

- You're listening to the HR Mixtape, your podcast with the perfect mix of practical advice, thought-provoking interviews, and stories that just hit different so that work doesn't have to feel, well, like work. Now, your host, Shari Simpson.

- Joining me today is Lisa Sun, the founder and CEO of Gravitas, a company on a mission to catalyze confidence. Lisa spent 11 years at McKinsey & Company, where she advised leading luxury fashion and beauty brands and retailers in the US, Asia, Europe, and Latin America on strategic and operational issues. Lisa, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today.

- Thank you for having me, I'm so excited.

- You know, you are an amazing woman, you have accomplished so much. You recently released a book called "Gravitas," and I absolutely love that you're redefining confidence for women. I was very fortunate I got a little bit of an advanced copy, and, you know, not even into the book during the intro, you have this great line. It's like, "Do any of these resonate with you? If so, the book's for you." And the first one's like, "I wanna show up." "I mean, really show up and not just be in the room." "I want the power to step forward when it's easier to stand still." "I wanna be seen and recognized." Three lines in totally spoke to me. I was very passionate about learning more about what you're doing and this intersection of fashion and self-insurance, influencing, you know, others' personal journey. So I guess, let's stop, and I'd love to hear a little bit about your journey and how you got to this place where you're empowering women.

- Well, you know, I always say our life stories are our leadership stories. So I'll share with you the three parts of my life story to date, and maybe that'll give you insight into where I've developed these learnings. The first part of my story is, I'm the daughter of Taiwanese immigrants. And so when you grow up seeing what it takes to create something from nothing, it's a very powerful way to frame your childhood. My parents came to the US, my mom worked on a hamburger truck, my dad worked on a loading dock, both college-educated, ended up owning restaurants. I worked there every summer. Mongolian Barbecue, 4.95 at lunch, 12.95 at dinner, all you can eat. And so, you know, they own restaurants, they own small businesses, and entrepreneurship. I really think immigrants are very well built for it because they can believe in something before they see it, they envision possibility. And that's how I started my life, is in the company of entrepreneurs. The second part of my journey is, I went to McKinsey & Company where I spent 11 years. That's a long time, thank goodness for my Asian genetics, by the way, 11 years is a long time to be at McKinsey. For those of you who are familiar, most people stay 24 months. And McKinsey really gave me the gifts of client service, that it's my job in life, to help others succeed, and the power of apprenticeship and mentorship. There are very few places that in your

20s and 30s you get to spend time with the world's leading executives and thinkers and solve tough problems in compressed timeframes. And you learn that your best coach is often your toughest one, right, the one that caress enough about you to succeed. And the last part of my story is, I ended up taking a year off. I actually had earned 11 months of paid leave, and I went around the world by myself and thought about what I wanted to do next. My mom convinced me to take my life savings and start my company Gravitas. And really, that year off framed what I wanted to do with the rest of my life, what I really thought my life's work would be, which is founding my own company Gravitas.

- I'm so inspired, and just the idea of traveling around the world by yourself, what an amazing experience that must have been.

- You know, as an adult, we don't really take a moment to hit the pause button very often and sit quietly with our thoughts. And, you know, I try to do that every week now, by the way. I still take one to two hours and turn off my devices. But that year off, all I'd had with me were books. I didn't know if I was gonna have a power source, so I couldn't carry a Kindle. And my Blackberry, I don't know if you miss your Blackberry, but I miss my Blackberry. That thing never died, screen never cracked, always had reception, and really gave myself the space to dream and the permission to just be in this moment. When you're on the treadmill of climbing a ladder, it's very hard to get off that ladder. And so I really needed that year off to figure out what I was gonna do with the rest of my life.

- I love that. You know, your book has this framework around eight strengths to help redefine your confidence. And it has this great little quiz in it where you can kind of evaluate what your super strengths are. And if you had to pick one strength from that list for HR professionals, which would be most critical for them and why?

