

PROPOSAL SUBMITTED FOR CONSIDERATION: Say goodbye to 'try': Updating the Girl Scout Promise

Since 1913¹, Girl Scouts have promised to *try* to accomplish three things: to serve God and my country, to help people at all times, and to live by the Girl Scout Law.ⁱ We propose deleting the word “try”. By eliminating this 100-year-old word, we will:

- more fully meet our mission of developing girls of “courage, confidence and character”.
- increase our young girls’ confidence by moving them mentally from just “trying” to fully “committing” to accomplishing their dreams of “making the world a better place”.
- better prepare young girls for overcoming the social perception that women are not confident and therefore less capable to take up leadership. This perception hobbles their ability to become leaders and make the contribution they want to make and are capable of making in their organizations and communities.

So how is confidence “created?”

The Girl Scout Research Institute (GSRI) found that a girl’s self-confidence has the strongest impact on whether she takes up leadership or not.ⁱⁱ So how do girls develop the self-confidence necessary for leadership? Self-confidence (the belief that if I take action I will achieve what I set out to achieve) is developed through a number of ways:

- 1- being exposed to role models (“if I see it I can be it”).
- 2- becoming competent in leadership skills by experimenting, being able to ‘fail’ in a safe environment, getting supportive feedback, and starting over again.
- 3- having opportunities to be responsible, lead others, work in teams, and do social good.
- 4- positively self-talking, encouraging oneself, particularly in times of difficulty or failure.

Girl Scouting exceeds in providing the first three confidence-building components: the structure of Girl Scouting emphasizes not only adult-to-girl role modeling, but also girl-to-girl; programming (badges, journeys, cookie sales, destinations, and awards) offers opportunities for skill experimentation and development; and the troop structure and many Girl Scout activities provide ample platforms for leading others and doing meaningful community service. Research conducted by Simmons College and Girl Scouts of Eastern Massachusetts (GSEM) indeed found that middle school-aged girls who were Girl Scouts rated themselves higher on confidence than other girls who were not Girl Scouts and boys.ⁱⁱⁱ

Yet the word “try” in the Promise injects into a girl’s mind the belief that “trying” is sufficient, fully committing is unnecessary, and “trying” versus succeeding is all she is capable of. This is not the mindset of a girl “who will make the world a better place”. The Girl Scout laws pledge “I will do my best”. Why not the

¹ When Girl Scouts began in 1912, the Promise was the same as the Girl Guide Promise. In that Promise, girls pledged, “On my honor, I promise that I will do my best to...” The Promise was changed the following year to “On my honor, I will try to do three things:...”

Promise? Girl Scout programming focuses on building a girl's competencies. Why does the Promise downgrade those competencies from strengths to just possibilities?

Why is the word "try" a problem?

1- A problem of self-talk: How I internally think of my capacity to be successful

When faced with a challenge, an obstacle or something new, do you tell yourself "I'll try this" or do you tell yourself "I can do this"? Self-talk, that internal conversation you have with yourself, stimulates, directs, and then evaluates your actions. Research on scholastic and athletic performance consistently finds that the more positive your self-talk, the more likely you will succeed at what you are undertaking: self-talk increases your ability to strategize what to do, and then focus, correct and adjust, and persevere through tasks. Most recently, positive self-talk has been determined to be an important component of "self-leadership."^{iv} The core of self-talk entails focusing on the desired outcomes or behaviors (such as getting an A on a test, sinking a 3-point shot, or speaking powerfully in front of a group of people), which leads to greater motivation, enhanced focus and attention on the task, and greater self-confidence.^v

Including the word "try" in the Promise dilutes the impact of positive self-talk. It's not as damaging as negative self-talk, which increases the likelihood that what you fear will happen actually does happen. For example, if you think you'll forget your lines in a play, you are more likely to forget them. But the word "try" gives permission to not succeed, and implies to the thinker that 'trying' is a sufficient end point. All the benefits of positive self-talk are lost.

