

Work & Careers

Why do so many incompetent men win at work?

A new book suggests data can highlight modest, team-focused leaders of both sexes



Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic: 'Traits like overconfidence and self-absorption should be seen as red flags'

Emma Jacobs 10 HOURS AGO

"Women are better [leaders](#)," says Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic. "I am not neutral on this. I am sexist in favour of women. Women have better people skills, more altruistic, better able to control their impulses. They outperform men in university at graduate and undergraduate levels."

This subject is explored in his new book, *Why Do So Many Incompetent Men Become Leaders? (And How to Fix It)*. In it, he writes that "traits like overconfidence and self-absorption should be seen as red flags", when, in fact, the opposite tends to happen. As Prof Chamorro-Premuzic puts it: "They prompt us to say: 'Ah, there's a charismatic fellow! He's probably leadership material.'"

It is this mistaken insistence that confidence equates to greatness that is the reason so many ill-suited men get top jobs, he argues. "The result in both business and politics is a surplus of incompetent men in charge, and this surplus reduces opportunities for competent people — women and men — while keeping the standards of leadership depressingly low."

This book is based on a Harvard Business Review [blog](#) of the same title which was published in 2013, and which elicited more feedback than any of his previous books

Feedback

London and at Columbia University, as well as being the “chief talent scientist” at [Manpower](#) Group and co-founder of two companies that deploy technological tools to enhance staff retention. This book builds on two of his professional interests: data and confidence.

Too often, he argues, we use intuition rather than metrics to judge whether someone is competent. In his book he argues that confidence may well be a “compensatory strategy for lower competence”. The modern mantra to just believe in yourself is possibly foolish. Perhaps, he suggests, modesty is not false but an accurate awareness of one’s talents and limitations.

The book’s title has been “too provocative” for many, Prof Chamorro-Premuzic tells me on the phone from Brooklyn, where he spends most of his time, juggling his teaching and corporate roles. “A lot of female leaders said they can’t endorse it as [they are] worried about looking like man-haters.” Some female colleagues feel depressed that his message is being heard because he is a man, whereas if it came from them it would be “dismissed”. Men criticise him for “virtue-signalling”.

He makes a convincing case for a more modest style of leader, focused on the team rather than advancing their own careers. Angela Merkel is the “most boring and best leader” in politics, he says. In the corporate sphere, he picks [Warren Buffett](#) who, he says, started off as a finance geek and taught himself leadership skills. David Cameron, the former British prime minister, is cited as an example of misplaced confidence in a leader — he held a referendum on Britain’s membership of the EU, sure that he would win, an assurance that, as it turned out, was misplaced.

A quiet leadership style is often overlooked as heads are turned by bravado and narcissism. “There is a cult of confidence,” says Prof Chamorro-Premuzic. In part this is because confidence is “easier to observe”. It is harder to discern whether someone is a good leader. “What we see is what we rely on, what we see is visible.”

People “overrate their intuition”, he says. Too often it turns out to be “nepotistic, self-serving choices . . . most organisations don’t have data to tell you if the leader is good.”

Those leaders who are celebrated for their volatility and short fuses, such as the late [Apple](#) boss Steve Jobs, might have succeeded despite, not because of, their personality defects, he argues.

One common narrative holds that women are held back by a lack of confidence, yet studies show this to be a fallacy. Perhaps it would be better to say that they are less likely to overrate themselves. The book cites one study from Columbia University

which found that men overstated their maths ability by 30 per cent and women by 15 per cent.

It is also the case, he writes, that women are penalised for appearing confident: “Their mistakes are judged more harshly and remembered longer. Their behaviour is scrutinised more carefully and their colleagues are less likely to share vital information with them. When women speak, they’re more likely to be interrupted or ignored.”

“The fundamental role of self-confidence is not to be as high as possible,” he adds, “but to be in sync with ability.”

Prof Chamorro-Premuzic’s interest in leadership was nurtured while growing up in Argentina, a country that he describes as having had one terrible leader after another. He came from a pocket of Buenos Aires known as Villa Freud for its high concentration of psychotherapists (even his family dog had a therapist), so it was a natural step to enter the field of psychology.

Recommended

There are many observations in the book that posit women as the superior sex, for example, citing their higher emotional intelligence. Such biological essentialism has been contested, for example by [Cordelia Fine](#) in her book *Testosterone Rex: Unmaking the Myths of Our Gendered Minds*.

Prof Chamorro-Premuzic says describing such differences as “hard-wired” would be an “overstatement”. Nonetheless, he argues that men score higher for impulsivity, risk-taking, narcissism, aggression and overconfidence; while women do better on emotional intelligence, empathy, altruism, self-awareness and humility.

The book’s central message, though, is not to make a case for preferential treatment for women, but rather to “elevate the standards of leadership”. We should be making it harder for terrible men to get to the top, rather than focusing solely on removing the hurdles for women.

He makes the argument against setting quotas for women in senior positions, which, Prof Chamorro-Premuzic says, can look like special pleading. Rather, he says: “We should minimise biases when it comes to evaluating leaders, rely less and less on human valuations and use performance data.”

Raising the leadership game will boost the number of women in such positions, but it will also highlight talented but modest men who are typically overlooked. “There are many competent men who are being disregarded for leadership roles,” he says.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2019. All rights reserved.

Latest on Work & Careers

Comments have not been enabled for this article.

Follow the topics in this article

Management

Media

Leadership

Work & Careers

Workplace diversity & equality

Feedback