



Beyond the Spreadsheet with Tracy Hooper, Founder of The Confidence Project

Helena Carmel (00:01.154)

Hello, and welcome to another episode of *Beyond the Spreadsheet*. I'm Helena Carmel. Have you ever felt awkward on a Zoom call? Been at a loss for words at a networking event? Do you ever feel like your colleagues just don't see and respect you as the professional that you are? Help is here, friends. I am delighted to introduce you to Tracy Hooper, founder of the [Confidence Project](#). Tracy and I were connected by our mutual friend, Kathleen Baldwin, who's the Executive Director at CICPAC. Kathleen recommended Tracy so highly that I could not wait to interview her. I know you'll enjoy hearing her story and learning skills for building confidence. Tracy's been a TV news reporter, an anchor, and a producer before starting the Confidence Project. And her most recent book, [The NOW Hello](#), is the confidence playbook on how to present ourselves in the world of work today.

Tracy's Confidence Project clients include Nike, Intel, eBay, even MTV. We are in for a treat. Welcome Tracy.

Tracy Hooper (01:11.006)

Many thanks, Helena. Nice to be here.

Helena Carmel (01:14.168)

We appreciate it. I'm so excited. Tracy, tell our listeners, what is the Confidence Project?

Tracy Hooper (01:22.828)

The Confidence Project is truly a project. It is an opportunity for me to work with people individually and corporate teams, people who want to work on their communication skills, and they want to carry themselves with confidence. Because once you feel confident in yourself, it gives other people more confidence in you. So it is this virtuous cycle going upward.

Helena Carmel (01:48.078)

And what really struck me is that you see confidence can be learned. That it's like a muscle like any other. I always just felt like, you know, some people are confident and some people are not.

Tracy Hooper (02:01.311)

Yeah, you know, that's interesting. I hear that an awful lot. And there is a part of confidence that's in our genes, that's a part of the personality we were born with, but the rest comes from taking action. Confidence is a skill and it comes from taking action and making mistakes and refining and refreshing and making it better and then doing it again and again and again. And I think that the mistake is that people think, "I'm reticent or I'm shy or I'm reserved." But that doesn't matter because the key about confidence in my experience is to treat other people as if they are the most important person in the room. And if you do that, then they will want to talk with you and listen to you and answer your questions and introduce you to people and recommend you to other people because you have made them feel important. Our world is very disconnected right now. People are living in silos, so to speak. There's a lot of discourse in our world. And I feel if we can simply look people in the eye, shake their hand firmly, and have a conversation that includes what I call the magic words, which are what, how, and tell me more. "Tell me more about that." "What's the most

interesting part of your job?" "What are you most looking forward to?" If we can ask those what, how, and tell me more questions, then people feel important, and then they treat you better, and then that builds confidence. It's contagious.

Helena Carmel (03:40.152)

The key is making people feel important. Wow, that is so simple, but I guess I didn't realize how significant. And Tracy, your personal experience has really brought you here. I know that you've worn so many hats in TV news and being an anchor and being a producer. Did your personal experiences help you recognize the significance of confidence?

Tracy Hooper (04:06.283)

Well, I would say in my career it did, but it really starts with most people in my family. I'm one of six children and every night at the dinner table, everybody had a chance to talk and everybody learned to listen. And we spanned from 12 years old to two years old and everybody really felt like they got to talk about their day, something that was important. And my mother, my 92-year-old mother, is originally a talk show host. Yep. God bless her. And my mom would get the conversation started. She would say, "Tell us about play practice today," and "Tell me, how was the wrestling match?" and "I know you have a spelling bee coming up," and "Missy, you have a science experiment." So she would get the conversation started. And so we practiced having conversations with each other. And then that expanded from there. And because everybody had to listen, then we learned how to have a conversation. And then of course I went into TV news and that's all about listening. You know, because most people on the street are not interested in speaking with a news crew. So the job really was to get people's attention, introduce myself and then get them to talk about themselves. Because in my view, everybody's favorite subject is themselves.

Helena Carmel (05:29.166)

I hear that. So why is confidence so crucial in the workplace?

Tracy Hooper (05:39.040)

Well, it's crucial because it's not enough to be competent. We need to be competent first. We need to know our job. We need to have skills that are related to our profession. But if we can't educate people about what we can provide for them... So I think about all the many of the listeners who are CPAs. And I think about how important your role is. And people think, "I don't want to brag." No, you're not bragging when you tell people about what you do and how you serve your clients. You're educating them. You are an advocate for your clients. You're teaching them. You're guiding them. We are all dependent on our accountants to get it right, to keep us paying the right amount of taxes, even though we don't want to pay as much as we do, and to lead us in the right direction.

