

## 9. A Guide for Female Leaders: Wielding Power & Remaining Feminine

Leadership and power are somewhat easier for men.

Women have to deal with the famous double standard, which is real and which won't go away any time soon because it's not just nurture, but also nature.

But this is also your opportunity: the fewer the women who can strike a great balance, the better for you.

So let's start.

**Question:** Can I, as a woman, be as tough and assertive as a man as a leader?

**Answer:** Sure you can. But it comes at a price.

Women who don't pay attention to femininity and "copy" more typically male assertive styles of leadership must be ready for compromises. An assertive female leader and a woman who embraces a more autocratic style of leadership will:

- **Face social backlash** (less liked and more isolated)
- **Lose out in social charm** (you know those women who enter any group, smile, touch people and everyone loves and respect? forget that.. )
- **Be less attractive in dating** (most men prefer more submissive women)

And also know that most guys will be joking a lot behind your back. Expect your employees or reports to laugh about "how big is your dick", about "your man crowing at home in your presence" and "how are you going to fuck your dates".

If you're OK with that, great.

But keep on reading and you can get a few good ideas to make your leadership even better.

On how to add some femininity to your leadership style and, maybe, how to combine both worlds of assertion & power with femininity and likability.

Why should you want to be both assertive and feminine?

Because as we said many times in this course, ultimate power is the ability to adapt and utilize different forms of persuasion, influence, and power.

## **The Science Of The “Female Leader Curse”**

Research has spoken loud and plenty: many women pay a social price for their power and leadership positions.

By “social price” I refer here as to being disliked and, possibly, socially marginalized and excluded.

On the workplace, that might mean being passed up for promotions, being the first choice for getting fired or, in politics, that could mean not getting elected.

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

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.

Of course, [there are also studies to the contrary](#), but when it comes to female leadership the body of research overwhelmingly points out to women facing strong social backlash when they pursue power and/or when they present dominant traits (just as an example you can check the abundant finding of researchers [Madeline Heilman](#) and [Susan Fiske](#)).

The tendency might be stronger with men and conservatives, but it also applies to women and liberals:

<https://youtu.be/XgGwFqYaAD8>

Let's not forget one of the major forces in highlighting the "likable" issue around Hillary Clinton was Barack Obama himself.

## **Female Leadership Curse & Politics**

Looking at the recent political elections also provide supporting evidence for the female leadership curse: Clinton's ratings dropped precipitously the moment she announced her candidacy for the presidency.

Correlation is not causation, but we can probably guess here that an important differentiating factor was her decision to go for the top leadership position.

## **Female Leadership Curse & Dating**

Most mainstream research does not discuss female power, dominance and dating success, but we have evolutionary psychology here to provide us with answers.

Evolutionary psychology postulates that while men seek quantity, women seek "better" partners.

The consequence, of course, is that men feel more comfortable dating and getting into relationships with women who are somewhat "less" than they are.

That's especially true when it comes to power and dominance and that's why women who complain about "bigot men being scared of powerful women" are missing the mark: men are actually being rather rational in going for a more submissive woman who is more likely to stay with them and not cheat or leave him for another man.

In a nutshell: powerful, ambitious and dominant women are unattractive for most men.

## **The Power-Charm Trade-Off**

Some women might want to 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.

The second problem is in actual power. Women who go for authoritarian and more typically male styles of power lose all or almost all of their charming power and seductive power.

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

As an example, look at this video:

<https://youtu.be/TpKzushB6nU>

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 her most angry, judgmental and haughty attitudes and facial expressions which make her easily disliked.

## The Solution

The “female leadership curse” has a solution though.  
The solution needs social intelligence, tact and some good understanding of psychology, power dynamics and human nature.

Here is how:

### **#1. Do It For An Ideal, The 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 an ugly expression, but it correctly identifies the problem here.

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

Indeed, typically female expressions of dominance are more pro-social than men.

So channeling your power and dominance towards more pro-social pursuits makes you come across as more feminine.

And if we’re talking about good leadership, you should 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.

## #2. Use “We” Frames No To Look 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](#) shows 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*

This is good for men as well by the way, and especially when you need votes and support.

One study examined the campaign speeches of candidates in every prime minister election in Australian history.

In 80 percent of elections the winner was the one to use more collective pronouns (i.e., “we” and “us”), suggesting an attraction to candidates who speak on everyone's behalf.

## #3. Go For More Indirect Forms Of Dominance

[Studies show](#) that direct expressions of power and dominance (for example: direct requests) adversely affected women's likability. But indirect expressions of power (ie.: eye contact) did not.

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)

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.

[In this SATC clip](#), you can see an example of using eye contact instead of verbal commands.

### **3.2. Use More Warm Body Language**

Whenever you can, consider using fewer commands and more body language.

Ideally, warm body language.

I will give you an example: years ago there was a lady hosting an event on stage.

We were just back from a break, and it usually takes a few seconds for people to get back in “concentration mode” and you could still hear the chatter when the lady was already on stage.

