

# Don't give away your power



Research shows that modest people are more helpful and better liked than those who are boastful and that self-promotion is perceived negatively by others

By Jeffrey Pfeffer & M. Muneer

Every day we see women – and men – giving away their power by talking about themselves in self-deprecating, circumscribed ways. An individual who had overseen about 20 health and fitness facilities, employing 650+ people, who then returned to school to get a master's in organization development, described herself as a graduate student. Another person who had run an extremely successful marketing analytics project at Apple consistently referred to herself in conversations as the youngest and least senior person in her unit and the only woman at her level. Surprising in this age of social media where people puff up their image.

People will act on these delimiting self-perceptions, believing that they do not really deserve greater opportunities at work. Even more importantly, others will not give those who fail to advocate forcefully for themselves sufficient credit. A 2002 study titled “Social Identity Complexity” found that people not making positive assertions about themselves were taken as a negative signal about their abilities. Thus, people's career opportunities can be limited through their own behavior.

Self-deprecation is fine once someone has built an enormous reputation and holds a role of great power. Before that, people should heed the wisdom of the late Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir: “Don't be so modest, you're not that good.”

## Why people don't self-advocate

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who are boastful and that self-promotion is perceived negatively by others. Many people want to be liked, and likeability is useful in interpersonal influence.

Jim Collins' analysis of Level 5 leaders in *Good to Great* described the best leaders as those characterized by fierce resolve but also with great modesty. Collins noted that many of the leaders he highlighted in his best-selling book were not well-known in the business press because they generously gave credit to others and remained in the background.

Moreover, modesty – and not over-claiming credit – is considered a virtue in many religions and cultures. Therefore, people

learn, in a variety of ways, not to boast and, in fact, to downplay their accomplishments.

## The evidence

Research by U. C. Berkeley Professor Cameron Anderson and colleagues shows that exhibiting self-confidence, even when it is unwarranted by objective reality, nonetheless helps people attain and hold onto leadership positions. Other research shows that narcissism, the opposite of modesty, reliably predicts hiring, promotions, and even some dimensions of job performance.

**The logic:** Emotions are contagious. People who display confidence engender confidence on the part of others who observe them. Moreover, people like to be associated with success. Of course, figuring out who is going to be successful is difficult. People who seem confident in their own abilities and success attract others by improving the odds that observers will see them as already, or going to be, successful.

## So, what shall you do?

1. For people worried about seeming boastful, get others (even paid agents) to sing one's praises. Having others make positive comments about a focal person projects that individual more likable and overcomes the self-promotion dilemma – the need to present oneself positively while not seeming boastful.
2. Understand that while being liked is obviously good, it is not really essential to building influence. As former casino company Caesar's CEO Gary Loveman has said, “if you want to be liked, get a dog.” Famous U.S. football coach Steve Spurrier noted, “If people like you too much, it's probably because they're beating you.”
3. Most importantly, never, ever, use words or phrases that might be taken by others as downplaying your accomplishments and abilities. If you don't think well of yourself, if you are not going to advocate for yourself, if you do not have confidence in your capabilities, why should anyone else?

Getting out of your own way is the first important stuff on a path to having more power and career success.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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