



LeadHERship in the Federal Government

Leadership Self-Efficacy and Self-Doubt: A Look
at Women in the Workplace

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PARTNERSHIP
FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

About the Partnership

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to revitalize the federal government by inspiring a new generation to serve and by transforming the way government works. The Partnership teams up with federal agencies and other stakeholders to make our government more effective and efficient.

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Introduction

In 2019, the Partnership for Public Service released the [Public Service Leadership Model](#) that set a standard for effective leadership in the federal government space. The model identifies two core values—commitment to public good and stewardship of public trust—four key competencies—becoming self-aware, engaging others, leading change and achieving results—and several subcompetencies for federal leaders to focus on in driving their agencies’ missions.

Based on this model, the Partnership developed the Public Service Leadership 360 assessment tool—a multi-rater instrument that evaluates leaders against the model’s values, competencies and subcompetencies. The tool was used by almost 2,000 federal leaders up to date, generating unique data that we analyzed to see patterns in federal leaders’ work experiences.

As noted in our previous [brief](#), our analysis of the Public Service Leadership 360 assessment tool data shows that women scored higher than men on our Public Service Leadership Model’s two core values: stewardship of public trust and commitment to public good.

Women also scored higher than men on all of the model’s key leadership competencies—becoming self-aware, engaging others, leading change and achieving results¹. When looking at the model’s 20 subcompetencies, we arrived at similar results: women scored higher on 19 of them.

These findings are consistent with research on leadership in the private sector. [According to](#) Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman—two pioneers in this field with over three decades of leadership-related research experience—women score higher than men on 14 out of 16 key leadership competencies that define effective leaders.



¹ The differences in values are not large (on a scale of 1 to 7), but are oftentimes statistically significant.

After reviewing these studies and seeing evidence of women’s ability to lead in different areas and circumstances^{2,3}, we asked ourselves a question: to what extent do these results align with women’s leadership self-efficacy—the confidence in one’s own ability to be a leader and achieve results?

Since the 1970s the concept of imposter syndrome, or doubting one’s abilities and feeling like your achievements were not deserved, has plagued many in the workplace.⁴ Some claim that women are more susceptible to this phenomenon and refer to it as a workplace “confidence gap.”⁵ In a 2011 study by the Institute of Leadership and Management, half of the women respondents reported experiencing self-doubt about their professional performance compared with less than a third of participants who identified as men.⁶

We sought to better understand women’s self-confidence in the federal workplace using our 360 assessment data, as well as qualitative data we collected during 13 research interviews and a focus group with women in federal leadership positions. Our data demonstrates that women tend to experience self-doubt and perceive their own performance and leadership skills less favorably than others perceive them. We also found some evidence that women are more reluctant than men to see themselves as confident leaders. We argue that addressing this issue will require structural change and collective action to shift how women are recognized in the workplace.

² Garikipati, Supriya, and Uma Kambhampati. “Leading the Fight Against the Pandemic: Does Gender ‘Really’ Matter?” (2020). https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3617953

³ Sergent, Kayla, and Alexander D. Stajkovic. “Women’s Leadership Is Associated With Fewer Deaths During the COVID-19 Crisis: Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses of United States Governors.” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 105.8 (2020): 771–783. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000577>

⁴ Clance, Pauline R. and Suzanne Imes. “The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention.” *Psychotherapy Theory, Research and Practice*, 15:3 (1978). https://www.paulineroseclance.com/pdf/ip_high_achieving_women.pdf

⁵ Kay, Katty, and Claire Shipman. “The Confidence Gap.” *The Atlantic* (May, 2014).

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/05/the-confidence-gap/359815/>

⁶ Institute of Leadership and Management (2011) cited in Kay, Katty, and Claire Shipman. “The Confidence Gap.” *The Atlantic* (May, 2014). <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/05/the-confidence-gap/359815/>



Self-efficacy in psychology and leadership

Self-efficacy is a term that was originally used in the field of psychology to refer to how individuals evaluate their capacity to execute behaviors to achieve specific goals, or the degree of confidence they have in their abilities to exert control over themselves, others or the social environment.^{7,8} It is important to note that levels of self-efficacy do not stay consistent over the course of a career or lifetime—rather, self-efficacy is thought to be dependent on specific circumstances and can change over time.

