

Transcript from Practice over Perfect: The art of building confidence.

Hello friends and maybe strangers, but soon to be friends. Welcome to our first vlog as a company. This is AG Collaborative and in this chat myself, Kari Bergman, and one of our founders, Abbey Johnston, are really going to dig into this thing called confidence. Abbey really takes us on a journey of her own transformation from self-consciousness to confidence and inspires ways that we can access that for ourselves within the workplace and how we can set the stage as leaders to build the confidence in those around us. We really jump in here. So if you need to grab a drink, warm up your coffee, or if you're taking us on a walk, go ahead and lace up those shoes. Here we go!

Kari Bergman: What is this thing that we're talking about? In this conversation, what do we mean when we're talking about confidence?

Abbey Johnston: This whole idea of confidence is actually pretty ambiguous.

One, I believe that confidence is less about a feeling and more about a mindset or a belief. And I think that's historically where I've gone off in this whole wrestling match with my confidence is that I've linked it very much with, I'm not confident, I'm afraid all the time. I don't know if I can do this, like that sort of thing.

And I don't know if that's lack of confidence or if that's just healthy fear at times. I think it's more in alignment with mindset and beliefs how we view ourselves and whether or not we will be okay.

And so for me, that's also why I think confidence is inextricably linked with failure. I think confidence is actually embedded in this internal rootedness of 'even if I do fail, I'm going to be okay.'

So I will put myself out there. So I'll do the things that maybe give me the feeling of being afraid or nervous. Confidence is not any absence of failure. Confidence is the ability to be with it and be okay anyway. And so we step into the things that make us feel uncomfortable.

About a year and a half ago, we were sitting with my dad and my little daughter was like crawling around on the floor. And so we were talking about what we were like as kids. So I'm one of four, and we were talking about, okay, if you had to give one word to describe us siblings as kids, what words would you give them? And so we went through, for my brother who spent a lot of time in the ER, it was like reckless.

When we were talking about me, the word for me was self-conscious. And I remember feeling that like it was a punch in the gut, not because I was offended,

but because it brought me back to that feeling of being a little kid and just so painfully self-conscious. So painfully fearful and aware of myself and like the potential of getting it wrong.

So part of my interest in confidence is I don't want to feel that way anymore. And my assumption was like, that confidence gets rid of that debilitating fear and self-consciousness. And confidence has always been something that I have really struggled with.

It has been like this narrative in my head being not confident, like "you see those other people? They're confident. You? You got some work to do."

As I dug in it and as I started to see the feeling of fear or nerves that didn't have to be a thumbs up or thumbs down on whether I could do something. And it didn't have to say whether I, at my core was a confident person or a non-confident person. Like it just got to be what it was.

As I let those feelings be what they were at times, yeah, I'm scared out of my brain right now. And I want to believe that means that I'm not capable or that I shouldn't be doing this. And someone else should. Someone else that isn't as scared by this, I started to be able to scratch some of the meaning and just let it be what it is. Like it's normal to be scared right now. It's okay that I'm scared. And the confident move, if I'm going to practice confidence, if it's a muscle to flex, then I will be with this discomfort and I will do it anyways, and then we can evaluate, we can move forward.

And the irony is that the more that you do that, the less debilitating that feeling of discomfort is. It doesn't mean it goes away. In fact, I think if I get to a place where I don't feel that discomfort, then I'm probably not challenging myself. Although don't we just love comfort.

Being able to see it as a practice, as a mindset, normalizing fear in combination with it, then I didn't continue to embed this narrative that made me want to just keep shrinking and pulling away and hiding in my bedroom kind of feeling.

Kari Bergman: There's a contraction sort of nature, even as you're talking about the self-consciousness, you're moving into yourself and away from the camera and retreating almost.

And then it's this, does confidence for you feel like an expansion?

Abbey Johnston: Yeah, it totally does. It does feel like an expansion.

And that's where I think it's super interesting, the intersectionality of our body and what messages our body sends to us. We are, we use that word inextricable again, we can't disconnect with that. And so with feelings of fear, it's like I'm protecting my body so I will be okay.

Allows me to open up to you, which opening up essentially exposes yourself and also opens yourself up to vulnerability and attack. If we use more survivalist language

Kari Bergman: There's vulnerability, but then there's also, there's there's more, you have more access.

When you're in this place, the world has more access to you. Therefore there's more potential threat, which has access to you. But also then there's more fullness that you're experiencing. What have you found if you're embodying or tapping into this embodiment and this alignment with a mindset of confidence?

What's the experience like?

Abbey Johnston: Again, it's, there's an element of being willing to be open, like open body language, but there's also an element. And I think this also maybe can be connected to genders is like this willingness to take up space. And be seen and because it's okay. If I'm seen and I'm not okay in someone's eyes, like the end of the day, that sort of like I'm tapped into a rootedness and internal holding that I have. And it doesn't mean that thoughts and feelings don't hurt or support. It doesn't mean that we're taking away the value of the impact of people, but there's something about being willing to take up space and be unapologetic.

What I would also say about that is just because I take up space, doesn't mean I'm taking your space. I think there's enough space for all of us.

The reason why I have a tattoo is just that, the quality of feeling freedom connected to all of this there's a feeling of being unhindered. And being free of being able to like let your guard down. And, we guard ourselves in our bodies all the time.

We are reading our own body language to get a sense for what we believe. So I'll essentially do a scan of myself. And so right now it's Oh, Abbey's standing with her shoulders back and she has her chin up, she must be feeling confident, let's release some hormones. Same with this. My body starts to be like, Oh, what's what's going on. She feeling attacked or she's freezing or she's right. And so then other things get triggered physiologically .

I think that the piece of passion for me comes in wanting to see people more free to take up the space and bring the contribution they were meant to take. And that means like the willingness to risk, like the willingness to put yourself out there and, know that putting yourself out there means that you're putting yourself out there.

And I don't think that we can risk without this feeling of hurt and discomfort, but I also don't think we can say small without lots of feelings of hurt and discomfort.

Kari Bergman: There's a risk in retreating and being small.

Abbey Johnston: Yes. Yeah, the only risk isn't in, when you put yourself out there, there's a cost to all the choices it's just evaluating what it is we're willing to spend if we want to use the cost language.

Kari Bergman: One thing we're talking about in Level Up is the things that we think make us weird actually can also be a source of strength and power and the things we actually need to be bringing and the ways we need to be taking up space.

Was there a discovery or maybe not a discovery, but choosing to bring those and to surface those things that you already knew? Like you are not apologizing for anymore, you were unapologizing.

Abbey Johnston: Yeah, I think part of the work was starting to appreciate that the way that I was had value versus just wishing I was someone else. I spent most of life in that space. If I could just be like, fill in the blank, then life would be easier. Or I wouldn't feel all the different variations of discomfort or self-loathing or shame. I had to be the one to start to choose to believe that I was okay. And not that I was just okay, but that there was something about me that was needed in the world. And that was like, that was a really hard shift. That's a, and that makes it sound as though it was a shift.

Kari Bergman: Light switch is now on.

Abbey Johnston: Oh, and now that's done.

No, that's, that's continuous choice. That's continuous done-ing.

And the shift was when I started to recognize my role in that I would have to keep choosing it, that it wasn't, I didn't just arrive. And the more that I chose it, the easier it got to accept it. But this isn't something that just goes away. We live in a world that thrives on telling us we're not good enough so that we buy stuff.

So, the idea that we just arrive in space where we, that I just like lounge in my worthiness while I hope that is possible - I also know that it's something I have to choose as a moment to moment thing, not a state I arrived at.

And then also I started to realize that the things that I was most ashamed of are the things that I allow myself to practice them and hone them are the things that actually made me really feel alive.

Part of what I hated about my childhood was my self-consciousness right. Where I felt a lot and I just felt so much. And so I would just go into myself and I just noticed too much about myself and others. It was almost like sensation overload and I didn't know how to cope. And I think now as an adult, what I realized is I was just a little feeling being, that's helping me be good at my work now, but that was me hone my empathy.

It was me learning that there was this like super power that I had, and it was something that had to grow and be harnessed. And the thing that I had so much shame for. Oh, I wish like I wasn't so sensitive or I wish I didn't feel so much, or I wish I wasn't so self-conscious, actually is the thing that now I can look at it and say, thank God I struggled with those things because now I see things differently than I would never see if I hadn't struggled in that way.

Or also been able to look back and say, Oh, that was like the bud of this thing that now I can see as like the thing that I get so much life from the ability to be with someone and hear them and understand them and to have the opportunity to get to participate in someone's world in that way makes me come alive.

And that's that empathy piece. That for a long time I resisted. And yet when I leaned into it, it's nah, this is this is, this feeds me too.

