

“At last. At last this very important book has been written, encouraging women to take up all the creative space they deserve in the world. I hope it will empower legions of women to step into their greatness.”

—ELIZABETH GILBERT

Founder of the acclaimed
global Playing Big leadership program

Tara Mohr

Playing Big

*Practical Wisdom for Women
Who Want to Speak Up,
Create, and Lead*

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Advance Praise for

PLAYING BIG

“While reading *Playing Big* I kept thinking of the many people I knew (men too!) who would love it. With clarity, warmth, and deep wisdom, Tara shines a light on our blocks to manifesting our potential and offers practical, well-honed strategies that move us toward fulfillment. This is a book that can transform the trajectory of your life.”

—Tara Brach, PhD, author of *Radical Acceptance* and *True Refuge*

“Tara Mohr shows us how to replace self-doubt, inadequacy, and worry with confidence, self-worth, and courage. She is a brilliant writer and teacher, whose warmth and passion fill these pages. Full of examples and practical tools, this is a gem of a book.”

—Rick Hanson, PhD, author of *Hardwiring Happiness*

“Don’t try to change the world before you read this book! In *Playing Big* Tara Mohr offers you the keys to unlocking your gifts, your potential, and your power to make a difference. I guarantee that you will find yourself and your dreams somewhere in this book; and when you do, Tara’s deep insights, her practical-action steps, and her real-life stories will set you free.”

—Rachel Naomi Remen, MD, author of *Kitchen Table Wisdom* and *My Grandfather’s Blessings*

“Luminous, deep, and practical. I’ve asked every woman in my all-woman company to put *Playing Big* first on her reading list. We want to make a difference in the world, we want to live full-on, and we know that our passion is powerful. We need this! *Playing Big* is like a torch that shows you where assumptions you’ve been holding could be holding you back—even if you think you’re using your power to the fullest.”

—Danielle LaPorte, author of *The Desire Map* and *The Fire Starter Sessions*

“For anyone who’s afraid they don’t have what it takes to live a bigger life, *Playing Big* shows that you unquestionably do. Mohr’s goal is not about getting the next promotion (although that may come too) but something much more lasting and limitless: true empowerment from the inside and the capacity to change the world.”

—Patty Chang Anker, author of *Some Nerve*

“When I was at a critical career juncture, I took Tara’s online leadership course and it was transformative. After just three sessions, I had decided to quit my current job, start my own consulting practice, and follow my passion around developing leadership for large-scale social impact. While I’d already had some success, Tara’s work was instrumental in helping me find my own inner calling, unhook from other’s expectations, and start playing really big.”

—Heather McLeod Grant, coauthor of *Forces for Good*

“This is *the* how-to manual we’ve been waiting for. Tara cuts through our playing small strategies with every brilliant word and liberating idea. This book will be passed from friend to friend, given as a graduation gift, and lauded in women’s lists of ‘books that changed my life.’ May this powerful book help us create a more just and happy world.”

—Jennifer Loudon, author of *The Woman’s Comfort Book* and *The Woman’s Retreat Book*

“If you’ve ever struggled (as I have!) with feeling like you have so much more to offer the world yet are

unsure of the next step, *Playing Big* will give you the road map. Chapter after chapter I felt Tara was speaking directly to my soul. Tara’s tools will help you excavate your voice, clarify your mission and message, and fuel yourself renewably from the inside out.”

—Manisha Thakor, CEO of MoneyZen Wealth Management and coauthor of *On My Own Two Feet*

“*Playing Big* enables the modern-day woman at *any* age to face her career and life with a sense of curiosity and confidence rather than fear and regret.”

—Sarah Brokaw, author of *Fortytude*

“I have been searching for a book to recommend that will solve the epidemic in women of thinking they’re not enough. *Playing Big* is that book. It’s an answered prayer for me and women all over the world. Smart, practical, profound, and heart-centered—Tara Mohr nailed it.”

—Kate Northrup, author of *Money, A Love Story*

“I have seen hundreds of women with big dreams get stuck behind walls of fear just as they are about to create something great. *Playing Big* holds the key to gently and firmly pushing down the wall so that no woman is held from her rightful destiny.”