In leadership studies, researchers define self-efficacy as an individual’s confidence in their ability to carry out necessary leadership behaviors to achieve results. One’s level of self-efficacy could impact many real-life workplace experiences, including salary negotiations. Women have been found to negotiate salary offers eight times less often than men and ask for one-third less of an increase when they do, while one-fifth of women never negotiate salaries.⁹

Our Public Service Leadership model does not measure self-efficacy precisely, but it does recognize the importance of this concept. One of the model’s key leadership competencies is [becoming self-aware](#), which we define as having an in-depth understanding of one’s abilities, values, thought patterns, motivations and areas for improvement. Developing strong self-efficacy starts with becoming self-aware.

⁷ Albert Bandura, “Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change”, *Psychological Review*, 84(2), 1977, 191-215.

⁸ Albert Bandura, *The exercise of control*, W. H. Freeman, 1997.

⁹ Babcock, Linda, and Sara Laschever, “Women don’t ask”, Princeton University Press., 2003.

What does our research say about self-efficacy?

Our 360 assessment data¹⁰ confirms that women perceive their own performance and leadership skills less favorably than others perceive them. “Other” raters, a group that includes supervisors, peers and direct reports, as well as friends and family, scored women higher than they rated themselves on all four of the Public Service Leadership Model’s core competencies—becoming self-aware, engaging others, leading change and achieving results—and its two core values—stewardship of public trust and commitment to public good.

Interestingly, our data demonstrated the same trend for men—they also rated themselves lower than others rated them.

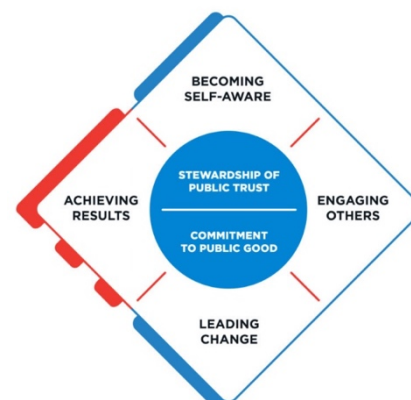


Figure 1. Public Service Leadership Model. Circle in center demonstrates the two core values: stewardship of public trust and commitment to public good. Diamonds around the circle list the key competencies: becoming self-aware, engaging others, leading change and achieving results.

Research from the private sector supports the finding on both women and men rating themselves lower than “others” rate them. But there is a twist. According to an analysis by Zenger and Folkman, the difference between women’s and men’s self-assessments is more significant in the under-age-25 category, suggesting that leaders who are young men are overconfident, while leaders who are young women believe they are less competent than they actually are. By the age of 40, however, this difference in self-confidence evens out.¹¹ Our 360 assessment tool does not ask age. However, it is an instrument aimed at government leaders, and according to the Office of Personnel Management, their average age was 47.5 in 2017¹² -- therefore, it is unlikely that the Public Service Leadership Institute 360 tool was used by many individuals under the age of 25.

Our [analyses](#) also revealed that, when scored by all raters including themselves, both men and women scored the lowest on emotional intelligence and self-reflection—the two subcompetencies within our model’s “becoming self-aware” key competency that is closely related to self-efficacy. The fact that this was true for both men and women leaders, again, points towards similarities between the two groups rather than differences when it comes to

¹⁰A total of 15,130 sets of rating scores were reviewed for this research project. The assessments were completed by 1,123 federal employees who make up the “self” category, and their managers, direct reports, peers, and friends or family--the “others” category. The data was collected during the period from December 2020 to April 15, 2022.

¹¹ Zenger, Zack, and Joseph Folkman, “Research: Women Score Higher Than Men in Most Leadership Skills”, Harvard Business Review, June 25, 2019. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2019/06/research-women-score-higher-than-men-in-most-leadership-skills>

¹² Office of Personnel Management, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/data-analysis-documentation/federal-employment-reports/reports-publications/full-time-permanent-age-distributions/>

this aspect of leadership. This finding suggests that there is a gap between leaders' self-assessments and how their peers and colleagues assess them. In short, both men and women leaders in government appear to be critical of themselves.

For additional insights on women's self-efficacy, we also examined the answers to one of the open-ended questions in our 360 assessment tool, which asked raters to describe the leader they were evaluating in up to three adjectives. As "self-efficacy" is a specialized term that is not likely to be used by people outside the leadership studies field, we searched for the word "confident" as a proxy.

