

Playing Big: Practical Wisdom for Women Who Want to Speak Up, Create, and Lead

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A groundbreaking women's leadership expert and popular conference speaker gives women the practical skills to voice and implement the changes they want to see-in themselves and in the world

In her coaching and programs for women, Tara Mohr saw how women were "playing small" in their lives and careers, were frustrated by it, and wanted to "play bigger." She has devised a proven way for them to achieve their dreams by playing big from the inside out. Mohr's work helping women play bigger has earned acclaim from the likes of Maria Shriver and Jillian Michaels, and has been featured on the Today show, CNN, and a host of other media outlets.

Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In gave many women new awareness about what kinds of changes they need to make to become more successful; yet most women need help implementing them. In the tradition of Brené Brown's Daring Greatly, Playing Big provides real, practical tools to help women quiet self-doubt, identify their callings, "unhook" from praise and criticism, unlearn counterproductive good girl habits, and begin taking bold action.

While not all women aspire to end up in the corner office, every woman aspires to something. Playing Big fills a major gap among women's career books; it isn't just for corporate women. The book offers tools to help every woman play bigger-whether she's an executive, community volunteer, artist, or stay-at-home mom.

Thousands of women across the country have been transformed by Mohr's program, and now this book makes the ideas and practices available to everyone who is ready to play big.

Tara Mohr has an MBA from Stanford and an undergraduate degree from Yale. Mohr has been a columnist with the Huffington Post since 2010 and has been featured on the Today show, in MORE, ForbesWoman, Harvard Business Review, Whole Living, The Financial Times, and numerous other media outlets. She lives in San Francisco.

INTRODUCTION

You know that woman. She's a good friend or a colleague from work. She's smart and insightful. She gets it: Whatever the situation at her company, or in her community, or in the news, she has great ideas about what needs to happen. She's high integrity too-no greed, no temptation to corruption, no big hunger for power. And she's funny, warm, and trustworthy.

Sometimes, you listen to her talk and think, if only people like her were in charge . . .

So here's the thing: The way that you look at that woman? Someone looks at you that way. In fact, many people do. To us, you are that talented woman who doesn't see how

talented she is. You are the woman who-it's clear to us-could start an innovative company or pull one out of the dysfunction it's in, improve the local schools, or write a book that would change thousands of lives. You are that fabulous, we-wish-she-was-speaking-up-more woman.

Playing Big is about bridging the gap between what we see in you and what you know about yourself. It's a practical guide to moving past self-doubt and creating what you most want to create-whether in your career, in your community, or in a passion you pursue outside of work. It's not about the old-school notion of playing big-more money, more prestigious title, a bigger empire, or fame. It's about you living with a sense of greater freedom to express your voice and pursue your aspirations. It's playing big according to what playing big truly means to you. And if you don't know what playing big looks like for you yet, the ideas and tools here will help you discover that.

This playing big is not about climbing the ladder within broken systems. It's about learning how to use your voice to change those systems. It's not about "opting in" or "opting out" according to our society's current thinking around what women should and shouldn't be doing. It's about turning away from those narrow labels, refocusing your attention on your longings and dreams, and playing big in going for them.

This book was born out of a frustration and a hope. The frustration? Brilliant women are playing small. The hope? That the world could be changed-for the much, much better-by our greater participation.

Nisha was one of my first coaching clients: in her early thirties; long, flowing black hair; always in bright colors that brought to life her beautiful face. Nisha was a midlevel program manager at a nonprofit organization. She was known there as a quiet, organized administrator, good at implementing others' plans.

Yet in our coaching sessions, I got to know a very different Nisha. It turned out she was an avid learner who spent much of her free time reading the important journals and books related to her field. She was a creative thinker, full of ideas for how her organization could improve its work by incorporating the latest thinking in the industry. I happened to be very familiar with Nisha's employer and, after just a few meetings with her, could see that she was thinking about the future of the organization in a way that was at least as sophisticated and smart, if not more so, as the CEO and board were. But no one in Nisha's workplace knew any of this. Nisha's ideas and gifts were hidden. They were not making it out of her head and heart and into her organization.

Among my coaching clients, friends, and colleagues, I kept encountering women like Nisha: brilliant women who couldn't quite see their own brilliance, women who were convinced their ideas needed more perfecting or refinement or time before being put into action, or women who-for reasons they weren't sure of-were not moving forward toward their greatest aspirations and dreams. It bothered me, a lot, because I wanted to live in the better, more humane, more enlightened world I knew these women could create.

