

Are some men too sensitive to succeed?

By [James Cowan](#) | April 08, 2011

Anne Sowden, a Toronto-based image consultant, recently advised a man with the credentials of a senior executive but the presentation skills of a pantywaist. He fidgeted constantly, refused to make eye contact, and when Sowden asked what he felt passionate about, he offered a monotone, barely audible: "I really enjoy working with people."

The man was well qualified, but his public image was feeble. "There's a perception out there that in order to get to the C-level -- be it CEO, CFO or COO -- that you have to be strong and assertive," says Sowden. "Very often, it's women's communication skills that don't allow them to come across that way. But it hurts men as well." Indeed, recent research suggests sensitive men might have as much trouble becoming senior executives as their female colleagues. The glass ceiling remains an unfortunate fact -- for women and wimpy guys alike.

The problem with sensitive men is they fail to meet perceptions of how a CEO should act, according to Mark Frame, a Middle Tennessee State University psychology professor. Frame and his colleagues recently studied how important "agentic" qualities, stereotypical male traits like assertiveness and independence, are considered in the workplace, compared with feminine or "communal" qualities, like empathy and selflessness. Drawing on a survey of 14,720 executives, the researchers found communal qualities were highly valued in first-line and middle managers. But as employees moved closer to senior executive roles, their communal qualities became less important while having agentic traits became a top priority. The closer individuals moved to the CEO's office, the more important it became for them to possess traditionally masculine traits. Given that the trend was consistent across genders, the researchers concluded that the glass ceiling could have more to do with behaviour than it does with gender. "Men who are too communal may face the same negative repercussions [as women]," Frame says, "people thinking they're too soft, that they don't have a killer instinct."

The shift in what is valued in employees is likely partially driven by a shift in the demands placed on different roles, according to Frame. "When you're first-line management, the job is very structured, and interpersonal qualities help you get the most out of your employees," he says. "But as you get higher up, responsibilities are fuzzier, and it is more important that you can set and meet goals."

Strikingly, both men and women respondents place a higher value on agentic qualities overall. This could be the result of "the pressure of assimilation into a male-dominated system," the researchers note, but is nonetheless bad news for anyone lacking in machismo and striving for an executive jet. While it was once women who struggled with their

upbringing and cultural norms in order to be more assertive, a growing number of men are similarly wrestling with their soft-spoken natures in order to succeed, says Sowden.

The solution is not a personality overhaul but a shift in management style. Frame cites the example of a football coach, who can be deeply empathetic toward his players but is tough and decisive during a game. "What we're finding is that a management style isn't just defined by a particular project or a particular deadline. It's defined by your position," Frame says. "So if you're a vice-president, it's going to be expected that you're a little more agentic. It's not to say one style is better than another. But you have to be able to adapt your style to the job you are seeking."

Relatively small changes, like learning not to fidget with a pen or ramble while speaking, can make a significant difference in how a manager is perceived, says Sowden. "When you're not direct, you can be perceived as a little bit wishy-washy."

Sensitive types can also seek out a workplace where their management style is actually valued. "You've got to work the right place," says Sowden. "There are places that value collaboration and are more team-oriented. If that's your personal style, that's the kind of company you should be working in."

While the career barriers faced by sensitive men and their female colleagues are similar, the risks in overcoming those obstacles are different. Few men have ever been punished for acting more manly. Women, on the other hand, can face a backlash if they become more assertive. "If you have a woman in a board meeting who is very direct, people may ascribe a particular adjective to her," Frame says. "Whereas if it was a man, you might say, 'Wow, I like how he took charge of that.'"