So when I think about competence, your listeners are competent. The next step is to teach people about you and of course to do good work and then that builds confidence in them for you and you feel better when you're able to say, "Here's what I can provide for you." Oftentimes we say, "Jump in if I'm missing something," or "You've been doing this a lot longer than I have." All those kinds of disclaimers. That really means that we're playing small, that we don't want to sound like we're all that or that we think we're any better than someone else. But our job is to talk with people about what we can do for them—whether it's in sales or accounting or medicine or education—whatever the field.

Helena Carmel (07:25.836)

You have to be confident to promote your competence in any industry, I guess.

Tracy Hooper (07:32.963)

That's interesting. My feeling is you need to be... They go hand in hand, but you can't be confident without being competent. People aren't going to hire you or interview you or recommend you. You need to know your craft. But then the confidence comes from telling people what you do and how you can be of service to them.

Helena Carmel (07:55.342)

In a way that feels impactful and right—straightforward. Okay, so can we talk about it? I feel like we're talking about two separate things. Like there, you know, I'm an employee and I work at my CPA firm and I want to build my personal confidence, but then the firm as a whole needs to build organizational confidence. It's two separate things but they're both really important, right?

Tracy Hooper (08:22.443)

Very much, very much so. Well, and I work with a lot of individuals and they say, "Do I take this to the workplace?" And the way you do that, if I don't have a chance to work with the whole team, is to take a model-and-teach approach. That if you model how to welcome someone into a conversation, how to get a conversation started, how to ask someone how to pronounce their name if it's a difficult one...

Helena Carmel (08:32.718)

Right.

Tracy Hooper (08:50.407)

If you practice those skills and people see you acting that way, then they will want more of that. "Give me some of that," you know? And that's what people want. They want to be surrounded by people who are welcoming and inclusive and make other people feel important. So you can, if you're learning these skills on your own, then you can bring them to your workplace. Let's say you have three direct reports. You can teach these skills. These skills are teachable. They're learnable. These are not skills that people are born with coming out of the womb. These are skills that you can practice with your colleagues, with people at home. You know, when our girls—we have three daughters—when they were little, we practiced how they could look someone in the eye. And by the way, if it's tricky for you to look someone in the eye, just look at the bridge of their nose. Right at the bridge of their nose. It looks like you're looking them in the eye.

Helena Carmel (09:45.314)

They'll think you're looking at them in the eye.

Tracy Hooper (09:49.044)

Exactly. And if I could digress for a moment, let's talk about Zoom calls or Teams or whatever is your platform. It's very tricky to make people feel like you're paying attention to them when you're looking down at the screen. Now, you and I are looking at each other now. Your audience can't see us, but I'm looking down at the screen. I can see you nodding your head. I can see the earphones and so forth, but that doesn't feel like I'm looking at you.

But now when I call "spot the dot," when I look into that dot into my camera—it's green, white, red, whatever is the color for your camera—now it feels like I'm looking at you. So whenever you can, look into the camera. And I remember in my early TV news days, I worked with a fabulous videographer named Pete Greer. In fact, he left Baltimore and moved to Philadelphia and worked at a station in Philadelphia—your hometown. But anyway, one day I said to Pete—I was doing a stand-

up and I'm holding a microphone, that's where you're standing on location, you're giving a part of a story—and I said, "Pete, I feel like when I look into the lens, it's just a black hole." And he said, "Tracy, picture somebody you know, like, love or respect on the other side of that lens and speak to them." And I thought, okay, I love my mother, I'll talk to my mother. And so from then on, when I looked into the camera, I pictured my mother on the other side of the lens and I told her the news story of the day. And it's no different than being on a Zoom call. I'm looking down at the screen occasionally, especially if you're on gallery view—you want to notice people's body language and facial expressions. But 60% of the time you should be looking into that lens. You can glance down and then glance back up. And now people feel like you are almost in the same room as they are. It's a great technique.

Helena Carmel (11:47.414)

Trying it as we speak and it feels a little awkward but I think I will get the hang of it.

Tracy Hooper (11:53.492)

Yes, it does feel awkward, but it's really important if you want people to feel like you're paying attention to them.

