

DARE: A book to use and not just read

During 25 years as a business professor, I've spoken to many women in major leadership positions. One quality that they all cited as being vital to success is the confidence to take risks.

The reason? To advance your career in an organization, you'll ultimately need someone to invite you into senior leadership. To get that invitation, you'll need confidence as you recognize and seize informal opportunities to take charge and put yourself forward as a change agent.

That's great if you have self-assurance to spare. But what if you are more cautious than confident?

Luckily, as I have learned from Becky Blalock, confidence is not an immutable trait, but a skill that can be developed and strengthened. Becky discovered that firsthand as a matter of survival during her climb to the top in the male-dominated utilities industry. Becky worked her way from literally the bottom at Southern Co. to become the chief information officer of one of the world's largest and most respected for-profit electric utility firms. She is eminently qualified to teach others

about how to take risks and to take them strategically.

Becky is one of the best mentors I've ever met, attested to by two dozen of her mentees I meet each year. Interestingly, many people who seek and gain from her mentoring are men hoping to ascend the corporate ladder. However, until now only a limited few could benefit from the lessons she's learned. Now she is sharing those lessons in her new book, "Dare: Straight Talk on Confidence, Courage, and Career for Women in Charge." Despite the title, I found that



VIEWPOINT
Jeffrey Rosensweig

the book contains insights that are as valuable for men as they are for women.

Here, for example, is her distilled take on the four main factors of confidence: attitude, knowledge, experience and mentors.

Attitude: By believing that you can succeed (or just acting as if you do), you put yourself in place to achieve your goals. In a world where much of what you have to deal with is out of your control, you can control your own attitude and reactions. Embrace the power of a positive outlook, and surround yourself with people who reinforce it.

Those who know Becky, including many executives reading this now, know that she is a force of nature, a positive spirit who catalyzes progress in Georgia and nationally.

Knowledge: Develop a deep understanding of the arena in which you operate. Evaluate yourself honestly about your gaps in knowledge. Admit that you don't know everything, and be willing to stretch beyond where you feel comfortable to learn something new. You may pinch a little to be the "newbie" when you are accustomed to being the expert, but what you gain will be invaluable. In addition to new knowledge, you build an environment of honesty and trust when you are willing to admit that you do not know everything. Others on your team will be encouraged to do the same.

Becky rose through diverse functions at Southern Co., daring to learn new things



Power woman: Becky Blalock worked her way from literally the bottom at Southern Co. to become its chief information officer.

outside of her accustomed comfort zone.

Experience: We learn from experiencing failure. We learn what works and what doesn't. We learn to own up to our mistakes, to take responsibility for our actions. Most importantly, we learn that we can survive it and recover. And we learn to shake it off, and immediately begin working to make things right.

One feature that makes the U.S. succeed is that we can learn and grow and come back from adversity stronger than ever.

Mentors: The image of the rugged individualist taking on the world has a special allure. But that approach can be a recipe for disaster when we want to advance toward our career goals. In the real world, we need someone to lean on, someone to give us advice and feedback and make introductions. Mentors are a must if you want to lead eventually. You also will be much more willing to take risks knowing you have supporters who will give you a hand up if you fall.

Frankly, many books by high-level business leaders are more about themselves and less about truly useful ways for the reader to advance. Academics often ignore these books. By contrast, the conclusion of a conversation I had with the superb president of Agnes Scott College, Elizabeth Kiss, is that Becky Blalock has written a relevant and valuable book. In sum, buy and read DARE — soon.

Rosensweig is a professor at Goizueta Business School of Emory University.



Book signing: Blalock's insights are as valuable for men as they are for women.

SPECIAL