

- REPORT -

# Q: CAN YOU LEARN TO BE A LEADER?

**A:** Developing your ability to project self-assurance is an essential skill if you are to earn the respect of colleagues and peers

By CATRIONA GRAY

A few months ago, I visited the home of an extremely successful CEO. Out of habit, I scanned the bookshelves, and came across a well-thumbed copy of Marshall Goldsmith's *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*. A long-standing bestseller, its premise is that in order to climb the final few rungs of the executive ladder, it is necessary to change your behaviour. You might comfortably attain a senior position by being an excellent employee, but in order to lead a company, you need to develop presence. Skills not previously required – such as commanding the attention of a room – are suddenly of vital



importance. If you want to be a leader, you need to act like one.

Hence one might assume the former England footballer and Arsenal captain Alex Scott is used to being in the spotlight. Last summer, she became the BBC's first female football presenter at a World Cup; this year, she will be its lead presenter for the Women's World Cup. Her transition from player to pundit looked effortless, but it was in fact the result of years of hard work, with Scott fitting in a media degree and work placements with the FA and Sky Sports around her gruelling training schedule, in order to prepare herself for life after her sporting career.

As a woman in a notoriously male-dominated field, she has learnt how to speak up and command authority. 'I just focus on my own performance,' she says. 'I'm not sitting there thinking "I need to be better than him", but rather that I need to do the job to the best of my own abilities. My favourite quote is from the American tennis player Billie Jean King, who said that "pressure is a privilege". Instead of looking at a stressful situation as a negative, you have to flip the situation and see it as a positive. You've worked so hard, you've done the preparation – this is your moment and you need to take it.'

Scott's in-depth knowledge of her industry means that she is not easily wrong-footed. During the World Cup, one of her (male) fellow pundits reiterated an observation that she had just made. This was quickly highlighted on social media, but Scott had already risen above it. 'I found it funny,' she says. 'As long as I've got my point across and that point is heard, then I'm totally comfortable. I've learnt from experience that people figure out what's going on in the end.'

If, like Scott, you're prepared to put in the hard graft to become a more powerful speaker, there are experts on hand to help. Louise Collins is a tutor at Rada Business, an outpost of the famous drama school that runs courses on executive presence, coaching clients on how to break through the glass ceiling. Much of her work involves encouraging women to behave more like actors – to become aware of how they speak and move, and how they need to present themselves to command respect.

'If you look at great leaders, you will see that they share many common traits,' she says. 'A key part of their credibility is that they keep their bodies relaxed and still. When they're sitting in a meeting, they're not leaning forwards, but sitting up straight. The way that they speak is also important – using a measured pace, pausing, and not being afraid of silence. Good leaders tend to avoid repetition because their belief is that saying something once is sufficient. They don't use filler words, such as "um" and "so", and their sentences are typically quite short and to the point.'

Such recommendations offer helpful guidance, but they're not



Former footballer Alex Scott. Right: Billie Jean King in 1970



the only way to make yourself heard. 'There is no gold standard for authority,' says Viv Groskop, the author of *How to Own the Room: Women and the Art of Brilliant Speaking*. 'There is a lot of stereotyping in this area, sometimes suggesting that women should moderate their tone to be "taken seriously". But Joan Rivers was high-pitched and shrill, as well as easy to listen to, clear and authoritative. If you communicate confidently in a way that feels authentic, you come across as powerful and in control. Choose people you've worked with, TED talkers, or speakers you like, and see what they do with tone.' That said, she cautions against 'uptalk' – when your voice goes up at the end of a sentence, suggesting a question. 'It has become a very common conversational tic and is not helpful in formal professional situations,' she says. 'It sounds indecisive and signals uncertainty.'

Developing your communication skills becomes even more important if you decide to become your own boss. A year ago, the property advisor Hannah Aykroyd made the decision to make the leap from employee to entrepreneur and set up her own business, which, in the past eight months has transacted on £60 million of London property. Yet despite having her name over the door, she initially found that some of her older clients would naturally address her male employee rather than her. 'Going from being an employee

to hiring staff and being personally responsible for every aspect of a business was a tremendous leap,' she says. 'I've certainly changed as a result. I think you naturally adapt as your career gains momentum, but you do behave a little differently. Now, when I meet a potential client, I always allow them to speak first – it enables me to assess what sort of person they are and what they need from me.'

'At the earlier stages of a career, it's good to build relationships and be friendly, but that can

only get you so far,' says Louise Collins, who encourages women to be conscious of their default behaviour patterns. 'As you move up the ladder, credibility is required, and progressively higher levels of it. People will be studying you more closely.' For some, this will mean a conscious effort to avoid being too friendly in a professional capacity, and instead learning to behave more formally, adjusting body language and actions to command a greater degree of respect.

The good news is that these skills can be learnt. 'Even something as simple as making bigger gestures makes such a difference,' says Collins. 'Women need to make sure that they're owning their space, and physically occupying it. Because that's something that comes very naturally to men – you only have to glance about on the Tube to see that.'

For tickets to *Bazaar At Work's* executive-presence event with Rada Business, see page 44.

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