Helena Carmel (11:58.946)

Right. So while we're digressing to Zoom, Tracy, what do you do when somebody won't put their camera on? That's like a nightmare. I feel like it's so, so hard to make any kind of like reasonable connection.

Tracy Hooper (12:14.889)

Yeah. Well, if I'm giving a presentation to a group, I will ask the person who hired me to ask everybody to turn on their cameras. Not everybody will, but you know, the interesting part is if you're on a group call, people whose cameras are on are on the first page. Everybody who just has their name is on a subsequent page. So if you want to be recognized, if you want to be seen as a leader, if you want to be able to raise your hand and people see you raising your hand, then turn your camera on. And it doesn't take much to present yourself well on camera. First of all, clean up your background. No hanging laundry off an exercise bike in the background. And I don't mind the blurred background—I don't love it—mostly because if you don't have a green screen, it looks like your body is not connected to your body. But you can have a very simple background. It doesn't have to be fancy. A plant, for instance. With you, you have a shade behind you. You have that drawn so you're not backlit. You have a nice bookshelf. I mean, that's simple.

And then also, of course, spotting the dot. That's really important. Clean up your background and make sure you have—I have an external camera. I'll give a plug for Logitech. That's the camera I have. It's not very expensive. You can get it everywhere. And the video quality between an external camera and one that's built into your laptop is terrific. And if you're using it every day, you want to look as good as you can. And I have to say, this is a Tracy-ism: you need to dress for the job. I'm finding that people feel so relaxed and they've been on Zoom for so long that they have on backwards baseball caps or they have a four-day beard that is unkempt or they don't really look professional. And it doesn't take that much. A collared shirt, a jacket—whatever, depending on the organization and what is the dress code. But like today I have on a dress because I want to look good from the waist up and I'm meeting somebody afterwards for a cup of tea later on this afternoon. I'm in the Pacific Northwest, so we're three hours behind you. But it doesn't take that much to look good. I think it's your credibility. It also lets people know that you care about this meeting, that you haven't just rolled out of bed and haven't taken any time to get yourself together.

Helena Carmel (14:47.168)

It builds your credibility. It's an easy way to build your credibility.

Tracy Hooper (15:06.219)

Like this meeting matters by not only being prepared for a meeting, of course, but dressing the part. Then they feel like, "Oh, this person cares about me." And that's really what we want.

Helena Carmel (15:19.852)

Back to making the other person feel important.

Tracy Hooper (15:22.603)

Yeah, very much so.

Helena Carmel (15:22.606)

So as we said, our audience is full of tons of CPAs. We have some business owners too, but a lot of accounting professionals. And our industry right now, Tracy, it's sort of, it's kind of in flux. There's some weird, weird push and pull happening. And I feel like people a lot of times have trouble advocating for themselves when things are uncertain. But it's important that they need to be able, like you said, to advocate for themselves, for their clients, to promote their own accomplishments. How do you navigate that when the field is sort of uncertain?

Tracy Hooper (16:05.301)

Well, thank you for saying that. I think we're only as good as our accountants. We're only as good as our accountants. You know, the job that you all have—I'm speaking now to your audience—is critical to running a business, to owning a business, to running a business, to hiring people. It's really the whole big picture. It's not enough to have marketing and sales. You need to have a good numbers team on your team. And I would say that there's never been a more important time to be an accountant because there aren't as many people going into accounting. I know this because I've done some work for accounting firms and it's very hard for people to find accountants and when you find a good one, it's worth their weight in gold.

Helena Carmel (16:44.384)

Amen.

Tracy Hooper (17:01.557)

So I want you to think about the fact that you are offering people a service that will make their life calmer and better. Calmer because you know the tax code, and although it changes all the time, I don't need to know that. I trust my accountant to know that. That is peace of mind. Now, it's up to the accountant to say, "Here's what you need to provide for me when we meet," and that's my job. But beyond that, it's really you are providing the service. So tell me what you're doing. Here's one suggestion: have a story. Everybody loves a story. And it could be something like this: I had an accountant for 25 years, and over those years, he seemed to get less and less interested in my business. He was more interested in auditing. And I sensed that he wasn't that interested.

Fast forward, I'm having—and so I'm wondering, "What am I going to do? How am I going to find a new accountant?" I'm having lunch with a new friend one day, and she said something about her accountant. I said, "How do you like your accountant?" She said, "I love her. She's amazing." I said, "May I have her number?" And I got her number. I met with this person. She's very interested in my business and what I do—not just my business, but in me. She has quite a robust practice, but I

really felt important. And so I'm leaving my accountant of 25 years because I seemed less important to him. And I'm going with somebody who cares about my business and me.