—Pamela Slim, author of *Body of Work*

PLAYING BIG

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



TARA MOHR

AVERY

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FOR HARRIET AND BILL

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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 the expertise about the external world these institutions had to offer would become integrated with wisdom about our inner lives, the internal reality that shaped external events.

I had an unusual childhood. I was seven years old before I learned that not all children analyzed their dreams each morning at the breakfast table with mom and dad, diagramming the archetypes on a yellow pad, next to the bowl of oatmeal. When I came home with a childhood complaint like “Johnny teased me at recess,” I was usually met with “What do you think is going on at home for Johnny that would cause him to tease other kids?”

My parents weren’t psychotherapists, religious fanatics, or even hippies. They were regular people who believed that understanding oneself and others was an essential part of living a happy life. From an early age, I was encouraged to learn about psychology and spirituality from all traditions—Eastern and Western—and apply tools from both areas to my daily life. Our house was full of books on those subjects and I grew up reading them. By the time I was a teenager, I was attending spiritual retreats and hanging out in the psychology section of the bookstore in my free time. I used meditation, journaling, and therapy to help me survive the storm of adolescence—and they helped, a lot.

In a thousand ways, my parents taught me that what happens in our inner lives shapes our outer realities. At the same time, I navigated a very different landscape: *school*. At home I was being told all human beings were equally miraculous creations of the divine, but at school there was a lot of ranking of kids, classes for the “gifted” children and, therefore, the presumably not-gifted ones. At home I was taught that people’s inner lives and unconscious motivations drive their behavior, but the teachers’ lessons on presidents and prime ministers certainly never discussed their inner lives. I couldn’t figure out why at school we weren’t talking about how Lincoln’s early childhood impacted his decisions, or why we never discussed the underlying psychological dynamics that led to every escalation to war.

Throughout my childhood, I often felt that I was living with one foot in each of two very different worlds. One world was about thinking, the other about emotion. One was about knowledge, the other about intuition. One was about what we can see and touch and hear, the other was about the inner life that created that tangible reality.

As I sought to weave together these two worlds, I moved between what I’d

now call times of playing big and times of playing small. During some periods, I could remember what I truly loved—writing, the arts, spirituality, entrepreneurship, creativity, women’s empowerment, and being a part of a community—and I could build a life that was about those things. But during many years, I was lost from all that. My education helped develop my intellect, but the artist in me became lost along the way and I neglected my spiritual life. I became a bit cynical about personal growth work, taking my cues from the academic culture around me rather than listening inward to what I knew to be true. Worst of all, I developed some fabulous “critical thinking” skills but then applied them to my own dreams for my future, playing the skeptic instead of being an ally to myself.

In my early thirties, I started to feel a disconnect from self that felt too painful to ignore, and I entered a process of significantly changing my life so that it reflected my real aspirations, both for my life and for my work. I also began to look closely at my own self-doubt and find my path to a more confident way of moving through the world. Many of the tools that helped me became tools I later used with my female coaching clients and in my leadership programs for women—tools now included in this book.

Helping Women Play Bigger

After business school, I went to work at a major foundation with two billion dollars in assets. One of the things I loved about the foundation, and one of the reasons I’d taken the job there, was its many strong women leaders. Nearly every part of the foundation was run by a talented, hardworking woman. But the very top position of CEO had been held only by men for the one hundred years of the organization’s existence.

While I was there, a new CEO was brought in. He was a young man who didn’t have experience managing large organizations but had a great deal of talent, charisma, and potential. Over the months that followed, his newly hired team launched major new initiatives quickly, without much research, testing, or planning, and allocated major dollars to them. The senior women who had been slowly rising in the ranks as they painstakingly gained more experience were overruled and passed over for promotions. On more than one occasion I heard those senior men ridicule the hardest working of those women as having no personal lives and call those who were most resistant to their decisions “difficult.”

I was stunned, and I was learning. I watched men move massive amounts of money and see their projects realized—even though they hadn't done much homework on them—while highly qualified women with important ideas to share stood on the sidelines both because they weren't listened to and because they didn't feel those ideas were ready for prime time.

