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Tall Tales: Do Men Exaggerate More?

Men may dominate top corporate positions because they exaggerate their achievements more than women, a new study suggests.

Males tend to be "overconfident" when recalling their past performances, thus persuading their peers to appoint them as leaders. Women, by contrast, tend to recall their accomplishments more accurately, putting them at a disadvantage when competing with men.

Researchers at several business schools, assigned a math quiz to a group of M.B.A. students comprising 100 males and 34 females. When asked 15 months later to recall their performance, the male test-takers mistakenly inflated their scores by an average of 30.5%, compared to 14.4% for the female test-takers—even though both genders performed similarly on the quiz. Everyone was told they would get \$50 if they recalled their performance with a certain degree of accuracy; so there was no incentive to inflate scores.

The researchers took the experiment a step further by dividing the students into 33 smaller groups of two to four people and asking each team to select a leader to compete in a math quiz competition between the leaders of each group. Each group was also told that their chosen leaders would receive a reward, which varied from nothing to \$75. And group members whose leader performed best would receive \$4 for each correct answer.

The study found that men and women were equally prone to exaggerate about their test scores when faced with a financial incentive, but men still tended to inflate their scores by a much bigger margin—about 40%, compared to 20% for women. As a result, 29 of the 33 groups selected a man as their leader, while just four chose a woman.

The findings suggest that many boardrooms might not be choosing the most qualified candidates, but rather the ones who are most boastful about their accomplishments—real or imagined—says Ernesto Reuben, one of the study's authors and an assistant professor at Columbia University Business School, which helped research the study. Companies should be aware of this phenomenon when comparing male and female candidates for a position, he says. Hiring managers should also seek peer reviews to ensure a more objective assessment of the candidate.

"Men honestly believe they're better than they are, so it's not about getting them to tell the truth. They're already telling what they think is the truth," Mr. Reuben says.

—Leslie Kwoh

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