Kari Bergman: I love the image of the bud. What are you now? What's your empathy like now?

Abbey Johnston: I am. Probably. It's probably more seasonal. There are times where I go through winters where there are no buds and times when I'm in full bloom and that can cycle within moments. And that can cycle within months, but I can be all those things probably at once.

Even in this moment, Kari, even in this moment, as we're doing all this talking like my head, I have to combat the like, "why are you talking so much? Like, why don't you let Kari talk? You're just like rambling, Zipit. What do you have to say about any of this?"

I'm talking about something I'm so passionate about, so lit up about and at the same time have to do some work in my head that says it's okay. You can feel that. But I just think sometimes we can listen to people, do what I do now and think they've got like all their shit together and all that sorted. And it's even in this moment, I'm like, fighting my demons and here we are.

Kari Bergman: Yeah. It's interesting you point to that because since I met you, I was like, oof. She's got it. Look at you. And there was and is beauty and wisdom and strength.

And I would see you from an outside of your own brain perspective and be like, look at her she's she knows what she's about and she's taking up space. And I wonder, as you can still show up in that way and people perceive you in that way and there's still work that's happening. What's possible for others? What do you dream of? What gets you jazzed about this? When you think about when others can touch this more and can feel this more? What would happen?

Abbey Johnston: Thank you Kari, for saying that. I think this is also why we have such — we create such toxic places in our brain with the comparison game and we all do it, right?

Like we all think, Oh, that person. And I think, social media does a brilliant job of supporting our false narratives. And yet we're all just trying to figure it out. And I think you're right this is well, more than a year and a half was that like moment where I was like, Oh, this is why I'm so passionate about this.

And this has been a, this has been a long, intense journey where I have been, I don't know I would say the lowest of lows, but I've been in some pretty shit spaces, struggling with some pretty shit things. And so this conversation is definitely a manifestation or an evidence of an evolution, a process, and an ongoing thing and this is a snapshot into what's continuing.

When I hope. And I think this is connected to thinking about my long journey and being in some really dark places. This is why I want to get up out of bed in the morning. Like legit is because I have felt so viscerally this feeling of being trapped by myself, so immobilized by my fear. So trapped in my perfectionistic tendencies, like just never ever feeling good enough. And the hustle and the striving for that just beating the shit out of me to the point where I just wasn't living. And I think that's, and the whole perfectionistic / confidence connection to all this is a whole other, this should be a series.

It's like a whole, we know that perfectionism lowers confidence, because we're striving for something that doesn't exist. And so we never allow ourselves to feel like we're good enough or worthy enough, because we never arrive. And I just never could get there. And I was literally killing myself.

And I think what I hope for people in this journey is one, their belief, like their ability to know that whatever they feel trapped by or stuck in, or like on the conveyor belt of the meh of life. That it doesn't have to be that way that it just doesn't have to be that way.

And so I think one, like this feeling of being alive and the feeling of being alive, doesn't, isn't necessarily always a pleasant feeling, right? I'm not wishing for people to have some state of euphoria, I'm wishing people to feel a sense of purposefulness and engagement in their life and in their world.

That switched on feeling versus all the other things that we can feel. I think it also is contagious. The world needs the things that make us feel alive because the things that make us feel alive, things that we really bring and contribute, the experiences that we've had, the perspective we bring that fill in the blank of all the things that go on and on about is not the same.

And that diversity of all of our contributions is what we need. I think that's also where the comparison game is so deadening to what we need most in the world, we just all think we need to be the same, like the other thing. And so then we don't bring what we have because we think what we have is broken or not good.

And so we try and get what someone else has, and then we never arrive and so we never bring it and we die.

Kari Bergman: Sounds like a great children's book.

Abbey Johnston: It's not that all of us then become selfish or self focused. I think that's also been a part of my journey is feeling that to be confident or put yourself out there means that you're self absorbed. That's the thing that I realized is that the irony is more grounded we feel in who we are, the more worthy we feel, the less we need to worry about ourselves. And the more that we can show up and bring what we need to bring for the betterment of all the things.

The world needs all the things that we have to bring. Even if, maybe what we're bringing is we're like we're limping along.

I just think something's better than nothing.