Growing up in the eighties and nineties, I had been told that women had equal opportunity in the workplace now, that young women like me had nothing to worry about, that if anything still stood in the way of women's career advancement, it was only the inevitable tension between work and family. Yet what I saw happening at my workplace was something else entirely—something that had to do with power, bias, confidence, and risk-taking.

As I talked with friends about what was occurring at my organization, I heard similar stories, again and again, about theirs: stories about charismatic male leaders at the helm, men who made bold but often rash decisions. Their organizations too were full of talented, hardworking women in lieutenant and other senior roles. Those women worked longer hours, were more attuned to the details, and had more experience and knowledge. Yet they were not leading at the highest levels, both because they were not being put in positions of leadership and because they weren't sharing audacious ideas or initiating big plans. Their employers were utilizing their strong work ethic but not their brilliance—their unique ideas, insights, and talents.

While I loved many aspects of my work in philanthropy—my colleagues, applying my MBA education to a social mission, and working with inspiring philanthropists—after a few years, I started to have the sense that it was not what I wanted to do long-term. I faced the truth that many of the real dreams I had for my career—to do something highly creative, entrepreneurial, and in the personal growth field—had gotten buried during my time in college and graduate school.

I'd been exposed to the field of coaching while at Stanford Business School and was intrigued. Coaching was a way to work with people's inner lives but with a focus on action and impact. That was just what I was looking for. I got trained as a coach and I also started blogging about personal growth. For a couple of years, my life looked like this: wake up at five; write a blog post; jump on the train; go to work at the foundation all day; and then, around six, head over to the office that I rented for a handful of hours each week to meet with my coaching clients.

It was around this time that I started to notice again and again brilliant women around me playing small. I first saw it in my clients, women like Nisha, Elizabeth, and Cynthia. I also saw it in my friends. One day, I was on a Saturday-morning walk with three of my girlfriends. I listened as Jessa talked

about what she thought needed to be done to fix the dysfunctional school board in her kids' district. I listened as Britt talked about some questionable practices happening in her company. I listened as Abby told the most remarkable story about a game she'd created for her nieces and nephews to help them learn about their family history. I listened as the whole group shared their sorrows and hopes about the news headlines of the week. I listened to them talk, in awe of their intelligence, their ideas, and their character—their honest concern for others and their commitment to doing the right thing. I kept thinking, *these* are the kind of people I wish were in charge: hardworking, wise, ethical women and men who care a great deal about people.

I said something along those lines—that I wished Jessa would join her school board, that Britt would get into a leadership role at her company, that Abby would write a book about parenting. They chuckled in response to my suggestions. They thought of themselves as amateurs pontificating, not as people whose ideas were ready for a larger stage.

Then the thought struck me: On that particular Saturday morning, around the country, there were *thousands* of groups like ours—women walking and talking about what was wrong with the status quo, what was needed, women sharing alternative visions of how things could be. Those ideas and critiques were being left on the sidewalks and trails, heard only in intimate conversations among friends. Leaps of imagination, important ideas and questions, and visions for change were not making it to the bigger stages where they could be heard and where they were desperately needed.

Of course, I was so attuned to this phenomenon of women playing small because I was struggling with it myself. All the support, education, and success I'd had somehow had not added up to confidence. It hadn't left me eager to pursue my dreams. Instead I was petrified of failure, embarrassment, not being good enough. As a result, I was not doing the work I longed to do. I'd grown up seeing again and again how women's voices were missing from the world, and now I was seeing the inner side of that dynamic—what caused women, including myself, to hold back our ideas and our voices.

A couple of years into juggling part-time coaching with full-time employment, I decided to leave the foundation. My blog, which had begun with thirty-eight friends and family subscribers, had grown to a readership of a few thousand women. I started to think about bringing the coaching work I did to the larger audience of these readers, and I wanted to know what kinds of workshops or courses would be most useful to them. So in a survey, I asked them, "What's the

biggest challenge in your life?”

I offered a big multiple-choice list of answers, a list of the challenges we typically talk about as looming large in contemporary women’s lives: work-life balance, stress, not enough time, financial problems, health challenges, relationship issues. But then, because of what I’d seen in my clients, my friends, and myself, I added one more challenge to the list: “I’m playing small.”