2- A problem of perception: how others think of my capacity to be successful

Consider this scenario: A Girl Scout graduates from college and is in a job interview. The prospective employer explains the responsibilities of the job and then asks, "Can you do this job?" The Girl Scout replies, "I will try." OK, to some that may sound honest and accurate. But here's the rub: in the interview with the next candidate the employer asks, "Can you do this job?" and the male college grad says "Yes, I can." YOU are the employer. Who would you give the job to, the person who will try to do it, or the person who can do it?

The Girl Scout's use of the word "try" softens her language from "yes" to "maybe", weakens how committed she sounds, and conveys lower confidence in her own ability to be successful. She can't promise she will do anything; she can only promise she will try. Fast forward to the world of work, and no wonder women are often accused of being unconfident: their language makes them sound weak, unsure and minimally committed. Their passion, competence and commitment disappear.

If this change in word choice sounds trivial, you only need to consider these recent headlines to see what women who aspire to be leaders are facing:^{vi}

- a. Women are less assured than men---and to succeed, confidence matters as much as competence (Atlantic Monthly, 2015, and new book, *The Confidence Gap*, 2014)
- b. Overcoming the Confidence Gap for women (New York Times, 2015)
- c. Women: If you're competent it's time to be confident (Forbes, 2015)
- d. Why Women Leaders need Self-Confidence (Harvard Business Review, 2011)

There are many reasons why women are believed to be less confident. It could be that their behavior is being judged against social expectations based on how men in leadership behave (aggressive, competitive, high risk-taking); or that women have been socialized to use less powerful language ("I will try" versus "I can").^{vii} Regardless of the cause, one important outcome of not being seen as confident is clear: women continue to be woefully under-represented in all areas of leadership^{viii}.

- Only 4.6% of the Chief Executive Officers of the Fortune 500 companies are women. Only two (out of 500) are women of color.
- In Congress, only 19.4% are women; only 31 (5.8%) of all 535 members are women of color.
- Even in industries heavily populated by women, there are few leaders. In nonprofits, while 75% of the workers are women, only 16.3% of the largest nonprofits are led by women. In education, where 75% of teachers are women, only 30% of the leadership are women.

So what can Girl Scouts do about this?

Girl Scouts is developing the leadership capacities girls need "to make the world a better place." Girl Scouting now also needs to address the issue of language, recognizing how it impacts both internal self-talk and external perceptions. The word "try" is a vestige of how women have historically been socialized to talk: don't brag, don't talk about yourself, be quiet, be passive, and certainly don't speak directly. "I will try" conforms to that historical socialization---- at a time when the world desperately needs more women as leaders.

Join with me in a Girl Scout Promise that strengthens a girl's internal self-confidence and projects her confidence externally to the world:

*On my honor, I will serve God and my country,
help people at all times,
and live by the Girl Scout Law.*

We don't need women leaders who will "try". We need women leaders who "will" make the world a better place.

ⁱ Check out the history of the Promise and Law at: <http://blog.girlscoutshcc.org/2014/12/05/history-promise-law/>

ⁱⁱ Change it up: What girls say about redefining leadership. 2008. A report by the Girl Scout Research Institute. Available at: http://www.girlscouts.org/content/dam/girlscouts-gsusa/forms-and-documents/about-girl-scouts/research/change_it_up_executive_summary_english.pdf Pages 17-21 speak directly to self-confidence, and suggests components that should be included in any "leadership development program" aimed at building self-confidence.

ⁱⁱⁱ For free downloadable pdfs of the two phases of this study, go to <http://www.simmons.edu/about-simmons/centers-organizations-and-institutes/cgo/publications/cgo-insight-briefing-notes> and click on Insight #35: "Dreaming Big: What's Gender Got to Do with It? The Impact of Gender Stereotypes on Career Aspirations of Middle Schoolers" by Shapiro, Deyton, Martin, Carter, Grossman and Hammer (October 2012). Phase 1 of this study found that Girl Scout girls rated themselves higher than boys or non-Girl Scout girls in three areas of confidence: confidence as a Leader in Charge, (speaking in front of others, being in charge of projects), confidence as Responsible Leader (getting good grades, organizing and finishing projects), and Team Building Leader (working in teams, resolving conflicts). Phase 2 of this study (Insight #40) looks at girls of color and finds they rate themselves the highest in confidence as Team Building Leader.