So if you have a story like that—you all—if you have a story where you met somebody at the Fourth of July parade or at a wedding reception, or you reconnected with somebody you went to high school with, and they asked what you did and you said you were an accountant, and you have a thriving practice or you have a growing practice or you're building your practice—that's a story that people will want to hear.

Helena Carmel (19:16.184)

That is very interesting, Tracy. It comes down again to making people feel important, being engaged, and positioning yourself as a partner with them and a confident and competent, capable partner.

Tracy Hooper (19:33.548)

Absolutely. I would say being an accountant in 2025 is essential for any business and having a trusted advisor. You can tell people that: "I serve as a trusted advisor. I serve as a confidant. I serve as an educator. I'll keep you updated on information that I need." How much confidence would I have in a person who said that to me?

The reason I talked about having a story is because we all think in pictures. When I talked about the fact I've had the same accountant for 25 years, and then I was having lunch one day with someone who mentioned her accountant—can you... yeah. And that's who people relate to.

Helena Carmel (20:21.742)

So I think it's a matter of that the accountant has to feel confident enough to really give himself his own due and really express his achievements and his abilities in plain language. And I think a lot of times people get hung up with that, but we're going to talk more about building confidence and not undercutting ourselves. I just want to talk for a second about the big picture.

You talk a lot about the confident company culture in your books, just organizational confidence. And part of it, I think, is if you don't support confidence in your team, then they'll be hesitant to come to you with ideas, with innovations, right? You could be missing out on great opportunities if your team feels too reticent to share. Is that right, Tracy?

Tracy Hooper (21:17.919)

Yes, very much so. I was talking with a client this morning, and he has a new manager, and the new manager has been in this role for a year—I guess nine months. My client has not had one one-on-one meeting with his manager. So if that's the way people lead, then they're not going to feel comfortable coming to you.

My advice for a confident company culture is to have regular one-on-one sessions. And that may include feedback. And people are terrified. They'd rather walk over hot coals than give someone feedback. But we all know that feedback delivered well is a gift. And it's as simple as—not as simple, it's simple but not easy. It's simple in the fact that it's important to tell someone why you're giving them feedback and then use "I" statements. "I wanted us to talk because I'm concerned how our team is being perceived in the company." That could be the motivation for why you want to talk with somebody. And then talk about something specific. "I noticed, with some regularity, at our

team meetings that you're not on time," or "you interrupt people." You want to try not to use "you" statements, but you sometimes need to tell people specifically what you're concerned about. And then you say, "I noticed. Help me understand what's going on."

So when you can give someone—when you have one-on-one sessions with people, of course it's for praise. I don't like to mix praise and feedback. I think that's confusing for people. If you're going to praise someone, give them praise. If you want to give them feedback, give them feedback about one specific issue that's a problem. Are they late? Is their work inaccurate? Do they not seem to respect the opinions of other people on the team? So give them one area that you want them to work on. And then ask them, "What are your thoughts?" And let them be defensive—because they will. But I think that one of the ways we can have a confident company culture is by knowing that we will get praise and that we will get feedback, which will help us to grow our careers. Feedback helps us to look around corners, to notice our blind spots that we might not necessarily know. As my wise mother says, we can't see ourselves. And often we can't hear ourselves. We have language that we use that we don't think about that can undermine our confidence. And so we need people to point out those areas for us.

Helena Carmel (24:08.622)

So just to pull back for one second, you don't believe in the old compliment sandwich, Tracy. Okay. I thought that was like a standard tenet of feedback, but I guess it's not. It's better to keep them separate.

Tracy Hooper (24:27.691)

No, I do not. Here's what happens: "Helena, you're so important to the team. You're doing such a great job. But I've noticed that your work is not accurate very much lately. So you really need to work on that. But you know what? Good job. We love having you." Now you think, "Well, what? What do I do with that information?" I think it can be short. You don't need to make a meal out of it. You don't need to tell someone that you have an issue with something they're doing for 20 minutes. As someone said one time, "Nobody wants to hear they smell for 20 minutes." Just tell them—whatever is the issue. I think it's important to keep it separate.

Helena Carmel (25:12.024)

Question for those of us who have a hard time giving straightforward feedback. I find myself sugarcoating a lot. Do you have advice—ways to just say it cleanly without muddying the waters, I guess?

