

Getting selected and elected

Women's challenges and strategies for success for women.

Women aspiring to political office face a significant barrier to success.

Well perhaps they face many, but I'm not talking about balancing family responsibilities, childcare, elderly care or domestic responsibilities.

The big issue is the L word, the Likeability factor.

To be selected or elected you have to be likeable. That much is obvious. As one senior political figure put it, "You've got to be the sort of person they want to go to the pub with after a day campaigning." You could argue that selecting for, or electing to, public office (whether that is as an MP, a councillor or any other public office) is not a popularity contest. We're not, after all, talking about the homecoming queen! You could argue that actually it's the intellect, knowledge, skills and experience that qualify you for the job, that are more important than likeability but sadly, that's not true.

Why you need to be liked

What all good salespeople know is that people buy on emotion and justify on reason. That is true of "buying" a person as well as a product. This sales adage may have initially come from folk wisdom and sales intuition but more recently it has been validated by research into biology and the structure of the human brain. Human's actions are largely controlled by our limbic system, our mammal brain which is our basic survival mechanism. We instinctively decide whether we "like" someone. That encompasses do we trust them. Do we feel safe with them? If we don't "like" someone, essentially, we feel a sense of distrust or threat from them and subconsciously our brains are making survival decisions - do we need to deploy a fight, flight or freeze response?

Clearly in the modern world just disliking or distrusting someone does not represent a threat to our survival, but our brains (which essentially haven't evolved that much since Palaeolithic times) interpret it as a threat. Once our limbic brain has made this subconscious judgement, our neo- cortex or human brain (which is the conscious, rational, logical part of the brain) then seeks and finds the factual data and evidence to support the emotional response. The brain has a filtering system. It has to. Every minute of every day there are literally thousands of stimuli we could pay attention to, from the person we're speaking to, to the noise of the traffic outside, the colour of the door mat, the paint on the walls, the expression of the person across the table. The brain needs to know what to focus on as it can't process all the stimuli and it is the limbic system, (and a



particular part of it called the reticular activating system) the survival mechanism that tells the brain where to focus. If we feel that someone is likeable, our rationale brain looks for evidence to support that, we notice only the good things about someone, if we don't then we notice only the negative things. There are more than enough indicators and stimuli about any one person for people to look for and find, evidence to support either a likeable or not likeable point of view.

So, Likeability is the driving factor in most people's decision-making process. What does this have to do with women? Surely women are as likeable as men when it comes to selection / election? The harsh reality is that often, this is not true.

Women and Likeability

When women are in an interview, a selection meeting or hustings environment they of course are selling themselves and outlining their achievements and their fitness for the role they are seeking. Sometimes women feel they need to be better than male counterparts to be selected so they heavily emphasise their skills, their experience, powerful jobs they've done and roles of authority and status that they have held.

The data however clearly shows that success, strength and likeability do not go together for women. You can be liked, or you can be respected, but not both. Men can do both, but it's hard, if not impossible, for women. Why is this?



It's caused by something called prescriptive bias. It is how we expect people to behave. Societal and cultural expectations of men are that they are strong, assertive, competitive and determined. These are also traits that are traditionally correlated with leadership and management. Women are culturally expected to be warm, nurturing, collaborative and gentle. So, when a woman is assertive, strong or competitive it contravenes people's expectations and offends deeply ingrained societal paradigms. It feels un-natural and therefore at a sub-conscious level, is rejected. End result? People then judge the women as not likeable. Interestingly, it can often be other women that are most subconsciously offended by this variance from the norm that they themselves have lived by. That is what prompted Madeline Albright (former US Secretary of State) to note, "There is a special place in Hell for women who don't help other women". These norms maybe unhelpful and anachronist but they are deeply ingrained in millennia old culture. Sheryl Sandberg in her book "Lean In" cites an experiment conducted at Columbia Business School and New York University by professors Frank Flynn and Cameron Anderson, respectively. They selected the résumé of a real-life female entrepreneur, who was quite successful and noted for her extroverted personality. The woman's real name was Heidi Rosen, so Heidi was placed on one set of identical résumés, and a man's name, Howard, on another. Half of a group of business school students read one résumé, and half the other.

The result was remarkable. The students rated Heidi and Howard as equally competent. Howard was judged to be likeable and a good colleague. Heidi, however, was seen as aggressive, selfish and not someone who would be a team player, and who they'd like to work with. This demonstrated the inherent bias that people carry within about typical gender roles and behaviours, and how men and women are judged by different rules, even when they are equally competent.

What this means to female candidates is a double bind, a catch 22 situation where the harder they work to articulate and project the leadership qualities expected of the holders of political office, the less likeable they can become.

So, what to do?

How to deal with the Likeability Bias

One answer lies in increasing awareness of this form of unconscious bias with the people making the selections and with electorates. That however is a societal and macro level issue, at the very least organisational in scope. Political parties for example would do well to educate people involved in their selection processes to avoid this Likeability Bias.

But for women seeking office today, what can the individual do to deal with this issue and give herself a better chance of overcoming it?

Three main strategies

1. Strike a balance
2. Call it out
3. Make it a strength

The first step is of course to be aware of the challenges that the Likeability Bias presents. Awareness in itself enables you to start thinking about how you successfully navigate the challenge.

How to deal with the Likeability Bias - Finding a balance

While women's natural tendencies can cause many women to not want to brag about what they've accomplished, when it comes to interviews and selections, they know they have to talk about themselves and their achievements. Women sometimes go in hard, and say a lot about their knowledge, credentials and experience. I've heard women make selection speeches that make it sound like they were so amazing that they practically solved world hunger before breakfast! What women perhaps have failed to realise is that by doing this, because of the prescriptive bias, they can make themselves less likeable and therefore less likely to be successful.

