



2019  
KPMG Women's  
Leadership Study

# Risk, Resilience, Reward

**Mastering the three "R's":  
The key to women's success  
in the workplace**



## Women looking to move into leadership positions in today's business world may benefit by taking more risks over the course of their careers and by being more self-assertive.

According to the latest Women's Leadership Study from KPMG, seven in ten women (69%) are open to taking small risks to further their career, but far fewer (43%) are open to taking the bigger risks associated with career advancement.

What's more, women's readiness to take risks declines as they become more experienced in their careers – even as their self-confidence grows. Forty-five percent of respondents with less than five years' experience say they are open to taking big risks to further their career, versus 37 percent with 15+ years of experience. Women of color are the biggest potential risk-takers, with 57 percent saying they are open to taking big risks to further their careers versus 38 percent of white women.

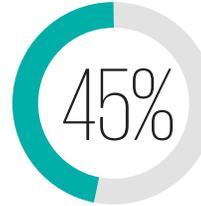
It's not that women don't see the benefits of risk-taking. More than half of the women surveyed (55 percent) believe people who take more career risks progress more quickly than others. And they are quick to cite the potential benefits of increased risk-taking, including career advancement, personal development and building respect among colleagues.

But when asked what has contributed most to their personal and professional success, risk-taking falls toward the bottom of the list. Women are far more likely to attribute success to good work habits – such as working hard, being detail oriented, and organized. And they are less likely to cite other, more personal, character attributes – such as being strong-willed or a good leader.

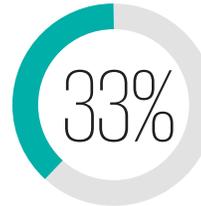
## How Has Risk-Taking Impacted Your Career?



**It helped me be more confident in my abilities**



**It has allowed me to gain a whole new set of skills**



**It helped me build respect among my colleagues**



**It has allowed me to progress more quickly**

## What Has Most Contributed to Your Professional Success?



**73%**  
Working hard



**45%**  
Being detail oriented



**24%**  
Being strong-willed



**18%**  
Being creative



**45%**  
Being organized



**17%**  
Being a good leader



**8%**  
Being a risk taker

This tendency – to focus on behaviors that are task-oriented over those that are self-assertive – is a pattern that repeats itself throughout the survey findings.

So how can we empower more women to consider smart risk taking and stepping outside their comfort zone in the workplace? How can we encourage more women to take action that will ultimately benefit themselves as individuals as well as the organization as a whole? Following are insights gleaned from our national survey of more than 2,000 women who work in a corporate setting. We used the learnings to identify actionable steps for both professionals – and their employers – to put into practice.

## Toward the Common Good

First, it helps to understand the kinds of behaviors in which women are most likely to engage. As noted, these behaviors tend to benefit their company or their group and are less likely to raise their profile or achieve a personal benefit. Only a minority of respondents, for example, say they have talked about their accomplishments or raised their personal external visibility over the past three years. Interestingly, extremely confident women are 22 percentage points more comfortable promoting themselves (as compared to all professional women; 65% vs 43%). In addition, those that identified as extremely confident are 25 percentage points more comfortable asking for a new position (as compared all professional women; 70% vs 45%).

This same dynamic holds true for the kinds of risks women are comfortable taking. Respondents to the survey are more confident engaging in risks that are seen as benefiting their company/group and less confident taking risks that benefit themselves as individuals. With a few exceptions, this tends to be true regardless of the magnitude of the risk or a woman's experience level. Only about a third of the responding women, for example, are confident asking for a higher salary.

### What Kinds of Risks Are You Confident Taking?



#### Women tend to be more willing to ask...



#### They are less confident...



“Organizations can do better at [helping women understand] the unwritten rules of where the opportunities lie...and the right risks to take.”

-Female business leader

## What Has Encouraged You To Take More Risks?



40%

The opportunity to make more money



35%

A past success



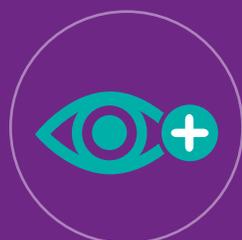
34%

A leader encouraged me to go for it



24%

The opportunity to get a more senior title or get a promotion



18%

The opportunity for greater visibility

## The Motivators: It's the Money, Not the Title

Although the responding women may be reluctant to ask for a salary increase, money remains a top motivator. Indeed, when these women have taken risks, the number one incentive has been the opportunity to make more money. This factor ranks equally high across all experience levels and among women across all ethnic/racial groups.

