



SPORTINGEDGE

Seven secrets of women who win

Inside the Mind of Champions®

“

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”

— Dame Sarah Storey DBE, 11 x Paralympic Gold Medallist

Seven secrets of women who win

Sporting Edge is a high performance consultancy that uses the winning mindset from sport to fast track corporate success. Our unique research into the psychology of success has taken us Inside the Mind of Champions® - we have interviewed some of the world's greatest athletes and coaches as well as leaders in neuroscience, the military and the performing arts to understand the habits and strategies which have underpinned their success.

Leona Deakin, Sporting Edge's principle Occupational Psychologist, has also spent the last few years interviewing women at the top of corporate UK, women regarded to be in the top two percent of their regions in terms of power and influence, from executive directors in public and private sector organisations to senior partners in professional service firms. Leona's research into the psychology of success combined with our exclusive insights provides practical tools for working women.

Introduction

The modern workplace is shifting from a hierarchical, male dominated environment to become more diverse and democratic with greater emphasis on technology, social networking and a healthier work life balance. Workers are able, more than ever, to access work anytime, anywhere, through numerous technologies and work increasingly fits around family and social commitments. Consequently, this new world demands a new type of leader who is agile enough to thrive in an ever-changing environment.

Transformational leaders are positive role models, inspirational, empowering, caring and encouraging of others, they value collaboration, diversity of thought, viewpoints and innovation. Research shows us that despite women having these transformational qualities and real leadership potential, there is a remarkable shortage of women leaders on boards and at the top table.

In his 2011 government report 'Women on Boards', Lord Davies stated, "The business case for increasing the number of women on corporate boards is clear. Evidence suggests that companies with strong female representation at board and top management level perform better than those without, and that gender-diverse boards have a positive impact on performance." Concluding the review, Lord Davies recommended that by 2015 25% of FTSE 350 directors should be women and according to date from BoardEx in May 2016 the figures stood at 25.9% within FTSE 100 companies, and 20.3% in FTSE 250 companies.

So what mindset and skills does it take to reach the top table? In this white paper, winning women from high performance domains including elite sport, the military, neuroscience and performing arts share their insights into what it has taken them to achieve success in their fields and win at the highest level.

Secret 01:

Self-belief and a can-do attitude

Believing in yourself and your right to achieve is a key ingredient for success.

An overwhelming majority of the successful women we interviewed had parents who built their resilience for the journey ahead by making them feel confident, enabling them to take control and encouraging them to remain committed to their aspirations. These are three of the four C's known in the world of performance psychology to be critical for handling pressure, maintaining momentum and overcoming obstacles (the fourth C is concentration).

Many women talked of a parent or family member who had instilled in them from an early age the sense that 'you can be whatever you wish to be.' Lucy Skilbeck Director of Actor Training at RADA recalls seeing a sticker in the family home which stated – 'A woman's place is everywhere' – she remembers thinking that this was an obvious comment to have on a sticker.

"I was six or seven and it never occurred to me that anybody might think that shouldn't be the case, so I grew up with a very particular quite strong philosophical and political approach that there was absolutely no reason why a glass ceiling should exist."

Lucy didn't understand society's limitations so she grew up believing 'why not me?' and assuming that her capacity matched anybody else's capacity.



The impact of having such self-belief instilled in you as a young person is no doubt critical. Having a keen awareness of your strengths and a constant hunger for growth and challenge are indelibly linked to feelings of self-worth. Feeling that 'I am a worthy and capable person' means you are more comfortable in your own skin, appreciative of your abilities and most importantly inclined to push yourself forward and have a go.

For women not fortunate enough to have had such a sense of self-worth instilled in them from a young age, there is a powerful message here. Believing in yourself and your right to achieve is a key ingredient for success.

Such self-belief is not sufficient alone - hard work, people skills and the ability to manage stress are critical too, as we have seen. Building your personal confidence and asking yourself 'why not me?' could make a huge difference to the successful achievement of your goals. In the words of Victoria Marr, former ballerina and one of the most recognised and respected first soloists dancing in prestigious productions all over the world:

“One of my teachers once described me of having a very strong inner confidence; I wasn't very extrovert in the class, but I had a very quiet determination and focus and I let my confidence build at each step in the process.”

