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Digital Article / Gender

## How Women in Leadership Can Shape How Others See Them

Strategies to subvert, counter, or sidestep assumptions and biases that may pose barriers to advancement. *by Deepa Purushothaman and Colleen Ammerman*

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**Impression management is a critical part of** every leader’s job. People’s perceptions of leaders directly impact their reputation, credibility, and status, which in turn influence their opportunities, assignments, latitude, and ultimately their career trajectory. For leaders who don’t look or act like our mental model of a leader—which historically has meant white, heterosexual, male, nondisabled, and from a

socioeconomically advantaged background—the work of perception management is even more demanding, because core aspects of their identity are seen as divergent from, or even antithetical to, the qualities of an archetypal leader.

This means that, on top of their day-to-day responsibilities, women in leadership can find themselves battling stereotypes that are emotionally charged and harder to shake once activated in the minds of their colleagues.

Women in power face a well-documented lose-lose scenario where they're either seen as competent but cold or likable but not very effective. Layer on top of this racialized tropes such as "Black women are angry" or "Asian women are meek," as well as double-binds against caregivers, and managing perceptions can feel like a tightrope walk. To navigate this tricky terrain, women leaders may either overcompensate or over-accommodate. For example, a woman leader may try to prove she's just as tough and gruff as the men around her, or alternatively may hold back for fear she'll be seen as aggressive or unlikable. Both extremes tend to leave these leaders feeling reactive, exhausted, and inauthentic, which does nothing to enhance their credibility and connection with their teams.

What if, instead of waging an unwinnable war against biases and expectations about who they are, women leaders could take control of their narratives and redirect the way they're seen? To map out a practical approach to effective impression management, we analyzed interviews we conducted with hundreds of professional women for our books, identifying common strategies they use to craft, deliver, and embrace narratives that turn potential obstacles into career advantages and long-term success.

Most leaders we spoke with want to be seen as credible, relatable, and capable, while also staying true to their experiences and the knowledge that comes from that background. Harvard Business School Professor Lakshmi Ramarajan, who studies personal and professional identity, told us that leaders often find long-term success in their company and industry when “they leverage their personal strengths and the complexity of their identities, which helps them build trust across their organization.” Leaders have to connect with broad constituencies, not just with the people who appreciate the hurdles they face and want to see them succeed.

Finding ways to take greater control of (and wield more influence over) their careers feels especially urgent for the women we’ve spoken with recently. Many have described heightened anxiety and waning trust as their companies continue to reverse remote work policies and pause, pivot, or even end programs and investments focused on women’s advancement. These women are worried the challenges they face in the workplace will become more pronounced as a result of economic uncertainty, evolving business priorities, and shifting political winds. Now more than ever, women leaders need deliberate, reliable tactics to subvert, counter, or sidestep assumptions and biases that may pose barriers to their advancement. The approaches we outline demonstrate that it’s possible to own your story and shape how you’re seen, even when the odds seem stacked against you.

### **Craft a Counternarrative**

Early in her career, Ashley\*, an Australian financial services leader, received two pieces of devastating feedback. First, she was told she lacked the “kill or be killed” fighter instincts necessary to advance because of her quiet and reserved demeanor; then she was told her liberal arts degree made colleagues question her “quantitative chops.” Ashley was initially taken aback by the feedback, wondering what she

had done wrong in how she showed up at work and presented herself to colleagues, since she prided herself on being “assertive and analytical” —the very traits she was criticized for lacking.

After the initial overwhelm subsided, Ashley decided she wanted to take control of how she was being perceived. For the next several months, Ashley went on a campaign to get people to see her as she saw herself. She started reminding her leaders about her statistics minor and used more forceful wording to describe herself in self-assessments and checkpoint reviews. She volunteered to lead the modeling of a complex financial forecast—a high-stakes, sink-or-swim project—and pulled it off.

Ashley also recognized that women’s self-advocacy wasn’t always received as positively as men’s in her company culture (he’s confident and compelling, she’s arrogant and grating), so she asked trusted mentors and sponsors to reiterate her messaging. This savvy move helped her evade backlash and put even more weight behind her counternarrative.

Crucially, Ashley didn’t just signal her strengths—she did so in ways that resonated with her leaders. As a result, she was able to reframe how others in her company saw her. She didn’t try to become someone she wasn’t. Instead she focused on qualities that she knew were valued—and that she herself valued—and that she could demonstrate excellence at. This congruence between her personal values, her firm’s needs, and her sense of how she wanted to show up as a leader allowed Ashley to cultivate a leadership identity that was both authentic and strategic.

Gender scholars have pointed out that image management disconnected from a larger purpose can cause leaders to overfocus on recognition and approval and actually undermine their reputations.

Ashley had a clear sense of purpose, a key aspect of which was succeeding or failing on her real merits and performance, not because her colleagues weren't seeing her full set of capabilities. That's why, after initially asking herself whether she should simply exit and go work at a place where she didn't have to do so much impression management, she decided to stay and fulfill her lifelong dream of working in Australian high finance. By taking steps to highlight her grit and relentlessness and shaping how her colleagues saw these characteristics in her—all while ensuring they couldn't ignore her technical skills—she garnered the support she needed to pursue those aims.

### **Use Positive Association to Shift Perceptions**

Anna\*, who climbed the ranks at a large advisory firm, mounted a campaign to change perceptions about her career intentions. Anna had thought the motherhood penalty, where women with children are assumed to be less competent and committed than others, especially men, was a “relic of the past,” and she hadn't expected it to show up in such pronounced ways in her own career.

