

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF BUILDING CONFIDENCE UNDER PRESSURE

BY LYDIA DISHMAN

It was the first day of her very first job and Nicole Williams admits she was scared. The then newly-minted college graduate was way out of her comfort zone. Coming from a working class family, Williams says she didn't have the benefit of witnessing what white-collar professionals did in office situations. "I didn't have the pedigree, so I had to be as prepared as I could."

Studying and careful grooming aside, Williams was still sweating bullets. "When you are trying to push the limits you are going to be stressed," she confesses.

A lot has changed since that first nerve-wracking first day 20 years ago. In addition to currently being LinkedIn's career expert and founder of WORKS, a media company focused on career development for professional women, Williams has also penned three bestselling books and co-created a reality television series.

But she's quick to admit that she's worked hard to cultivate a sense of effortless confidence. On the surface, she says, it's about stepping into a persona. "It's our armor," she says. And while she advocates being authentic, Williams admits you should never let colleagues or clients see you sweat. "They perceive you are less trustworthy, even if they can't articulate that," she says.

A new study on the chemo-signals of stress by the Monell Chemical Senses Center in partnership with P&G's Secret Deodorant, backs this claim. It found that body odors change with different emotional states, and that affects both the neural and behavioral states of the receiver --whether or not they're conscious of it. "So why not take all that off the table?" Williams asks.

But it's hard to fast track calm when you want to make the best impression. Science tells us one strategy is to tell ourselves we're excited, rather than anxious, to give off an air of confidence when the situation heats up.

So how did Williams go from cold sweat on that first day at the office to the put-together woman she is now? Here are some the tactics she suggests to help boost your own confidence.

BE HONEST

When Williams was touring the country promoting her first book, she admits she was a victim of “got it all together” disease. “No one ever talks about how scared they are,” she says, especially not someone who is a career expert. Initially, she mitigated stress by containing it, so no one would suspect she lacked confidence.

Life had a hand in changing her attitude. “I worked my ass off,” she says, “I was divorced, broke, and then I had a kid at 43.” Now says Williams, “I’m more realistic about what’s happening.”

Like the time during a snowstorm when she had to get her son to preschool and herself to a meeting. Williams knew she was going to be late. Five years ago, her “control freak” self wouldn’t have admitted nature was getting in the way of her professional life. But she’s discovered that people are much more receptive when she’s honest, and it gives her a chance to exhale, too.

BUILD YOUR CONFIDENCE MUSCLE

“Confidence is earned,” says Williams, “You build it through experience.” Like management which she also views as a muscle, gaining confidence takes practice. Her best advice? “Practice in situations that are not dire.”

By pre-stressing yourself, you’ll discover what your threshold is for keeping it together under pressure. To test your mettle, Williams recommends videotaping yourself giving a mock presentation. The play back will make it obvious if you overuse a word or doing something distracting.

For Williams, it’s her hands. An appearance on the Today Show drove home the fact that she’s an “outrageous hand talker” gesturing with every sentence. “Unless you see yourself doing it, it doesn’t really set in,” she explains. Once you are aware of your tics, you can work on minimizing them. Then, if you’re ever caught by surprise, you’ll appear that much more poised.

This approach helped Williams mid-career when a big presentation went horribly wrong, despite her careful preparations. Recognizing she did her best and maintained a sense of dignity throughout helped deflect the negative demons within.

TAKE MENTORING MOMENTS

Williams believes that any career can be rife with learning opportunities, even if you don’t have a dedicated mentor to guide your every step. For Williams, it began with a woman in her first job who pointed out that her hem was too high and she wasn’t getting the attention she deserved.

Now she says, she takes mentoring moments to build her arsenal of confidence. “I don’t believe in reinventing the wheel. I’m quick to ask the question instead of presuming I have the answer.”

JUST DO IT

Stress builds when we are waiting for something to happen. “Our anticipation is so much worse than doing the thing you’re afraid of,” she observes. Instead of procrastinating so much that you lose sleep, take apart the situation, think it over logically and get it over with as soon as possible. “You are going to survive this,” Williams says. Stress can be a great thing, she says, because it signals that you are doing something challenging.

ADVICE TO YOUR OLDER SELF

Though she’s incorporated these lessons from her past, Williams says it wasn’t too long ago that she believed all the pieces of her life would magically fit together at some point down the road and lead to permanent bliss.

She’s not waiting for that any more. With a pocketful of authentic confidence, Williams says she’d advise her older self to appreciate what’s working and focus on that. “It gives you more motivation to take risks,” she points out.

Source: <http://www.fastcompany.com/3025083/how-to-be-a-success-at-everything/the-art-and-science-of-building-confidence-under-pressure>