There was Elizabeth, another client, a dynamic former magazine editor who had adopted four children from abroad. She wanted to write about her experiences of adopting. "Tara," she said to me, "I feel like I've learned so much about what motherhood is really about and what life is all about. Yet everything I know and have learned from the past years of raising these children-well, when I look out into the world, it's like it's invisible. No one is talking about it." I read Elizabeth's blog posts-essays she wrote quickly in between carpool shifts and swimming lessons. Her writing was powerful, and she was indeed talking about motherhood and love across borders in new and important ways. I wanted to see her perspective in newspaper op-eds and on bookstore shelves. And yet despite Elizabeth's many connections in the publishing industry, she was stuck-held back both by bouts of insecurity and by a sense of overwhelm and confusion about the practical steps to take.

And then there was Cynthia. Cynthia was a director of sales at a Silicon Valley tech company. Super sharp and hardworking, Cynthia also had an incredible gift for mediating conflict. But Cynthia was relatively bored in her job-having worked in the same kind of role for over a decade and never having enjoyed it much to begin with. There was, however, another arena of the company's work that she was excited about, exploring a new line of business she felt could be very successful and bring customers a valuable new service. When we talked about Cynthia pitching to the senior leadership that they invest in such a position and put her in it, she couldn't believe she'd be able to get that kind of special opportunity.

Each of these women had the potential to be shaping her organizations and communities in a much more significant way than she was. Each had the talent, intelligence, and training to easily achieve the dream that felt out of reach. And each one was missing out on a lot of joy, fulfillment, and professional success as a result. I believe that most of us are in some way like these women-not seeing how possible our big dreams are, not seeing our own capabilities, and not yet having careers as successful, easeful, and exhilarating as we could.

I was personally frustrated by what I was observing in my clients. Nisha had powerful ideas and critiques that could help move her organization forward. Cynthia was the kind of dedicated, ethical, collaborative leader we need more of in the corporate world. Elizabeth's writings about service and mothering told an important story too hidden in our cultural conversation. I wanted to see these kinds of brilliant women and their ideas impacting our world. So for me, the question of how to get their voices out was personally urgent. It was also professionally urgent, because they were coming to me for help.

My coaching practice became a laboratory to discover: What would enable these women to create the careers and lives they really wanted? In coaching sessions, the rubber meets the road. It's not enough to give advice that sounds good; together with the client, you've got to produce the change that the client is seeking.

I needed to figure out: What had to happen so that Nisha could become a respected leader in her organization? So that Elizabeth's writing would reach people beyond her friends and family? So that Cynthia could do work that energized her each day?

There are the conventional answers: more confidence, good mentors, some accountability around the steps toward their goals. I quickly learned by working with clients that none of those things helped much. Tactics and tips-how to write a résumé, interview, negotiate, speak in front of a group-didn't do the job, because women couldn't use all that new knowledge if the inner foundation for taking risks, overcoming fears, and dealing with self-doubt wasn't in place. Helping women develop relationships with mentors was mostly ineffectual, because without the tools to trust their own thinking and be discerning about mentors' advice, they'd get lost in others' opinions and depart from the course that was truly right for them. The conventional supports didn't go deep enough; they didn't get to what was holding women back or what they needed to move forward.

What did help women play bigger was a set of concepts and practices that changed how they thought about themselves and the kind of action they took. It was a set of movements-away from listening to the voice of self-doubt within and instead listening to a voice of calm and wisdom; away from perfectionism and overplanning and toward a new way of taking quick action; away from worrying about what other people thought and toward a focus on their own fulfillment; away from self-discipline and toward self-care. All those pieces worked together to create an inner infrastructure that supported women to go for their dreams boldly, to both overcome internal blocks and better deal with external challenges.

The same set of tools and practices helped diverse women play bigger: young women and older ones, corporate women and start-up entrepreneurs, women in business, the social sector, and the arts. After a few years of coaching women, I took the work I'd been doing with my clients and created a group experience, a leadership program called Playing Big. From its first session, it received rave reviews. Today, over one thousand women from around the world have participated in the program. Some have applied the work to playing big in high-powered careers, others to a pursuit outside of work, like a creative passion or volunteer activity. I'm proud that participants report that as a result of the program, they

- ☐ feel more confident.
- ☐ share their unique ideas, questions, and critiques more frequently and more boldly.
- ☐ are less afraid of criticism.
- ☐ are more powerful communicators.
- ☐ can tap into their inner wisdom more easily.
- ☐ feel a greater sense that they have and are "enough" to do what they want to do in their careers.
- ☐ see themselves as a part of a global network of women seeking to make positive change.
- ☐ are playing bigger according to what playing bigger means to them.

As a result of those inner changes, they've made the career moves they desired, received promotions and raises, launched and grown their businesses, and taken on leadership roles. They started changing their communities-and the world-in the ways they longed to but

didn't think they could before. In this book, you'll learn what they learned so that you can walk your own path to playing bigger.