Tracy Hooper (25:31.711)

Can you give me an example? It could be generic—something that you've experienced or that you've heard someone else deal with.

Helena Carmel (25:41.240)

Well, instead of saying, "You know, that was a huge issue and thank goodness that I noticed it and fixed it," and whatever, like I might just say like, "You know, I noticed that you did X and actually in the future you should just do Y. And if you'll just do Y moving forward, we'll be good to go." Like I maybe won't be frank about the impact of their actions, I guess. And maybe then I'm not getting my point across. And I'm sure I'm not the only person who has a hard time just speaking plainly, I guess.

Tracy Hooper (26:19.711)

Right, right. Well, in my view, people appreciate someone being honest with them without being

aggressive. So it could look something like this: "Do you have a couple of minutes? I want to talk with you about something. I'm telling you this because I'm concerned about the accuracy of our numbers and how that reflects on our team." That's the motivation. If you don't tell people why you're motivated to give them feedback, then they'll just think you're doing it to be vindictive or to show off or to try to act like you're all that.

Give them the reason: "I'm concerned about the impact on our team. I'm concerned about losing this client. I'm concerned about how people are perceiving our work." That's the motivation.

And then you say, "I noticed..." and give that specific example. "I noticed in the numbers that you put together for ABC client that all of section four, the numbers were not accurate." I'm making this up. And then you talk about the impact: "The impact is that we could have lost that client." "The impact is they could have had to pay a five-figure higher tax bill," whatever is the impact. Because if people hear that they've done something that needs to be fixed or is wrong, but they don't know the impact, then it doesn't really motivate them to fix it. They could think it's a one-off.

Then you give them the impact, and the impact is: "We could have lost this client," and, "I jumped in to make it right, but I'm noticing a pattern here." And then you say, "What are your thoughts?" And then just let them spew.

"Well, I was... you know, I had to put my dog in the vet, and he was in the ICU, and then my car broke down, and you don't understand, and I had to get my daughter to school..." and they're gonna have all kinds of excuses. And you're gonna say, "I hear you." Not "I agree with you," but "I hear you." "I can see this is a tough time for you," or "I can see this is... you're frustrated," or "I understand this is difficult." And—*the magic word*—and not *but*: "I can see this is hard for you, **and** we need to get it done right." Well now the person feels like all the acknowledgement has been pushed to the side.

"I can see how you feel this way, **and** we need to get this right." And then you build an agreement with them: "From now on, would you agree to double-check your numbers?" "Going forward, would you run this information by me before we hand it off to the client?" Whatever is your solution.

And then ask them—make sure that they get what you're talking about. Build an agreement that they're going to do this and then thank them for the conversation. And this takes a lot of muscle, but I have found—and I do this with my own children, I do it if I'm dealing with something that my husband and I are trying to work on—giving feedback is a gift. Because otherwise we keep doing the same behavior and people either get mad or frustrated or dismiss us or get disappointed, and it comes out in other ways. That's how you can begin to build a confident company culture.

Helena Carmel (29:59.310)

So the truth is those of us that are a little wishy-washy when it comes to feedback, we are doing a disservice to the people that we're working with and to the company culture as a whole, it sounds like.

Tracy Hooper (30:11.355)

Absolutely, absolutely. And it doesn't bode well for you. Who wants to be known as the person who beats around the bush? No. Tell the story. And I also think it's important, as you're building a confident culture, that you say to your direct reports, that you say to your team, "I'd like us to work on giving helpful feedback to each other. And we're going to practice, and it's going to be messy,

and it's going to be uncomfortable. We're going to take a generic situation and talk about it, and we're going to practice this together." Because we'll never improve, we'll never refine our communication skills if we can't speak truth to each other. And it really is awkward, Helena. I mean, nobody wants to do that. But you know what's worse? What's worse is holding on to it and not dealing with it, and then that person doesn't even know that they're doing something that's annoying or difficult or wrong.

Helena Carmel (31:17.230)

Right. Okay, what really piqued my interest, Tracy, when I first heard about you was your "Words to Lose, Words to Use." And "Words to Lose" are words that undercut our messaging, and often we don't even realize we're using them. I looked at your list and I was horrified to discover that I use hedge words all the time—in practically every email I'm hedging here and I'm hedging there—and I was disappointed because I think that I am harming my own credibility. And I'm a hundred percent sure that I'm not the only one. Can we talk about hedge words? Can we talk about how to break this habit?

