

GUEST ESSAY

Women Know Exactly What They're Doing When They Use 'Weak Language'

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By Adam Grant

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"Stop using weak language." If you're a woman, you've probably gotten this advice from a mentor, a coach or a teacher. If you want to be heard, use more forceful language. If you want a raise or a promotion, demand it. As the saying goes, nice girls don't get the corner office.

This advice may be well intentioned, but it's misguided. Disclaimers (I might be wrong, but ...), hedges (maybe, sort of), and tag questions (don't you think?) can be a strategic advantage. So-called weak language is an unappreciated source of strength. Understanding why can explain a lot about the way women acquire power and influence — and how men do, too.

It turns out that women who use weak language when they ask for raises are more likely to get them. In one experiment, experienced managers watched videos of people negotiating for higher pay and weighed in on whether the request should be granted. The participants were more willing to support a salary bump for women — and said they would be more eager to work with them — if the request sounded tentative: "I don't know how typical it is for people at my level to negotiate," they said, following a script, "but I'm hopeful you'll see my skill at negotiating as something important that I bring to the job." By using a disclaimer ("I don't know ...") and a hedge ("I hope ..."), the women reinforced the supervisor's authority and avoided the impression of arrogance. For the men who asked for a raise, however, weak language neither helped nor hurt. No one was fazed if they just came out and demanded more money.

In 29 studies, women in a variety of situations had a tendency to use more "tentative language" than men. But that language doesn't reflect a lack of assertiveness or conviction. Rather, it's a way to convey interpersonal sensitivity — interest in other people's perspectives — and that's why it's powerful.

In the United States and in many cultures, gender stereotypes still hold that men should be dominant and assertive, while women should be kind and caring. When women violate these stereotypes, they often get punished. In a meta-analysis of dozens of studies, when women asserted their ideas, made direct requests and advocated for themselves, they were judged as less hireable. Although they were seen as equally competent, they were liked less than men who engaged in the exact same behaviors.

New evidence reveals that it's not ambition per se that women are being penalized for. In fact, women who are perceived as intelligent and capable, determined and achievement-oriented, independent and self-reliant are seen as *more* promotable to leadership positions.

The problem arises if people perceive them to be forceful, controlling, commanding and outspoken. These are qualities for which men are regularly given a pass, but they put women at risk of being disliked and denied for leadership roles. (Not surprisingly, the backlash is even stronger when a woman is Black). Instead of being judged just on their performance, they are dinged for their personality. *Overbearing. Too abrasive. Sharp elbows.*

A man who issues orders is known as tough and hard-charging. A woman who speaks authoritatively still gets branded as a self-centered shrew. As the cartoonist Judy Horacek put it: "What's the difference between being assertive and being aggressive? Your gender."

Talking tentatively appears to be a strategy that women use to avoid these unjust repercussions.

In a classic experiment, the psychologist Linda Carli had men and women record the same speech two different ways. One version was assertive. The other was tentative, sprinkled through with disclaimers (I'm no expert, but ...), hedges (sort of, kind of), and tag questions (right? wouldn't you say?).

When the speech was given by a man, audiences found the assertive and tentative versions equally persuasive. When the same speech was delivered by a woman, though, style made a big difference. So did the gender of the audience member. Female observers found the woman more persuasive when she spoke assertively. But men were more convinced when she spoke tentatively. They saw her as more likable and trustworthy.

Because men can find female power threatening, women learn that they frequently have more sway if they equivocate a bit. As the organizational behavior expert Alison Fragale observes, we often underestimate "the power of powerless speech."

It's outrageous that women have to tame their tongues to protect fragile male egos, but the likability penalty is still firmly in place. And it's outrageous that it's easier for me to call out these dynamics than it is for women, who get penalized if they dare to point out the same disparities. Instead of punishing women for challenging stereotypes, we should be challenging the stereotypes themselves.

In workplaces, structural changes can help. Performance reviews should focus on substance, not style. In deciding promotions, bosses should consider all those who meet the objective qualifications unless they opt out. When no one has to ask for a promotion, women don't have to risk coming across as too demanding. Those changes are enough to help reduce the gender gap in leadership. But that doesn't erase the unfair reality that every day, when women speak up for themselves and promote their ideas, they face a tax for violating stereotypes.

Gender stereotypes don't hurt only women — they often hold men back too. Economists find that headstrong girls grow up to earn less money at work ... and so do needy and dependent boys. This is true even after accounting for occupation, education and self-esteem. And just as women are liked less if they're seen as arrogant and disagreeable, men are liked less and paid less if they come across as too modest and too agreeable.

The solution to this problem isn't to urge meek men to become arrogant. It's to normalize "weak language" as a strong way to express concern and humility. If we do that, we won't have to keep encouraging women to communicate more forcefully. Instead, we'll finally be able to recognize the difference between assertiveness and aggressiveness.

Assertiveness is advocating for yourself. Aggressiveness is attacking others. Standing up for yourself isn't pushy — it means you're not a pushover. It's not a selfish act but an act of self-preservation.

I hope for a day when we no longer need articles like this. I might be wrong, but it's probably time to stop penalizing women who speak their minds ... don't you think?

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