

When your woman card isn't working right

By [MaryAnn McKibben Dana](#)

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My computer science husband sent me this link recently: [“I had so many advantages, and I barely made it”: Pinterest engineer on Silicon Valley sexism.](#)

How can an article be so unsurprising, yet so wholly dispiriting at the same time?

The author describes her early career in computer science, but the dynamics are common in many male-dominated fields:

At Stanford, I took two introductory computer science classes. I soon became convinced that I was much too behind my male classmates to ever catch up. ... My classmates bragged about finishing assignments in three hours. Listening to them chat, I felt mortified: the same work had taken me 15 hours of anguish at the keyboard to complete. *They are quantifiably five times better than I am*, I told myself.

So she was shocked when the professor asked her to TA the class. She agreed with great trepidation. But then she started grading the same assignments she'd previously found intimidating—and was shocked: the braggarts were *not* five times more competent. In fact, their work wasn't nearly as good. There was a disconnect between the men's level of confidence and their actual output.

The so-called [confidence gap](#) between men and women has gotten a lot of airplay lately. This confidence drops off among girls in the middle-school years, especially in technical subjects—and we're seeing a bit of that in our own household.

Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In movement grows out of the awareness that women underplay their abilities relative to men, for a variety of reasons. It's been famously reported that men will apply for a job when they meet only 60 percent of the criteria, whereas women only tend to apply if they are a 100-percent fit. Women are also reticent to negotiate higher salaries for themselves.

This disparity has bothered me for a long time, though probably not in the way you think. I agree with the diagnosis, but not the prescription. Too often—that is, almost 100 percent of the time—the problem is framed as a deficiency for the women, a character flaw that the women must fix somehow. Women need to lean in! Be confident! Fake it 'til you make it!

OK. I can accept that. And what about the men? Where is their need for change?

Take the example of the men who bragged about completing the programming assignment in three hours. At best, their bragging shows a startling lack of self awareness of their own competence. At worst, these men are aware of their limitations and are outright lying to cement their status in the pecking order. How messed up is that?

So sure, maybe women have some work to do to feel empowered to apply for jobs even if they don't meet every last qualification. But we should also be teaching men to do an honest self-assessment of their gifts and skills. Is applying for a job when you only meet a little more than half the qualifications a good thing? Is that something I'm supposed to aspire to?

Sometimes it works out, I suppose. Other times you end up with a grossly underqualified [man] in the job, whose primary gift is the art of bulls\*\*\*ting. (Hey, they call it the [Peter Principle](#), not the Patricia Principle!)

And yes, there's a certain amount of "fake it 'til you make it" required to get along in the world. But shouldn't we be critiquing a culture in which men are socialized to misrepresent themselves in order to gain status? Why is it the women who must do the changing, adjusting, and conforming?

"If Lehman Brothers had been Lehman Sisters, maybe there wouldn't have been a global financial crisis." Many have quipped this, and [at least one person has asserted it in all seriousness](#). I believe strongly in increasing women's presence in historically underrepresented fields. And that representation will bring its own cultural shifts. But I grow weary of the framing that women must contort themselves to the default (male).

Meanwhile we have Donald Trump saying that Hillary Clinton wouldn't get 5 percent of the vote if she were a man. Yes, many of us are excited at breaking that highest glass ceiling. But it's cute that the Donald thinks Clinton's gender is a net positive to

the tune of 50 percentage points in the presidential race.

As Sady Doyle argued a few months ago, [“America loves women like Hillary Clinton—as long as they’re not asking for a promotion.”](#) Clinton’s approval ratings as First Lady, Senator and Secretary of State were quite high. She’s consistently ranked one of the most admired women in the world. But now that she’s asking for our presidential votes, her disapproval ratings have predictably increased.

Setting aside the particularities of Hillary Clinton, the broader point stands: we judge women harshly when they come across as too assertive. What’s going to change that dynamic? Women getting better at the game? Frankly, I doubt it. What’s going to change the dynamic is men learning skills in collaboration, self-awareness, and authenticity. Once the typical corporate alpha male ceases to be the default marker of success, we’ll see real change.

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