When the survey responses came back, “I’m playing small” was what the largest number of women deemed their most significant problem—yes, more than work-life balance, stress, or relationship issues. There was indeed a larger phenomenon reflective of what I was observing: Bright, full-of-potential women were playing small, and they were *aware* of this and they didn’t like it. In fact, many saw playing small as the most pressing challenge in their lives.

In some sense, what I’m now doing is the very same thing I did that day in high school when I decided to try to change the English curriculum. I’m working to bring forward women’s voices where they are absent, because I believe those voices will help us create a better world.

On Doing Inner Work

A year ago, I was appearing as a guest on a live morning news show. Fewer than ten minutes before my airtime, the producer of my segment walked in. “Here’s the introduction the anchors will be using for you,” she said. She showed me a bright purple piece of paper with a script that said, “Recent studies show that even though women account for 51 percent of middle managers in the US, they are only 4 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs. Our next guest says there’s no one to blame but ourselves. . . . She says women tend to do things that undermine us and our work. Welcome, Tara Sophia Mohr!”

Uh-oh.

In any moment of the day, I would not have looked forward to standing up to the producer, and I especially wasn’t in the mood for it in my early-morning, pre-TV nervous and exhausted state. But I heard myself think, I’m not going down like that.

I figured this was a *news* show, so I’d try an accuracy angle. “Oh, you’ll want to change that because it’s inaccurate,” I said casually. “I’d never say that women have no one to blame but themselves for those statistics, because many external factors—like discrimination—lead to those numbers.”

“Oh, okay . . . ,” she said reluctantly. “I can ask the executive producer about

changing it, but it's doubtful . . .”

I could tell that if I wanted this to get changed in the next ten minutes, I needed to supply an easy solution. “How about if we change it to ‘Our next guest, Tara Sophia Mohr, says women can do something to change those numbers’?” I asked her.

“Hmmm, I’ll check,” she said.

They changed the introduction.

The script the producer originally showed me perfectly reflected our collective confusion about the question of “external” versus “internal” barriers to women’s career advancement. Our usual cultural conversation divides the challenges into two categories: unfair external barriers to women’s advancement that women are victims of (discrimination, bias, poor work-family policies, pay disparities) and internal, psychological things that women “do to themselves” and for which women are therefore to blame. A rather ridiculous debate follows: “Are the internal or external barriers more important? Is this all women’s responsibility or is it not ‘their fault’?” The producers’ assumption was that if we were talking about what women do to undermine themselves, “it’s women’s fault.” It was “their choice.”

I see it differently. Centuries of women’s exclusion from political, public, and professional life have had many effects. Some of those effects were *external*: legislation, formal policies, pay disparities, lack of legal protections, and the denial of women’s basic rights. But inequality of men and women has also left *internal effects* in us. Over generations, it shaped how we think of ourselves and what we see as possible for our lives and work. It shaped our fears—fears of speaking up, of rocking the boat, of displeasing others. It caused women to develop a number of behaviors that enabled them to survive in environments where they had no legal, financial, or political power—behaviors like conflict avoidance, self-censoring, people-pleasing, tentative speech and action.

While we’ve done a great deal of work collectively, especially over the past forty years, to remove the external barriers to women’s empowerment, we have not taken the same close look at the internal legacy of inequality and how to change it. We have a lot of inner unlearning and relearning to do.

The tools you’ll acquire in this book are for playing bigger in the ways you most want to; but at a deeper level, they are tools for unlearning the lessons that centuries of women’s marginalization have left in each of us.

About the Book

People often ask me, “Where does the Playing Big material you teach come from?” It’s a hybrid. Some comes from my business school training. Some comes from twenty years of learning about psychology and personal growth. Some comes from the wisdom of the spiritual texts I grew up reading. Some comes from the lessons I’ve learned on my personal journey. And of course, much comes from what I learned working with women to help them play bigger.