This sort of self-belief is not something we can achieve alone. All our interviewees talk about the support they have received over the years not just from parents but from partners, coaches, mentors, bosses and friends, and how critical this had been to aiding their progress, building their resilience and boosting their confidence. And when self-belief and confidence are present, boundaries are pushed and new ground is made.

This is illustrated by Eniola Aluko, women's football champion and qualified lawyer who has been part of the England squad since she was 14. When asked to be a guest presenter on the BBC's Match of the Day, she not only considered her confidence but also the impact it would have on others, male and female, who saw her sit shoulder to shoulder with some of the biggest names in the male game:

“Match of the Day... it's something I've watched since I was ten years old. It's a huge institution in football so I was incredibly nervous, I was the first female footballer to ever go on the show so I knew I was pioneering. When I got on the show and realised I was talking about something I knew about — I play the game - the only difference was I was a woman — I quickly settled my nerves. I'm really proud that other women have watched it and said 'Wow, your sort of flying the flag for all of us'”.

Self-belief comes to the fore in these career defining moments and champions consistently back themselves to take that step forward.

Toolkit:

01

Understand the importance of believing in yourself; if you do not, how can you expect others to?

02

Surround yourself with people who will help to improve your self-belief through honest feedback and positive support.

03

Practice asking 'why not me?' It is the most frequent question our women who win attribute their success to.

Secret 02:

Knowing your own strengths

Having a keen awareness of your personal strengths brings elevated vitality and motivation, a greater sense of direction and higher probability of achieving your goals.

When successful women are asked for the secret of their success their answers rarely contain an element of, 'I was lucky' or I was 'in the right place at the right time'. Instead, they speak of the strengths that put them ahead of the game; strengths such as being capable, a doer, a hard worker, a people person, and having a focus on quality or some unique skill or trait that set them apart.

Commonwealth gold medal swimmer – Fran Halsall, describes it as:

“I know what my strengths are and what they are not, and it's this realisation that can help you. If you're too busy worrying about the things that you're not as good at, you can't excel at what you are good at. I think more about what I'm good at, and that kind of gets me through the bad bits.”

This is not to say that these women do not recognise or acknowledge personal weaknesses, they simply modify their approach around them so that they don't become an achilles heel.

Understanding what you are good at, and placing more emphasis on this than on any weaknesses is a central tenet of Positive Psychology. It leads to elevated vitality and motivation, a greater sense of direction and higher probability of goal attainment, not to mention increased self-confidence and productivity (Clifton & Anderson, 2001-2; Hodges & Clifton, 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

“You've got to own your accomplishments and be proud of them.”

— Anna Richards, 3 x Women's Rugby World Cup winner

The champions that we have interviewed don't see feedback as a negative issue, they proactively embrace it as essential for their self-improvement. Amy Williams MBE, Winter Olympic Skeleton Gold medallist and Britain's first solo Winter Olympics champion in 30 years says:

"Every day I want feedback from my coaches on how I can improve ... I know some people try and avoid it but I'm always asking for it because that's the only way you can improve and get better."

Strong self-belief in their talents and abilities allows women to accept, own and take pride in their accomplishments. Coach and Women's Rugby World Cup triple gold medal winner for New Zealand, Anna Richards explains why this is important:

"I was not very good at promoting myself and saying I was a good rugby player. People would say, do you

play rugby? Are you any good at it? And I would say 'I'm ok'. I won four World Cups! If you gloss over things like that, then you gloss over things that you've done and what a lot of other women have done before you. For any woman out there who is striving to be successful you've got to own your accomplishments and be proud of them."



Toolkit:

- 01 Understand your own strengths and appreciate what has brought you this far, it is your foundation to build on.
- 02 Seek out feedback, good and bad, to ensure you have all the data you need to achieve your goals faster.
- 03 Focus more of your time and effort on harnessing your strengths rather than worrying about your weaknesses.



