious disagreement in a meeting and then go out socially together without any hard feelings. Women tend to take things to heart and disagreements can permanently damage a relationship if emotions are not consciously controlled. Pause and think before you respond. You can’t always choose what happens to you or how you are treated but you can choose how to react.

Building rapport and developing a network

Instead of trying to do everything on your own, build a team of positive supporters around you. Women in business are sometimes determined to prove they can cope with any situation. But it is actually a sign of strength and good judgement to seek help and support when appropriate.

Running your own business can be a lonely affair so build a support network and tap into external sources of help and advice. Assume everyone is important and treat them as such. You never know when someone who at the moment may seem irrelevant to your success may reappear in an influential position.

Relationship-based networks are more important than ever in the tough business environment. Don't leave meeting the right contact to chance, but consciously identify those that can help you and look to build relationships with them. Develop a strategy that works for you and build and use your networks creatively to serve your business goals. You can also raise your profile and increase your knowledge by attending seminars, joining professional networks and volunteering to organise or present at events.

You can also model the success of others by identifying other successful entrepreneurs and examining their qualities and skills. It is possible to speed up the "trial and error" learning curve by drawing on and learning from the success and setbacks experienced by others.

If you don't already have one, you may also want to consider getting a mentor. A mentor acts as a sounding board and can give you the benefit of his/her experience, wisdom and contacts. When choosing a mentor, first work out what qualities and skills you are looking for. Trust and confidentiality are also critical to a successful mentoring relationship.