

Want to Lean In? Try a Power Pose

by Amy J.C. Cuddy

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For women who may be “leaning out,” Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg’s urging to “lean in” requires some behavioral changes and deviations from how many women are expected to or accustomed to behaving. Fortunately, we have the power to do this for ourselves, through tiny tweaks that actually reconfigure our brains in ways that may make us more assertive, confident, relaxed, risk tolerant, and fearless.

Recent experimental psychology from Dana Carney, Pranjal Mehta, Robert Josephs, Jennifer Lerner, Gary Sherman, and our lab at Harvard suggests that the best leaders – both male *and* female – seem to have relatively high testosterone, which is linked to decreased fear and increased tolerance for risk and desire to compete, and low cortisol, which is linked to decreased anxiety. Effective leadership is associated with hormone levels, and with this hormone profile, leaders are confident and willing to take risks, but not overly threatened or reactive to stressors. Who wouldn’t want to work for this kind of leader?

This is not an argument for masculinizing leadership; it is an argument for providing people with the tools that will allow them to bring their strongest, most resilient and confident selves to stressful or uncomfortable situations, like being the only woman in the board room, pitching a new idea, or negotiating for a raise or promotion – the tasks that Sandberg refers to as “sitting at the table” and “speaking your truth.”

It turns out these two hormones, testosterone and cortisol, are very touchy, sensitive to social and physical cues and fluctuating a great deal over the course of a single day. As Sandberg mentioned in her book, our research shows that people can change their own hormone levels and behaviors, by “faking it” – by “power posing,” or adopting expansive, open nonverbal postures

that are strongly associated with power and dominance across the animal kingdom (imagine standing with hands on hips and feet spread, like Wonder Woman). By holding these postures for just two minutes before entering a high-stress situation, people (both men and women) can increase their testosterone by about 20% and decrease their cortisol by about 25% (Want to do the opposite to your hormones? Adopt a low-power pose – wrap your arms around your torso, cross your ankles, lower your chin). Power posing also increases people’s tolerance for risk and pain, and their ability to think abstractly. This isn’t about what your body language is communicating to others; it’s about what your body language is communicating to you: your body language is changing your mind, which changes your behavior, which changes your outcomes.

This simple life hack – standing in a bathroom stall like Wonder Woman before a stressful meeting – has the potential to substantially improve women’s ability to lean in - to take risks, face fears and barriers, and to endure the stressors inherent to the kinds of changes Sandberg recommends.

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