

You Cannot Outperform Who You Believe You Are

The gap in women's leadership was never about ability. It's about identity — and the neuroscience proves it.

By Clarette C. Farmer, Esq., MBA • Founder, The Lexicon Institute

Somewhere in your organization right now is a woman who is, by every measure, the most capable person in the room. She has the credentials. She has the results. She has the judgment. And she is the quietest about it.

She over-prepares and under-asks. She rehearses the sentence, then softens it as it leaves her mouth. She reads the room so well that she disappears into it. And when the stakes are highest — the pitch, the raise, the negotiation, the moment that decides things — she becomes smaller than she is. Not because she lacks the talent. Because something older and quieter takes over.

If you flinched reading that, stay with me. This one is for you.

The gap was never ability

For a decade we have explained the leadership gap as a pipeline problem, and the numbers are real. Women hold just 29% of C-suite seats, and the erosion starts at the very first step up: for every 100 men promoted to manager, only 93 women are — and just 60 Black women — a “broken rung” that has persisted for over a decade (McKinsey & LeanIn, Women in the Workplace 2025). The math compounds cruelly — a gap that opens at the first promotion widens at every level above it.

And it is expensive for everyone, not just for women. Companies in the top quartile for gender diversity in leadership are meaningfully more likely to financially outperform their peers (McKinsey). This is not a fairness footnote. It's a performance problem hiding in plain sight.

But here is what a decade of programming keeps getting wrong. We treat it as a skills gap. We send women to another workshop, another “lean in,” another seminar on confidence — and the most capable women in the building stay exactly where they are.

The ceiling was never their ability. It's who they believe they are when the pressure is on.

This is physiology, not a metaphor

When a woman steps into a high-stakes moment under evaluation and some part of her senses threat, her brain does exactly what it evolved to do. The amygdala fires. Stress hormones flood the system. And the prefrontal cortex — the seat of judgment, working memory, and self-control — goes quiet.

Neuroscientists such as Amy Arnsten have mapped this precisely: under stress, the very region you rely on for clear thinking is the first to go offline. So the most capable person in the room loses access to her best thinking at the exact moment she needs it most. Not because she is weak. Because she is human, and her nervous system arrived before her intellect did.

Now layer on what psychologists call **stereotype threat**. Decades of research beginning with Claude Steele show that when a woman is aware she might confirm a negative stereotype, that awareness itself consumes cognitive resources. She runs a silent background program — don't prove them right — that draws down the capacity she needs to perform. She is doing two jobs at once: the work, and the constant management of how the work will be perceived. The men beside her are usually doing one.

This is why “just be more confident” is not merely unhelpful — it's the wrong instruction to the wrong system. You cannot think your way out of a nervous-system response. But here is the hopeful part: you can train it. The brain is plastic. Regulation is a skill. Composure is not a trait you were born with or without — it is a physiological capacity you can build, until the pressure that used to shrink you becomes the pressure you lead through.

Communication and negotiation are the same act

Hold two truths next to each other.

First: **every act of leadership is a negotiation**. Every hard conversation, every ask, every boundary, every deal — the same act. And every negotiation is, at its core, communication. How you speak is your leverage. The words, the pauses, the willingness to let a sentence land without rushing to fill the silence — that is where power lives, or leaks.

Second: the research shows women are penalized for the exact behavior we keep telling them to adopt. In landmark studies, women who negotiated on their own behalf were judged less likable and less hireable — while men who did the identical thing paid no such price (Bowles, Babcock & Lai). So “negotiate harder, ask for more, take up space” marches women straight into a double bind: too soft and you're overlooked; too assertive and you're punished.

Here is the intersection almost no one names: **you cannot solve a double bind with better tactics**. You solve it by changing where the communication comes from. When your voice flows from a grounded, settled identity — not from apology, not from armor, not from the exhausting calculation of how to be palatable — you stop performing “confident” and start being clear. You are no longer too much or too

little. You are simply yourself, with authority. That is the difference between a woman who negotiates and gets punished and a woman who leads and gets followed. It was never the volume. It was the source.

Why I do this

I learned it the hard way.

For years I was an attorney who sat across the table in high-stakes negotiations and won — securing more than a million dollars in outcomes for the people I represented. I could protect anyone's leverage but my own. I under-charged. I over-gave. I explained myself when I should have simply stood. I had every skill and still shrank — and for a long time I believed the fix was to be sharper, tougher, more.

It wasn't. I was leading, speaking, and negotiating from a self I had performed for so long I'd mistaken it for me. The day that broke open, everything changed — not because I learned new tactics, but because I finally knew who I was at the table. My composure held. My language sharpened. My results followed. That is the whole of it, and it is why I built The Lexicon Institute: to give women the one thing no workshop ever gave me — a way to lead from the identity up.

Before your next course on confidence

Sit with a harder question first.

How much of your energy today went to doing the work — and how much went to managing how the work would be received? How many times did you soften a sentence you were right about? How often, in the moment that actually mattered, did you make yourself smaller than you are?

You are not underqualified. You may be **under-claimed**. And no amount of competence will fix a problem that competence was never the cause of.

Here is the sentence I would hang on the wall of every capable, stuck, brilliant woman I have ever met:

A woman leads, negotiates, and decides exactly as well as she knows who she is.

The gap was never your ability. It is the distance between who you are and who you've been performing. Close that distance, and everything downstream — your voice, your leverage, your composure, your ceiling — moves with it.

You cannot outperform who you believe you are. So it is worth getting very, very serious about who that is.

Clarette C. Farmer, Esq., MBA is an attorney, executive negotiation strategist, and founder of The Lexicon Institute, where she develops women leaders from the identity up.

SOURCES

McKinsey & LeanIn, [Women in the Workplace 2025](#) · Bowles, Babcock & Lai on the negotiation “backlash effect,” via [Harvard's Program on Negotiation](#) · stress and the prefrontal cortex (Amy Arnsten) · stereotype threat (Claude Steele).