The table below shows the percentage of answers by "others" and leaders' self-ratings that included the word "confident." As the table demonstrates, "others" used this term nearly equally when evaluating men and women, but women were less likely to use the term when describing themselves than men were.



Q: Describe this person in up to three adjectives

Confident

	Others' ratings	Self-ratings
Men	2.43%	1.86%
Women	2.37%	1.29%

Source: 360 Assessment data. Number of responses by "others" - 11,951; by "self" - 996.

These results, though limited, support the idea that women are more reluctant than men to see themselves as confident leaders, even though their supervisors, peers and direct reports might be more likely to characterize them this way.

To further explore this finding, we also asked women leaders about being self-critical in our interviews with them.

All but two of those we interviewed stated that they have experienced moments of self-doubt. This was a strong theme that women supported with personal stories and examples during our focus group as well. These anecdotal insights suggest that women leaders in government struggle with self-efficacy to a certain extent.

Although our interviewees did not ask specific questions about imposter syndrome, some of our research participants also used this term specifically, with one stating that “imposter syndrome is real.”

A few interviewees also agreed that women might be more critical of themselves and less confident than men. “We doubt ourselves,” one said. “And I think women tend to do that a little bit more than men do.”

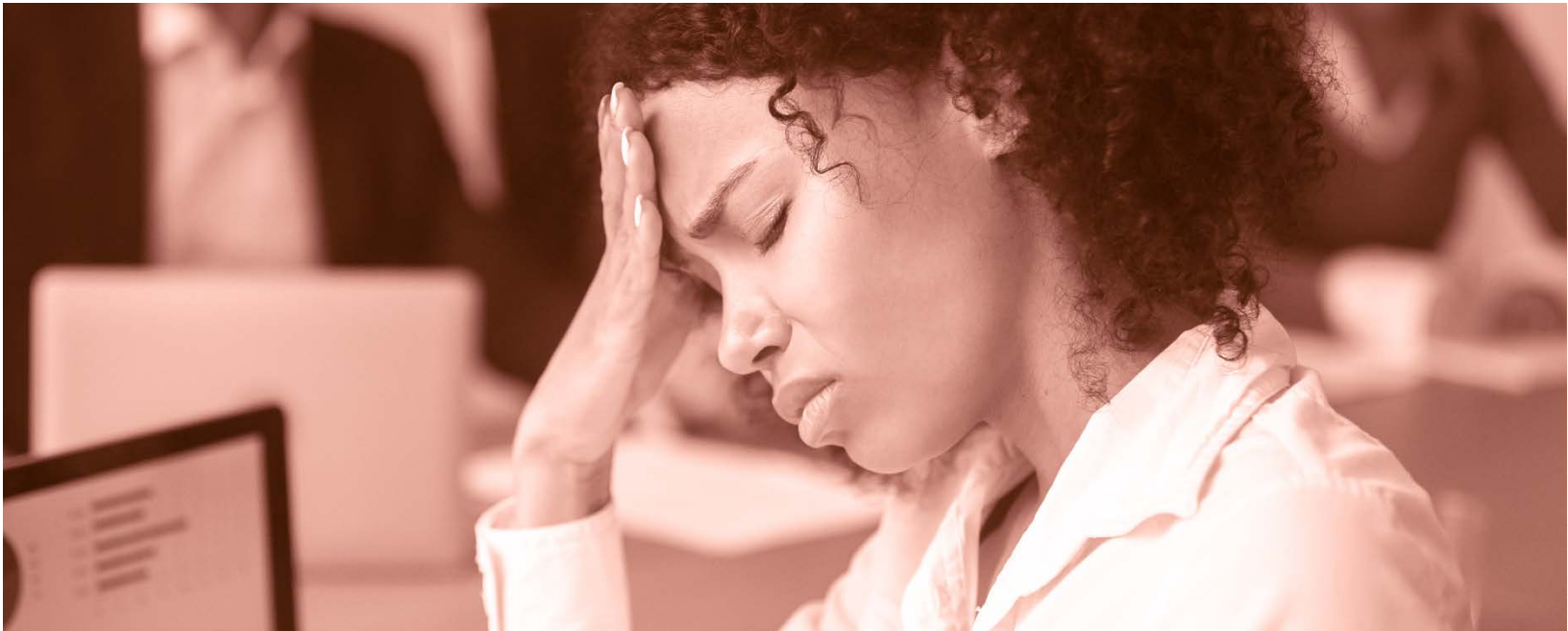
“Sometimes,” said another, “I feel like I hold myself to higher standards than my male counterparts might.” Still another leader spoke to the intersection of race and gender in leadership disparities, and discussed struggling to voice her opinion and communicate more assertively. “It’s getting up the nerve to actually do it and feeling the confidence of a mediocre white man,” she said.

