

Debate skills for women in the workplace

1 Warmer

Discuss the questions with your partner.

1. Are men paid more than women in your country?
2. What are the common reasons given for a gender pay gap?
3. Do you agree with the reasons? Why / Why not?

2 Key words and expressions

Scan the article and complete the sentences below with words from the text. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. Margaret McCabe was a _____ . (para 1)
2. McCabe decided to incorporate equality training in the _____ of Debate Mate. (para 2)
3. The training brings _____ to employees. (para 3)
4. Women report that they _____ confidence at work. (para 4)
5. Superiors are _____ male. (para 4)
6. The training teaches _____ listening. (para 6)
7. Nomura use the training with women who want to participate in _____ programmes. (para 8)
8. Participants in a debate learn not to lose their _____. (para 12)

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".
- 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."

Continued on next page

- 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.”

FT

Madison Darbyshire, 7 March 2019.
© The Financial Times Limited.
All rights reserved.

Articles republished from the Financial Times

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 at work is no longer a big problem.
2. Debate Mate training is available in schools and offices.
3. Women’s lack of confidence is the only reason men are able to outperform women at work.
4. Debate Mate radically improves participants’ communication skills.
5. You can’t learn to be confident.

4 Discussion

1. Many people in the article believe gender discrimination is still a big problem in the workplace. Do you agree?
2. Are employers in your country doing anything about 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. Read the list of seven top soft skills. Put the list in order of importance (1 = most important – 7 = least important). You may want to do some research and read about the skills on the internet before making your decision.

- Communication
- Leadership
- Problem solving
- Relationship building
- Flexibility
- Time-management
- Creativity

C Compare your list with another group and discuss any differences in the order.