Kari Bergman: You mentioned the contagious nature of this confidence. And it's almost like I say this a lot, that when we show up in a certain way, we give other people permission to do the same. And as you're talking about, even if we're limping, if that is what our authentic state of being is, then all of a sudden we show up limping and then someone else is like, "Wow, what I really need to do is limp right now. thanks for showing me that it's okay." And I wonder then it's rather than the comparison of, Oh wow. Look at this person. They are doing AB&C. And so therefore for me to be worthy, I have to do their AB&C. Oh no, look at this person being authentic. And then the authenticity is the thing that I'm compelled to step into, but it's going to be different because it's my authenticity.

Abbey Johnston: And I think that there's this belief that, if we show up fully, like I said earlier that somehow we take up other people's spaces. And one I do think that there's space enough, but I also think that part of it is like being okay with, part of what we see in the competitive nature or the comparison piece is that we allow other people's gifts or strengths or differences to be a threat to us versus something that we celebrate and encourage.

And, what would it look like if we didn't spend our time resenting each other, being threatened by each other, but really could drop the threat, drop the defensive ego and be able to be like, "Yeah, you're awesome at that. I'm not. But I freaking love that you are, and we can be different and together at the same time."

I don't need you to be like me so that I can feel okay being me.

Kari Bergman: That brings me to the question of what can we do to contribute to more confidence for more people and as individuals and how we're showing up in relationship or in the world with others. And also what kind of culture can we build? What kind of organizations can we build or environments can we build that are contributing to this for others?

Yeah. In three steps, please.

Abbey Johnston: No, I think that this is this is why part of what we all crave is okay, give me the steps now. Let's do it. Let's do all the things. I think there are good practices. And there's not a one size fits all formula for, and this is how we build courageously competent insert_____.

Kari Bergman: In order for someone to have the experience of, if I run out on that field and I play really hard and I still don't win that, I'm okay. There are ways to reinforce or detract from that message of you're okay.

And I think like from a team perspective, organization perspective, like what is happening when failure exists or when we hit, we set a goal and we don't hit it. That is either going to say that let's keep setting high goals or let's actually play it safe next time.

Abbey Johnston: Yeah. What you named is so powerful, which is how do we interact with, embrace, teach about failure in our organization. And so many people right now say fail fast, which is great. And I wonder how many organizations are doing that. Because if we really went for something and fail, it does suck a little bit and it is hard and it's risky.

So how do we like normalize and learn how to fail? Like how to know that we really wanted something and we didn't get it and be able to see it less as a what's wrong with us and more of how do we adjust and pivot and also name it's okay, that sucks. And how do we grow and evolve from this.

I just think so often failure is connected with our character, failure feels fatal because somehow it's saying something about who we are, whether it's personally or our organization. And I think to take the power away from failure and be able to say, Nope, actually if we're not failing we should be pretty concerned. If we're not failing then maybe we're not putting ourselves out there. And so I think absolutely how we create healthy cultures around failure. I think how we create healthy cultures that are not based on comparison, how we create cultures that reinforce and celebrate the variety of strengths and difference.

And the true, like collaborative nature of work, not like, you do - this I do this, like delegation, but how do we bring all of our differences together and create something together that we couldn't create separately because it's all of the contributions that make the thing and allow it to be something that we struggle for

Collaboration isn't the quick solution. I think it has the best results, but I think we have to be willing to have tough conversations. We have to be willing to struggle. We have to be willing to wrestle with our own demons if we really want to do the collaboration thing.

And I think all of those struggles are really worth it. A lot of us would rather - it just feels too inconvenient - and it is at times, but the reward on it is so much greater. So that ability to celebrate and not just celebrate, but foster and grow the difference, I think is a really important piece to creating a space where people are willing to step out.

Kari Bergman: Yeah. It's no longer something to accommodate. It's an expectation that you're showing up with all these things that make you unique and different, and we need you to do that rather than "Oh, okay. Let's take a time out while Tim, feels heard" and then we can get back on track, right? It's adding rather than detracting.

Abbey Johnston: And what are we validating? What are we celebrating? Are we celebrating perfection? Are we celebrating effort? Are we celebrating all the different ways we can get somewhere are we celebrating risking and it not going well?

What are we reinforcing? And what I would say, if we move it to the leadership space, what is our behavior reinforcing? I think that's one of the powerful things. And one of the most powerful disconnects in leadership, which is espousing certain things verbally, but then having our behavior really not back it up.

Like me saying to our team, I really want us to feel like we can show up however we are. And name when we're overwhelmed, ask for help. And me not doing that is basically me screaming at you. "It's not okay. Not okay to feel overwhelmed. You just need to get your shit together." I realize that I can say all that stuff as much as I want, but if I can't practice that, I know that it's having problematic implications on our team, which feels weighty.

