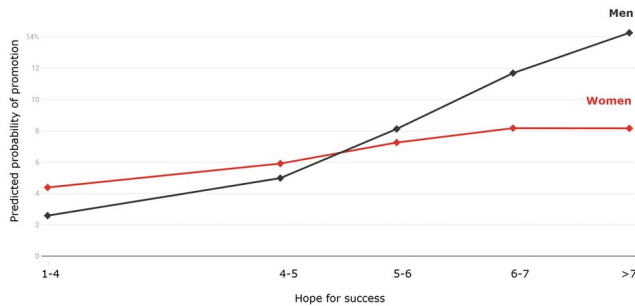


# Data shows that advice to women to 'lean in,' be more confident doesn't help

14 October 2020, by Leonora Risse



Promotion probabilities are estimated for 2013 using hope for success responses collected in 2012. Categories at the lower levels are grouped due to small sample sizes. Credit: [Source: Author's analysis using the HILDA Survey](#)

"Just be more confident, be more ambitious, be more like a man."

These are the words of advice given over and over to [women](#) in a bid to close the career and earnings gaps between women and men.

From self-help books to [confidence](#) coaching, the message to "lean in" and show confidence in the workplace is pervasive, propelled by Facebook Executive Sheryl Sandberg through her worldwide [Lean In](#) movement:

"Women are hindered by barriers that exist within ourselves. We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking [self-confidence](#), by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in."

The efforts are well intended, because women are persistently [underrepresented](#) in senior and leadership positions.

But where is the proof they work?

## Repeated advice needn't be right

As a labor economist, and a recipient of such advice throughout my own career, I wanted to find out.

So I used Australian survey data to investigate the link between confidence and job [promotion](#) for both men and women. The results have just been published in the [Australian Journal of Labour Economics](#).

The nationally-representative Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia ([HILDA](#)) survey includes a measure of a person's confidence to take on a challenge.

The measure is called [achievement motivation](#).

It is made up of [hope for success](#) which we measure by asking people how much they agree with statements such as

- when confronted by a [difficult problem](#), I prefer to start on it straight away
- I like situations where I can find out how capable I am
- I am attracted to tasks that allow me to test my abilities

And it is made up of [fear of failure](#) which is measured by a person's agreement with statements such as

- I start feeling anxious if I do not understand a problem immediately
- In difficult situations where a lot depends on me, I am afraid of failing
- I feel uneasy about undertaking a task if I am unsure of succeeding

More than 7,500 workers provided answers to these questions in the 2013 HILDA survey.

## Confidence matters, with a catch

Using a statistical technique called Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition I investigated the link between their answers and whether or not they experienced a promotion in the following year.

After controlling for a range of factors, including the job opportunities on offer, I discovered higher hope for success was clearly linked to a higher likelihood of promotion.

But there was a catch: the link was only clear for men.

For women, there was no clear evidence stronger confidence enhanced job promotion prospects.

Put differently, "leaning in" provides no guarantee of a payoff for women.

## Promotion rate for men and women by hope for success

Personality traits reveal further gender patterns.

Men who display boldness and charisma, reflected by high extraversion, also experience a stronger likelihood of promotion. As do men who display the attitude that whatever happens to them in life is a result of their own choices and efforts, a trait we call "locus of control".

But again there is no link between any of these traits and the promotion prospects for women.

Collectively these findings point to a disturbing template for career success: be confident, be ambitious... and be male.

## Be male and unafraid

This template for promotion also prescribes: don't show fear of failure. Among managers, though not among workers as a whole, fear of failure is linked to weaker job promotion prospects—but more profoundly for men than women.

This echoes the way society penalizes male leaders for revealing emotional weakness. Both

men and women are hindered by gender norms.

So what's the harm in confidence training?

For women, it could do more harm than good. In a culture that does not value such attributes among women, contravening expected patterns carries risks.

## 'Fixing' women is itself a problem

Imploring women to adopt behaviors that characterize successful men creates a culture that paints women as "deficient" and devalues [diverse](#) working styles.

A fixation on [fixing women](#)—without proof it pays off—steers resources away from [anti-discrimination initiatives](#) that could actually make a difference.

In any case there is very little evidence confidence makes good workers. Overconfident workers can be [liabilities](#).

Workplaces would be served better by basing their hiring and promotion decisions on competency and capability rather than confidence and charisma.

My study is one of a [steadily growing number](#) suggesting gender equity shouldn't be about changing women, it should be about changing workplaces.

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