

Busting myths about gender and confidence

By Alison Maitland

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A cartoon shared on LinkedIn recently caught my eye. Drawn by J.A.K. of *The New Yorker*, it shows a young man and woman conversing over a glass of wine. The woman is looking frustrated as the man smilingly tells her: ‘Let me interrupt your expertise with my confidence.’

Women are often told that, if only they were more assertive and confident, they would be able to grab those leadership roles. It’s the central theme of the bestseller *Lean In* by Facebook’s Sheryl Sandberg, who urges women to be more openly ambitious to get to the top. Innumerable training courses are built on boosting women’s confidence.

There are of course situations where assertiveness is essential, to fend off interruptions, or to stop harassment in its tracks, for example. But two new studies underline why encouraging women to mimic alpha male behaviour is unlikely to propel them into leadership.

The first, a [large-scale study](#) of 7,500 men and women across Australia, looks at confidence and promotion prospects. It finds that having a confident personality gives men an average 3.3 per cent greater chance of promotion, but does little to increase women’s promotion chances.

The study’s author, Leonora Risse of RMIT University in Melbourne, finds that men, on average, have a higher hope of success – a psychological measure of higher confidence – and women a higher fear of failure.

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However, even highly confident women do not benefit from a greater chance of promotion. Comparing men and women at the top of the confidence scale,

she finds that men's chances increase by 6 percentage points (from 8% to 14%), but women's remain unchanged at around 7% to 8%.

'This signal of potential bias in how women are treated in the workplace is consistent with other research showing that women receive a lower benefit – or even suffer backlash – for demonstrating ambition, confidence, assertiveness and leadership qualities,' she says.

'Instead of encouraging women to converge to a stereotypical image of a successful leader, workplaces should focus on the gains that diversity in workers' personalities and attributes brings to their organisation.'

Confidence, so often regarded as an essential attribute of leaders, is not necessarily an indication of competence. In fact, there's now a name for the behaviour depicted in the J.A.K. cartoon – 'mansplaining'. According to Wikipedia, mansplaining means '(of a man) to comment on or explain something to a woman in a condescending, overconfident, and often inaccurate or oversimplified manner'.

Further fascinating light is shed on the confidence issue by a [study](#) to be published in *Human Resource Management*, explaining why it may be easier for men than women to gain influence at work.

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The study by three European business school researchers looks at the link between strong performance and the *appearance* of self-confidence – how people's confidence is perceived. The subjects are highly skilled computer engineers, supervisors and peers, working in project teams in a male-dominated sector.

It finds that successful performance makes both men and women appear self-confident in the eyes of their supervisors, but that women need something extra in order to gain influence in the organisation. This 'extra' is being affable and caring about other people. Men did not need this to gain influence.

If it is only women who are expected to be warm and helpful to others while meeting their performance goals, this puts them at a disadvantage.

‘For men, the take-away would be: “Do not worry about being pro-social, if you perform you, will get ahead anyway”,’ say the researchers. ‘In contrast, for women the message would be: “If you want to be influential and thus be able to progress in the organisation, make sure you perform *and* also invest time in helping others and being a good citizen.’

How should organisations address this double standard? First, they need to be aware of it and then to make it explicit. Is ‘a warm and caring personality’ a desired trait for promotion? If it is, then it should be applied to both women and men in hiring, development and promotion.

If it is not seen as a desired characteristic, this also needs to be explicit. And promotions must be carefully monitored to ensure that women who have lower ‘pro-social’ skills are not penalized compared with their male peers.

Only with such concerted actions to counter bias can we hope that J.A.K.’s cartoon characters will one day be consigned to history.

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