

goop

Why Women Struggle With Self-Promotion

Tara Mohr, a career coach and author of [Playing Big: Practical Wisdom for Women Who Want to Speak Up, Create, and Lead](#), has noticed something in her years of coaching women to reach their potential: We're often not good at owning our accomplishments. As [Mohr explains in her book](#), this is often why women in particular excel as students: It's quiet, heads-down work that's then graded independently—it's good work that's then recognized as good work, without the need to draw any extra attention. This "good girl" modeling doesn't serve us very well in the real world, though, where it's easy to get overlooked if you're not inclined to point out all of your accomplishments. We asked Mohr—who has written on [why women are so inclined to criticize other women](#), and [how we undermine ourselves with words](#) for *goop*—how to get past fear of self-promotion.

Q

Why is self-promotion so tricky for women?

A

It's tricky for women to talk about our accomplishments and our abilities for a few different reasons. In the workplace, we tend to be judged more harshly than men for self-promoting, particularly when it's other women who are doing the judging. (Yes, sadly, the research suggests that women are more likely than men to deem other women who advocate for themselves strongly as "unlikable.")

Combine that with good girl conditioning that tells us to never do anything that could come across as "full of ourselves," and many women end up uncomfortable talking about their accomplishments, quite worried about coming across as "bragging" or "arrogant."

Then, in our discomfort, it's easy to assume that putting a key accomplishment on a resumé is enough for it to be noticed in a job interview process, so we never bring it up in the interview. Or we assume, for years, that working hard and getting great results in our job is enough—but we don't realize that the leaders around us are too busy to notice what we've done!

What I've found working with women, is that at some point in their careers, many realize that to be put in the roles they want, to get the projects, the clients, the opportunities they desire, they have to figure out how to make people aware of their great performance.

This is a realization many women are late to come by, especially if they were good student types in school, because self-advocacy isn't needed much to excel in the classroom. In school,

we get used to doing heads down, quiet, quality work without ever having to talk it up. In the workplace, the rules change.

And yet, even as women realize they need to make their good work more visible to others, they also sense that they will probably need to do that in a little bit of a different way than their male counterparts do, if they don't want to be seen as arrogant, or not team oriented. And that's where many women feel stuck.

Q

Are there ways to make the whole concept of self-promotion for women more comfortable (or is that uneasiness in and of itself, the real problem)?

A

What's been helpful for me, and for so many women I work with, is to not think of self-promotion as pumping yourself up, faking, or striving to prove anything. Instead, it can be more of a centered, honest sharing, and highlighting of what you've truly accomplished. It's really just what you'd say if we were able to [take your inner critic](#) and your fear of being seen as arrogant out of the conversation.

If the idea of self-promotion makes you cringe and want to run the other direction, here are a few tips for reframing the concept:

1. Don't use the term "self-promotion"—even in your own head! That may sound too pushy, ego-centric, or just annoying to you. Think about "making your work visible" instead. That's a much more comfortable framing for many women.
2. Focus on being of greater service. Instead of thinking about promoting yourself, call to mind the ways your talents and your work are of service to others. Get excited about having more impact. For example, let's take a graphic designer who is a few years into building her business. Instead of feeling like she has to "promote herself" she can focus on her positive impact helping organizations create beautiful, distinctive visual presences. She can get really excited about the idea of expanding that positive impact on others. From there, she can talk about her great work in a way that will feel better to her and likely be more compelling to those around her.

Q

Can you expand on the concept of making your work visible? How does that manifest?

A

This first thing to do is to simply start living with this idea—that your works’ visibility is important and something to be mindful of. In my courses for women, I find that when women begin looking at their careers through that new lens, it often sparks a lot of insight for them, as well as ideas about how they can make their work more visible.

Ask yourself, “Are my accomplishments visible within my organization?” Or, if you are an entrepreneur, you might ask, are my important accomplishments and best work visible in some way to current and potential clients, desired partners, or even my industry more broadly?

It’s also helpful to think about the “who.” Who do you want to be aware of your good work? Who are the decision makers impacting your career? Who are the leaders you’d like to work with more, or be “tapped” by for future roles or special projects? Is anything currently in place that would make them aware of your good work? If not, what might help them become aware?