What often felt like a disjointed split in my childhood between heart and mind, intuition and education, right brain and left brain, has become a unique blend that I bring to my work. There’s the MBA in me and the spiritual seeker. The part of me that loves intellectual rigor and the part that loves poetry. So in these pages, you’ll learn tools as tactical as research-based communication techniques and as soulful as a two-thousand-year-old spiritual teaching about fear. I teach both because both can help you play bigger.

We’ll begin by talking about what most fundamentally gets in the way of women playing big. It’s the voice of self-doubt, of “not me”—the voice inside that is sure you aren’t the one to lead, to write the book, to take on that bigger role, to speak up in the meeting. It’s the voice that tells you that you aren’t qualified enough, smart enough, experienced enough, good-at-x-enough . . . to ever play big. I know you are familiar with this voice, and you probably have some sense of how self-doubt has held you back in your work or in your personal life. In chapter 1, you’ll learn what to do when you feel insecure or self-critical, so that all those thoughts no longer get in your way. I *love* teaching women this because it’s actually relatively easy to change how we relate to self-doubt—once you have the right understanding of your inner critic and the appropriate tools to use the moment it acts up.

Once you’re not listening so much to your inner critic, you have the opportunity to listen to a very different voice within. After working with thousands of women to help them play bigger, I know this: *Every woman has at her core unfailing, perfect wisdom.* When you have a dilemma, the wise part of you knows what next step is right. When you are feeling confused, the wise part of you has clarity. When a problem seems overwhelming and complicated, the wise part of you has a simple, elegant answer. I call this core your inner mentor, because it’s like having an advisor and supporter inside your own mind—and therefore available to you around the clock. In chapter 2, you’ll learn how you can access and start taking direction from this part of yourself.

Learning how to listen to your inner mentor instead of your inner critic is the

first major movement toward playing bigger. Playing big doesn't come from working more, pushing harder, or finding confidence. It comes from listening to the most powerful and secure part of you, not the voice of self-doubt.

Then we tackle the other obstacles that most commonly hold women back from playing bigger. First: fear. Whether it's fear of failure, of standing out from the crowd, of conflict, or of greater visibility, fears hold back most women from sharing their voices and ideas. And yet, not all fear is problematic. In chapter 3, we'll cover two types of fear. One kind of fear keeps us playing small; one kind is an essential ingredient for playing big. The task before us is to shift out of that limiting type of fear and welcome the positive kind. You'll learn how to distinguish between the two and what to do when each one arises.

Next we turn to unhooking from praise and criticism. Attachment to praise and avoidance of criticism keeps us from doing innovative, controversial work and—more simply—from following the paths we feel called toward, whether or not those around us understand or approve. And powerful women are often met with hostile criticism, so we need to learn how to receive it and not be paralyzed by it. We also need to learn to interpret feedback so that it propels us forward rather than hurting or immobilizing us.

Then we look at what we've all learned in school and how it can stand in the way of our playing big. I started to notice a surprising phenomenon in my work with women. I expected that women who excelled in school would also excel in their careers. After all, wasn't school—particularly college and graduate school—preparation for the work world? Yet again and again I saw that women who were stars in school ran into major, self-imposed walls in their careers. As I dug deeper, I understood that they were struggling because school cultivates and rewards a particular way of working that not only doesn't help us play bigger but often *gets in the way* of our playing bigger. Chapter 5 is about how to leave behind the good-student habits we are conditioned in for our many years in school and that we need to unlearn in our adult lives.

In the second half of the book, we move into talking about action. I share some of the most common ways we stall on playing big and hide our brilliance. Typically, when women read about these hiding strategies, they have a few “uh-oh” moments as they come to recognize how they've been unconsciously putting their playing big on hold. Once you see which ones you are using, you can't go back to them in the same way anymore; you've brought them into the light of awareness.

The antidote to all that hiding and stalling is a special kind of action called a leap. A leap is an immediate, experimental, simple act—the exact opposite of the overplanned, overthought, perfectionist action so many brilliant women are most

comfortable taking. A leap stretches you into playing much bigger, *right now*.

