

How Men Get Penalized for Straying from Masculine Norms

by David M. Mayer



When women behave in ways that don't fit their gender stereotype — for example, by being assertive — they are viewed as less likable and ultimately less hireable. Does that same hold true for men? Are they similarly penalized for straying from the strong masculine stereotype?

The short answer is yes. Research demonstrates that men too face backlash when they don't adhere to masculine gender stereotypes — when they show vulnerability, act nicer, display empathy, express sadness, exhibit modesty, and proclaim to be feminists. This is troubling not least because it discourages men from behaving in ways known to benefit their teams and their own careers. Let's look at each of these behaviors:

Showing vulnerability. Men are socialized to not ask for help or be vulnerable — and they can be penalized when they challenge this notion. An informative set of studies from 2015 finds that when male (but not female) leaders ask for help, they are

viewed as less competent, capable, and confident. And when men make themselves vulnerable by disclosing a weakness at work, they are perceived to have lower status. This is problematic, as not seeking help when you need it or admitting areas for improvement inevitably leads to mistakes and less development.

Being nicer. Given that many of us want more nice guys at work, we might assume that men would be celebrated for being calm and unassuming. Wrong. Research has found that men who are more communal and agreeable (e.g., warm, caring, supportive, sympathetic) made significantly less money than more stereotypically masculine men. More agreeable men across multiple industries made an average of 18% less in income and were evaluated as less likely to have management potential as compared to less agreeable men.

Similarly, “nice guys” were evaluated as less competent and less hireable for managerial roles. One experimental study found that male managers in consulting who tended to advocate more for their team than for themselves were judged to be lower in agency and competence and more likely to be considered for job dismissal. Unfortunately, given the costs — real and psychological — of being a nice guy at work, men may be less likely to engage in these behaviors that could help their own career and make them better colleagues.

Displaying empathy. Empathy is an important part of leadership. However, women are more likely to receive “credit” for it than men. A recent study found that female leaders who displayed empathy (as reported by their employees) were less likely to be in danger of career derailment — e.g., problems with interpersonal relationships, difficulty building and leading teams, difficulty changing and adapting, failure in meeting business goals and objectives, and having too narrow a functional orientation. Men did not get this boost — there was no relationship between male leaders’ empathy and their bosses’ assessment of potential career derailment. These findings are consequential because displaying empathy is critical for leading effectively.

Expressing sadness. U.S. men are socialized to be stoic. What happens when they show emotions other than anger? Research demonstrates that men who show sadness at work are thought of as less deserving of that emotion as compared to sad women. A study from 2017 found that men who cry at work are perceived as more emotional and less competent than women who cry. And when men cry in response to performance feedback, the feedback provider rates them as a lower performer, less likely to get promoted, and less capable, as compared to women who cry. While we don’t want men

or women regularly crying at work, an authentic work environment has to allow all employees to experience the same emotions without penalty.

Exhibiting modesty. What happens when men display modesty? Research demonstrates that men who were more humble in expressing their qualifications were evaluated as less likeable, less agentic, and weaker than modest women. Similarly, men in the hiring process who were more self-effacing were evaluated by potential employers as lower in competence and less desirable to hire, as compared to self-effacing women. With the increasing awareness of the detrimental effects of narcissism at work, we should encourage men's modesty rather than penalize it.

Being a feminist or feminine. As noted previously, a sizeable percentage of American men self-identify as being a feminist. However, research shows that feminist men are more likely to be the victims of sexual harassment — from being told inappropriate jokes to being the recipient of unwanted sexual advances. In addition, research shows that men are more likely to be harassed when they work in male-dominated jobs and are perceived as too feminine. Research finds that men who ask for family leave, something that was historically in the purview of women, are viewed as poorer workers and are less recommended for rewards, compared to female counterparts. We should be welcoming feminist men, rather than derogating them for not being “man enough.”

Can we stop penalizing good behavior from men?

Organizations have a stake in ensuring that men aren't penalized for these behaviors — which not only help men's own and their team's performance, but also create a culture that supports gender equality. So what can leaders do?

Celebrate men who engage in positive behaviors. It is important for men who display these “nice guy” qualities to be well received by organizational leadership. For example, when negotiating pay, organizations should not give in to a man who is dominant, but instead try to make sure men are paid based on merit. In addition, given the many benefits of humility, organizations should create a culture where men who are humble are praised. Organizational leaders can champion men in the organization by telling stories about how their vulnerability helped the organization perform better.

Train more broadly about gender stereotypes. Diversity training often evokes skepticism from employees—especially men. One way to address this issue is to focus on how gender stereotypes about women *and* men impact expectations for how they should

behave. Given that white men are more likely to feel defensive when organizations provide diversity training, highlighting how men and women are both victims of gender stereotypes can help invoke compassion from all trainees.

Do not “gender police.” Gender policing means imposing normative gender expressions in terms of behavior or appearance. Research shows that trying to make men adhere to gender norms, for example, in terms of attire, is detrimental in terms of allowing men to fully express themselves at work. Workplaces that allow for authentic expression in terms of dress and demeanor will be more attractive to employees, especially millennials.

It is an important time to encourage a more modern form of masculinity. Organizations can and should celebrate traditional aspects of masculinity such as responsibility, assertiveness, and competitiveness, as well as compassion, humility, and kindness. This is not only the right thing to do but also will create the type of environment in which men, women, and organizations will thrive.