

Good morning. Thank you, Councillor Curry for having me here today. It is an honour to speak to you all this morning about my personal journey as a woman and what challenges I have faced and overcome over the course of my career.

I thought I would start off by sharing a little about myself. I was born and raised in Ottawa. I grew up in a household where the ceiling was never mentioned. My parents raised me (especially my mother) with a simple, yet powerful conviction:

*I could do anything or be anything I wanted to.*

I was taught that hard work was the only currency that mattered. You show up, you work hard, you learn, you excel and you get rewarded based on that.

I walked into my early career with that armour on, believing the world was a perfect meritocracy. Perhaps a little naive on my part. Because as many of you know, the "real world" often has a different set of blueprints than the ones we were given at home.

After graduating with Honours from Carleton University, I lined-up with the rest of classmates to get one of the very sought after positions in what was then known as the Big 5 Accounting Firms.

I remember the day I received my first offer. I was so incredibly proud. I thought to myself - My parents were right! I worked hard and I got rewarded for that work.

On my first day in Public Accounting I realized that out of 8 new hires, I was the only female. While many might be worried about this, I was not phased. I grew up a tomboy, I played sports and was a walking encyclopedia for NHL statistics. Many of my friends were guys, so – this seemed like a perfect scenario for me.

Very early on however, I hit hurdles I wasn't expecting; invisible barriers that weren't about my ability to audit or build relationships with our clients or my colleagues, but about how I occupied space in a room and how I was perceived.

I would be the first auditor in in the morning and the last one to leave at night. For those of you that aren't familiar, your first couple of years in public accounting are what we call the grind years. You end up burning the candle at both ends so to speak. I was putting in 80-90 hour work weeks. But because I wasn't on the hockey team, I somehow only received about half the recognition as my male coworkers. This was a really tough pill for me to swallow.

But, I put my head down and remembered what my parents always taught me - you get rewarded for working hard. So, I was determined to set myself apart from the rest of my colleagues to try and earn some of that recognition.

In the world of auditing, you have to be precise. You have to ask the uncomfortable questions that no one else wants to ask. And often times you have to be firm and confident in your delivery.

It was at this stage of my career that I quickly learned about what I call the Double-Bind of assertiveness.

Picture this: I'm wrapping-up my first year as an auditor going through my first profession performance review. I had what I thought was a great year. Everyone wanted me on their files, they loved the quality of my work and how efficient I was at getting things done. Not to mention clients were asking for me to be put back on the file for the following year.

In the absence of any constructive criticism, I was expecting a pretty good review. Then I get my written assessment (...) and one big word jumps out at me (...) "aggressive". Not a word you like to see associated with yourself.

I was so shocked. I decided to speak to my male supervisor who was responsible for my assessment. Unfortunately, that discussion didn't get me very far. So, one morning I decided to speak with one of the female managers about it to get some advice on how I could improve, since I was struggling to understand what I had even done wrong.

Without giving it one thought she looked at me and said" Nathalie ...

If a male is firm and direct, he is seen as "decisive" and "confident". Whereas women often, get labelled as aggressive, difficult, or another term that I won't mention here today, but you can probably fill in the blank.

What is 22 year old supposed to do with this information. It completely shattered this image I had of the world and went against everything I was told - you work hard, be a good person and you will get recognized for it. I had to learn to navigate this new universe I found myself in.

I tell you – over the years that followed, I was exhausted. Having to curate my personality just to ensure my professional findings were heard and that I was seen in the same light as my male counterparts.

I spent years navigating that narrow path. Trying to be assertive enough to be respected, but soft enough to be liked. I have to be honest, I still find myself doing this at times.

While the role of Auditor General is often well respected, you generally are not delivering a fun message. Not one people want to hear and definitely not one people want to see made public. And I wouldn't be very good at my role if I was .... dare I say ... submissive or too soft.

Which brings me to the first message I wanted to convey today:

Assertiveness in a woman is not aggression; it is clarity, it is confidence. Woman must stop apologizing for having a backbone. And we must continue to lift and support our fellow female colleagues in doing so, without painting labels.

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I just mentioned that assertiveness is clarity and confidence.

But even with my experience across seven countries and two and half decades of auditing experience, I am not immune to self-doubt.