On the other hand, only one-quarter of responding women report that earning a more senior title or promotion has been a strong driver for risk taking. Fewer than one in five cite gaining greater visibility, although this is slightly higher among extremely confident women.

Beyond money, other factors that have encouraged women in the survey to take more risks include having a past success, a leader that encouraged them to go for it, working in a supportive culture and having more training opportunities.

# The Deterrents: Perceptions as a Major Barrier

Despite the fact that many of the respondents have experienced positive outcomes from taking risks, too many still hesitate. What's holding them back? It may be a concern with how others perceive them.

When asked generally about situations at their companies that cause concern, many respondents cite looking like they don't know as much as they should (41 percent), being ignored or not taken seriously (40 percent) and not succeeding in something they try (37 percent).

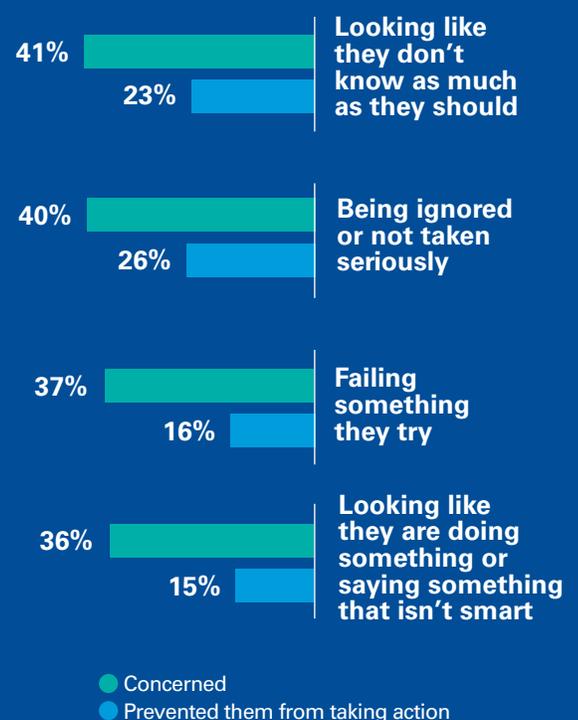
Some of these same concerns – being ignored or not taken seriously and not having the support of more senior people – surface when respondents are asked what has prevented them from taking more risks at their company (26 percent and 25 percent, respectively).

But other factors also emerge. The leading one – not being confident enough – is cited by 29 percent of the women surveyed. Other obstacles reported include: being judged by others (27 percent); being intimidated (26 percent); and not being confident enough in a specific skill or task (23 percent).

Another potential obstacle is an overabundance of caution. A staggering number of respondents (86 percent) admit that when they have failed at something in the past at work, it has made them more cautious about how they did things in the future.

On a positive note, 70 percent of the women surveyed say they tend to be very resilient when they fail at something, and 45 percent say they don't regret having taken a risk even when they failed, because it has helped them learn and they were still able to move ahead in their careers. These numbers are even higher (77 percent and 54 percent respectively) for women of color.

## Situations That Both Cause Concern and Prevent Risk-Taking



"People do not know you have failed unless you act as though you have failed. Women wear it and reinforce the belief that they have failed and hand the victory to everyone around them."

-Female business leader



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# Opportunity: The Importance of Self-Confidence

**So, what can be done? Building self-confidence may help. According to the KPMG research, women who reported feeling extremely confident were also more likely to feel comfortable doing something outside their comfort zone in their current role or give direct, candid feedback about someone else's work. In addition, our findings indicate that confidence and risk-taking are related, but the relationship is complex and nuanced, with multiple factors affecting how professional women rate their confidence and what motivates – or deters – them from taking risks at work.**

The majority of women surveyed say they are generally confident in both their personal and professional lives: Seventy-two percent say they are confident in their

professional lives – with 26 percent extremely confident and nearly half (46 percent) somewhat confident. Twenty-three percent are neutral. But clearly confidence ranges along a spectrum, and there are actions that both individuals and their employers can and should take to foster and grow professional confidence. The findings indicate that increasing the confidence of individual employees benefits the organization as a whole, as those that said they were extremely confident were also more likely to take risks (small and large) and manage employees/staff.

