



TRIPPING  
YOURSELF

UP?

## INTROSPECTION AND A BIT OF CONFIDENCE GO A LONG WAY WHEN IT COMES TO SELF-LIMITING BEHAVIOUR

BY Claudia Padayachy

Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's popular book, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* (Knopf), is a powerful rallying call to women to stand their ground and be better leaders. In the book, Sandberg explains how the "leadership ambition gap" between working men and women is preventing females from succeeding. She also discusses women not asserting themselves at work, being perpetually in conflict with themselves because of their need to please others and their difficulty in establishing their credibility.

Asanda Gcoyi, the CEO of CB Talent and a business coach who specialises in taking high-potential individuals to the next level, offers an example: "If a male manager at a board meeting says something that a female manager of equal rank doesn't agree with, it takes a lot for her to stand up and challenge him. She'd rather take it up with him privately later. She doesn't believe she's earned her role, so feels she should avoid contradicting or upsetting anyone. This totally self-limiting belief frequently stands in the way of the progress of many women in the professional environment."

Gcoyi's advice for overcoming this obstacle requires nothing more than introspection and a bit of confidence. "If you know your value and are sure of your facts, you're perfectly qualified to articulate your opinion and stand your ground. You need to take the time to understand what you are and aren't good at so that you can work on what you lack and learn to fill those gaps. Then you'll feel more confident."

Victoria Brescoll, Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at the Yale School of Management in the USA, found that powerful women who fear a negative response are curtailing how much they speak at work. Her study, entitled *Who*

*Takes the Floor and Why: Gender, Power and Volubility in Organisations*, compares the amount of time men and women in powerful roles express themselves at the office. "When men talk a lot and have power, people reward them either by hiring them, voting for them or giving them more authority and responsibility at work," says Brescoll. "But when women do it, they're seen as domineering and presumptuous. Women perceive this, which is why they temper how much they talk."

In one of Brescoll's experiments, men and women rated a hypothetical female CEO who was more loquacious than other CEOs as significantly less competent and less suitable for leadership than a male CEO who spoke as much. A female CEO who was less garrulous than others was judged equally competent and deserving of leadership as a high-powered male CEO who talked more than others. However, a less talkative CEO was deemed to be as incompetent and unsuitable for leadership as the talkative, high-powered woman.

Interestingly, Brescoll's findings also revealed that only high-powered women adjusted their talking time for fear of being disliked, perceived as "out of line" or controlling, and other forms of backlash.

Struggling to find the right balance between being taciturn and talkative isn't the only thing women need to watch out for: Gcoyi warns that women often subconsciously sabotage their prospects right from the beginning. "I've found that even in a job interview, females are more likely to downplay their experience and expertise. A woman will say: 'I wouldn't say I'm great at this because of [whatever reason].' These disclaimers damage their chances of being hired, as they lead potential employers to believe the women have no confidence. Even if women meet 90% of the requirements, they focus on what they *don't* excel at. Men, on the other hand, tend to do the complete opposite: even if they aren't 100% skilled, they sell themselves harder with confidence."



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## CATCH A WAKE-UP



Willene Sieberhagen, a Chata Romano corporate ambassador and senior image consultant for seven years, pinpoints three common errors women make and how to overcome them

**Verbal and non-verbal communication:** Posture, greeting, voice tone and volume, gestures, handshake and eye contact are also integral parts of your professional image, so constantly check yourself and the way you're coming across. Talk clearly and at an even pace. Moreover, ensure you use language that isn't inappropriate – avoid swearing, addressing colleagues or clients in an overly familiar way or telling off-colour jokes in professional settings.

Above all, keep politics, race and religion completely out of your conversation at all times, unless you know the person you're addressing well enough to refer to their background or beliefs.

**Being overly emotional:** Being angry or rude, whining, complaining, shouting and crying will make people avoid you. Control your feelings and learn to express yourself without breaking down or becoming flustered. If you find your feelings overwhelming you, excuse yourself and go somewhere private until you've regained your composure. Look for solutions to problems, rather than culprits or scapegoats.

**Being overly timid:** Showing a lack of confidence in yourself and your abilities could cost you that next exciting promotion or career opportunity. Women who consistently minimise their accomplishments, constantly apologise and remain silent in meetings or presentations are seriously setting themselves up for failure. Strive for greatness by leveraging your strengths, even while trying to improve your weaknesses. ■

## STEREOTYPES TO AVOID

Avoid becoming one of the following stereotypical career women

**THE STRESSED WIFE OR MOM:** Never bring your personal issues to work with you. Don't have telephonic arguments with your family at the office.

**THE GOSSIP:** One of the fastest ways to failure is by discussing your colleagues and clients at work. No matter how juicy a rumour or outrageous someone's behaviour, avoid commenting on it.

**THE SECRETARY:** This isn't an episode of *Mad Men*, so unless you really are the secretary, don't keep volunteering to be the minute-taker or tea-maker. Consider the subliminal messages you send out when you're always performing these tasks.

**THE MOTHER HEN:** Every time you offer Thando boyfriend advice or give Sue a pep talk about coping with her in-laws, you're overstepping your boundaries. If a colleague specifically asks you for support, suggest you meet somewhere neutral – like a coffee bar – after hours to discuss their issues.

**THE PLEASER:** Women are conditioned from an early age to be nice, share things, sympathise and help others, but these qualities could be holding you back. While there's no need to turn into a witch, you also shouldn't slip into subservience. Learn how to be assertive without being aggressive.



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