She was passed over for an exciting role in a new city, eventually hearing she was never really considered a viable candidate because leadership presumed she wouldn't want to relocate due to her family. She decided she wanted to take more control of her future and would strategically act to correct assumptions about her preferences and desires that were rooted in biased preconceptions. Strategically, Anna was careful and intentional in how she went about resetting the assumptions that held her back, knowing her company culture tended to penalize people who openly questioned feedback or decisions.

For the next year, Anna constantly raised her hand and asked for new assignments, always being flexible and forward-looking, always

expressing her enthusiasm for new challenges. Although she didn't know it, Anna was deftly deploying positive arousal, a psychological concept referring to the way pleasurable emotions like excitement, joy, and enthusiasm feel energizing and motivating. Anna made the case for readiness in such a way that her leadership experienced her as upbeat and engaged; indeed, they started calling her a "go-getter" and describing her as "eager and ready for any challenge." Anna's approach made the case for her readiness while also engendering a sense of warmth and increased trust among the people whose perceptions mattered most.

In less than two years, Anna was offered a role similar to the one she had originally been passed over for. It's true that Anna would have been justified in naming bias as a likely reason behind her being overlooked, or in pointing out gender disparities in the distribution of key assignments. At times, that may be the most effective response, but sometimes taking a different tack can open more career possibilities. Relying on positivity to implicitly counter stereotypes and keeping conversations future-focused, rather than taking up a defensive position or explaining why the bias is wrong, can offer a way out of a lose-lose dynamic. The choice doesn't have to be between accepting unfairness or calling it out only to be branded as difficult. Instead, redirecting perceptions can allow you to craft a new dynamic, and this kind of approach can be especially powerful in cultures that resist self-reflection or punish people for raising issues.

### **Turn Feedback into Power**

Lisa Sun, CEO of Gravitas, was a first-year consultant when she received this feedback in her year-end review: "Lisa comes across as young and overly enthusiastic at times. She should seek to have more gravitas." As a young Asian woman who feared being perceived as stereotypically deferential and who struggled with feelings of belonging at her firm,

Lisa found it a particularly complicated message to absorb. She had spent a lot of energy managing aspects of her cultural background that made her different, and now she wondered if her personal struggle with authenticity was costing her in her career. After initially feeling like she wanted to hide, she decided she wouldn't allow the feedback to diminish her or confirm her fears of being out of place in an environment where most leaders didn't look like her.

Instead she decided to get curious and began asking her mentors and co-workers questions: How did the leaders around her find or grow their confidence? What gave them the wherewithal to convey authority and self-assurance? What exactly did her reviewer mean by “gravitas,” and how was it measured at her company? Lisa didn't just accept the criticism, she adopted an investigative mindset so that she could decide for herself whether gravitas was an important leadership quality and determine how she might be able to cultivate it within herself.

Lisa had been raised with a “humble-first” upbringing where modesty was rewarded and overbearing or self-aggrandizing behavior was looked down upon. Cultivating something called “gravitas” felt opaque and alien. Many of us adopt a “fake it till you make it” approach when we get feedback we aren't sure how to address, essentially guessing what we should do and throwing ourselves into it. Lisa could have mimicked the style of senior colleagues who possessed gravitas, but she would have been missing out on ways to leverage her innate strengths. Even if she had been successful in impersonating the qualities she observed in leaders around her, she believes her impostor syndrome would have grown over time. Lisa's decision to take space and interview everyone at the firm who would meet with her on the subject allowed her to cultivate a style of authority that felt true to her. In the process of her “gravitas journey,” Lisa found herself sharing more of her backstory and the interests and beliefs that mattered to her most, which made

her feel more aligned and authentic as a leader. Eventually, this shift contributed to others seeing her as more centered, powerful, and, yes, having greater gravitas.

Lisa went on to make junior partner in the firm and years later left to found the lifestyle and clothing brand [Gravitas](#), where she used what she learned to help other women reframe their confidence and power inside and outside of the dressing room. She used the feedback she got early in her career to define her brand's mission to catalyze confidence. By not letting early feedback change who she was, Lisa drew from her own growth experiences to build an industry-shifting brand.

### **Where to Start**

Next time you hear feedback that doesn't sit well with you, consider the following actions:

**Step 1: Pause, assess, then leverage your complexity.** Professor Ramarajan told us, "You can't and you shouldn't have to address everything you hear. Be thoughtful about the qualities you feel you already have and that you want others to see." Rather than downplaying the complexities of your identity in an attempt to fit a model based on someone else, rethink how you can bring forward important dimensions of your story and build your career from a base of self-knowledge.

**Step 2: Communicate powerfully and strategically.** Don't just change your actions, but also align your communications so that people around you see, hear, and experience the "new" you. If you start approaching projects or priorities differently but no one is around to witness the change, it may have little impact on your career. What you do and what you say both matter.

**Step 3: Build a coalition.** Get mentors and sponsors to be active on your campaign, which not only adds oomph but can help shield you from the backlash that can come with tooting your own horn. Professor Ramarajan suggests that being successful as a non-archetypal leader is about getting people who have shared your particular journey and understand your story to actively support you, as well as building coalitions with those who may not appreciate the complexity of your journey but can find common connection around a shared goal or concern. Successful leaders build bridges with those similar to and different from themselves.

**Step 4: Put your message on repeat.** Any leader contending with biases about who they are needs to remember that changing perceptions isn't a one-and-done effort. Tell the story you want heard, and tell it over and over again.

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For leaders navigating the complexities of modern workplaces, proactively mapping out the bias you may face, defining your image in your own voice, and turning feedback into fuel constitute a new and bold playbook for advancement.

*\* Name has been changed for privacy.*

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