And professional confidence grows with experience. Seventy-five percent of respondents with more than 15 years of experience are professionally confident, versus 62 percent of those with less than five years of experience.

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**“You need to have enough confidence and conviction to get done what you need to do.”**

*-Female business leader*

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But here's where self-confidence and a willingness to take risks intersect. As noted, 29 percent of women surveyed say that not being confident enough was a factor – the leading factor – preventing them from taking more risks at their company. On the other hand, the primary benefit that many women experience after taking a risk is that it helps them become more self-assured about their abilities. Overcoming a lack of confidence may therefore be key in creating a cycle in which successful risk-taking fosters the resilience and confidence needed to attempt further risk-taking and advancement.



## Advice from KPMG

Women are taking on even greater leadership roles in business and society, and as more opportunities arise, women must be proactive in seizing them. Here's leadership advice from Laura Hay, Global Head of Insurance at KPMG:

*"It starts with confidence. Success in business correlates as much with confidence as it does with competence. And acting with confidence breeds confidence. How can women act with more confidence?"*

- 1. Make a conscious effort to ask for what you want.** This requires being clear about your true motivations, wants and needs. Such self-knowledge is the foundation for confidence and greater assertiveness.
- 2. Be aware of the impression you make** – particularly your body language and tone of voice: establish your space, speak in a lower register (which some studies say can increase your sense of confidence and power) and maintain eye contact.
- 3. Speak early, often and calmly.** Even more important – have a point of view; don't just act as a facilitator. And don't be afraid to defend your position.
- 4. Finally, take risks.** No risk, no reward. We all know this, but fear of failure can sometimes prevent us from taking that critical next step. So, work on your mindset. Get comfortable with the idea of failure and develop strategies to build credibility so a failure won't derail you. Think like an athlete: they face failure every day but quickly learn to recover and move on. Remember: the more risks you successfully navigate, the more confident you'll become, and the more risks you'll be willing to take. It's a virtuous cycle.

*And never give up. The only true failure is quitting."*

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# Opportunity: Passing on to the Next Generation

Interestingly, women's self-confidence and openness to risk-taking appear to stem in part from experiences early in life. Self-confidence is a quality socialized as women grow up – with organized activities proving valuable in unlocking their confidence later in life.

For example, women in the survey who participated in organized activities through high school are more likely to consider themselves successful (67 percent vs. 55 percent who never participated in organized activities) and professionally confident (75 percent vs. 65 percent who never participated in organized activities).

They are also more likely to be comfortable taking risks at work (52 percent vs. 39 percent) and more likely to recognize the benefits of risks in their careers.

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*"Women are on the right path – things have improved significantly with an increase in women role models and examples on which to base their own success."*

*-Female business leader*

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But here's perhaps the best indicator of the importance of self-confidence: Only 22 percent of responding professional women say their parents instilled in them – above other things – the value of self-confidence growing up. More commonly taught values were hard work (66 percent) and respect (57 percent).

This factor may also be why nearly half of the surveyed women – 43 percent – say they are likely to instill in their own children the value of self-confidence above all else. Given that 68 percent of respondents say their mother served as the main female role model in their lives, the shifts in how women teach confidence may greatly impact future women leaders.

# Actions For Today

We need not rely just on future generations for women to engage in greater risk-taking. The good news is that most of the women (71 percent) responding to the survey believe that their company is accepting of them taking a risk and failing. But they also think more can be done now to encourage risk-taking among women. Among the action-oriented options they cite:

- Offering more training opportunities (41 percent)
- Encouraging mentorship (33 percent)
- Offering more flexibility for employees to be able to take more risks (28 percent).

The other good news: the vast majority of respondents believe their companies empower women in the workplace. Fully 84 percent say their company supports women in leadership, and the same percentage say their company culture allows women to succeed. With this support structure in place, we hope to see more women take the leap and pursue bigger risks knowing the potential reward for themselves, their organization as a whole, and future generations of women.

## What Could Your Company Do To Make You More Confident to Take Risks?



Offer more training opportunities



Encourage mentorship



Encourage managers to support risk taking



Offer more flexibility that allows employees to take a risk without it being all consuming



Help employees develop a trusted group of professional or career advisors



Offer more flexibility that allows employees to have control/ predictability of schedule

[kpmg.com/socialmedia](https://kpmg.com/socialmedia)

