

Feminine AND Powerful: 9 Tips For Women Bosses

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Marrying [femininity](#) and [leadership](#) is not easy.

And being a strong, powerful woman while also remaining feminine, well-liked, and, why not, [successful at dating and relationships](#), is even more difficult.

But alas, difficulties also present the biggest opportunities for those elected few who manage to crack the code.

This article teaches you the science and psychology of being a powerful woman while also remaining feminine, attractive, and well-liked.

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The Science of The “Female Leader Curse”

Research has spoken loud and plenty:

Most women pay a social price for their power and leadership positions.

By “social price” I refer here as to being disliked for [carrying herself with power and confidence](#). And, possibly, socially marginalized and excluded.

In the workplace, that might mean being passed up for promotions. In politics, that could mean [not getting elected](#). And in dating, that could mean being passed up [for the more submissive woman](#).

The female leader’s curse applies without women having to do anything.Â

Indeed [research shows](#) that when students read the exact same description of a male and female leader, they ended up liking the male leader but disliking the female one... For the simple fact of being a woman.Â

Of course, [there are also studies to the contrary](#).

But there are almost always studies to the contrary. And, in this case, the overall trend is clear.

When it comes to female leadership, **the body of research overwhelmingly points to women facing more or less strong social backlash when they pursue power and/or when they display [dominant traits](#)** (see for example the findings of researchers [Madeline Heilman](#) and [Susan Fiske](#)).

Women who pursue power are not liked across the board.Â

Including by other women and, albeit they might deny it, it also applies to liberal men.

See here Obama leveraging the “likability” issue against Clinton:

Obama: You are likable “enough”

With that power move, Obama effectively makes Clinton’s likability an issue, and calls it into question.

Female Leadership Curse & Politics

The 2016 US election also provides supporting evidence for the female leadership curse.

When did Hilary Clinton’s ratings drop?

Hillary Clinton’s rating droppedÂ precipitously the moment she announced her candidacy for the presidency.

Correlation is *not* causation, but we can probably guess here that Hillary became “unlikable” the moment she decided to go for the top leadership position.

Female Leadership Curse & Dating

There is little research into female power, dominance, and dating success.

Luckily, we have enough experience there.

And we can also use [evolutionary psychology](#) here to provide us with answers.

Evolutionary psychology tells us that while men have a bias towards quantity, women prefer “better” partners ([female hypergamy](#)).Â

The consequence, of course, is that men *do* indeed fear -or “are intimidated”- of women who are “more than they are”.

It’s a rational choice: women who are better than they are are far less likely to accept them, like them, respect them, or stay with them (and more likely [to cheat](#)).

In a nutshell: powerful, ambitious, and dominant women are less attractive for most men than less powerful, ambitious, and dominant ones.

The Power-Charm Trade-Off

Some women might say

“to hell being liked, I don’t care about a few bigots, I’ll go for power and make them all jealous with my success”.

Most of the times it doesn’t work that way though.

To begin with, most of us suffer when we are harshly criticized and most people dislike us.Â

The second problem is in actual power.Â

Women who go for authoritarian and more typically male styles of power lose all or almost all of their [charming power](#) and seductive power.

While a more aggressive man *can* more easily move from social charm to authoritarian leadership, a woman who crosses into authoritarian leadership can hardly be charming.

As an example, look at this video:

[Kamala Harris chose to go the authoritarian way, leaving all her femininity behind.](#)

[That makes it much harder for her to use charm the same way that a more feminine woman could.](#)

Unless your natural disposition is exactly like Kamala Harris, I recommend you stay away from that style. Especially from her most angry, judgmental and haughty attitudes and facial expressions which make her easily disliked.

The Solution

Luckily, there are plenty of solutions to the “female leadership curse”.

These solutions require social intelligence, and some good understanding of psychology, power dynamics, and human nature.

This article is here to help.

Let's start with the techniques:

#1. Lead For An Ideal, For People Or A Bigger Goal

The women who pay the biggest social price of the female leadership curse are the ones who look like they are in it mainly for the power.

Power is mostly a male pursuit, and women who are after power look very “gender deviant”.

Gender deviant is a very ugly expression, but it correctly identifies the problem here.

[Research shows](#) indeed that men who look like they are after power are not penalized.Â

But women are.

And that's why you should avoid looking like you're after power for power sake.

As a matter of fact, I warmly invite you NOT to go after power for power's sake as that makes you a much worse leader, no matter whether you're a female leader or male leader.

Also read:

- [How to keep power](#)

#2. Use “We” Frames To Avoid Being Overly Ambitious

Similar as above: ambition is a trait that is OK or even appreciated in men. But it's very much disliked in women.

Sheryl Sandberg in [Lean In](#) says that when you negotiate from an “I” perspective, both men and women will like you less.

You must approach negotiations, speeches and campaigns from a “we” and “us” platform instead of “I”.