Another participant shared that she is working to find the right balance between confidence and overconfidence. “I continuously fight with, like, ‘Am I being too assertive? Am I pulling back too much?’”

Being self-critical is another way our participants talked about issues related to confidence. “I think I can see where my weaknesses are more easily than I consider my strengths,” one said. These remarks suggest that women public servants are self-conscious when it comes to confidence in professional settings and believe imposter syndrome influences their workplace experiences and performance.

But determining precisely how these factors influence work performance and experiences might not be a clear-cut case. Intuitively, it seems that self-doubt could be holding women back. Did the women we interview have to work harder to be the leaders they are now while experiencing self-doubt? And would they have reached even greater professional heights were self-doubt not an issue for them?

On the other hand, it could be also that self-doubt drives stronger performance, which may help explain why our 360 assessments show that “other” raters—direct reports, supervisors and colleagues—rate women higher than men on all of our core leadership values and competencies. These questions suggest that more research is needed to fully explain the relationship between leaders’ level of confidence and their performance.



Imposter syndrome as a function of common biases

Although imposter syndrome is a widely accepted concept in the public discourse, it is gradually starting to be viewed as a problematic term. “Syndrome” implies that a lack of self-confidence is an individual problem and places the burden on people to fix something within themselves. The word “imposter” also has a negative connotation and suggests that someone is intentionally pretending to be someone they are not. Using the phrase imposter syndrome thus downplays the idea that the environment plays an important role in how people see themselves in the workplace and averts attention from the complex and systemic solutions that would enable leaders to have a better work experience.

For a long time, women’s position in the workplace has been fraught with barriers and biases. And although the situation has recently improved, we are still far from ensuring a level playing field and having diverse leadership in most sectors, including the public sector. As we noted in our [introductory brief](#) and earlier in this piece, women made up just 27.3% of the U.S. Congress in 2021 and 39% of the Senior Executive Service—the highest level of our government’s career workforce—in 2022.¹³

While admitting to experiencing moments of self-doubt and a general lack of confidence, our focus group participants also recounted times when supervisors and colleagues gave their opinions little attention and overlooked their ideas. Some women recalled being talked over by male colleagues and feeling like they had to be overprepared for every task and meeting just to not have their work or perspectives dismissed. They also mentioned the difficulty of often being the only woman in the room and having but a few role models in high-level government leadership positions who could serve as supporters or allies.

¹³ [World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2021.](#)

Despite recent progress on gender equity, many people, often without realizing it, still hold a dominant image of leaders as men.¹⁴ These mind-models, stereotypes or biases are powerful, partially because they often manifest themselves in repeated unconscious actions that can be difficult to identify and fix. Moreover, these biases influence all individuals who formally or informally assess the performance of women leaders —both the “others”, like colleagues, bosses and direct reports, as well as the women leaders themselves.

Operating in an environment built on negative biases towards women leaders may contribute to feelings of insecurity and, ultimately, lower self-efficacy among women. Based on our analyses, the reality is complex: women leaders score higher than men on both their self-assessments and their assessments by “others”, but they still struggle with self-doubt and remain underrepresented in leadership positions across the federal government. As such, it seems that the gender gap in federal leadership positions stems less from women’s underwhelming performance in those roles and more from a system and society that has historically favored and celebrated men leaders. Addressing this issue requires collective and structural change in how women are treated and recognized in the workplace and the perception of the issue needs to shift from that of solely individual to collective responsibility.

¹⁴ Koenig, Anne M., Alice H. Eagly, Abigail A. Mitchell and Tiina Ristikari, “Are Leader Stereotypes Masculine? A Meta-Analysis of Three Research Paradigms”, *Psychological Bulletin* 137(4), 2011, 616-642. Retrieved from https://www.tjsl.edu/sites/default/files/anne_m_koenig_et_al_are_leader_stereotypes_masculine_a_meta-analysis_of_three_research_paradigms_1374_psychol_bull_616_2011.pdf



Selected best practices

Given these findings, we wanted to offer some strategies that could help alleviate women’s low self-efficacy in the workplace, as well as the persistent underrepresentation of women leaders in government.

