

The Confidence Gap: When Success and Body Confidence Collide

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[The Confidence Code: The Science and Art of Self-Assurance – What Women Should Know](#) is one of many books that examines the differences between men and women as presented in the corporate workforce – specifically, the ways women still lag behind men when it comes to confidence. Motherhood, lack of mentorship opportunities, socialization, and biology all may play a role in the underrepresentation of women at the highest levels of leadership. But what about the role that body image plays? Research implies that physical expectations are high – and criticism fierce – for women in positions of power. “What you chose to wear expresses who you are as a woman. For men in a professional world, you’re going to be in a suit – the choices are much more limited”, says Sharon MacLeod, VP of Personal Care for Unilever in North America, the brand that brought us the [Dove Self-Esteem Project](#).

Studies in Britain and the United States have found that weight discrimination is alive and well in various classes of employment. Researchers at Michigan State University found that between 45 and 61 percent of male CEOs had BMI levels that would be considered overweight, versus just five to 22 percent of female CEOs. So what’s the message that women considering careers in business and politics receive? Professional attire and grooming aren’t enough. Thin, it would seem, has become shorthand for the discipline, self-control, and desire to succeed necessary to achieve success. Part of this pressure may be compounded by the fact that women in corporate sectors are often outnumbered by male colleagues. By “Being the only woman in a room of 25 or 30 people, when you walk in, you’re noticed instantly,” says MacLeod, “When you’re the only woman there, you can’t be invisible.”

Forbes author Lisa Quast rightly argues, “women around the world need to work together to help employers and hiring managers become aware of and overcome ingrained biases of how people’s weight affects hiring and promotion decisions”. MacLeod also points to the positive effects that developing self-confidence can have on self-expression: “Dove research has shown that when you don’t feel great about the way you look, you’re less likely to share your opinion, and speak up. If you do feel good about your appearance, being at the centre is okay.” And by being at the centre, women are more likely to create meaningful change and attain higher positions of leadership.



The reality, as many of us can attest to, is that biology trumps the best laid plans when it comes to changing our physiques. Learning to demonstrate excellence isn’t only about developing our professional selves, and standing confidently at the centre – it’s about maintaining a future focus which accepts our bodies, sometimes in the face of a critical audience. Luckily, we can be healthy, fit, and attractive no matter our size. The shape of our bodies doesn’t have to determine the shape of our assets, much less our happiness. As Sharon MacLeod puts it, “We want beauty to be a source of happiness, not of anxiety. And it’s only a small part of what we are.”

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