If you are negotiating for a raise, always frame it as a win for both you, the company and your team.

Say “me and the team can do so great if we find a solution” and:

| Let's just find an agreement and we will be so strong

Also read:

- [Best negotiation books](#)

#3. Make Use of Indirect Forms of Dominance

[Studies show](#) that direct expressions of power and dominance (for example: direct requests) adversely affected women's likability.Â

But indirect expressions of power (ie.: eye contact) did not.Â

This means that for you as a woman it might be better to ask something in a friendly tone such as:

You: Do you think you can do that?

(hold eye contact)

Him: Yeah, I think so.Â

And then hold eye contact and have him (or her) acknowledge that yes he can, rather than telling him "do it".

The effect is the same, but the indirect social pressure might be a more effective tool to wield power for women (and from an [Influence](#) point of view, it's also much more effective!).

Also read:

- [Soft power](#)

#4. Use Democratic Style of Leadership

So far we have spoken generally of the inverse relation between power, dominance and effective female leadership.

But here is the catch: [research shows](#) that when women lead with a [democratic style of leadership](#), then there is no social price to pay and no adverse effect on her likeability and social relationships.

Says Eagly (Eagly et al. (1992)):

Female leaders showing autocratic (i.e. masculine) behaviour are evaluated more negatively than male leaders showing the same. However democratic male leaders and democratic female leaders are not evaluated differently.

People are much more comfortable with women in power positions who ask questions, include and, generally, act like benevolent leaders.

But what to do when a female leader needs to put her foot down?

#4.1 Consider A Maternal Style of Leadership

As much men can adopt a "father figure" style of leadership, women can adopt a "mother figure" style of leadership.

A mother figure style of leadership is a powerful role and a good solution to most of the resistances that women face in positions of power.

When needed, you bust out the spanking.

But it's not a [scathing dress down in front of everyone](#) to display power. It's more like a spanking for the bad boy because he deserved it, but which is delivered not to re-assert power but because it's in everyone's interest.

And then you can go back to a more communal and affiliative style of leadership.

Angela Merkel is referred to as “mutti” or “mommy” in Germany. She is not “motherly” in a feminine way, but more like a detached, “father & mother” type of mother because the father is not around.

See some examples:

[Angela Merkel's secret is that of staying away from all excesses of both extreme male expressions of power and typically feminine expressions which would decrease a leader's perceived authority.](#)

#5. Offset Power With Stereotypically Feminine Qualities

I remember years ago in my first big corporate job, working as a Lean Methodology consultant alongside McKinsey and internal DHL consultants.

The head of the program was called “Tania”, and she was an icy German woman with an authoritative streak and a tall figure with blue eyes and light blonde hair.

Her appearances certainly didn't help her to come across more relatable. But she didn't even try that hard: everyone thought of “nazi” and “ice queen” in her presence when in the presence of Tania

When Peter, one of the line managers described her to me, he said:

Peter: The new project head is *German, woman, 43... No kids..*

You should have seen his expression of contempt as he highlighted those words.

And by the time he had reached “no kids” I already knew where he was going.

What he wanted to say was this:

| She is not a real woman

Which, in turn, translated to this:

| She is not a normal human being, she doesn't belong to our species and we can't relate to her.

This is rather common.Â

When women come across as “gender deviant”, from a sociological perspective, people place them in the “out-group”, or “different from all of us”.

We don't relate to people from the out-group and it's much more likely that we will see them as enemies.

Here is the catch though: if a woman can show and “prove” her femininity, she can increase acceptance, and make herself more likable.

[This research](#) indeed shows that when people see that powerful women also present typically female characteristics, hostility decreases and the strong female leaders become more liked and more accepted.

Here is what you might strategically choose to do:

- If you're a mother, make that information circulate
- Spread information on how you spend time home/parenting
- If no children, get a dog and do the same
- Tell stories of yourÂ cooking
- Put fresh flowers in your office
- Avoid masculine suits
- Use more colorful dresses
- Do yourÂ makeup

All these actions serve to communicate to the people around that “oh yes, she’s a woman alright”.

Remember:

Since the backlash against women arises in good part for her violation of “expected gender roles”, a woman can offset her power and dominance by showing feminine traits outside her leadership position

Also read:

- [How to be feminine](#)

[How to Be Feminine: Step-by-Step Guide \(Videos & Pics\)](#)

#6. Offset Power With Hyper-Femininity

At the opposite of neutralizing yourself is the hyper-feminization of your power.

Imagine if your power is 10, then you want your feminine level to be an equal 10. Or even your feminine levels to outstrip your power, depending on the occasion -for example, when dealing with a superior-.

There is a special place in the Olympus of powerful women for the elected few who can correctly go for this style.

Why?

Because **combining super high power with super high femininity is what makes you “the queen”**.^Â

Joan Holloway from the show “Mad Men” is a good example of hyper-feminization of power.