There is a fantastic book, I am sure many of you have heard of it, called *The Confidence Code* by Katty Kay and Claire Shipman. In this book, these ladies highlight an interesting fact:

They claim that men will apply for a promotion if they meet only 60% of the qualifications, while women often won't apply unless they meet 100%.

While I am an auditor and we like to understand all the facts supporting conclusions, I can't tell you if the statistics these ladies reference are truly reflective of our society. But what I can say is, that I can definitely apply it to myself.

I experienced this first-hand a few years before I took my current role. I was working at the Office of the Auditor General of Canada, and a female colleague of mine (someone I deeply respected) turned to me and said quite matter-of-factly that she saw me becoming the Auditor General one day.

My immediate reaction? I laughed.

I didn't just chuckle; I laughed it off as if it were the most ridiculous, far-fetched idea in the world.

I thought she was being overly generous or perhaps a bit delusional.

In my mind, that role was for someone else - someone "bigger," someone "more ready."

But to my utter surprise, a few years later, that exact role came knocking. The universe sometimes has a funny way of delivering what you laughed at when you weren't ready to believe in yourself.

Fast forward a few years - I was approached by a recruiter to become the Auditor General of Ottawa. And I tell you that "Confidence Code" trap snapped shut on me once again.

When the recruiter reached out to me to gauge my interest in the role my husband asked me (very lovingly and supportively): “Nat, do you think you could do the job”. I turned to my husband and very hesitantly said – “Honey, I don’t know”.

I was trying to picture myself in the role, a young woman, when the preceding Auditors General were men at the age of retirement.

Some weeks went by and I was asked to interview for the role. My husband once again asked me again the very same question: “Nat, are you ready? Do you think you could do that job?”. This time, I decisively said, heck yes, and I think I could do a great good job.

It took me weeks of assessing the situation, learning about the office, reminding myself about my own capabilities, and seeing how my new fresh perspective could bring forth positive changes to the City that I had loved since I was a little girl.

A few months later, I became the first francophone female to hold the role.

Which brings me to the second message I want to convey

Confidence is not perfection. Confidence is not pretending you never fall or never fail. It is knowing with absolute clarity that you can get back up.

That is the kind of confidence women bring into leadership. And it is the confidence we deserve to own, unapologetically.

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But what got me across that finish line wasn't a sudden burst of ego. It was the women in my life. Like that colleague at the Office of the Auditor General of Canada who saw a future for me that I couldn't yet see for myself. My mother, my best friends who encouraged me to put my hat in the ring, regardless of me not fitting the mold for the position that had been created in the past.

I was surrounded by mentors and peers who didn't just tell me I could do it (...) they demanded that I try. They acted as my "external auditors" so to speak, pointing out the assets I had overlooked in my own self-assessment.

We are often told that the corporate ladder is narrow and that women must compete for a seat at the table. I don't believe this to be true. Because in my journey, the most pivotal moments weren't defined by competition, but by support.

When women support women, we don't just share the space; we expand the room, including the seats at the table.

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I've talked about some challenges I've experienced in my career, but I would say one of the biggest roadblocks that I have faced, and believe many women have as well, is that we tend to overthink things a little. We replay conversations long after they've ended.

We try to please everyone in the room. And we carry defeats longer and more personally than we should.

I'm curious if anyone in the room can relate to this. Perhaps maybe with a quick show of hands. Where you've second guess yourself, if you used the wrong words, the wrong tone, if you made the right decision, if you tried to replay events in your head to see if you should have done things differently?

Thank you – I'm glad to see I am not alone in this. That would have been embarrassing 😊.

A legendary WNBA coach once said that the biggest psychological hurdle he sees in his female athletes isn't talent or ability it's "the propensity to dwell on failures and mistakes, and an inability to shut out the outside world." Those patterns directly affect confidence and performance.

And he's right. We may not realize it in the moment, but confidence has a kind of gravitational pull. When someone projects it, we instinctively give it weight, credibility, and respect. Confidence influences how ideas are received, how decisions land, and how leadership is perceived. It shapes rooms before we even speak.

So that brings me to a really important question: How do we find the balance? How do we stay self-aware and reflective, qualities that I believe are so important in a leader, without letting that reflection chip away at our confidence?

What I've learned, often the hard way unfortunately, is that reflection becomes a strength when it looks forward, not inward. It should sharpen us, not shrink us. Because the goal isn't to silence our inner critic but perhaps teach it better timing.

