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Who lies more to get ahead? Men or women?

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In the Women at the Top blog, we dedicate a lot of electronic ink to the reasons for the lack of female representation in upper management and executive positions: a dearth of women role models, too few companies with family-friendly policies, straight-up discrimination – to name just a few. But one reason we've hardly touched on is the healthy male ego and the obstacle that it poses to women trying to get ahead.

According to new research by Ernesto Reuben, assistant professor at Columbia Business School, men are consistently overconfident in their performance, which may account for the gender gap in leadership at companies.

I recently spoke to Reuben about his findings. He says:

“When you apply for a new job or go up for a promotion, a lot of the way you are evaluated depends on your CV and how you talk about yourself. So, recruiters and hiring committees are relying on candidates to reveal their true performance. If you are able to convince others that you're very good, chances are you will get the job. We found that men do this more often and they do it better. They do it better because they deep down believe they're better.”

Reuben and his co-researchers asked MBA students to complete a set of maths problems on which both men and women tend to perform about the same. One year later, the researchers brought back the same students, asking them to recall their previous years' performance.

Most participants overestimated their performance — not a shock, as many studies have documented this tendency. Men, however, consistently rated their past performance about 30 per cent higher than it really was. Women, on the other hand, consistently rated their past performance only about 15 per cent higher.

Next, the researchers asked participants to estimate their performance on a task if chosen to represent a group, and were then divided into groups to complete the same maths problem. Each group had to choose a representative that would compete with the other groups, with a cash prize awarded to the highest-scoring team. It was in the best interests of the group to choose the person who had performed best on the problem sets in the past. But the researchers added an extra incentive: for some (but not all) groups, the representatives got an additional payment. In other words: in certain groups, a person could be chosen as a rep if they lied about their performance, and the group would lose while the leader would gain.

Reuben found that, on average, both men and women lied about their performance. When participants had an incentive to lie, they lied more; and the incidence of lying increased as the monetary award for being chosen as leader increased. But while women kept pace with men on how frequently they lied, women did not exaggerate their performance to the same degree, and it cost them: women were selected a third less often than their abilities would otherwise indicate.

The upshot: the main difference in women not being selected as leaders appears to be attributable to the fact that men inflate their abilities. This kind of gender difference is tricky to reconcile because while it may seem that men's overconfidence is a character flaw, it is, in fact, honest.

Reuben says:

“They honestly believe their performance is 30 per cent better than it really is.”

The lesson for recruiters, he says, is that they should not take male candidates' claims about past performance at face value.

“If they are aware of this issue, they could probe their male candidates to find out what part is truthful and what part is overconfidence ... Or if they have more than one position open, they can compare candidates within the genders: man to man, or woman to woman, because that way there wouldn't be a bias.”

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