- Well, you know, first of all, let me just say, the whole reasoning behind these eight strengths is, I believe that we as a society have defined confidence as a performative swagger, it's a behavior, right? If you look up the word confidence in a dictionary, it has nothing to do with swagger. It's an understanding and appreciation of your own abilities. And I truly believe confidence is a choice and a mindset, not a behavior. And so these eight strengths, when we quantitatively went out and developed them, 'cause we did extensive surveys, focus groups, the whole idea of having this quiz was, when was the last time you took a self-affirming inventory of your own strengths? And so I know you've taken the quiz, the idea is, it's paying yourself a compliment and believing it. So the very act of discovering your superpowers in and of itself is confidence boosting. And so for me, it's less about one of the eight, it's more that you need to know which of these eight you naturally embody. So I don't think there's a perfect answer that all HR professionals should have it, it's more

that every HR professional should validate themselves before they go out into the world, right? Our lives are external mirrors of what's happening on the inside. So until we can reset and self-talk in a way that feels really affirming and authentic, it's hard to be confident. But to answer your question, right, and I think that's the thing, is all eight are valid and equally as strong. My hypothesis, though, is when you're in HR, so much of your role is supporting others' growth and being there for people in these important transitions and helping them get to the next levels of leadership. And there are two qualities in there that do do that effectively. One is giving, so that makes sense, you generously support others, you're there for other success, believing, which is all about positive intent, you can see the best in others and situations. In fact, if you get fired, you wanna go find somebody who has believing, or you, yourself, channel believing because it allows you to recover from disappointment. You can say, "Oh, this is in the service of something greater than me." And then I think leading to a certain extent because it helps you advocate, whether it's advocating for yourself or advocating for others, setting direction, inspiring followership. But I will say all eight are awesome, by the way. You know, there's not one that I would pick for HR professionals. It's the very act of just discovering them that I think it's the empowering part of it.

- You know, I couldn't agree more. Obviously that's your theory behind the book. And it's so interesting because we were talking right before we got started. It's like, this isn't just another "inventory," quote-unquote, another "assessment," quote-unquote. Like, it really is an opportunity for you to think about how you show up and kind of leverage that and be excited about that. You know, sometimes we just, you know, I talk about the humble brag sometimes, and like, we get stuck in this, like, "I can't share my story, I can't whatever because it's gonna look..." Stop doing that, like, we have such amazing things to bring to the table, and I really got a lot out of that with your book. I'm curious, as you went through your research and you did your travel and you've done advising to, you know, companies like luxury fashion brands, and you've worked with these great diverse teams across the globe, have you noticed any cultural differences in how confidence is perceived and expressed?

- Yes, and I would say, you know, first of all, I love that you saw this. I never wrote this book with the intention of it being an assessment. I love Myers-Briggs, CliftonStrengths, Enneagram, like, I love all of these leadership diagnostics because I think they give us great insight into who we are and where we wanna grow. We built this purely as a way of reaffirming your self-esteem, right? So this diagnostic is not supposed to expound across all your leadership attributes. It's simply to be a way for you to say, "Wow, look how powerful I am." And when I've had a lot of people take it and come up to me, 'cause you can take it for free, by the way, without buying the book at myconfidencelanguage.com, I've had a lot of people come and

show me the results and say, "Is this real? I have five out of the eight?" I said, "Well, my mom has all eight." She took the quiz, like, "I am all of these." 2% of our dataset actually did have all eight. And they're like, "Wow, I didn't realize that I'm underleveraging my own power," right? There's all these ways in which I can feel better about what I bring to the table, and maybe that gives you that moment, that boost that you need to do something outside of your comfort zone. We did see differences. I don't think anyone's surprised that in American culture, when you say be more confident, it's literally, stand on a stage, speak up, be assertive. That's only two of the qualities of the eight that we talk about, and less than 20% of people have that. Does that mean we all don't deserve to feel confident? No. If you go to Asia, which is where my family lives, self-effacing, high-achieving, so achieving, giving, knowing, believing, these other qualities are more celebrated. In fact, you don't want to be swaggery. And what that means to me is that self-assurance has nothing to do with outward behavior. Self-assurance is really what you feel that you bring to the table and being acknowledged for that. So I do think we need to change the scorecard by which we evaluate confidence.

- How have you used that language to help those who, and I'm using air quotes here, talk about imposter syndrome. I don't know if I'm totally bought into the idea around imposter syndrome in totality, but I do think there are moments that we have where we don't step into our confidence in the way that we know we could, you know? How do you help kind of change that self-belief, especially with that example you just shared, where they came to you and they're like, "Hey, I'm not leveraging these things."