When we treat reflection as a tool rather than a scoreboard, something shifts: our confidence becomes grounded, not fragile. It stops depending on perfection or approval. It becomes rooted in our capacity to adapt, recover, and rise.

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I would like to switch gears a little bit. I'd want to speak about something that has followed women through their careers for decades, definitely mine: the idea that emotional intelligence is sometimes seen as a liability.

Women are often told, sometimes subtly, sometimes bluntly, that we are "too sensitive," "too emotional," or "too empathetic." These traits get dismissed as soft, when in reality they are some of the hardest skills to master. And dare I say even harder to teach.

In my experience, emotional intelligence is not a weakness. It is a strategic asset.

If I think about the environments many of us work in: high pressure, tight deadlines, sensitive issues, political visibility, and, in my case, audits that affect entire communities.

In those environments, emotional intelligence shows up in very practical, yet measurable ways.

- It allows us to identify resistance before it becomes conflict.
- It helps us anticipate how a message will land before we even deliver it.
- It helps us guide a team through uncertainty without losing momentum.
- And it creates an environment where people feel safe telling the truth - especially when the truth is uncomfortable. And in my line of work, this has been invaluable.

Some people think emotional intelligence means being “nice.” It doesn’t.

As Auditor General, I can’t always be nice, because I have to sometimes expose things that may not paint someone in the greatest light.

To me (...) emotional intelligence is the ability to deliver difficult findings without diminishing dignity. It is knowing when to push and when to pause. It is understanding that credibility isn’t just built on facts - it’s built on trust.

I have led files where the stakes were extremely high: our audit of the Convoy Protest, and our work on Lansdowne just to name a few. In those moments, technical skill was obviously essential. But what I believe truly determined our success was our emotional intelligence to:

- manage strong reactions,
- stay grounded under pressure,
- maintain respectful relationships,
- and keep the team focused when emotions were running high.

The hard truth is, many women develop emotional intelligence, not because we have wanted to, but because we’ve had to. Because navigating bias, micro-judgments, and perception has forced us to read rooms more closely than perhaps others have ever needed to.

That skill, the one women are often told to tone down, is the very skill that in my opinion makes workplaces stronger, safer, and more effective.

I guess my third message for today is, when someone implies that empathy or emotional intelligence may not always be a strong trait in a leader, I’d like you to hear a different message:

I’d like you to see it as competitive advantage.

And as leader, we need more of it, not less.

I often think of what I hope for the future. I have a beautiful 17 year old step-daughter. She starts university this fall. She's an intelligent, hardworking, determined and stubborn young lady. She often reminds me of me.

And so I think back to when I was her age and how I felt and what my outlook on the world was at that time and at the beginning of my career. Now I am well aware of how privileged I am. The many women that fought for rights that open the doors I walked through. But if I am truly being honest - I want a better experience for her than what I went through.

## **Closing**

On this International Women's Day, my hope is simple: that we stop asking women to earn confidence by proving themselves flawless and working themselves to the bone, and instead help them build confidence by proving to themselves that they are resilient, capable, and ready (...) even when they doubt it.

Because the truth is: women don't lack competence. We often lack permission> Permission to be imperfect. Permission to grow publicly. Permission to lead in our own authentic voice.

Today, I'd like us all to grant ourselves that permission.

As I look back on my career, the moments that shaped me most weren't the smooth ones. They were the ones where I stumbled, recalibrated, and kept moving, sometimes with shaky hands, but always with intention.

Those moments taught me that confidence isn't a personality trait. It's a practice. And the more we practice it, the more space we make for other women to do the same.

If you have taken anything away from today – great – but I'd like to leave you with 2 calls to action:

*To everyone in this room:*

I challenge you all to commit to being the "support" rather than the "hurdle." Let's stop labeling assertive women and start listening to them. Being aware of the unconscious bias is key to achieving this.

*To the women here today:*

When you feel that hesitation; the one that makes you laugh off a compliment or a career suggestion, don't let it be the final word. Recognize it as a symptom of a system, not a reflection of your own skills and abilities.

My job as Auditor General is to ensure the City of Ottawa is accountable to its people.

That being said - My job as a woman in leadership is to ensure the door I walked through stays propped open for the next woman who, right now, might be laughing off her own potential.

Thank you and Happy International Women's Day.