As with all issues of this scale and depth, there is no universal answer, and each agency, office and individual will have to act in accordance with their specific circumstances. However, our past research and the interviews we conducted for this brief yielded some suggestions worth noting.

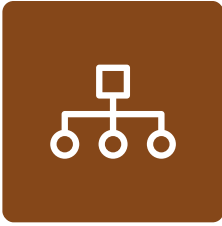
These recommendations are geared toward all leaders, not just women, and are aimed at the agency level professionals—to help enable broader systemic changes.



Develop Self-awareness

It is for a good reason that becoming self-aware is the first of the four key competencies of our Public Service Leadership Model. According to our [Public Service Leadership Institute](#), “Becoming self-aware begins with an understanding of your values, thought patterns and motivations.” As demonstrated in our [first brief](#), self-awareness was an area of growth for all the federal employees in our sample, regardless of gender.

Having this as a foundation allows leaders to develop areas in need of growth, as well as celebrate areas of strength. Developing self-awareness would lead women to recognize their own strengths more readily and accurately, and professionally develop around them.



Be aware of structural barriers

It is important to stay up to date on the latest research findings, as well as use the data available to agencies, including 360 tool results, employee surveys, customer feedback forms, etc., that time and again demonstrate that women are just as effective—if not more effective—than men in the workplace when provided with adequate tools and support. Being equipped with this knowledge may help women leaders realize that imposter syndrome is not an individual issue or character flaw, but rather the product of an environment that is at times unfriendly to the notion of women leaders. Importantly, such awareness could also help men recognize that women are performing on a high level, while being less represented in leadership positions.

Taking external factors into consideration is crucial—for women leaders themselves, as well as their supervisors. Women leaders often have to contend with societal challenges in the workplace that men do not. Consider this thought shared by one of our participants: “People make sacrifices for their family and none of them are right or wrong. We just make them. So I feel that some of the challenges women may face either in deciding to move forward or take on additional responsibilities—sometimes it's not a question of their competence. Sometimes it's just that they can't do it.”



Share and promote women’s success stories

Highlighting success stories of women leaders and celebrating them as potential role models for others is one way to expand broader notions of what it means to be a leader and who can lead. By celebrating successful women leaders, we can celebrate diversity and normalize the notion of women leaders in government more broadly—both for agency leadership and staff and for the general public.

Consider this inspiring example from one of our research participants, who contributed to her agency’s mission in a creative way, which ultimately shifted the policy conversation:

“I led screening operations for TSA in the airport during the government shutdown that lasted almost six weeks, and after the shutdown ended, I was commended by our administrator for all the things I did ... to support our employees—not just Transportation Security Administration employees, but for all federal employees who worked at the airport unpaid during the shutdown.

“I ended up leading the distribution of approximately \$85,000 worth of donations received from the community, not only in the form of gift cards, but also perishable and non-perishable items, plus breakfasts, lunches and dinners donated by organizations from around Portland who brought meals to the airport every day over a four-week period. The public was so generous with their donations, and I worked with the airport authority to create a mini-mart in one of the conference rooms, so federal employees could come and shop and grab whatever they needed.

“One afternoon we had an officer come into the mini-mart, she saw cake mix and frosting and started crying. She told us, ‘Tomorrow's my daughter's birthday. I haven't had time to shop and haven't even thought about a cake with everything going on. You have no idea what this means to me’

“My goal throughout the shutdown was to ensure my officers were taken care of and able to focus on their job. It was definitely a team effort, not only within TSA, but with our federal partners and the airport authority. I only had two officers who called out for reasons related to the shutdown. We kept our airport running, and the community in Portland came out and supported us.

My understanding is that we were one of the first airports to start the conversation with the headquarters about how we can accept donations from the public, and we ended up changing agency policy regarding donations to government employees, which impacted airports and employees nationwide.

— Kristen Best, former Assistant Federal Security Director – Screening, TSA; currently Deputy Assistant Secretary (A), Counter Transnational Organized Crime, DHS Strategy, Policy & Plans

For a good model on how to celebrate the accomplishments of federal leaders—and for more stories that highlight the success stories of women in government—please visit our Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Medals® page.

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