My Story

In some sense, this book began its journey into being more than twenty years ago. I was a fifteen-year-old, short-shorts wearing, Red Hot Chili Peppers-loving, wannabe rebel teenage girl. On the first day of a new school year, I waited through chemistry lab (nothing could have bored me more), Spanish class (so-so, I thought), precalculus (hated it), and, worst of all, P.E. to get to the promised land: English class. English class: the realm of characters and stories and poems and big ideas-everything I loved.

Little did I know I was about to be very disappointed.

Our teacher gave his first-day-of-school introductory speech, leaning against a decaying metal desk with his arms folded and resting on his big belly. "This year we'll explore the theme of 'Coming-of-Age'-the transition from childhood to adulthood. We'll read diverse stories of coming-of-age: *Black Boy* by Richard Wright, *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles, *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. We'll uncover the universal themes and challenges around this rite of passage."

At first, I just noticed that I didn't feel very excited about any of the books. Then I realized why. None of the books were about a girl coming-of-age. At fifteen years old I knew that girls' coming-of-age and boys' coming-of-age made for very different tales. I wanted a story I could relate to.

Then I noticed none of the books were written by women either. I thought to myself, here was this grown-up telling me we were going to learn about this subject fully, while we were really hearing only male voices. I knew, even at fifteen, that my English class was not the only place like this. In a thousand ways in my life, I could see, boys' and men's stories were being told as the whole story.

I felt a kind of pang in my chest and a rush of energy. I knew I had to do something about this. I went over to the teacher's desk after class. "Mr. Haverson? Um, I wanted to ask you about something. I noticed that none of the books are by women, and none of them are about girls coming of age. It seems . . . unbalanced."

"These are the books we have. I don't have the budget to purchase any other books," he told me.

"Well, how could we raise the money?" I heard myself ask back.

Within months, a committee had been formed, a few thousand dollars raised, and a curriculum plan approved. The following year, new books written by women and featuring female protagonists were added to a number of English classes taught at the school.

That was the beginning of what has become a lifelong calling for me: to recognize where women's voices are missing and do what I can, in my corner of the world, to help bring them in.

After high school, I went off to Yale and experienced in a different way how women's voices were missing. Large portraits of the school's leaders graced the walls, but those portraits were never of women. The tenured faculty was mostly male, and none of the books required for English majors to read-not one-was written by a woman. Whenever someone got up to give a speech to the student body, it wasn't someone who looked like me. Women were new arrivals-present for only thirty of the school's nearly three-hundred-year history. They had been allowed to join the institution and participate in it, but there had been no inquiry into how to significantly adapt the institution so that women and men would thrive equally there.

When I graduated from college, I teamed up with two other women to create an anthology of Jewish women's writings about the Passover holiday, enabling families to add women's perspectives to a liturgy that-despite being about freedom and oppression-traditionally included no women's voices.

A few years later, I surprised my friends and family by deciding that my next move would be to get an MBA. I wasn't the typical business school candidate, but I was eager to learn the tools to grow mission-driven organizations to significant scale. Stanford Business School allowed me to do just that. It also gave me a kind of crash course on the culture surrounding women in the corporate world-a culture which all too often resembles that of a frat house. At both Yale and Stanford, I saw very clearly that it's simply not enough for institutions created by and for men to open their doors to women. Much more needs to change-the norms, the practices, and the face of its leadership-to create a place where women can truly succeed.

In all those experiences, I found myself longing for an environment more equally shaped by women and men. And there was a second kind of change I wanted to see as well: that all...

Other Books

Making Time to Write. Publishing is the currency of academia. But if publishing is so important, why is it so hard to find time to write? *Making Time to Write* exposes how women's experiences with writing in their careers are mired in the racist, ableist, patriarchal culture of academia that was built to exclude them. Building on her experience navigating the academy to become a tenured, full professor, and her work as a writing and career coach for hundreds of academic womxn, Cathy Mazak guides readers through the work of finding and honoring writing time. In the process, readers learn to build their careers around their writing practice instead of letting writing occupy the edges. From mindset work to creating a relationship-based writing system, *Making Time to Write* shatters the myths around writing every day (you don't have to), accountability (it's paternalistic), and motivation (it blames the victim). More than just a how-to guide, *Making Time To Write* is a manifesto on the feminizing of academic culture through reshaping women's writing practices.

❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ ... so you are playing small. It's time for you to play big. In *Playing Big: Practical Wisdom for Women Who Want to Speak Up, Create, and Lead*, Tara Mohr distinguishes between two types of fear based on the teaching of Rabbi Alan Lew."