And it feels weighty. Because it is, our behavior impacts each other.

Kari Bergman: When your confidence is waning or when those messages are just like firing, what gives you a confidence boost?

Abbey Johnston: There are some key things that pop to mind right away. And the first thing that comes to mind is my people. I have been lucky and we've worked our butts off my husband and I to have a good relationship. And he is, he's definitely one of my people. And so I have found that when I get in a loop, like reaching out and saying, "I just need to tell you about the loop that I'm in."

I need to tell you about the regret that I have, like a fear that I have or the shit I'm telling myself. Like I just need to get it out. And so just having like people who are willing to be there in all of that with me is a big part.

A good part of the role that my husband plays, which is another technique is "I hear you. And let's think about all the other times you've had these same fears. What happened? Were they validated. Did they work out the way that you thought they would?" That's a discipline, which goes something like this...

Okay. So I feel this way, but what is like the actual data telling me? The actual data tells me that I don't die. I don't get ex-communicated that I, that things actually go way better than what I think. If there's, if I go back and get all the times, I was just beside myself and then look at what, what occurred. I can start to see okay, yeah, this is a normal feeling to have. And it doesn't mean the feelings that I have are going to materialize into chaos or death .

And another pattern that I have used is gratitude. So like, when I'm scared about whether I can do something or what's going to happen, or, et cetera, et cetera, being thankful for the opportunity to actually even do it. I think about this a lot with like public speaking, like I'm so even in this moment, like I'm scared or I'm nervous and wow. Wow, I get to do this.

That sense of gratitude, not in a way that dismisses the fears, but just, it has a way of reorienting okay, this is why this matters to me. This is the thing that's more important than me being afraid. Being able to connect with that and feel grateful for the opportunity to connect with that and have an outlet for that, like that tends to be a thing that helps me be like, okay, deep breath at the end of this, I know why I'm doing this.

And then there's always just really loud music, I honestly, don't think there's anything better than a beautiful day windows down and just fantastic music blaring. Unfortunately right now with my daughter, it means that we are listening to baby shark really loud. But it's a thing.

Honestly, I would, one of the techniques that I use is when I'm really nervous about something and I noticed more nerves and I'm starting to go down the line of catastrophizing. I will listen to a new song that I haven't heard before and try and remember the lyrics and that gets my brain, like outside of the loop.

Yeah. So that's been a thing that like, at least gets me over the line. These are the things that helped me flex my confidence muscle.

What do you use, Kari?

Kari Bergman: Lately I've been playing Janelle Monáe. Forget the name of the title, but it's the one where it's like a lot of [Kari trying to imitate "Make Me Feel"], I just turn that on and dance around.

Not in public. That's not a level that I'm at yet, but thankfully working from home, I can just do it in my little home office. That's a great one. Yeah, I think similar to you

naming it to someone else outside of myself, like vocalizing and verbalizing it, even if they don't even respond, like the response from them, I think is less important than just like shedding light on it and letting myself give it a little bit of air.

And I feel like that takes the impact away. And then it's okay, I'm choosing to name this scary thing. So that in itself brings me out from that retraction mode. But I love what you said about what is the thing that's bigger than the fear. So rooting into the purpose and the why.

I don't think I do that enough and it's so grounding.

Abbey Johnston: So easy to not, again, it often feels like life does us, and this is a practice that requires us to pump the brakes a little bit and be like, Oh, wait a minute. Why am I like, yeah. It's because actually this does really matter to me.

Kari Bergman: Hey everyone.

Thank you for joining Abbey Johnston and I, as we dug into this messy wild thing called confidence.

I just am so grateful for her vulnerability and transparency as she took us into her own journey of confidence-building and named the fact that she's not done.

This is ongoing work for all of us. So we hope that you found something in here, that'll help bring you into a deeper sense of confidence and even invite you into the courageous work of building confidence for those - and with those - around you, especially in the workplace.

We would love to hear how this landed. What's coming up for you? Drop us a note, send us an email, find us on the socials. We are committed to making more of this available and capturing more conversations and more goodness from our team to share with you all.

So if you want to know when that's happening and when those are available, sign up and subscribe to our newsletter so that you can be one of the first to know. All right. We love you all. We thank you for being in the world and in the work with us

Now go out and take up all that space that is meant for only you to take up and celebrate all the space others are taking up along the way.

Abbey Johnston: I wonder what I actually said.