- Yeah, well, first of all, I do think Ruchika Tulshyan and Jody-Ann Burey have abolished the idea of imposter syndrome in their phenomenal Harvard Business Review article. You know, so much of what they wrote about is, imposter syndrome is a construct that really is about systemic bias, right? Why are we twisting ourselves up in pretzels when the system wasn't built by us or for us? And so how much do we have to say, "This is the system, this is not me." I can beat myself as much as possible and feel less than, but do I fundamentally believe in the metrics by which I'm being evaluated, right? The way I can explain that is, McKinsey Women in the Workplace 2021 study said, "Women are the reason why companies made it through the pandemic," the qualities of cooperation, collaboration, compassion. And yet they won't get credit for it because the HR scorecard was created by men who don't necessarily value those emotionally intelligent skills. So women are feeling undervalued, and the imposter syndrome we might feel is actually the system. So their argument is we should abolish it. Now, I can turn the page and say, "All of us have healthy self-doubt," right? The analogy I use is, we're born fully self-confident. Ask any five-year-old what they're the best at in the world, and they'll tell you, "I'm the best at hugs, I'm the best at soccer, I'm the best at everything." And in our adolescence, in my book, I write about there's

six forces that start to work against us. We start to feel setbacks, disappointments, as a result of that, we feel deficit mindset. We start to see our flaws more than our potential, shrinking effect, we underestimate our own abilities vis-a-vis others, right? There's all these things that start to work against us so that as adults, we first have to make a choice towards self-confidence, and then we have to embody a mindset that is rooted in our unique talents and gifts. So in order to overcome healthy self-doubt, and I've helped so many women, men, non-binary, everyone get there, is you first have to decide that you're going to be confident. And that isn't active choice, that's not something that happens by chance. Once you make that decision, then we go through the process of saying, what are your unique talents and strengths? What are things that you bring to the table that no one else does? By the way, there's no way to measure that, okay, that's in your own head. And I liken it to the iceberg model, right, there's only 10% of the iceberg you can see above the water. Those are behaviors, those are actions. 90% is happening below the water, and those are thoughts, values, and feelings we have about ourselves. So until we can really work below the water, and that's where, if you notice, two-thirds of my book is below the waterline, it's that 90% around values, thoughts, and feelings. Only 10% above the water, that's the last third of the book around what do we do about this. And I think that's really a important shift in how we talk about confidence. Hundreds of books about confidence, why do we need another one? It's because we're truly resetting the definition of it.

- You know, I wrote down, "Decide to be confident." And the reason I wrote that down is, I think we forget sometimes how powerful mantras are in using them in our life to achieve the things we wanna achieve. Because the more we say something, the more we practice something, the more it becomes a part of our narrative, you know? There's all those people that talk about, you know, like, instead of saying, "I want to be wealthy," "I am wealthy," right? "I don't wanna fly first class, I do fly first class." "I want to speak," like, changing that narrative, it's so powerful, and I love that you shared that. You know, as you think about how this applies to HR professionals supporting their employees in showing up more confidently, how does that look, how do they translate that personal growth into maybe an employee program?

- You know, I'm not a fan of fake it to make it, right? I'm not a fan of act confident, it's actually be confident. And I think there's so much anxiety when someone tells you, "I need you to be more confident." I really think that is an anxiety-inducing phrase, and so what I wanna do is eliminate the ambiguity around it and create more dimension. So if someone says, "I need to be more confident," we can change the conversation and say, "Which of these eight qualities do you want me to be?" "You need me to be more performing, so I need to be more extroverted and outspoken?" "Or do you need me to be more self-sustaining in that I can handle criticism well because I like myself and I value myself?" We need to stop using the phrase, "Be more