Look at this scene:

Joan adds hyper-sexuality to her femininity. You don’t need to go that extreme with sexuality, but a highly feminine woman will always have a touch of sexuality.

It’s not a matter of being beautiful or attractive, or young. It’s simply that very high femininity, with its flowing and cat-like, simpering moves, also oozes sexuality, independently of age.

Remember the direct/indirect language “[how to look confident at work](#)“?

Well, notice how Joan wields power:

Joan: “I SUGGEST you pick your tents elsewhere”

She’s not really suggesting it, she’s *telling* them to move.

And her voice tonality says that she’s ordering them to move *right now*. But, again, she doesn’t need to express that verbally.

Using indirect language and voice tonality to wield power makes her come across as higher class and more socially polished. That makes her the true queen of the office.

Had she used a more direct expression, for example: “guys, move out of here, right now”, she would have come across as overly aggressive and overpowering, too rough around the edges.

People would have jumped on that opportunity to call her a “bitch”, “hag” and “a bad manager unsuited to hold any position of authority”.

Eventually, she would have lost power -and possibly her position, if management agreed with that

Also, she would have put herself at the same level of the guys, making her lose in femininity. With direct

language, even if she kept her position, she would have been just another bossy boss -not “the queen” anymore-.

#7. Pursue More Typically-Female Careers

[Paustian-Underdahl](#) in her meta-analysis on female leadership and power found out that:

(...) Male leaders were seen as more effective than female leaders in organizations that were male-dominated or masculine in other ways (i.e., numerically male-dominated organizations; military roles; Eagly et al., 1995). Additionally, **female leaders were seen as more effective than male leaders in less male-dominated or less masculine organizations** (i.e., educational, governmental, and social service organizations)

Basically: organizations and **businesses that fit the female gender stereotype boost the credibility of female leaders.**

This was a study on effectiveness rather than likeability, but I wouldn't be surprised if we can infer the same for likeability and acceptance.

Miranda Priestly in “The Devil Wears Prada” would have been less respected, would have had less authority and would have probably been even more disliked and has she worked in, say, an arm's producer rather than a fashion magazine.

#8. Combine Warmth With Power

This is more from a technical point of view, but whenever you can combine warmth and humor with a reprimand or with a request for compliance, you are better off than crude power.

This is an example of a woman who's done it very well:

Is The Female Leadership Curse Cultural or Inborn?

Shall we really get into this?

Alright, let's do it quickly.

If you read the researches and studies linked in this page you will realize that the researchers themselves often speak about “culture”, “qualities traditionally associated with...”, “traits linked to behaviors that people associate to leadership and genders” and, of course “gender stereotypes” (as if all gender differences when it comes to dominance and power were stereotypes).

Basically: most researchers refer to the culture and nobody mentions nature, genes or evolutionary psychology.

I'm not surprised in the slightest.

For various reasons, it's politically risky to say that something might be genetic and inborn.

It's much safer instead, and you are much more likely to be heard and appreciated if you say it's mostly cultural.

That is not true, though. Sure as hell culture plays a (big) role. But, as Steven Pinker shows in “[The Blank](#)

[Slate](#)“, so do genes and nature.

The Future of Female Power

Will things get better for women?

Since part of the backlash against powerful women is partially culture, we might see further improvement for the conditions of female leaders.

[Researchers who have compiled meta-studies](#) have indeed noted a tendency toward more acceptance of female leaders.

It's also possible that as more inclusive and less authoritarian styles of leadership become more the norm than the exceptions, women will do better and better (also read "[Leaders Eat Last](#)" for an example of leadership cultural shift).

As Koenig et al (2011) point out [in another meta-analysis](#):

Leadership now, more than in the past, appears to incorporate more feminine relational qualities, such as sensitivity, warmth, and understanding.

Basically, things have improved for women and are likely to further improve.

However, in my opinion, that's a tendency that cannot be extrapolated to infinity and to perfect equality. And that means that **the social backlash against powerful women is not going away any time soon.**

It's also not obvious and not written anywhere that we will keep moving towards more equality.

Cultures always change and our culture might also swing again towards more conservative attitudes in the future.

This makes it all the more important for women leaders to learn how to wield power in a way that maximizes their chances.

SUMMARY

There is no research that shows that people dislike successful women. Indeed, nobody has anything against' women's success.

It's when women have power, act dominant, or hold leadership positions that things can get a bit trickier. Specifically, it's *how* women wield their power that makes a big difference. And when women behave like men, they lose.

Power, dominance, and femininity are not necessarily at the opposite end of the spectrum.

Yet they don't exactly overlap either.

And it's sometimes difficult to combine the two.

However, it's possible, and this article gave you a few ideas how to be a successful female leader all around: from power to charm to social success to success in dating and relationships.

This is a sample from [Power University](#) (far more examples in the course).

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