^{iv} Since the mid-1960s, scholars have researched the concept of positive and negative self-talk, namely the link between what individuals say to themselves and the resulting attitudes, beliefs, and performance. The body of research includes how self-talk **impacts depression and irrational fears** (see Beck, A. T., Rush, A. J., Shaw, B. F., & Emery G. (1979). *Cognitive therapy of depression*. New York: Guilford Press; on **cognitive strategies to deal with pain, outpatient surgery, and anxiety disorders** (for example, see Treadwell, Kimberly R. H.; Kendall, Philip C.(1996). "Self-talk in youth with anxiety disorders: States of mind, content specificity, and treatment outcome", *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, Vol 64(5), 941-950; on **sports and athletic performance**, (for example, see Hardy, Grommage & Hall (2001). " A Descriptive Study of Athletic Self Talk", *The Sports Psychologist*, Vol 15, 306-318); and **more recently, the speculation that self-talk is an essential component of "self-leadership"** (for example, see Neck & Manz (1992) "Thought self-leadership: The influence of self-talk and mental imagery on performance". *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol.13, 681-699).

^v For an overview of the outcomes of self-talk see: Antonis Hatzigeorgiadis*, Nikos Zourbanos, Sofia Mpoupaki, Yannis Theodorakis (2009). "Mechanisms underlying the self-talk–performance relationship: The effects of motivational self-talk on self-confidence and anxiety", *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* Vol. 10, 186–192; Berenstein, E. (2014) "Self Talk: When Talking to Yourself, the Way You Do It Makes a Difference", *Wall Street Journal*, retrieved from: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304831304579543772121720600>; Starechski, L. (2014). "Why saying is believing-The science of self-talk". Retrieved from: <http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2014/10/07/353292408/why-saying-is-believing-the-science-of-self-talk>

^{vi} Check out these articles on women's lack of confidence: Confidence Gap, Atlantic, 2014m Katty Kay and Claire Shipman; Overcoming the Confidence Gap for women, NY times, retrieved from: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/13/business/dealbook/overcoming-the-confidence-gap-for-women.html?_r=0 ; Women, if you're competent it's time to be confident. Forbes 2015, retrieved from: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/brucekasanoff/2015/03/23/women-if-youre-competent-its-time-to-be-confident/>; Why Women Leaders Need Self-Confidence. Retrieved from: <https://hbr.org/2011/11/women-leaders-need-self-confidence.html>

^{vii} Many studies examine the impact of women's language on their perceived confidence and competence. Check out: "Why you should never say these 3 common words at work: **but, fine and TRY**" (by Jacquelyn Smith, 2015), retrieved from: <http://www.businessinsider.com/common-words-you-should-never-say-at-work-2015-8>; Marlene Price (2012) Well Said! Presentations and Conversations that Get Results", American Management Association; Deborah Tannen's ground breaking book on how men and women are socialized to use language differently *Talking 9 to 5:Men and Women at Work*, reissued 2001,Quill Publishers; "How women undermine themselves with words" is an interview with Tara Mohr, author of book, *Playing Big: Finding your voice, your mission, your message*. Retrieved from: <http://goop.com/how-women-undermine-themselves-with-words/> This article provides an updated list of verbal patterns (such as apologizing, using qualifiers, turning declarative sentences into questions) that make women **appear** weak and unconfident.

^{viii} For statistics on the participation of women in leadership positions, see Center for American Progress. 2014, March 7. The women's leadership gap. Retrieved from: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/report/2014/03/07/85457/fact-sheet-the-womens-leadership-gap/>; Di Mento, M. 2014, April 28. Lack of women in top roles hinders nonprofits, female nonprofit workers say. *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*. Retrieved from <http://philanthropy.com/article/Lack-of-Women-in-Top-Roles/146237/>; Lennon, T. 2013. Benchmarking women's leadership positions in the U.S. Denver, CO: Colorado Women's College, University of Denver. Retrieved from: <http://www.womenscollege.edu/media/documents/BenchmarkingWomensLeadershipintheUS.pdf>