Tracy Hooper (32:02.729)

Sure. Yes. Thank you for asking. Hedges, according to linguists, are those small, sneaky add-on words that we use because we don't want to come on too strong. We don't want to sound like we're difficult or being aggressive. And therefore, instead of being straightforward, we hedge by saying something like—see if this sounds familiar, Helena—"I just have a quick question." "I'm just checking back." "I'm just wondering." "I'm just looking for alignment." As if we need to justify what we're saying. We don't need to.

Here's another one: "sort of." "I sort of think we should go in a different direction." "I'm kind of wondering if maybe this could be sort of... kind of... maybe..." "Literally." Why do we say "literally" all the time? "Actually." "I actually think we have an issue here." Well, do we or don't we? We have an issue here.

And here's one of my—I call this a hot hedge because everybody says it, or many people say it—it's "a little." Have you heard about "a little"? I mean, a little could be something like, "I want to tell you a little bit about myself." "I am a little concerned." "Would you be open to a little feedback?" Well, what does it mean? Because it diminishes us. It diminishes our statement. "I'd like to offer a little feedback." "I'm a little concerned." What does that mean? You're a little concerned? I'm concerned. "I'd like to tell you a little bit about myself." Well, don't tell us a little bit—tell us about yourself.

Helena Carmel (33:31.618)

Wait, why is "a little" bad?

Tracy Hooper (33:56.456)

It really makes people feel like what you're saying isn't important. And the way you can get rid of hedge words actually—here's another one: "pretty." "I'm a pretty good writer." "Yeah, I'm pretty strategic." And how about this for all the accountants in the room: "I'm pretty good at taking complicated information and simplifying it." Why do we say "I'm pretty good"?

Helena Carmel (34:08.942)

Oh my gosh, I use that all the time.

Tracy Hooper (34:25.171)

"I'm pretty capable." So this is the technique: First of all, record yourself. Have a conversation with someone, record it. It'll feel weird in the beginning, but then you'll both talk like you would normally. Or if you're going to be on a call and you can record it, record it and find out what those hedges are—the fillers like "you know"—but then those hedges: "a little," "literally," "maybe," "pretty." "I'm pretty capable."

And then once you have found that, I want you to pick one word every 30 days that you want to lose. Just one. And I say that because if you had to think about every word that comes out of your mouth—out of my mouth—it's overwhelming. Pick one. Okay, let's say you're going to pick the word "a little"—or "pretty." "I'm pretty careful." So practice the power of pause. When you pause, it gives you a chance to gather your thoughts...

...pick your words. Gives the other person a chance to process what you're about to say, or process what you said, or get ready for what you're about to say. And instead of saying, "I'm pretty capable of...", say, "I'm capable of taking complex information and simplifying it." "I'm just looking for alignment" becomes "I'm looking for alignment."

That simple pause. We don't have to fill up every second of every conversation with sound. You know, before comedians deliver a punchline, they pause. And we can too. It gives you impact. And tell people around you, "I need your help. I want to get rid of the word 'just'. I want to stop using the word 'almost'. I almost think that we should go back to square one." "I almost think that we should..." yeah.

Helena Carmel (36:18.840)

I do that too.

Tracy Hooper (36:20.893)

It's common. And here's part of it: I want you to give yourself grace. Part of it is we hear these words in our culture. We're influenced by our family culture—the words we heard growing up—by our elders and others, teachers and so forth, but we're also influenced by the popular culture: the cars we drive, the clothes we wear, the social media we ingest. It's all a part of popular culture. Words are the same.

Here's another word I hear in our culture often: "right?" It's that validator, it's a hedge, it's a filler word. It's as if we're trying to get all this validation from the other person by saying, "Leadership is important, right?" and, "It's important to share what we are doing in the world, right?" Because we want people to know that our world, our jobs are significant, right? Why do we need all that validation? It's a wasted word, but we hear it in the culture, and if we hear it, we repeat it. And so we're going to have to hold ourselves steady and not use those words.

So what would be your one word you'd like to lose—one word in the next 30 days?

Helena Carmel (37:39.970)

Gosh, there's so many. But probably I'll start with "pretty," because I do use that as a modifier to describe my own skills. So I'm going to try to work on it. I'll start there.

Tracy Hooper (37:51.916)

Great. And if you go from saying in one conversation—let's say you say "pretty" in an hour-long conversation—you say it six times: "I'm pretty prepared." "Pretty is enough." "I'm pretty confident." If you can get it from five times to four or three... And by the way, when you say the word "pretty"—

"The food was pretty good"—I mean, that's normal. That makes it more relatable.

