

## When “Too Much” Is Strategic Power

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At some point in their careers, many high-performing female leaders receive feedback like this:

- ✗ Too aggressive.
- ✗ Too direct.
- ✗ Too competitive.
- ✗ Too intense.

On the surface, it sounds like a critique of their personality. However, it often reflects something more structural: how leadership behaviors are interpreted inside organizational cultures. Research in organizational psychology shows that identical leadership behaviors can be interpreted differently depending on who displays them and how those behaviors align with expectations of leadership. A man who pushes decisions forward may be described as decisive. A woman who does the same may be described as aggressive.

Researchers studying leadership dynamics have documented what is often called the competence–likability tradeoff. Women who demonstrate strong leadership behaviors are frequently perceived as highly competent but sometimes less likable than men displaying identical behaviors. This does not mean those behaviors are wrong. It means leadership is interpreted through social context, not just through performance.

Once someone receives feedback that they are “too direct” or “too intense,” the pressure of an invisible second job often begins. Managing perception. Suddenly every interaction carries additional calculations:

- ✓ Am I coming across too strong?
- ✓ Should I soften this message?
- ✓ Will this sound abrasive?

Instead of focusing entirely on the work itself, women begin managing how their leadership style will be received. Over time, this creates a quiet but powerful cost. Energy that should be directed toward solving problems and shaping strategy is diverted toward moderating behavior. But the leaders who ultimately rise rarely solve this problem by shrinking their leadership style. They solve it differently.

Leadership is not evaluated in isolation. It is interpreted through relationships. Research from Harvard Business School and large-scale workplace studies shows that strategic networks, visibility, and sponsorship relationships significantly influence how leadership potential is perceived within organizations. When trust and familiarity exist, intensity is rarely interpreted as aggression. It is understood as commitment. Directness becomes clarity. High standards become leadership discipline.

Relationships provide the context that allows others to see leadership behavior accurately. As leadership scholar Herminia Ibarra notes, professional networks and sponsorship relationships are often the mechanisms through which leadership potential becomes visible, especially for women, at the highest levels.

Once leadership style is understood within the right context, the narrative changes quickly.

- ✓ “Too aggressive” becomes a bias for action.
- ✓ “Too competitive” becomes high standards and ambition.
- ✓ “Too direct” becomes clear communication that accelerates decisions.
- ✓ “Too much” becomes the leadership energy organizations rely on when the stakes are high.

The leader did not change. The frame did. The goal is not to eliminate intensity, ambition, or authority. Organizations need those qualities. In fact, leadership assessment research analyzing thousands of leaders has shown that

women often score as highly as or higher than men in many leadership competencies, including initiative, integrity, and results orientation. The strategic question is whether your leadership style is positioned so others can see the value it creates. Because when leadership energy is understood as strategic horsepower rather than personality friction, it becomes unmistakable.

So, stop shrinking and start positioning. Your leadership style is not the problem. The question is whether the environment, and the narrative around your work, allows that style to be recognized for what it truly is. The leaders who rise are not the ones who shrink themselves. They are the ones who position their leadership so its value and authenticity become impossible to overlook.

### **Resources**

Harvard Business Review — For Women Leaders, Likability and Success Hardly Go Hand in Hand  
<https://hbr.org/2013/04/for-women-leaders-likability-a>

Zenger & Folkman — Women Score Higher in Most Leadership Skills  
<https://hbr.org/2019/06/research-women-score-higher-than-men-in-most-leadership-skills>

McKinsey & Company — Women in the Workplace  
<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace>