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Four Ways Women Stunt Their Careers Unintentionally

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Having combed through more than a thousand 360-degree performance assessments conducted in recent years, we've found, by a wide margin, that the primary criticism men have about their female colleagues is that the women they work with seem to exhibit low self-confidence.

Our gut says that this may partly be a perception issue — we've observed that men sometimes interpret (or misinterpret) an inclination in women to share credit or defer judgment as a lack of confidence. Still, perception or not, there is some research to suggest that women themselves feel less self-assured at work than men. [A study](#) released in 2011 by Europe's Institute of Leadership and Management revealed that women report having lower confidence in regard to their careers:

- Men were more confident across all age groups, with 70% of males having high or very high levels of self-confidence, compared to 50% of the women surveyed.
- Half of women managers admitted to feelings of self-doubt about their performance and career, but only 31% of men reported the same.
- The study also found that this lack of confidence extends to a more cautious approach to applying for jobs and promotions: 20% of men said they would apply for a role despite only partially meeting its job description, compared to 14% of women.

Looking back through scores of interviews we've conducted in the course of training and coaching engagements, and returning to the 360 reports, these are the four specific low-confidence behaviors cited by managers (male and female alike):

Being overly modest. We see that men are more willing to take public credit for their successes. Women believe their accomplishments should speak for themselves, and they spend less effort ensuring they get the gold star next to their name. While modesty is a nice character trait, it's naive to believe that your boss, your clients, or your colleagues will recognize your accomplishments if you fly under the radar.

Not asking. We've seen it over and over again: women fail to get promoted because they fail to step up and apply. It feels personally risky to step-up and ask for a big job or assignment — but there's really no other way. Not asking means you've lost the chance to influence the outcome.

When [Sharon Allen](#) became chairman of Deloitte & Touche USA in 2003, she not only became the highest-ranking woman in the firm's history, she also became the first woman to hold that role at a leading professional services firm. It may seem surprising, then, that even Allen learned this lesson the hard way. As a rising manager in her thirties,

she was taken aback when she received a memo announcing the promotion of several close colleagues. She wondered why she didn't make the list. Allen stewed about it for a day or two, and then went in to see her boss.

"I was surprised to see my name not included on the promotion list," Sharon said to him. "I have accomplished A, B, C, D and E and I think I deserved that promotion." Her boss replied, "Sharon, I had no idea you had accomplished all of those things. You didn't let me know." When Sharon tells the story today, she laughs and shakes her head. As she told us, "That's the very last time I ever let that happen."

Blending in. Some women go to great lengths to avoid attention. They don't want to stand out — in meetings, in the boardroom or even in the elevator. A client from one of our workshops told us that her greatest fear was riding the elevator with the CEO. *What would she say to him? Would they talk about the weather?* But blending in means you are missing opportunities — every single day — to stand out and sell your ideas. Another client we know (also a woman) waits in the lobby many mornings in order to ride the elevator with the CEO. Her confidence has never been questioned.

Remaining silent. It's not easy to get a word in during meetings, especially when six other colleagues are all fighting for the floor. But failing to speak up and express yourself when you have something relevant to add is a missed chance to get in the game. Getting your point of view across during important discussions is essential for your career.

What we've found in our work is that career momentum for women is not about adding job skills but about changing everyday thinking and behaviors. We don't think the majority of high-performing women need to make major changes. Small adjustments in how they think and act can improve not only how confident they seem, but how confident they feel.