Then we turn to how we present ourselves through our communication. Whenever I teach about the subtle ways we undermine ourselves with our words, I receive a huge response from women saying, “Wow, I didn’t realize those things were making me come across less powerfully, but now I see it!” It’s incredibly powerful to change undermining communication habits so that you are perceived as the intelligent and strong woman you are, and it can even be fun to work on them, especially with a friend or colleague. Chapter 8 is about shifting from speech and writing that diminishes you to communication that conveys confidence, competence, and warmth.

Next we talk about callings. Each of us is gifted with callings. A calling is the pull you feel to address a particular need in the world. For example, you might feel a calling to run for city council, teach yoga to teens, or volunteer to support veterans in your town. You might feel a calling to a certain career change or to launch a new initiative in your company. We all have callings, but most of the time we play small by denying them. One of the most important and fulfilling parts of playing bigger is moving from resisting your callings to embracing them.

In the last chapter, I discuss how to *sustain* playing big. We’ve all had the experience of pursuing a goal with gusto for a while, thinking self-discipline will be enough to help us achieve it, but then finding that motivation fades. We end up disappointed in ourselves and not taking action. This chapter explores a very different way of maintaining motivation and achieving big results, one that’s based on self-care.

And finally, in the conclusion, we’ll talk about the big picture, the journey ahead, and what is for me the most important shift we make when we move from playing small to playing big: to not just succeed within systems as they are but transform them to be better—more humane, just, safe, and supportive for human beings.

At the end of each chapter, you’ll have the opportunity to apply the ideas to your own life and put them into practice through exercises and journaling questions. I know you are busy, so the exercises never take more than a few minutes, and in most cases, they don’t take extra time at all; they’ll just give you a new way of thinking about and approaching the challenges that cross your path.

Journaling is a tool for playing bigger because change begins with self-awareness. Writing enables you to figure out what you are *really* thinking and *really* feeling. While we can often get into unhelpful rumination or worrying when we simply ponder a topic, when we write about it we move forward in our

thinking. New truths emerge after three or five or ten minutes of putting pen to paper.

This book is for brilliant women like you. I wrote it so that you can move forward in pursuing whatever calls to you, so that your greatest gifts find expression. I wrote it because I'm tired of meeting women who have important messages to share but whose self-doubt is keeping them quiet. I'm tired of encountering woman after woman deluded by the myth that she needs to be more something—more qualified, more prepared, more expert—than she is in order to share her ideas. I wrote it out of allegiance to the art not yet made, the companies not yet founded, the books and op-ed columns not yet written, the critiques not yet voiced. I wrote it because all those expressions of goodness, of insight, of beauty, hang in the balance. I wrote this book because I want our world to be changed by you.

CHAPTER 1



The Inner Critic

I recently had lunch with a colleague—an executive coach and business consultant. She’s worked at the most prestigious consulting companies and maintains a roster of executive clients who find her advice indispensable. Over our meal, she explained to me that she wanted to do more public speaking, sharing the ideas she’d developed in her consulting practice with a much wider audience. She sounded eager and ready to go, uncertain only about what practical steps to take next.

I offered to introduce her to a few speaking agents who I thought would love to work with her and could help her secure engagements. Suddenly, she started talking about how she needed to spend some months doing small, local talks to “hone her craft.” A new narrative came out, about how she wasn’t really ready to take her speaking to a large stage. Having just watched a video of her giving a speech, I knew this wasn’t the case.

I was hearing in her something I’ve now heard in hundreds of women. I think of it as “the voice of not-me”—the internal chatter that tells a woman she’s not ready to lead, she’s not enough of an expert, she’s not good enough at this or that. It’s the voice of self-doubt, of the inner critic. We begin our journey here because it is what most holds women back from playing bigger.

All women grapple with this voice of self-doubt in one way or another. For some women, it is most prominent around their professional lives. For others, it comes up around their sense of competence as mothers or partners. For others, it speaks mostly about appearance, body image, or aging. And for others, it chatters most loudly about their creative dreams—to make music or paint or write. We are so used to living with this voice, most of us don’t imagine it could be otherwise. It’s become the background noise we live with. Since women don’t talk to one another about the most vicious things it says, we don’t hear counterarguments or get support, and we don’t learn that other women—women we admire because they seem so confident—hear the same irrational, harsh