“

Store up positive stories so if you get into a negative thinking spiral, you can replace that thought with a positive one.

”

— Dr Tara Swart, Neuroscientist

Secret 03:

Seeking new challenges

Champions are defined by taking control of their own careers and embracing the risks and challenges that come with raising their game.

A restlessness to move on and a desire to be challenged are core qualities seen in women and men who succeed in both sport and business. For some, like Eniola Aluko, this need for achievement manifests itself as goal setting:



“I’ve always been somebody that wanted to achieve. I’ve always got a goal in front of me. I’m proactive in terms of setting new goals at the start of the year and really holding myself accountable to them.”

For others, this quest for achievement meant stepping outside their traditional performance domain, where they had previously experienced success. Take Dame Sarah Storey, British road and track racing cyclist and former swimmer, who with 11 gold medals, is considered among the most successful British Paralympians of all time:

“At the point where I decided to change sports, it was an opportunity to try something new, and it wasn’t really with any motivation to say ‘it’s going to be first time anyone’s done it in two sports’ or, ‘it’s going to make me the greatest Paralympian ever’, it was just wondering ‘could I take on this challenge and be the best I could be?’”

“Don’t let the noise of other’s opinion drown out your own inner voice.”

— Steve Jobs, Co-founder of Apple

Trusting your gut instinct is a key characteristic that sets high achievers apart in any performance domain as Steve Jobs outlined in his Stanford University graduation speech:

“Don’t let the noise of other’s opinion drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition, they somehow already know what you truly want to become.”

Annabel Croft, former professional British number one tennis player and now international television presenter exemplified this in making the transition from her playing career at the age of 21.

“It was really a very difficult time because I had my parents who had dedicated enormous amounts of time and energy into my tennis career. I had a coach that had given away so much of his time to me, I had signed-up five-year contracts with different sponsorships, I had managers, agents around me and it

was just this realisation that I just thought, ‘You know what, I just need to stop.’”

She has never doubted her decision to end her tennis career for one minute:

“I applied the same energy, positivity and dedication to the career that I’ve now had...I have to pinch myself with what I do now.”

This is where the sporting champions apply the confidence and self-belief that you read about in section one to overcome the nerves and apprehension about a new challenge. They don't expect their first steps to be perfect, but they back themselves to find a way to win again.

Toolkit:

- 01 Consider yourself the CEO of your own company and create a three-year strategy for your career success. What decisions do you need to take and what will you need to sacrifice?
- 02 Remain open to new experiences and challenges either within your current career or outside it.
- 03 Trust your gut instinct during times of uncertainty, it's your values and past experiences informing you of the best way forward.

“

I've always been somebody that wanted to achieve. I've always had a goal in front of me.

”

— Eniola Aluko, Chelsea and England Women's Footballer and Lawyer

Secret 04:

Building strong, collaborative relationships

The best leaders are those who foster positive feelings in the people whose co-operation and support they need.

Successful senior women talk of building strong relationships with others. They emphasise the importance of creating strong networks, knowing people's names and being accessible. Some talk of understanding what makes people tick and appreciating different motivators, while others speak of forming friendships at work that persist over many years.

Anna Richards describes the culture created in the New Zealand's Black Ferns Sevens team and Senior World Cup winning women's rugby team:

“The New Zealand Sevens team call themselves the New Zealand Sisters...it's very family orientated, it's about looking after each other on and off the pitch and working for each other. We have kind of the same

culture in the Black Ferns as well, we never leave anybody by themselves we're always looking after each other. It's like an extended family.”

Certainly in the world of leadership research there has been a paradigm shift over the past decade. Gone is the idea of a charismatic leader who has a monopoly on the vision and in its place is the importance of building shared visions and engaging with internal and external stakeholders. (Alimo-Metcalfe 2007). The best leaders are those who foster positive feelings in the people whose co-operation and support they need.

“Women rarely bludgeon their way to something, it's not the way. They coach their way to it.”

— Baroness Sue Campbell, Head of Women's Football - FA

Head of Women's Football, Baroness Sue Campbell, describes how the female approach to influencing and building relationships is both different and complimentary to that seen in her male colleagues.

