



Tooting Your Own Horn: Why Women Leaders Resist Self-Promotion

By Carol Caley

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WHEN WOMEN LEADERS GET TOGETHER, THE ELEPHANTS LEAVE THE ROOM, and we open up to talk about the myths and realities we face as women in the workplace. We give each other critical support on our often uphill journey to achieve positions of influence in business, consequential civic engagement, and purposeful and significant roles in the community. Together we find ways to identify and break down myths by sharing our stories.

We also share stories about what men do better than us. Unlike male leaders, women leaders tend to think first not about what they already do well, but what they should do differently to move the needle of their success. Here's the thing: men are better at self-promotion.

That was a key presentation point at a seminar I had the pleasure of attending a few weeks ago, held by a women's leadership organization for which I direct marketing and communications.

With executive business coach and educator [Barbara Kaufman, Ph.D.](#) presenting, we learned that executive women believe they can get ahead, win praise and advancement—particularly that big plum job—by simply being smart and doing their current job well. OK, really, really well.

Kaufman has been a trusted advisor to academic and nonprofit leaders for a quarter century. Her

specialty is leadership effectiveness. So we took it from her: women are terrible at tooting their own horn, whereas men are great at it.

I wanted to know why.

Getting an A+

In all her years of working with leaders of both genders, Kaufman has seen that working women aren't their own best advocates. Too focused on getting tasks done, and getting work in on time, they aim for perfection. They're too busy trying to get an A+, zeroed in on the latest task or initiative rather than thinking long-range about their next role.

So what's holding us back? Women don't manage their own careers actively—they don't take the long view, with concrete goals in mind, and consequently tend to miss opportunities that are right at hand. A woman with her mind on the future listens to informal conversations—whether it's at a cocktail party, a conference or a meeting, and makes connections that will lead to her next move. She'll develop more discipline about documenting her achievements, gain a deeper understanding of her strengths and her development needs, and ask for feedback. Said Kaufman, “It took me many years to realize how to seize these kinds of opportunities. Let's say I moderated a panel, and someone came up to me afterward to say what a great job I did. I used to just thank them. Now I also ask, what in particular resonated for you? Don't miss the chance to get feedback on what your strengths are.”

Why Rewards Don't Come from Being Talented and Working Hard

The idea that being smart as a whip and a good worker to boot will win you recognition from others and advancement up the ladder persists among women, but it's a myth, no matter how unfair that seems. “Why would we want to leave our career aspirations and career trajectory to others? Men don't,” said Kaufman. “Don't wait until someone taps you on the shoulder, you've got to be active about building your strategic relationships.” For example, men use the informal time before meetings to build and reinforce relationships, whereas women tend to appear at the last minute, hurrying in from some important task that just had to be done. “Showing up, and really being self-aware, not only of your current role, but of future possible roles, is something most women don't do particularly well. Men have this down pat.”

Owning your Success: Self-Confidence, Bragging and Backlash

According to some experts, it's women's lack of self-confidence that leads to their reluctance to self-promote. Social norms against bragging also play a role. Clance and Imes have pointed to

the prevalence of the [impostor syndrome in high-achieving women](#), whereas men own their success, seeing it as the result of their inherent talent, while women, not wanting to brag, point to luck or effort.

[A study by Corinne A. Moss-Racusin and Laurie A. Rudman](#) confirms that women who self-promote are viewed as violating female gender stereotypes, and consequently experience social and economic backlash, even though self-promotion is a necessary component of their professional success. They also found that merely the *fear* of backlash—the social and economic penalties for improper behavior—inhibits women’s ability to self-promote. However, self-promoting men and peer-promoting women experienced no such backlash.

So it’s not surprising that a woman who lacks self-confidence or thinks she might be criticized tends to hold back.

