



Stanford Business magazine

STANFORD BUSINESS MAGAZINE ONLINE

Women Who Display Masculine Traits — and Know When Not to — Get More Promotions Than Men



In the business world, women who are aggressive, assertive, and confident but who can turn these traits on and off depending on the social circumstances get more promotions than either men or other women, according to a recent study by Olivia O'Neill and Charles O'Reilly.

March 2011

STANFORD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS—In the business world, women who are aggressive, assertive, and confident but who can turn these traits on and off, depending on the social circumstances, get more promotions than either men or other women, according to a recent study coming out of the Stanford Graduate School of Business.

The research suggests that for women to be successful they must simultaneously present themselves as self-confident and dominant while tempering these qualities with displays of communal characteristics. "Women may have a ways to go, but their ability to be flexible in how they behave is leading to some extraordinary results. Some women are starting to go very high in the managerial ranks using this strategic approach," concludes Olivia O'Neill, PhD '05, assistant professor of management at George Mason University who coauthored the article

with Charles O'Reilly, Frank E. Buck Professor of Human Resources Management and Organizational Behavior at the Stanford Graduate School of Business.

Using comprehensive interview, survey, and observational data from 132 business school graduates over 8 years, the researchers found that certain women high in "masculine traits" — defined as aggressiveness, assertiveness, and confidence — were also able to "self-monitor" their behavior. "These women were able to be chameleons, to fit into their environment by assessing social situations and adapting their actions accordingly," explains O'Neill.

Masculine women who were high self-monitors did quite well professionally, according to the study. They received 1.5

Behavior

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"Overcoming the Backlash Effect:
Self-Monitoring and Women's
Promotions," Olivia A. O'Neill and
Charles A. O'Reilly III, *Journal of
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"Careers as Tournaments: The Impact of Sex and Gendered Organizational Culture Preferences on MBAs' Income Attainment," Olivia A. O'Neill and Charles A. O'Reilly, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 2010.
"Backlash Effects for Disconfirming Gender Stereotypes in Organizations," Laurie A. Rudman and Julie E. Phelan, *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 2008.

times more promotions than masculine men, and about two times as many promotions as feminine men, regardless of whether the men were high or low self-monitors. They also received 3 times as many promotions as masculine women who were low self-monitors, affirming that masculine behavior alone does not garner success.

"The interesting thing here is that being able to regulate one's masculine behavior does not simply put women on par with men, it gives them even more of an advantage," notes O'Neill. "This shows that for women who do want success at the managerial level, the paths are there."

The study also showed that self-monitoring masculine women received 1.5 times as many promotions as feminine women, regardless of whether those women were high or low self-monitors. "There is no evidence that 'acting like a lady' does anything except make women more well liked," O'Neill said. "Women with ultra-feminine traits, in fact, are still seen as less competent in traditional managerial settings."

The effect of managing "masculine" traits is significant, say the researchers, since it can have a noticeable effect on success early in women's careers. Even small differences in success rates at the beginning of one's career have large long-term effects. They postulate that as more and more women understand and adopt the behavior pattern they describe, the lower percentages of women currently in the upper managerial ranks could reverse out over time.

The study resolves the conundrum that has plagued women in the business arena: To be successful, you must be assertive and confident, but if you are aggressive as a woman you are sometimes punished for behaving in ways that are contrary to the feminine stereotype. Such negative response to assertive women has been labeled the "backlash effect."

The paper follows upon an earlier study by O'Neill and O'Reilly, using the same data set, in which they determined that learned behavior patterns — not biological sex — may be the greatest determinant of workplace success as measured by salary and promotion.

— Marguerite Rigoglioso

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