

Women Face Backlash for Speaking Up at Work

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From the floor of the US Senate to auditions for orchestras, researchers have found that men are often seen as more competent and powerful for talking, while women are more harshly criticized, more frequently interrupted, and judged as less competent for the same behavior.

“Either she’s barely heard or she’s judged as too aggressive. When a man says virtually the same thing, heads nod in appreciation for his fine idea,” write psychological scientist Adam Grant and Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg in a recent *New York Times* [op-ed](#). “As a result, women often decide that saying less is more.”

In a study he authored, Grant describes how speaking up about ideas for improvements at work—also known as “voice”—can be a risky undertaking for women.

“Despite its potential contributions to organizations, voice is a risky endeavor for employees, as it challenges the status quo and often threatens managers. Numerous studies have shown that many employees perceive managers as discouraging, penalizing, or punishing voice,” Grant writes in the *Academy of Management Journal*.

Grant surveyed 100 employees at a health care company and assessed how frequently they spoke up to offer constructive ideas and suggestions for the office during small group sessions. He found that male and female employees didn’t get equal credit for coming up with potentially valuable ways to improve the company.

“When male employees contributed ideas that brought in new revenue, they got significantly higher performance evaluations. But female employees who spoke up with equally valuable ideas did not improve their managers’ perception of their performance,” Grant describes in the *New York Times*. “Also, the more the men spoke up, the more helpful their managers believed them to be. But when

women spoke up more, there was no increase in their perceived helpfulness.”

And a study from psychological scientist Victoria L. Brescoll of Yale University suggests that even when women occupy positions of power they’re likely to face a backlash in the workplace for speaking.

“Powerful women are in fact correct in assuming that they will incur backlash as a result of talking more than others—an effect that is observed among both male and female perceivers,” Brescoll writes in the journal *Administrative Science Quarterly*.

In one of Brescoll’s studies, a sample of 156 online volunteers read a short biography of a CEO who was introduced as either female (Jennifer Morgan) or male (John Morgan). The only other difference between the biographies was that in one condition the CEO was described as speaking more than average while in the other they were described as speaking less than average.

After reading one of the potential biographies, the volunteers rated the CEO on leadership suitability, competence, knowledge, and effectiveness using 7-point scales.

The results revealed that, for female CEOs, talking resulted in a very real penalty. When female CEOs spoke often, their leadership ratings took a significant dive compared to when they were described as quiet. In contrast, male CEOs received a boost in ratings for being talkative rather than quiet. A further comparison showed that men were seen as better leaders than women despite having the exact same description for how frequently they spoke.

“These results suggest that high-power women are in fact justified in their concern that they will experience backlash from being highly voluble,” Brescoll writes. “Results showed that a female CEO who talked disproportionately longer than others in an organizational setting was rated as significantly less competent and less suitable for leadership than a male CEO who talked for an equivalent amount of time.”

Grant and Sandberg hope that growing numbers of women in leadership positions will help diminish bias against women speaking: “The long-term solution to the double bind of speaking while female is to increase the number of women in leadership roles,” they write. “As more women enter the upper echelons of organizations, people become more accustomed to women’s contributing and leading.”

Reference

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