Kaufman has advised many women who want to move up, but hesitate when they get their big chance. These women frequently say they’re not quite ready—they need one more win, one more big initiative, need to understand their current role a little more deeply, or think they need another year in the role. She’s heard a lot of excuses, but none like this from her male clients. “This is how opportunities can slip away. Women don’t leap, they don’t lean in. They might think they’ll be seen as too aggressive if they toot their own horn,” she said. Women should reach out to volunteer for special assignments, committees and taskforces as a way to gain broader visibility. They shouldn’t wait until they think they’re completely prepared for the next role, and should guard against getting pigeonholed in a certain role. “You have to be thinking about this deeply all the time,” she said. “Make people aware of the skillsets you have.”

Promote Your Potential

Women tend to think they need *all* the skills for a future role before they begin to plan their next move. What they fail to understand is that once they’ve found their voice and started to engage, they should self-promote based not only on what they currently know, but on their potential.

According to research by [Barbara Annis](#) and Associates, women who have already achieved positions of leadership in their organizations still reported a high level of difficulty advocating for themselves.

Women often hesitate to talk about their accomplishments, but when they do, they mostly talk about their past successes, not their future potential. A woman needs to understand her value proposition—her unique way of delivering work that contributes to the success of the

organization—and learn to express it well and project it into the future. If you can articulate that vision, you’ve built the foundation of authentic self-promotion.

Negotiating: Practice Asking for what you Want

Men tend to feel entitled to advance, and to increase their compensation, whereas women feel awkward about it. Companies and hiring managers know this: Men will negotiate their salaries, but women often don’t.

Kaufman has too often seen a female client accept a too-low salary offer because she simply didn’t ask for what she wanted. “A CEO told one of my women clients, ‘I’m going to pay you less because you’ve never been in a role like this before.’ I don’t think he would have said that to a man. My client had done some research on salary and had a number in her head, but she was offered significantly less, and she accepted without trying to negotiate. She lowered what she thought she was worth, just to get the position. She regrets it now.” Learning to self-promote can have far-reaching consequences. Knowing your worth and advocating for yourself at the critical moment—that is, right before you’re hired—could make all the difference in your career trajectory.

Six Tips for Tooting your Own Horn

Kaufman laid out these strategies for effective self-promotion:

- **BUILD YOURSELF A PERSONAL ADVISORY BOARD.** If you’re weak in, say, finance or operations, find someone you think is really superb in that field. Ask them for advice, shadowing or mentorship.
- **ATTEND CONFERENCES IN AREAS WHERE YOU ARE WEAK,** not in areas in your own specialty. Why? People tend to go to conferences in their own discipline, and you already have those connections. Attend something on, say, innovation. It could pay off in both content and networking.
- **GET ACTIVELY ENGAGED IN MANAGING YOUR CAREER.** Don’t wait until you’re fed up or overdue for a promotion. Do at least two things every week to pursue your career ambition. Think of strengthening relationships as building currency, so people really get to know you.
- **TALK TO A SEARCH FIRM COLLEAGUE** about a role you want. Ask what skills and background they would write into that job description. They’ll think of you when an opportunity comes up.

- **ASK FOR A SPECIAL ASSIGNMENT** rather than waiting to be asked. Volunteer for a panel or task force looking into strategic issues. If you're on that committee, making a contribution, you will be noticed.
- **TAKE ON A ROLE BEFORE YOU REALLY THINK YOU'RE READY.** Even effective women leaders tend to over-prepare, over-think. You don't have to be the perfect leader, good at everything and possessing every skillset. Remember that mid-management roles require workers to deliver on a task level. The more senior the position, the more generalist the role is. You won't be an expert in everything you're responsible for overseeing, so you're going to have to delegate. Draw on others for their complementary strengths.

Claiming Your New Role

Maybe it's not a direct route, but a woman who promotes herself with careful thought and purposeful action will go far along the road to her next career. The strategies are relatively simple: Find your voice. Show up. Be willing to take on a new role before you think you're fully prepared, rather than feeling like an impostor. Practice informal networking over time. Really engage in your own career development, and not just when you really have to make a move. These are the strategies that serve men well. When women tap into them, doors will open for them too.

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