

## Leadership & Professional Development: Dis-Missed: Cultural and Gender Barriers to Graceful Self-Promotion

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*“The world accommodates you for fitting in, but only rewards you for standing out.”*

—Matshona Dhliwayo

Graceful self-promotion—a way of speaking *diplomatically* and *strategically* about yourself and your accomplishments—is a key behavior to achieve professional success in medicine. However, some of us are uncomfortable with promoting ourselves in the workplace because of concerns about receiving negative backlash for bragging. These concerns may have roots in our cultural and gender backgrounds, norms that strongly influence our social behaviors. Cultures that emphasize collectivism (eg, East Asia, Scandinavia, Latin America), which is associated with modesty and a focus on “we,” may not approve of self-promotion in contrast to cultures that emphasize individualism (eg, United States, Canada, and parts of Western Europe).<sup>1</sup> Additionally, societal gender roles across different cultures focus on women conforming to a “modesty norm,” by which they are socialized to “be nice” and “not too demanding.” Female physicians practicing self-promotion for career advancement may experience a backlash with social penalties and career repercussions.<sup>2</sup>

One’s avoiding self-promotion may lead others to prematurely dismiss a physician’s capability, competence, ambition, and qualifications for leadership and other opportunities. These oversights may be a contributing factor in the existing inequities in physician compensation, faculty promotions, leadership roles, speaking engagements, journal editorial boards, and more. Women make up over 50% of all US medical students, yet only 18% are hospital CEOs, 16% are deans and department chairs, and 7% are editors-in-chief of high-impact medical journals.<sup>3</sup>

So how do you get started overcoming cultural and gender barriers and embrace graceful self-promotion? Start small!

First, write a reference or nominating letter for a colleague. The exercise of synthesizing someone else’s accomplishments, skills, and experiences for a specific audience and purpose will give you a template to apply to yourself.

Second, identify an accomplishment with an outcome that educates others about you, your ideas, and your impact. Practice with a trusted peer to frame your accomplishment and its

context as a story; for example: “Dr. X, I am pleased to share that I will present a key workshop on Y at the upcoming national Z meeting, based largely on the outcomes from a QI initiative that I developed and oversaw with support from my hospitalist team. We overcame initial staff resistance by recruiting project champions among the interdisciplinary team and successfully reduced readmissions for Y from A% to B% over a 12-month period.”

Third, consider when and how to strategically promote the accomplishment with your medical director, clinical leadership, department leadership, etc. Start out gracefully self-promoting in person or via email with a leader with whom you already have a relationship. If you want to share your accomplishment with a leader who does not yet know you (but may be important to your career), nudge a mentor or sponsor for an introductory conversation.

Finally, ask yourself the next time you are doing a performance review or attending a hospital committee meeting: Am I contributing to a culture in which everyone is encouraged to share their accomplishments? Which qualified candidates who don’t speak out about themselves can I nominate, sponsor, mentor, or encourage for an upcoming opportunity to increase cultural and gender representation? After all, paying it forward helps foster the success of others.

Graceful self-promotion is an important tool for personal and professional development in healthcare. Cultural and gender-based barriers to self-promotion can be surmounted through self-awareness, practice with trusted peers, and recognition of the importance of storytelling gracefully. A medical workplace culture that encourages sharing achievements and celebrates individual and team accomplishments can go a long way toward helping people change their perception of self-promotion and overcome their hesitations.

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