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How women can assert themselves without triggering backlash

It probably would not be worth it to most women to acquire a longer chin, prominent nose or bushy eyebrows to gain an advantage in negotiation, but it turns out that there are many other things a female negotiator or leader can do to assert dominance without experiencing what is known as the “backlash effect” — a well-documented phenomenon in which women who display assertive behavior experience negative outcomes.

The key to avoiding the backlash effect, according to a recent article reporting on a meta-analysis of 71 studies involving nearly 7,500 participants, is to assert dominance in a way that “flies under the radar of awareness.” In sum, instead of using direct language, use body language or the manner in which you speak to show you are in charge.

Professors Melissa J. Williams of Emory University and Larissa Z. Tiedens of Stanford University explain what causes backlash and how to avoid it in their recent article, “The Subtle Suspension of Backlash: A Meta-Analysis of Penalties for Women’s Implicit and Explicit Dominance Behavior” in the *Psychological Bulletin* of the American Psychological Association.

Past research shows that women are viewed more negatively than men when they seek to be dominant. For example, in early studies, women trained to be dominant in group discussions were “less liked than their male confederates displaying the same behaviors” and in interviews, “women who assertively emphasized their skills, accomplishments or desire to lead tended to be liked less, and to be seen as less hireable, compared with men describing themselves identically.”

Williams and Tiedens reviewed a large amount of underlying data from the scientific literature

(including data from unpublished articles and articles not explicitly focused on gender) and concluded that displays of dominance that are communicated outside the conscious mind escape the backlash effect.

Like a herd of horses, we are all constantly sorting ourselves into a social hierarchy based on perceived dominance. While dominance itself “is inherently neither socially desirable nor undesirable,” our unconscious minds do not like it when we notice women asserting it.

Backlash is a reaction to a perceived “violation” of expected social norms. Apparently, despite massive strides for women in the workplace, our unconscious minds still believe that women should be warm, not dominant.

The theory of backlash is similar to intriguing research on mimicry that demonstrates that you are more likely to get the deal or the job offer if you mimic someone’s body language. If you do it subtly, for example by moving your arm in a similar but not identical way and delaying your mimicry by a few seconds, it can be extremely powerful.

However, if you mimic in a way that violates the other person’s unconscious expectations, such as mimicking someone lower in the hierarchy more than they are mimicking you, it destroys likeability.

So how can women be assertive under the radar?

According to the studies, using your body to take up space, by standing tall, draping an arm over the chair next to you, putting an ankle across one knee, leaning back in a chair with your hands behind your head or holding your arms out wide are all effective. (Think of animals fluffing their fur to look bigger.)

Other ways to establish dominance without initiating the backlash effect include speaking in a loud voice, lowering your



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eyebrows, interrupting, maintaining eye contact while speaking, using intrusive gestures such as pointing, taking long turns when talking and avoiding hesitating while speaking.

The studies also showed that women with dominant facial structures, such as a prominent brow, chin or nose did not experience the backlash effect.

Given this research, a woman who is seeking to influence others may want to incorporate some of this (short of plastic surgery) into her repertoire.

Of course it seems ridiculous that women would have to engage in such strategies when they need to make demands of others, but the human brain has not kept pace with the advances of women over the last century. The backlash problem persists in part because even humans with the best of intentions have brains that are constantly taking shortcuts without conscious awareness.

The good news is that strategies are emerging to defeat these biases. For example, Chicago’s own Arin Reeves has written on specific ways a well-intentioned interviewer can defeat implicit race and gender biases, including substituting a different identity for a candidate on a resume he or

she is considering to see if there is an effect on the interviewer’s initial reaction to the candidate.

Do you like the female athlete as much as you like the male? The Asian student as much as the one that looks like you?

Such strategies are rooted in revealing unconscious bias to the conscious mind. This makes me wonder if — in certain situations — a woman who is trying to establish dominance can save herself from having to do the avoid-backlash-effect dance simply by explicitly reminding her audience of this body of research. However, I find it difficult to imagine how this conversation would unfold.

Williams and Tiedens point out that although the studies focused on the evaluation of “one type of behavior (dominance) that is counter-stereotypic for one social group (women),” the flying under the radar technique may apply to other biases.

For example, in one experiment, male job candidates who described themselves modestly violated the expectation that they would be self-promoting and were not liked. The authors speculate that if males communicated humility in more implicit, nonverbal ways, they might get better results.

Writing about this research is somewhat uncomfortable for a woman. Describing how to use body language instead of direct language to assert oneself feels like pandering to a biased society instead of working to change it.

Planning nonverbal ways to assert dominance in a meeting to avoid inciting backlash also seems like a lot of work on top of all the other tasks a busy and assertive woman already has on her to-do list.

It would be nice to just be direct and effective. I wonder if some of those plastic glasses with the bushy eyebrows and big nose attached would do the trick.