The negative Likeability effect can also be compounded as when strongly stating our case, women push themselves out of their comfort zones and can end up coming across as forced, unnatural and therefore "pushy" in articulating what they have achieved.

What many successful senior women in business do (often subconsciously), to overcome this Likeability double bind, is to work really hard to offset any negative judgement. For example, a man can walk past his PA's desk, drop some papers on it and say simply, "I need this report for tomorrow", and get away with it without much comment, a woman who did the same would undoubtedly attract a hail of negative epithets. Instead, what women tend to do, is almost overcompensate being nice in order to offset any accusations of being aggressive or unfeminine. So, a woman would stop by her PA's desk, ask about her weekend and then about her kids and 10 minutes later might get around to asking if she could, possibly manage to turn this report around in time for an important meeting tomorrow? Please? Whilst time consuming, this is an effective strategy for senior women, however how do you replicate that in an interview/ selection meeting environment where you have perhaps a 3-minute speech and a brief question and answer session to make your impression?

Maybe some of the answer here is to not have to rely on the formal selection process alone. Wherever possible, it's important to have done your research and spent time networking ahead of an interview / hustings situation. That will give you time for the charm offensive, to enable you to come across as strong and assertive without being called aggressive or pushy!

Whether you have time and access to do a good job of the initial engagement, in an actual speech, the carefully crafted balance women need to find is to say enough about their background to ensure people know that you are credible and successful, but be wary of saying too much about your achievements. It is a question of walking a tightrope, but awareness is key. At least knowing there is a tightrope, you are better equipped to walk it!

How to deal with the Likeability Bias - Call it out

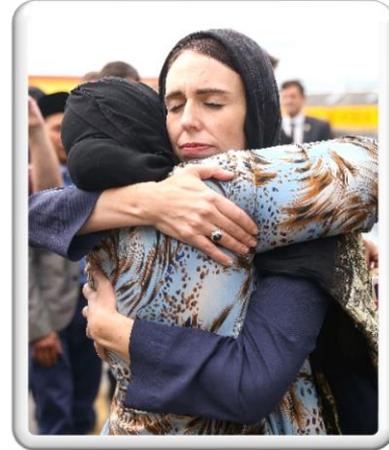
This is an approach that advocates naming the elephant in the room and talking about it! The problem is the elephant is not always obvious to many in the room. Many electors and selectors will not be aware of their own prescriptive bias. They will be unaware of the Likeability double bind. When they find the female candidate that they are considering to be not likeable and not as good, it'll be caused by their limbic system's sub conscious, emotional reaction to the dissonance between societal paradigms and what they are seeing in the candidate. That limbic, emotional response will be seamlessly followed up by their neo-cortex which will find plenty of rational supporting evidence to validate their feeling and assure them, that theirs is a perfectly logical and evidence-based decision. Raising their awareness of this needs to be done carefully, if it's to have the desired positive effect. A head on challenge would risk seeming aggressive, pushy and even less likeable. Thankfully there is clear advice on how to do this from no less a source than the ancient Greeks. It's called refutation.

Part of Greek rhetoric involved proactive refutation of the other persons argument before they make it. The technique is to refute their point of view early in the statement of your argument so that you almost take the steam out of the issue. What you do is to clearly and openly outline the issue or objection you face. You bring out into the open what people may be thinking (consciously or even sub consciously), which then enables you to offer the counter argument. What this might sound like is, "I've done XYZ in my career and achieved ABC. Now some people might think that makes me driven, aggressive, and uncaring, which of course is not what we expect women to be, I'm sure however that you are more sophisticated than that, you do not buy into those anachronistic stereotypes of women. Yes, I work hard and yes, I compete to win, but that makes me someone who strives constantly for the good of my constituents / community and that's what I would do for you if elected / selected."

How to deal with the Likeability Bias - Make female characteristics a strength

Let's face it, the vast majority of MPs are men (as are the leaders of FTSE 100 companies), so perhaps not surprising that the cultural and social paradigms are still strong and, in that context, that male qualities and leadership qualities are seen as synonymous. Traditionally female characteristics of compassion, caring, collaboration and empathy, can be seen as lovely, but not synonymous with leadership.

One approach is making electors and selectors think about and question their underlying assumptions about “What makes a good MP/ representative/ councillor?” Help them think about what models of leadership they really want and what is most effective in the 21st century. In the tragic shooting incident in New Zealand (where a gunman killed 50+ worshippers at a mosque), the female Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Arden, demonstrated that leadership and being a politician can look different from the traditional male orientated paradigms. She took strong and assertive action in rapidly driving through much tougher gun controls and committing Government resources and money to support the bereaved families. She also showed female traits of gentleness and compassion in how she hugged and comforted the survivors. Given the dramatic circumstance, the whole world noticed this and applauded this model of leadership. No one suggested that she was weak for showing active empathy or that she was unfeminine for taking assertive action on gun law change.



You can emphasise traditional feminine strengths and demonstrate how they will be of benefit to the constituency. For example, you could emphasise how much you care about your constituents (before talking about how you would fight for them), talk about how you would seek to collaborate and build consensus (balanced with standing up for what you think to be right). So, be yourself and bring that great female mix of skills to the party. Bring that blend of compassion, empathy, nurture and care with strength, assertiveness and drive.

In some respects, it seems bizarre that 100 years on from women getting the vote we still don't have a gender balanced parliament or councils but when you look at the barrier that the Likeability Bias creates (alongside many other more logistical concerns) you begin to understand why. If the progress made on gender parity continues at the current rate it'll be about another 50 years until it is achieved. A massive step forward will be taken if more women are prepared and skilled to be “armed and dangerous” in dealing with the Likeability Bias.

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