"The meeting was pretty successful." Okay. That makes it more modified. But when you're talking about your own skills—yeah, lose "pretty."

Helena Carmel (38:31.544)

Right. Why do I feel the need to diminish them? Right.

Tracy Hooper (38:34.183)

No, exactly. And people say, "You know, I don't want to sound like I'm all that." I was working with a man who had a great career at Nike. And I said to him, "So tell me about your career." And he said, "Well, I'm an expert at leading large global teams." And I thought, how cool is that? Not only that he was an expert at leading large global teams, but that he said it matter-of-factly. It wasn't like, "Well, you know, I'm an expert at leading large global teams."

And I thought if we could all speak that way—if we could all have that ability to say, "I'm an expert at leading large global teams." My specialty is... Here's another one, Helena, that's really effective: "People know me as..." And you can think about this—those of you CPAs in the audience—"People know me as the accurate guy." "People know me as..." If you were to ask any of my clients, they would tell you that I am exacting, professional, a trusted advisor. I call that third-party proof.

So, it's as if you're bringing a testimonial into the conversation from someone else: "If you were to ask any of my clients..." "If you were to ask the people who are my colleagues..." "People I worked with..." "In our company I am known as..." That way you are educating people about you, but you're not bragging—because it's coming from someone else.

Helena Carmel (40:05.838)

And it's really impacting the way that the listener is perceiving you.

Tracy Hooper (40:11.132)

Absolutely.

Helena Carmel (40:13.112)

You know, you mentioned culture before, and I have to consider another cultural aspect just as a woman in business. Do you feel like women are more prone to undermining their credibility with language? Do you think it's more of a female problem, or am I just totally off base?

Tracy Hooper (40:32.627)

No, you're not off base. I... I would say... gosh, I hate to say yes, because I don't want that to be true. I think it is more often more true than not. I think what happens to women is we think, "Well, I don't want to come on too strong because I don't want to intimidate people." Therefore, we use these weak hedges and fillers and so forth. And then we don't feel confident because those words are coming out of our mouths and people don't know us to be confident because they don't hear the stronger words. And I think if you can take out the simple words, you can get a strong message without being overly aggressive.

And by the way, I want to be surrounded by confident people. I don't want to have to be lifting people up all the time. No—we have a job. We know how to do it. If we don't, we ask. As opposed to, "This may sound like a dumb question." I mean, that's a disclaimer: "This may sound like a dumb question," or, "I'm just thinking off the top of my head," or, "I'm no expert." Nobody wants to hear that.

So if it's hard for you—you, me, everyone—if it's hard for someone to use this language, just know that it uplifts everybody in the room when you uplift your language. Instead of saying, "I'm no expert," you could say, "From my perspective..." "In my experience..." "What I know after 15 years in the accounting industry..." Wow. Now you say, "Wow, what I know after 10 years as a consultant..." Now that's building credibility, and people are excited to know you. People want what you have. Yes—people want what you have, everybody. You all have skills that I don't have. Give me some of that.

Helena Carmel (42:16.526)

It's incredible.

People want what you have.

Wow, the impact of just one small turn of phrase is remarkable. Remarkable when I hear you. I could talk about this all day. Frankly, I still have more questions. But I know you're a busy lady, Tracy. And we've talked a lot about things that people can do to enhance the way that they show up in the world of work today. If someone's listening and they're thinking, "I don't even know where to start," do you have any quick and easy tips?

Tracy Hooper (43:03.657)

Yes. First of all, I would dress for the job you want, not for the job you have. I say beef up your wardrobe. I believe women should wear makeup. I'm not talking about a lot of makeup, but lipstick. People may disagree. I'm open to that. But I think people need to get a nice haircut and have decent clothes. It doesn't cost that much to have a good pair of black pants and some nice shirts or blouses. And to really make people feel like you care that you're meeting with them—by how you dress.

Somebody—my gosh—somebody said to me, I was speaking with a client and I hadn't seen her for a long time. And she said, "Wow, you look all dressed up today. What are you doing?" And I said, "I'm meeting with you." And she looked at me and, honest to God, her shoulders went back, she lifted up her head. It made her feel important.

All right, that's one. And no playing with your hair. And no playing with your beards. You know, are people playing with their hair? It's always fun. No, that's a habit. You know, guys are always tugging on their beards and picking at them. Don't do that, people.