“Women rarely bludgeon their way to something, it's not the way. They coach their way to it. They are subtler in the way they get the decisions made, the way they want them made and I think it's all complimentary. I don't think it's better, it's different and I think those differences are to be valued. The best is when you put those together and actually make them work harmoniously together. I think you get the best of both worlds.”



To level the corporate playing field, the relationships that women build with one another is critical. As women become more senior, they also become more visible and open to judgement by others, including female peers. In her New York Times bestseller book 'Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead', Sheryl Sandberg discusses how supporting female colleagues enables women to go further. She encourages women to look for ways to offer support from listening to, encouraging, celebrating, advocating, soliciting and mentoring.

Marketing, Media and PR expert Nicky Fuller who has 25 years' experience helping individuals and organisations with their communications and marketing has valued support she has received:

“We hear a lot about the glass ceiling for women across sport and in industries that are quite male dominated. Having worked in a variety of different industries, working in networks with other women has been hugely beneficial.”

Toolkit:

- 01 Develop your emotional intelligence so you can foster positive feelings in those whose co-operation and support you need.
- 02 Show interest in others, listen well and collaborate more than you compete.
- 03 Foster relationships with other women, support their contribution and celebrate their successes.

Secret 05:

Hard work, practice and persistence

The role of hard work, practice and persistence in achieving success is critical. Even for the most talented performers, increased effort reaps rewards.

A strong work ethic, high levels of energy and the willingness to put their careers first characterise many successful women. No one talks of getting ahead without having to be flexible, take on extra work, and make sacrifices. It is clear that they are seen as people who are good at their jobs and who work hard to do their best, and achieve the best. Consider Victoria Marr, who says:

“I never, ever had the natural god given talent or attributes to be a dancer. I got where I got through sheer determination and hard work. I didn’t have a completely wrong shape, but I certainly wasn’t blessed with the perfect classical body or technical ability. I built a career on determination... I just turned up, worked hard, and gave it my all.”

It is true to say that the role of hard work, practice and persistence in achieving success is critical. No matter how bright or talented, it is effort which truly reaps rewards. This is true for athletes and business people alike. Not only does such a work ethic mean you hone your skills and grow your experience faster than others, it also makes you stand out from the crowd. The literature tells us that conscientious people are the best employees because they finish what they start and do what they say they will (Hurtz & Donovan,

2000). Organisations need this, and leaders are wise to integrate it into their recruitment criteria. Dame Sarah Storey summarises this perfectly:

“I think anyone’s success is down to hard work. You can be fabulously talented, but if you aren’t prepared to work hard then it doesn’t matter how talented you are. If you stand on the blocks or sit in the start gate of a race knowing you couldn’t have done any more to prepare for that particular race, knowing that you’ve put in more than anyone else in the world, then you’re increasing the odds of winning. Whereas if you go into there and think, ‘wow I’m so talented, I don’t even care how much training I’ve done’ then that complacency will catch you out.”



Stanford University Professor Carol Dweck conducted fascinating research with college students where a large cohort was split in to two groups: one that was told that their success in a test came from their 'fixed' natural talent and the other group (who attained a similar level of performance) was told that their success had come from their hard work, preparation and persistence. Over time these two mindsets were reinforced by praising one for a binary intelligence and the other for an ability to work hard, solve problems and 'grow' from the experience.

When confronted with a more difficult test, the students with a fixed mindset were more hesitant as they were worried that their fixed ability may be found inadequate, whereas the growth mindset group embraced the challenge and interpreted any potential set back as another opportunity to learn and improve.

Whether you operate in a sporting or corporate domain you will recognise the behaviours of people with a growth mindset as they embrace tough challenges, seek out feedback and persist in the face of adversity. A great example of this in a career context is given by Baroness Sue Campbell:

"I've learnt to say 'ok the door is shut, I'll see if I can get through the window'. And if the window is shut I'll dig a tunnel into the house, and if the tunnel's not available I'll burrow through the roof. In other words, there's always a way round things."