You can brainstorm from there about ideas. For example, posting an updated portfolio of your great work on your website and sending out an announcement about it to past clients might move the needle. Or, if you work inside a large organization, you might send out an email commending the recent great work of your team, knowing that their work reflects well on you, as their manager. Or, you could set up a brown bag lunch for other departments in your organization to learn about the cool project your team has been working on, and to share best practices that you know would benefit the rest of the organization.

The specifics will look different depending on your goals and organizational culture, but there are lots of ways to gracefully make you and your work more visible.

Q

If you feel like you’re being overlooked in the workplace how should you address this?

A

Sometimes the issue is that you’re doing great work but it’s not visible. If that’s the case, you need to brainstorm ideas for more visibility, like the ones above.

Sometimes the issue is that you aren’t yet delivering the standout work that’s enough to get noticed. A lot of us are still waiting in some way for permission to play big, to share our voices. We’re waiting to be noticed by someone important—as if after that we’ll really start shining. But it works the other way around!

If this is your situation, ask yourself, “What are my greatest strengths and are they coming forth here?” Think back on what abilities you’ve often been recognized for, or what talents propelled your biggest accomplishments. Are you using those strengths much in your current job? If not, brainstorm how you could use them more in your work. For example, if you realize you’ve been praised a lot for your abilities with numbers, maybe you want to take a bigger role in the quantitative planning your team does.

A second great question to ask is, “How can I add more value?” How can I contribute more of what will really move the dial for what matters to my company or team? Start doing those things! Or, if needed, talk with the appropriate person in your organization about your ideas for how you could add more value, and with them, decide on one or more to get started on.

And last but not least, ask some curious questions. Approach the people that you feel overlooked by and ask them: “Am I contributing what you’d like me to contribute? What would you like to see more of from me?” Aim to be surprised at least once by what you learn in this conversation. (If you are truly asking curious questions and listening carefully to the answers, you’ll be surprised by something you learn from them.)

Q

On a bigger level, do you think that there’s a way to push—socially—for change and the acceptance of “self-promotion” from women, or to undo that “good girl” conditioning? Or do you think it’s part of our biological natures not to “brag”? OR, do you think that there needs to be more of a sensitivity to it when it comes to men “bragging,” so that the playing field becomes more even?

A

We could have such a long conversation about this one rich question!

I think we can each help bring about a more comfortable climate for women around this. One way is for each woman to do it herself—to own her accomplishments and highlight them. As we do that collectively, we alter what’s normal for women in the culture.

The second hugely important thing is for women to notice when they are having the thought, “Gosh, she’s bragging.” Or, “She sounds arrogant.” When you have that thought, you are contributing to the policing of women owning their accomplishments. Notice the thought you are having about her bragging or arrogance, and do your own inner work to let go of it!

Most likely the woman you are listening to isn’t doing something you’d perceive as “bragging” if she were male—and if she is really bragging, so what? You have better things to spend your energy on than reacting to that. And since there are so many women underplaying their

accomplishments, maybe we can all feel just fine if we encounter a woman on the opposite side of the spectrum—she’s balancing things out.

When I think about this idea of “bragging” or “arrogance” I often think about a little girl—maybe five or six years old. Picture her making a drawing she just loves, that she’s so proud of. She’s probably going to want to show it to a parent or teacher or someone else. She hasn’t yet learned not to gleefully say, “Hey look, I made this!” We have a natural instinct to want to share and be affirmed for our creations. Of course, as adults, we (probably) aren’t going to dance around the house singing about our latest piece of work like when we were five, but we can still indulge in that healthy pride, joy, and desire to share about what we’ve made and what we’ve done. When we become overcome with the fear of being perceived as bragging, we’ve let stereotypes about what’s appropriate for women to express cause us to lose our connection to that healthy desire to have our work be seen and recognized by others.

—

*[Tara Mohr](#) is a career coach who offers courses for women on *Playing Bigger in the office*. Goop readers can get Tara’s free *10 Rules for Brilliant Women Workbook* [here](#).*