

# WOMEN AND THE DOUBLE BIND

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Women face different judgments when they exhibit the same behaviours as men. This is simply because masculine behaviours contradict our expectations of femininity. Leadership traits are still considered to be those in the masculine category, resulting in a damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don't scenario called the double bind. The more feminine a woman is perceived to be, the worse the disparity becomes.

The double bind is the double standard that women leaders must face when it comes to their behaviour. It's a double standard that men do not have to contend with, and it can be summed up as follows:

- Feminine behaviours are deemed to be incongruent with leadership behaviours
- Competence is assumed for men; competence must be proven for women

Specific behaviours are problematic for women because of the dramatic difference in how men and women are perceived when they exhibit them.

- **Aggression**
  - We expect men to be aggressive and are neither surprised nor put off by it when we see it happen, but we have not yet come to accept this strength in women. The assertiveness movement tries to shift public opinion to be more accepting of strong behaviour in women. Women who display aggressive behaviour are labeled negatively, and it doesn't take much more than a single occurrence of standing up for yourself to launch your reputation down that slippery slope. Increase the level of trust in the organization, and strong opinions become valuable assets as opposed to sources of conflict and confrontation. A line must be drawn for overly aggressive styles, but be sure to draw the line in the same place for both men and women.
- **Decisiveness**
  - When women behave in a decisive fashion, it goes against gender role expectations of women being inclusive and collaborative. As a result, that decisiveness can be interpreted as controlling, demanding, and domineering. Modify your message so it doesn't offend anyone and is seen as being supportive. Be patient and understand people, and help people to feel like you've heard their side of the story.
- **Emotional Display**
  - When a man shows emotion, he is heralded for being sensitive or endearing. When a woman shows emotion, she is unstable or hysterical. Watch a boardroom meeting get a bit heated with a man raising his voice and pounding his fist on the table and he's likely to be labeled as passionate and determined. Have a woman do the same thing and she's angry and out of control.
- **Collaboration**
  - The ability to get people to work together is a laudable trait, but a woman can be seen as being overly collaborative, which can lead to the conclusion that she's indecisive. When men go above their regular duties to help out, they receive recognition and rewards for doing so because a level of caring is not expected as a matter of course from men. But women are expected to be helpful and caring, so when they do exhibit these tendencies, they are simply meeting expectations and not exceeding them. Unlike women, men tend to be liked just as much when they are warm and friendly and caring as when they are not.



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- **Communication**
  - *Being highly communicative can be seen as being talkative, and thus perceived as a negative. Women tend to use more words, which can be perceived as poor articulation or lack of clear thinking. When men take the time to get to know people and relate to them, it rarely shares the same harsh judgment. When it comes to communicating successfully, women find they must learn to be more subtle and diplomatic to avoid triggering negative gender stereotypes in others.*
- **Self-Promotion**
  - *When men brag about their accomplishments, act aggressively, or behave competitively in what would otherwise be a friendly game, we say, “boys will be boys.” But woe to a woman who promotes her strengths and achievements. She is judged harshly if she self-promotes and is overlooked if she doesn’t. Women who self-promote are considered more competent, but they risk being less influential when they do. Despite this risk, women need to find effective ways to display their competence because they face the effects of discrimination due to uncertainty about their ability to lead.*
- **Family Orientation**
  - *The assumption that family responsibilities will interfere with work responsibilities affects women in ways that are not a factor for men. A woman’s manager is likely to make assumptions about whether she is willing to take on tough assignments, work extended hours, and even travel, based on whether she has, or is likely to have, children. This even has an effect on women who don’t have children at all, as it is often assumed that women who are married will also have limitations on what they are willing to do and where they are willing to do it.*

| <b>COMPETENCE</b>                        | <b>CARING</b>                            |
|--|--|
| <i>Assertive but not overbearing</i>     | <i>Friendly but not submissive</i>       |
| <i>Strong but not stubborn</i>           | <i>Likeable but not gullible</i>         |
| <i>Expressive but not dictatorial</i>    | <i>Warm but not weak</i>                 |
| <i>Confident but not confrontational</i> | <i>Collaborative but not manipulated</i> |

*“Whether we realize it or not, unconscious biases affect women in the workplace. Simply put, women are judged more harshly than men for displaying the same behaviours.*

*This is called the double bind.*

*The source of this judgment is the dissonance between the conscious and unconscious beliefs about what behaviour we deem appropriate for a woman, and the behaviour we are witnessing.*

*These beliefs come from centuries of societal conditioning, generations of traditions, and the values we pick up along the way.*

*Ultimately if a woman behaves in a way that is considered outside the normal boundaries, she receives lower ratings in her performance evaluations, and she can face resistance to her leadership efforts.*

*But for most people, there is no intention to discriminate. They want to choose the best and most qualified person for the job, but a subconscious image of men and women is influencing them psychologically.*

*Neutralizing the double bind begins with finding the balance between demonstrating competence and displaying caring. This is the new balancing act that women must manage.”*

*Dawn Frail, MA*

*Author: The Ruby Report; How Organizations Can Profit by Promoting Women Leaders*

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