Now it was on her to accelerate that process and make the crowd go silent.

How would she handle it?

She did it very poorly: she put her index finger in front of her mouth and blew out her “shhhht” as loudly as possible.

Very bad move: it made her come across as too domineering and it felt disrespectful towards the audience.

At the very least, she could have smiled while doing that.

What would have been a better way of achieving the same goal? If the audience is small, you can just look at the people with a slight smile and they will know what's up. And they will be grateful for you being so gracious.

With a bigger audience, you could raise your hands to grab attention and start talking.

Seen an example here:

<https://youtu.be/mz7B1WpCo54>

Or even just start talking is enough, especially if you have a microphone.

For example, you could comment on the break, use some humor or even comment on how “it takes a few seconds for the room to go silent”.

## **#4. Go For Democratic Style Of Leadership**

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

But here is the catch: [research shows](#) that when women lead with a democratic style of leadership (also read: “[Primal Leadership](#)”), then there is no social price to pay and 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 Maternal Style of Leadership**

As much as I recommend men to adopt a “father figure” style of leadership, I can also recommend a “mother figure” style of leadership to women.

A mother figure style of leadership is a wonderful role and solution to most of the female leadership problems.

When needed, you bust out the spanking.

But it's not a scathing dress down in front of everyone, but 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:

[https://youtu.be/H\\_Ga20cefMg](https://youtu.be/H_Ga20cefMg)

Angela Merkel's secret is that of staying away from extreme male expressions of power and typically feminine expressions which would decrease a leader's perceived authority. It can be a valid option for women.

## **#5. Offset Power With 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:

*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.

When women come across as “gender deviant”, from a sociological perspective, people place 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 offset the

[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  
Talk about how you spend time home/parenting

If no children, get a dog and do the same

Speak about hobbies and passion which are typically feminine

Make a point to deny interest in typically male fields (technology, cars, football etc.)

Tell stories of your cooking

Put fresh flowers in your office

Avoid masculine suits

Use more colorful dresses

Do your 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 of her leadership role*

## **#6. 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.

<https://youtu.be/2PjZAeiU7uM>

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. Neutralize Yourself**

Since highly-feminine leadership is difficult, you can consider a more gender-neutral style of leadership.

A gender-neutral style of leadership refrains from the most masculine expressions of power as much as it stays away from the least leader-like expressions of femininity.

As you might have guessed, an example is the previous “mutti” Angela Merkel.

One of the advantages of foregoing high femininity is that you can more easily go into more assertive leadership styles without breaking character or feeling like you’re not being true to yourself.

And you can also more easily go into a more submissive, more typical female role when you’re out dating. Or when you’re home with your man.

## **#9. 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:

<https://youtu.be/T-QndjqHDGU>

## **#10. Add Feminine Traits To Power**

Finally, depending on your position and role, you can add a few typical feminine traits to your presentations, speeches and daily conversation.

The woman in this example is an absolute master.  
Not only people love her, but everyone also respects her.

Her individual situation might not fully reflect your position: she is the president of a big Toastmasters club, so she's somewhat in the entertainment industry.

Thus, you might not be able to go as far as she goes.

But you could take a few of her moves and tone them down a bit.

Or you might use them outside of work.

Take a look:

<https://youtu.be/aue7t2iPkWM>

A great mix of femininity, power, and vulnerability.

What allows her to be relatively extreme in both her feminine and self-expressions while still being held in high regard is that she is really good at what she does.

And that's a good rule of thumb: the better you are, the more freedom you have of injecting your own character in whatever you do (as opposed to "distant, neutral professional").

## **Unfeminine Example Of Female Leadership**

Watch this video of Mel Robbins for an example of unfeminine leadership style:

<https://youtu.be/992lt-qpz8Q>

She is generally too forceful and dominant in her delivery.

But while at times she changes her pitch and delivery style for her speech, her commands are always too forceful. And that also creates a big rift between her content and her commanding interludes, which breaks the flow of communication.

It also comes across as insensitive and cold.

She blurts out commands without any regard for the receiver, making

her come across as that type of “always angry” boss that you would never want to have.

When she addresses the public she is also being too domineering, which is not going to give her any brownie points with the audience.

I’m not sure whether she is forcing herself to push just a little bit too hard, but that’s also one of the issues: some people might think that she is trying to overcompensate –[just like the martial artist we saw earlier](#)–.

But whether she’s forcing herself or she’s being natural, she still comes across as “jarringly overpowering”.

I will tell you what most guys would never say but definitely think: “Gosh, I feel sorry for her husband”.

## **The Future Of Female Power**

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.

So yes, it makes sense to invest and learn how to be a more feminine leader.

## SUMMARY

Some men deeply, truly resent female success.

But it's a minority.

So success is not the issue, here.

It's power, dominance, and leadership that are a bit trickier.

Specifically, it's *how* women wield their power that makes a big difference. And when women behave like men, they lose out in important aspects which can help make your life much more fulfilling.

This lesson gave you practical pointers on how to be a strong leader while retaining femininity.