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Feeling Lucky: One Way Women Can Get In Their Own Way

Mary E. Rigdon, PhD
Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs and Professional Development, Indiana University School of Medicine

Many metaphors have been used to describe women’s careers: a glass ceiling, a sticky floor, a labyrinth. While women have comprised more than half of the U.S. undergraduate and graduate student population for many years, progress is not uniform across disciplines. Women remain a minority of doctorate earners in computer science, engineering and math, for example. Further, the U.S. college and university faculty body does not match the gender diversity of the student body. While there are more women at the instructor and assistant professor ranks than ever, there are fewer women faculty at each progressive phase of the faculty career ladder, and very few at the most senior positions. Across degree-granting institutions in the U.S., there are well over twice as many men full professors than women full professors. This pattern is also true in the corporate sector: only a small number of Fortune 500 companies have women in the C-suite. The reasons for gender differences among positions of senior leadership are multifactorial and there is strong evidence that many barriers are institutional. For example, policies that limit flexible work arrangements and poor support for family leave have a disproportionate impact on women. Many women experience a chilly climate and feel less than welcomed in their work units, particularly if there are few role models of success. Further, when men are successful, they frequently attribute their success to internal factors such as innate talent and hard work. Women tend to attribute their success to external factors such as being in the right place at the right time, having help, or luck. There are several consequences to this for women. When women feel as though their success was obtained through luck, they are more likely to underestimate the competence of other women relative to men. Even more striking is the finding that women also underestimate their own competence. Research has shown, for example, that when women and men are asked to predict their scores on a standardized test, men are far more likely to estimate a higher score. They predict and expect success. Women, however, tend to predict lower scores on average than men. They may predict adequate success, but they are more likely to underestimate their actual performance than men are. In a study, men and women who were considering running for a political office, researchers found two major reasons why women were much less likely to run than men: they received less encouragement to do so, and were twice as likely as men to think they were unqualified. In addition, some studies have shown that when men are successful, they frequently attribute their success to internal factors such as their intelligence. However, when they are unsuccessful they are more likely to attribute this to external factors such as their professor or supervisor. Women sometimes do the opposite: blame failures on themselves but success on external factors such as being in the right place at the right time, having help, or luck. There are several consequences to this for women. When women feel as though their success was obtained through luck, they tend to undervalue their worth, be apologetic for their successes, are less likely to negotiate for resources, have lower confidence, and underestimate their personal choices. This can lead to missed opportunities and less feelings of ownership over one’s career and life.
There are enough obstacles to career success without women getting in their own way by inadvertently undermining their own competencies or attributing their success to factors outside of themselves. While many interventions to nudge the gender gap need to be done at the institutional policy level, women invest, at the individual level, become conscious of the impact of unconscious biases on their own experiences of themselves and take deliberate steps to counteract it.

Women’s Assessment of Self
by Kathleen Grove, Director, IUPUI Office for Women

College Students:
Research from Linda J. Sax¹ indicates that there are non-uniform effects of the experience of college on the genders. In general, women students continue to undervalue their academic ability even when performing well and doing better than men and routinely undervalue their math abilities.

Using data from the national longitudinal survey by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at the Higher Education Research & Barrington at the University of California, Los Angeles, Sax showed that women students rate themselves lower in nearly every assessment of academic ability over the 4 decades of the study.

Working Women:
Research by Jil Flett, Kathryn Heath, and Mary Davis Holder based on a review of one thousand "360" performance assessments showed that men in the sample thought women’s primary problem at work was that they exhibited low self-confidence. Four specific “low-confidence behaviors” that women exhibit that were noted by both male and female managers include: being overly modest, not asking, allowing others to take credit for one’s work, and remaining silent.


Of course, women can succeed and do succeed and are proving their competence in all spheres of civic and work life. We are creating the opportunities for our own advancement. We need to take credit for our hard work and enlarge our images of ourselves to match the reality of our achievements.

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Your: "How can you say luck and chance are the same thing? Chance is the first step you take, luck is what comes afterward." Amy Tan

The bravest thing you can do when you are not brave to profess your age and act accordingly." Corra Harris

The authors also cite a 2011 European study² that supports this finding and showed that men were more confident across all age groups, with 79% of males in the study having high or very high levels of self-confidence, compared to 50% of the women surveyed.

Contributing Factors: Many social and cultural forces may contribute to these results. In her article on women and ambition, psychologist Anna Fels describes two requirements for success: mastery and recognition. She describes how women are equally interested in mastery of skills and knowledge but how their expectations for recognition from society are often disappointed.

In addition, she believes that women have “to face powerful cultural imperatives that equate ambition and drive for recognition with a lack of femininity.” Her suggestions for women include identifying and purposefully developing “spheres of recognition” that can provide sustaining affirmation and learning to promote your talents and abilities to people who have the power to advance your work.”³

A number of studies also illustrate how women often face “stereotype threat” especially when trying to succeed in science or math. Stereotype threat occurs when the possibility of social exclusion or social evaluation through a negative stereotype impacts one’s performance. The concept originated in the 1990’s when a study by Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson demonstrated that lower scores resulted when members of a minority group were reminded of a negative stereotype impacting their performance and interest in science, technology, engineering and math.

³http://www.i-l-m.com/downloads/resources/centres_communications-and-marketing/ILM_Ambition_and_Gender_report_0211.pdf

Charleszetta Waddles

You can’t give people pride, but you can provide the kind of understanding that makes people look to their inner strengths and find their own sense of pride.”

Charleszetta Waddles

Sources:
3)Holt² based on a review of one thousand “360” performance assessments showed that men in the sample thought women’s primary problem at work was that they exhibited low self-confidence. Four specific “low-confidence behaviors” that women exhibit that were noted by both male and female managers include: being overly modest, not asking, allowing others to take credit for one’s work, and remaining silent.