For statistics on the participation of women of color in leadership positions, see Center for American Progress, 2014; Center for American Women and Politics. 2014. Women of color in elective office 2014. Retrieved from: www.cawp.rutgers.edu; Catalyst. 2015. Women CEOs of the S&P 500. New York, NY: Author. Retrieved from: <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/women-ceos-sp-500>



Girl Scouts of the USA
420 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10018-2798

SUPPORT OF PROPOSAL FOR 2017 NATIONAL COUNCIL AGENDA

(Originated by another Council)

Name of Girl Scout Council

City

State

TITLE OF PROPOSAL SUPPORTED

Say Goodbye to Try: Deleting 'try' From the Girl Scout Promise

STATEMENT OF PROPOSAL SUPPORTED (exact wording)

THAT the National Council delete the word "try" in the Girl Scout Promise as follows:

Current wording: On my honor, I will try: to serve God and my country, to help people at all times, and to live by the Girl Scout Law.

Proposed changes: On my honor, I will ~~try: to~~ serve God and my country, ~~to~~ help people at all times, and ~~to~~ live by the Girl Scout Law.

Proposed wording: On my honor, I will serve God and my country, help I people at all times, and live by the Girl Scout Law.

REASONS OF SUPPORTING COUNCIL

Since 1913, Girl Scouts have promised to *try* to accomplish three things. At Convention 2017 we propose updating the Promise where Girl Scouts *will* serve God and their country, help people at all times, and live by the Girl Scout Law. By eliminating this 100-year-old word, we will:

- More fully meet our mission of developing girls of "courage, confidence and character".
- Increase our young girls' confidence by moving them mentally from just "trying" to fully "committing" to accomplishing their aspirations of "making the world a better place".
- Better prepare young girls for addressing the social perception that women are not confident and therefore less capable to take up leadership. This perception hobbles their ability to become leaders and make the contribution they want to make and are capable of making in their organizations and communities.

The Girl Scout Research Institute (GSRI, 2008) found that a girl's self-confidence has the strongest impact on whether she takes up leadership or not. Self-confidence (the belief that if I take action I will achieve what I set out to achieve) is developed by:

- 1- Being exposed to role models ("if I see it I can be it").
- 2- Becoming competent in leadership skills by experimenting, being able to 'fail' in a safe environment, getting supportive feedback, and starting over again.
- 3- Having opportunities to be responsible, lead others, work in teams, and do social good.
- 4- Positively self-talking, encouraging oneself, particularly in times of difficulty or failure.

The Girl Scout movement powerfully addresses the first three sources of confidence. Yet the word "try" in the Promise injects into a girl's mind the belief that "trying" is sufficient, fully committing is unnecessary, and "trying" versus succeeding is all she is capable of. The word "try" is a problem in two ways:

A problem of self-talk: How a girl internally thinks of her capacity to be successful

Research on scholastic, athletic, and leadership performance consistently finds that the more positive your self-talk, the more likely you will succeed at what you are undertaking: self-talk increases your ability to strategize what to do, and then focus, correct, adjust, and persevere through tasks. Including the word "try" in the Promise dilutes the impact of positive self-talk: the word "try" gives permission to not succeed, and implies to the thinker that 'trying' is sufficient.

A problem of perception: How others think of her capacity to be successful

Nationally, society promulgates the belief that women lack self-confidence. One of the foundations for this argument is women's often indirect language. For example, if an employer asks a job candidate "Can you do this job?" a woman would reply, "Yes, I will try"; a male candidate would say "Yes, I can." **Women are socialized to use that less direct language, and the Girl Scout Promise is part of that gendered socialization.** A Girl Scout's use of the word "try" softens her language from "yes" to "maybe", weakens how committed she sounds, and conveys lower confidence in her own ability to be successful. She can't promise she will do anything; she can only promise she will try. As they grow into adults, women's use of 'try' makes them sound weak, unsure and minimally committed. Their passion, competence and commitment disappear.

Signature and Printed Name of chair, or secretary, council board of directors

Date of council board meeting

On or before September 30, 2016, email to: BoardOffice@girlscouts.org

Or mail form to: Office of the National Board of Directors, Girl Scouts of the USA, 420 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10018-2798.

Submission Deadline: September 30, 2016

If additional space is needed, please attach a separate page.