It's this belief that you can and will find a solution that is the hallmark of champions.

Toolkit:

01 Look back at your past achievements and reflect on the hard work and persistence that delivered your success.

02 Be clear of what changes in your approach might be necessary and which you are prepared to make.

03 When people are successful, recognise their hard work and persistence rather than praising their 'fixed' talent or intelligence.

“

I never, ever had the natural god given talent or attributes to be a dancer. I got where I got through sheer determination and hard work.

”

— Victoria Marr, Former Principal Ballerina



Secret 06:

Performing under pressure

Champions embrace moments of high pressure and deliver their best game when they need it most.

Successful women are committed to moving forwards and upwards in their chosen fields. They know where they want to be and are confident in making the decisions needed to meet their goals. They also know that goals are not achieved by playing safe - and that means taking risks and performing under pressure.

High pressure business situations such as presenting to a board, participating in an important meeting or making a speech provide tremendous opportunities for women to elevate their position as leaders yet psychologically few are naturally pre-disposed to handle such pressure. Lisa Akesson, RADA Communications and specialist voice coach, who supports business leaders and politicians in increasing their interpersonal impact, explains why:

“People are fearful because it’s that primitive instinct of being watched, being judged, being criticised.”



It's this fight or flight response which leads to butterflies in our stomach and our heart rate shallowing

and quickening as our brain perceives a 'threat'. The world's elite athletes frequently have to deal with the stress of competition and performing in the spotlight, and wouldn't dream of competing without being physically and psychologically prepared. Amy Williams MBE, describes how self-talk affects the performance outcome:

“What goes on up in the head up on the start line, whatever it is... will mean you'll achieve or not achieve.”

Champions realise that the loudest voice they hear will be the one in their head, and they have worked out strategies to help them thrive. One of these is acknowledging the physical signs of nerves and managing their breathing depth and pace and gestures to be slower and more controlled. This brings about a composure which allows the performance to happen in a calm and considered way. This doesn't mean that athletes don't feel nervous, they just use nerves in ways that enhance their performance. For Dame Sarah Storey her nerves give her an edge:

“Nerves can be bad, nerves can be good, I think that you have the opportunity to control those nerves, keep them simmering away, and keep the adrenaline pumping, allow that adrenaline to carry you through.”

In essence, Sarah's nerves are a positive reinforcement that what she is about to do matters and that her body is simply switching on.

For leaders delivering an important message, their posture and voice demonstrates their confidence and commitment to the cause. Sheelagh McNamara, Voice, Speech and Presentation Tutor at RADA, who has helped Oscar nominees, politicians, and CEOs prepare for political forum, television debate, radio interview and presentations, says:

“I’ve worked with a lot of women who have risen to or want to rise to board level, and what they need is much more credible behaviour. They need to keep their sentence length short, they need to keep their pitch down. One of the key things for women to remember is to avoid their sentences rising at the end which almost turns a statement into a question, it’s what I call HRT - high rising terminal.”

Lisa Akesson continues:

“Women tend to place their voices higher up their chest, so they sit in a higher girly position. Very often when they are trying to gain the attention of the room or have authority, they find that people talk over or interrupt them, and don’t give them the recognition they desire. Margaret Thatcher had to take her voice a few octaves lower down to be taken seriously in the House of Commons. There is something about where you place your voice that gains you the credibility and authority to be listened to.”

What all successful women understand is that if they want to achieve their goals they need to seize opportunities. Annabel Croft sums this up nicely:

“A lot of sportsmen are so fearing of failure that they have a cut-off point, but the great champions go where they need to go.”

Toolkit:

- 01 Use positive self-talk and visualise yourself doing well. Write a reminder to slow your breathing and gestures down to regain a feeling of composure and calm.
- 02 Practice your delivery so that you are ready to deliver your message with authority, credibility and passion.
- 03 Embrace opportunities - pressure is a privilege that comes with increased responsibility.

Secret 07:

Developing resilience

Work/life pressures make it tough to get the right balance between achieving goals and personal wellbeing. High performers know that sustained success calls for giving as much focus to their recovery as to their performance.

