

Debate skills for women in the workplace

1 Warmer

Discuss the questions with your partner.

1. What does the term 'gender pay gap' mean?
2. How big is the gap in your country?
3. What are the common reasons given for this gap?
4. Do you agree with the reasons? Why / Why not?

2 Key words and expressions

Read the article. Replace the words in bold in the sentences below with words and phrases from the text.

1. Margaret McCabe was a **business lawyer**. (para 1)
2. McCabe decided to **make** equality training **central to the creation** of Debate Mate. (para 2)
3. The training brings **the ability to do things for yourself**. (para 3)
4. Women report that they **find** confidence **difficult**. (para 4)
5. Superiors are **mostly** male. (para 4)
6. The training teaches **listening to understand**. (para 6)
7. Nomura use the training on **programmes for new employees**. (para 8)
8. Participants learn how to cope with a work culture where people can be **argumentative**. (para 9)
9. People who do the training learn not to **get angry quickly**. (para 12)
10. People agree or disagree with the **main point** of an argument. (para 14)

How teaching women to debate boosts their workplace confidence

Communication skills can help young women make their voices heard above the men

BY MADISON DARBYSHIRE

- 1 When Margaret McCabe gave birth to a daughter, she knew something had to change. She was exasperated by the gender discrimination she faced as a commercial barrister, and wanted to make the world a more equitable place for her child. "I thought that by the time she grew up, it wouldn't be a problem. But it's still a problem," she says.
- 2 Ms McCabe, whose successful legal career had equipped her to deal with argument, negotiation and debate, felt these skills could help to improve social mobility among at-risk youth. In 2009 she founded a charity called Debate Mate to teach debating skills in under-resourced schools in London with her now-grown daughter, Scarlett. Drawing on her experience campaigning for the advancement of women and workplace equality, Ms McCabe decided to embed gender equality training into the foundation of Debate Mate.
- 3 Debate Mate's training, heralded as "amazing" by backer Bill Gates, has been so effective in schools that it is heading into the office. It aims to bring empowerment to the employees who need it most. Clients include Rolls-Royce, Tesco, BP, the Japanese bank Nomura and the UK government.
- 4 At its core, Ms McCabe says, it is a skills programme. Learning to communicate an idea simply and effectively builds confidence, something corporate women report to struggle with, especially as they increasingly enter industries where superiors are predominantly male.
- 5 Much has been said of the "confidence gap" or the difference in self-confidence between male and female employees that can have an impact on their trajectories and salaries. While women outperform men in school and are entering the workforce in record numbers, half of female managers in the UK reported self doubt about their job performance and careers. This compared with just one-third of male respondents, according to the 2011 study by the Institute of Leadership and Management.
- 6 But a confidence deficit is not the only reason why men still outpace women in the workplace. Debate Mate trains female staff to master skills such as empathetic listening and information processing that allow them to communicate more effectively. Women often struggle to get their ideas across fully before being interrupted.
- 7 Women still ask Ms McCabe about the best way to negotiate a pay rise, how to deal with professional evaluations, sexual harassment and balancing a career with children and family life. "We tend to work with younger women because they're the ones that are most interested," Ms McCabe says.
- 8 Nomura uses Debate Mate's corporate training for young women hoping to be chosen for the internship programme that it uses to select new employees.
- 9 "What we wanted to do was enhance our very junior workforce so they can enter into a corporate environment that can be a bit confrontational," says Sarah Vincent, head of Emea graduate recruitment. Those who participate rapidly develop skills that help them communicate more effectively with clients.
- 10 "They're able to articulate their ideas and take a step back to think about what they want to say", she says, and they "tend to do exceptionally well on the summer internship".

Continued on next page

- 11 Confidence is not necessarily the biggest hurdle for Debate Mate's corporate trainees. "I think I'm pretty confident," says Sophie, a senior adviser at law firm DLA Piper who participated in the training in 2018. "For me it's about slowing things down so I don't ramble, it's about bringing it in and channelling my nervous energy, controlling both my breath and physicality. It helped me cope when things don't go according to plan."
- 12 Debate training breaks down into basic principles: listening, speaking, strategic teamwork, and dispassion. "They develop what I call a third eye, and can take a step back from the situation to figure out how to get what they want. It's what the Buddhists call dispassion," Ms McCabe says. "Debaters can have a discussion, they don't lose their temper, and they can make a point."
- 13 In feedback from participants in the female corporate program, 100 per cent of women said that their ability to make a structure argument increased, and 91 per cent said that their ability to speak with confidence has increased.
- 14 Debate Mate's corporate training is fun, participants say, because the programme is taught through games. In one, participants walk to one side of the room or the other, dependent on whether they agree or disagree with the premise of the topic, which could be something like, "should women make up 50 per cent of UK board seats?". Scarlett McCabe says participants must argue the opposite side of the choice they make, which helps develop empathy for opinions they do not believe in.
- 15 In a "balloon" game, participants are placed in an imaginary sinking hot air balloon and are assigned a celebrity they must pretend to be. They then argue why that celebrity should remain in the balloon, rather than be thrown overboard to reduce weight.
- 16 "People think you're born confident or you're not, but confidence is a skill," Scarlett McCabe says. "You can trick people into thinking you're confident. Clench your bum or clench your toes, it helps anchor and ground you, and lowers your voice. Take a deep breath before you talk so you don't start your sentence with an 'um'."
- 17 Claire Pelly of Virgin Galactic has worked with Debate Mate to provide corporate training through the professional women's organisation, BroadMinded. She says women initially find that speaking in front of a group "is terrifying – they can't speak," but over the course of the training, the transformation she sees is extraordinary.
- 18 Margaret McCabe laughs: "If I could float confidence on the stock exchange, we would all be very rich."

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3 Understanding the article

A Read the article and decide if the statements are true or false according to the information given. If the statement is false, write the correct information.

1. Margaret McCabe believes gender discrimination is no longer a big problem.
2. Debate Mate training is available in schools and offices.
3. Women are offered training in empathetic listening because they often interrupt others.
4. Debate Mate radically improves participants' communication skills.
5. You can't learn to be confident.

4 Discussion

1. Many people mentioned in the article believe gender discrimination is still a big problem in the workplace. Do you agree?
2. Are employers in your country taking any steps to reduce gender discrimination?
3. What do you think about the Debate Mate training?

5 Wider business theme – Soft Skills

A Discuss the questions with a partner.

1. What are soft skills?
2. How important are soft skills at work?

B Work in small groups. Your teacher will give you a 'soft skill' to research. Look up the term on the internet and prepare a short presentation that answers the following questions:

- What does the skill involve?
- Why is it important at work?
- How do you master the skill?
- What are the group's opinions about the importance of the skill?

C Work as a class. Decide on the most important soft skill. Use the information from the presentations to help you.