You know, your face is your sphere of influence, so don't give people anything to be distracted by. That's one piece. Number two: If you can, record a conversation that you're having with somebody and find out what are some of those words to lose.

Then another—I know we have limited time—but I really want to encourage people to not over-apologize. Now, if you've made a mistake, if there's been a misunderstanding, if you bumped into someone and spilled a cup of coffee all over their white jacket, of course you need to apologize. Or to express empathy: "I'm sorry you're going through this situation." "What can I do?" "How can I help you?" "What do you need me to know?"

But in general, I am finding a lot of people are over-apologizing when they don't need to. Two people headed for the same door—people say, "Sorry about that," as opposed to, "After you." Going into a crowded elevator—"Sorry, go ahead, it's no big deal," "Sorry." Or you could say, "I have a meeting

that starts in a couple of minutes. Would you mind if I went ahead of you?" It's not a big ask to ask someone.

And then to really switch "I'm sorry" to "thank you." Instead of saying, "I'm sorry, you seem upset," you could say, "It looks like you're upset. How can I help?"

Helena Carmel (45:51.468)

I read you said somewhere, instead of saying "sorry for the delay" in response in an email, that instead you should say, "thank you for your patience." And I was like, whoa—like that's just a small phrase, but it just changes the whole tone of your communication.

Tracy Hooper (46:06.059)

Yes. I mean imagine if every email you said, "Sorry this is late," "Sorry I'm behind," you know, "Sorry about the noise on our Zoom call." No. "Thank you for your patience." Now, if you are terribly late—if this was due and you're way behind—you say, "I hope you'll forgive me for being late." "I hope this didn't disrupt your schedule."

But anytime you can say, instead of "sorry" to ask this question, you could say, "I have a question about that," or, "Is now a good time for questions?" Instead of saying, "I'm sorry I disagree," you can say, "I take a different approach." "I look at it differently." "Here's how I see it." Instead of "sorry I disagree," we want to hear your opinion. What you all have to say is important. Trust that, and let the words build around it.

Helena Carmel (46:58.776)

Shaking my head, listeners—you can't see, but I'm just blown away. And I am thinking I need to write down some of these phrases, some sticky notes around my workstation, and just have those words on tap because I can't believe how impactful it really is—just a small turn of phrase.

Tracy, I know your books are available and we'll share the links with our audience, and there's tons of info on your website. I did a big dive there and we'll share that too. But what if people want to talk with you? What if people want to work with you one-on-one? Or if an accounting firm wants to do like a corporate firm-wide training? Is that something that's on the table?

Tracy Hooper (47:40.114)

Absolutely. Sure. I would love people to reach out to me. My email is tracy@confidenceproject.com, or they can go on [the website](#) and do an inquiry there—put in your name and your email address. Right on every page of the website, there's a place where somebody can do that.

I also—of course—I'd love people to read [The NOW Hello](#). Much of what I've talked about is in that book. And it's one thing to read it and then it's another to practice it. Once you've—you know, and this is what I say—scan the table of contents, pick a chapter that sparks interest, and read that. You don't have to read the whole book, or you can read it at different times.

But I also offer—or and—also offer a complimentary video every month. The first Thursday of every month I have a free video that goes out to people who have signed up for it. You can get that on my website too. And I talk about all things confidence. And I have over a hundred videos that I've done. They're short—they're three to four minutes, two to four minutes. And you can pick any number of topics and look back at the archives and see those videos. But sometimes that's helpful to see it in real life—or in video—and then you can practice it in real life.

Helena Carmel (48:55.790)

Tracy, it's been a real pleasure. I can't believe how much of myself I heard in all of your examples. So I definitely have what to practice—but I will be. I learned so much today, Tracy. Thank you for your time.

Tracy Hooper (49:10.446)

It was my great pleasure. Thank you for your interest in The Confidence Project. And may we all take one phrase and make that be our signature phrase.

Helena Carmel (49:22.464)

I'm gonna work on it. Thank you. Listeners, I hope you enjoyed that as much as I did. If you liked what you heard, why not subscribe? We're on Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Spotify, Podbean, or just visit capstantax.com/podcasts.

Thank you again to Tracy Hooper of [The Confidence Project](#). All of her info is in the show notes. I'm Helena Carmel. Thanks for joining us on *Beyond the Spreadsheet*, and we'll see you next time.

Tracy Hooper (49:23.690)

Thank you.