The economic downturn of the last eight to ten years brought an expectation that people had to perform better with reduced resources and multiple demands on their time – this impacts on a number of things from health and fitness, right through to sleep and quality of clear decision making. For women, this is often on top of taking care of a family and home.

Keeping check of and managing your physically and psychological wellbeing is fundamental to maintaining high performance levels. Many of the successful women we interviewed talk about putting work in a box when they go home and ensuring they have real downtime to recharge. They also spoke of being attuned to their bodies, understanding what makes them feel good and knowing what to do when they are out of kilter.

Medical Director and Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Washington University, Dr Dehra Harris stresses the importance of considering psychological and physical stress as two sides of the same coin.

“Historically we have thought of our brain as being separate from our bodies but we are actually one

chemical truth. So when you are understanding stress, the things you are doing to your body on every level, whether that’s sleep or how you eat and exercise, you are one chemical truth and it will be affecting how you think.”

Our whole system – brain and body – benefits from a high level of regularity in terms of eating, sleeping, resting and work. It’s this regularity of work and periods of recovery which are challenging to maintain in a busy executive schedule but without it, we can experience burnout. Neuroscientist Dr Tara Swart says:

“The most successful, driven, business people that I’ve worked with understand that what you eat and what you drink effect your physical health.”

She suggests:

“Oxygenate your brain by doing exercise or at least going for a walk, but if you are bombarded with multiple tasks and emails, that’s not always possible. So if you can’t go for a walk, at least do some deep breathing at your desk.”

Anna Hemmings MBE, six times world canoeing champion, was diagnosed with chronic fatigue due to over training. She was told by medical experts that she would never race again, but after two years fighting her illness, made a full recovery and regained her status as the world's leading marathon canoeist.

“A big part of resilience is about having the energy to deliver your performance day in day out at your best, being strong in the face of adversity, being well equipped mentally, emotionally and physically in the face of life's challenges. Whereas being stubborn is just ignoring the warning signs — sleeplessness, lack of motivation, becoming short tempered, avoiding things, withdrawing or losing confidence — because I'm being stubborn and I'm being focused. There's a big difference for sure. I know the difference now and I don't want to go there again.”

Great leaders overcome their obsessive work rate by acknowledge their responsibility to be fresh and supportive of the people they lead. Lieutenant Colonel Lucy Giles, the first woman in history to take command of a college at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, told us:

“If you're tired you start to compromise your decision making, you become more susceptible to the biases within the evidence of decision making and you start to take short cuts. In my view you are being really disingenuous to those you work with if you don't give yourself enough rest.”



In essence, high performers judge themselves by their impact, not their busyness. They find ways to work smarter in order to preserve that all important time for rest, reflection and recovery. By managing their own energy they are able to sustain their success and help others to stay ahead of the game too.

Toolkit:

01

Listen to your body and be aware of warning signs that tell you you're out of balance.

02

Prioritise your recovery especially during stressful times, your nutrition, exercise, hydration and sleep will all enhance your tolerance for stress.

03

Remember to take the time to connect with friends and family who energise you. Your work will often recover but your health and relationships won't.

An aerial photograph of a mountain range. The foreground shows a valley with distinct, parallel ridges and gullies, illuminated by warm, golden light. The background features more rugged, forested mountain peaks under a clear blue sky.

“

The thing that gets me up in the morning is a sense of purpose, the fact that I can make a difference and I can inspire people.

”

— Lieutenant Colonel Lucy Giles, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst

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About Sporting Edge

Sporting Edge is a high performance consultancy that supports leaders and teams in elite sport and business. Our unique learning framework takes you Inside the Mind of Champions® – we've interviewed Olympic and Paralympic gold medallists, World Cup winning coaches, Grand Slam tennis champions and Formula One teams. Beyond sport, we've also interviewed artistic directors, actors and military leaders. These fascinating video insights are the foundation of our approach, and we've translated their secrets into practical tools to fast-track your success.



From inspiring conference speeches and workshops to consulting and digital content, our services will deliver results whether you're in the dressing room or the boardroom.

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