confident." It's, "I need you to be more of one of these eight qualities because this is what the situation asks for." So that's the first thing, is we can start to change that conversation. I think the second thing, and I love that you talk about mantras. You know, I find mantras, I'm a little bit on the fence about them. Sometimes I think they're not helpful because they're performative, right? "Hustle like a boss today." "Be a boss," right? What does that even mean? What I do think is helpful is, and it's the conversation you and I had before we started, right, is, "Wow, my superpower is creating." Or, "My superpower is leading or believing or performing." That is why I can go into this session and feel really good about myself. And so if we make those mantras really authentic to our character and our value, and they help us estimate our own abilities in a situation, that's where they start to work. And that's where I think the power comes from. So I think as HR professionals, if you're able to help someone you're coaching or trying to get to the next level of leadership, think about what are the unique talents you're bringing to this role and how do we overcome the voice of your inner critic, right? Because the other thing I think happens is, we wave away our inner critic, we're like, "Oh, I wouldn't have given you that if I didn't think you were capable." Versus, "Let your inner critic have a voice, go ahead, tell me all your fears." And what you realize in that process is, my inner critic is backwards-looking, pessimistic, harsh, usually wrong. And you let the worst-case scenario have a voice, and then you can say, "What does the megaphone of your superpowers say about the situation? Let's talk about all these unique talents and gifts you bring to the table, and that's why you're able to take on this new challenge. It just really changes the tenor of the conversation.

- I don't know if you've ever watched the show "This Is Us."

- Ah, yes! This is Beth and Randall Pearson, worst-case scenario!

- Yes, that's exactly what I was gonna share. And I was like, every time they did it on the show, I was like, "Man, I gotta start doing that." Because you just get it all out there and then you can kind of see the BS for what it is in the conversation.

- Shari, we're meant to be friends because that's actually, when I do my keynotes, I actually show a picture of Beth and Randall Pearson when I talk about this. And the thing that I say is, you know, first of all, name your inner critic. My inner critic's name is Fred, there's a whole backstory. But once you name it, it takes away its power. It's like Harry Potter, once you can say Voldemort, you're not afraid of it anymore. And then I always say, okay, worst-case scenario, "Fred, tell me what you think the situation is happening." And then I say, "Okay, Lisa, my superpowers, how would you counter that?" When you do this worst case, best case, you realize that the most likely scenario is closer to the best case because you're in control again. And I love that, Beth and Randall Pearson, I literally

put a photo of them up in my keynote speeches, so people identify with that. "Oh yes, okay, our daughter's coming home from college, and quote-unquote, 'has something to tell us.'" And they go, "Worst-case scenario, go!" "She's pregnant and we're gonna have to raise the baby." "She's dropped out of school." "She's moving back in," blah, blah, blah. They unleash their fears, and then they go, "You know? We have a big house." "We have room for her to move back in." "We've raised kids, we could help raise a grand baby, right?" They start to realize that they're stronger than they know 'cause things don't get easier, we just get stronger.

- I could spend the rest of the day talking to you, Lisa, but I do wanna wrap up our conversation. You know, if you are listening to us and you're inspired by what Lisa's doing, you gotta get her book, you gotta spend some time with it. I really enjoyed it, I really enjoyed digging into it. And I've read a lot of books being in the HR space and being an avid reader myself, so I really appreciated that. I have one last question, though, and it's related to being on the HR Mixtape. It's something I'm asking my guests now. What is your favorite music track right now that's giving you inspiration?

- Well, I actually have created a Spotify playlist for my book. And I'm going to just read to you some of the tracks I have because I was thinking about it. The first one is from the "Barbie" movie soundtrack, which is "Make Your Own Kind of Music," and it's a song from Cass Elliot. And I just think the words are really very much about what my book is about, which is, how do we truly figure out our own song? And it doesn't have to be the song that society's defined for us. I absolutely love Beyonce, so "Alien Superstar" is on that list, and "Who Says" by Selena Gomez. There's literally 20 tracks on this playlist, I'll probably publish it on my social media so that people can listen along as they're reading the book. But those are three tracks that have really spoken to me and what this book is about.

- I love it, and we'll make sure to link to that as soon as you post it so that if you're listening, you can go ahead and subscribe to that playlist.

- And I do wanna say, you know, I do hope people pick up the book. I feel like this book should be self-affirming in a way that, I hope, it's what I intended for myself. I wanted to give myself this book when I was in my 20s and I was told I didn't have gravitas, in my 30s when I was fired for the first time, in my 40s when I was gonna give up during the pandemic. This is the book, I think you write the books you most need to read yourself, and so this is the book I wanna give to myself. But also we did create myconfidencelanguage.com. So if you don't buy the book, again, I hope you do, but you can take the quiz for free. And I felt very strongly about offering that for free without any gateway because I want everyone to take a moment during

their day and be able to affirm their own inventory of strengths.

- Love that, Lisa, thank you so much.

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