

Men's 'honest overconfidence' an advantage

Women less likely to sing their own praises

BY KIM COVERT, POSTMEDIA NEWS APRIL 30, 2012



Ever notice how fish tales - those stories where the size of the catch, and the skill it took to reel it in, grow with every telling - are usually told by men?

Apparently that sort of exaggeration is a gender-specific trait that comes in as handy in the boardroom as it does around the fishing shack.

A study conducted by researchers at several business schools suggests that when it comes to getting ahead at work, men's natural overconfidence in their performance helps them "fake it till they make it," while women are handicapped by the fact that they just don't exaggerate enough.

For the study, which was looking at whether there are forces beyond simple gender discrimination to explain men's greater success in the corporate world, test subjects were told to carry out certain tasks, which they all performed at about the same level. A year later they were asked to recall how well they'd done. A second part of the test involved offering a financial incentive to high-performers - and leadership roles to the person in a group whose past performance was seen as most likely to bring a financial benefit to everyone.

On average, men and women both lied about their performance, and when there was an incentive they both lied more, the study found. But while women lied as often as men, they didn't lie as much, and it cost them. Because men were willing to exaggerate their abilities to a greater degree, what the researchers called an "honest overconfidence," they were chosen more often for leadership positions.

That kind of bias is difficult to overcome, says Ernesto Reuben, an assistant professor of management at the University of Columbia Business School, which participated in the study.

"It almost calls for direct intervention because men's overconfidence is honest," Reuben says. "It's not just a matter of telling men not to lie - because they honestly believe their performance is 30 per cent better than it really is. Similarly, it's not as if you can simply tell women they should inflate their own sense of overconfidence to be on par with that of men."

Reuben suggests recruiters should take male candidates' claims of past performance with a grain of salt - and be careful about a tendency to overlook better female candidates.

Women's reluctance to sing their own praises not only acts as a bit of a selfimposed glass ceiling, but it also has an effect on the way they're paid, says Vickie Milazzo, author of *Wicked Success is Inside Every Woman* (Wiley).

Milazzo says it's time women start acting more like men - particularly when it comes to something like

negotiating salary ahead of a job. She points to a recent New York Times article that said only seven per cent of women negotiate their salaries upfront when entering a new position, compared with 57 per cent of men.

"When I'm hiring, I actually weed out candidates who underprice themselves because I assume they won't perform at the level I expect," says Milazzo. "It makes me view those candidates as commodities - employees who are easy to obtain and easy to replace. You look dispensable, and that's not a quality that is going to help you move up in the ranks of any organization."

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