

TRUST ACROSS CULTURES – HOW IT SHAPES WOMEN’S CONFIDENCE AND VOICE IN INNOVATION

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I used to believe confidence was something you either have or don't. Working across countries taught me the opposite: confidence grows or shrinks depending on how trust is built, and how your voice is received. Women do not lack ideas or ambition; they navigate different "trust codes" - subtle cultural rules that determine whether their ideas are heard, valued, or dismissed. Ruth Bader Ginsburg once said, "Women belong in all places where decisions are being made."

Over the past five years, I have worked in Germany, France, and Canada with teams spanning more than ten countries. These experiences taught me that confidence is not universal. It is shaped by cultural context, social codes, and leadership expectations. What is assertive in one culture may be seen as aggressive in another, directly affecting how women's voices are received. For women in innovation, their ideas are often filtered not by competence, but by the trust codes of their environment. Understanding this is essential to building environments where women's voices are actually heard.

1.

CONFIDENCE IS CONTEXTUAL (NOT A PERSONALITY TRAIT)

“CONFIDENCE IS THE QUALITY OF BEING CERTAIN OF YOUR ABILITIES OR OF HAVING TRUST IN PEOPLE, PLANS, OR THE FUTURE.”

Confidence is often framed as an individual trait to develop, yet research shows it is culturally interpreted. Leadership behaviors are assessed through cultural norms: assertiveness valued in the U.S. may be read as aggressiveness in Japan, while discretion praised in East Asia can be interpreted as a lack of leadership in Western contexts (Catalyst, Women in Leadership Across Cultures). The dominant narrative suggests women lack confidence. Empirical evidence contradicts this: women often lack recognition, not self-belief. According to Catalyst, 29.2% of U.S. chief executives are women, showing structural and cultural barriers persist despite demonstrated competence.

This creates a double bind: behaviors aligned with leadership in one context may be penalized in another. Misread confidence devalues women’s contributions, limiting voice and innovation – not due to capability, but cultural misalignment. In one context, speaking early signaled leadership; in another, legitimacy required restraint. Same competence, different recognition. In innovation environments, ideas only create impact when they are recognized, trusted, and acted upon. For women in innovation, this is a leadership challenge: their contributions are judged not only on merit, but through cultural expectations of trust and authority. Navigating these codes is essential to being seen and recognized as a leader in innovation.



2.

HOW TRUST IS BUILT DIFFERENTLY ACROSS CULTURES

“I was interrupted. No one listens to me. I’m not given the floor.” These complaints, common among women globally, reveal that the challenge lies in how trust is built rather than how women speak. Trust is culturally coded, shaping whose voice is heard. Research identifies four dominant forms: competence-based, relationship-based, leadership-based, and process-based trust (Meyer, *The Culture Map*; World Economic Forum, *Women in Leadership Report*). In low-context, task-oriented cultures like the U.S. or Germany, competence-based trust dominates. Leadership is earned through visible performance, expertise, and measurable impact. Speaking early signals credibility, while women who do not self-promote may be perceived as lacking confidence (HBR, “How Cultural Differences Shape Women’s Leadership”). In high-context cultures, relationship-based trust takes priority. Trust develops over time via observation and social harmony. Direct or early communication can undermine credibility, while waiting to speak may limit recognition. Amélie Nothomb’s *Fear and Trembling* illustrates how hierarchy and implicit norms can render competent women invisible. Hierarchical cultures rely on leadership-based trust: ideas gain legitimacy from who speaks rather than what is said. Women are less frequently seen as natural leaders and often need authority validation. Process-oriented cultures emphasize rules, transparency, and consensus, yet informal dynamics still marginalize women’s contributions (Meyer). Across contexts, women’s influence is rarely about competence alone. Leadership and recognition are culturally mediated, and navigating these norms is essential.

3.

WHEN TRUST CODES COLLIDE – WHAT HAPPENS TO WOMEN’S VOICES?



In multicultural environments, women’s voices often collide with differing trust norms and gender expectations. In multinational meetings, they may be interrupted, overlooked, or minimized, creating low psychological safety (HBR, Women in Multicultural Teams; Catalyst, Women’s Voice in Meetings). Research shows that women are 33% more likely to be interrupted than men and 20% less likely to receive credit for their contributions, highlighting how recognition remains a key barrier. The consequences are tangible: valuable ideas are lost, solution diversity shrinks, and innovation slows. Women internalize these experiences, reinforcing impostor syndrome while facing persistent double standards. A KPMG study found that 75% of women executives have experienced impostor syndrome during their careers, suggesting that self-doubt is often not an individual weakness, but the result of repeated patterns of under-recognition. Real-world examples, from multinational corporations to conferences and hackathons, show that competent women must navigate cultural codes or secure allies to have their ideas recognized. Madeleine Albright famously said, “There is a special place in hell for women who don’t help other women.” Supporting women’s voices is not only equitable but essential for organizational learning, creativity, and success.

4.

EMPOWERMENT – FROM CONFIDENCE TO INFLUENCE

Confidence alone does not make a leader; leadership emerges when confidence translates into cross-cultural influence. Women who understand cultural norms, adapt communication, and build networks of allies can ensure their ideas are heard (Sandberg, Lean In; Global Women Leaders).

Women leaders need to actively build a “toolbox” for empowerment: a set of strategies to navigate cultural differences and assert one’s voice. This includes observing and decoding cultural codes, adjusting communication styles, seeking mentors, and reinforcing visibility. For instance, a leader may wait to be invited to speak in Japan, yet speak early in U.S. meetings - same competence, different context, recognized influence.

As Indra Nooyi said, “Leadership is hard to define, and good leadership even harder. But if you can get people to follow you to the ends of the earth, you are a great leader.” Empowerment is therefore about moving from confidence to actionable influence, equipping women to navigate cultural norms and make their voices count.



CONCLUSION

Across cultures, trust shapes women's confidence, voice, and ability to influence. In many workplaces, ideas are filtered not by talent but by unspoken rules of trust. The challenge is not only encouraging women to speak up, but creating conditions where their voices are truly valued. Intentional action, through building inclusive cultures, designing trust-based processes, and supporting women's leadership; ensures innovation benefits from every perspective. Communities like Voice of Women in Innovation (VOwi) provide spaces to grow confidence and influence while navigating diverse workplace cultures.

In a globalized world, where innovation depends on every voice, the question remains: how can we ensure women are not just present, but truly empowered to lead?

What kind of trust culture are you creating in your teams?

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