CASE STUDY

The promotion shortlist decision

How female talent can stall despite a solid process, a trained moderator and good intent

"Does she really want this promotion?"

A REAL SCENARIO, ANONYMISED

SUMMARY

A senior leadership group was reviewing individuals for promotion, narrowing a longlist to a shortlist. One individual, referred to here as Anna, had demonstrated strong and consistent high performance over several years, received positive feedback from both clients and colleagues, and was already operating at the standard expected of the next level of seniority – yet the leadership group almost prevented her from progressing to the shortlist, until one of them intervened.

THE MOMENT

As the group discussed Anna's case, the HR representative said:

> THE HR REPRESENTATIVE
>
> "Based on what I have heard – consistent high performance, strong feedback from clients and colleagues and already operating at the next level of seniority – it sounds like we should be putting Anna onto the promotion shortlist."

One of the senior leaders raised a question:

> A SENIOR LEADER
>
> "I hear all that, but does she really want this promotion? She's not been very vocal about it, has she?"

The room began to nod. The conversation drifted toward the fact that Anna had not visibly campaigned for the role, and that this was a reason for her not to make it onto the shortlist.

WHAT WOULD NORMALLY HAVE HAPPENED

The default outcome in this situation would have been that Anna was not placed on the shortlist. She would have been told that she had not made it on this occasion and she might have received some feedback about why. She might have been offered some coaching or a training course.

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED

Another senior leader, referred to here as Paul, paused the discussion. He said:

> PAUL
>
> "Hold on. I'd like to share some of what I have learned from the CONFER programme that I've recently attended. There is a large body of research which shows that:"

THE RESEARCH PAUL SHARED

1. Men, on average, present with more confidence than women, largely as a result of how we have all been socialised.
2. We all, men and women, tend to associate confidence with competence when they are clearly very different. We can all think of examples where the most confident person in the room was not the most competent.
3. Women face a much narrower band of acceptable confidence: too little and they are criticised; too much and they are described as abrasive, bossy, strident or opinionated – descriptions rarely applied to men displaying the same behaviour. It is a very difficult line to tread, and as a result women often self-regulate.
4. On average, men self-promote more actively, because women who do so are criticised for being abrasive. So for a man and a woman of equal competence, the man is, on average, likely to present as more confident and more likely to be self-promoting.
5. None of this has anything to do with ambition, suitability for promotion or whether someone wants to progress.

Paul then reframed the decision for the group:

> PAUL · THE INTERVENTION
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> "What I've just heard is that Anna has been consistently high-performing, with strong feedback from colleagues and clients, and she's already demonstrating performance at the level we expect of someone at the next grade. And we're about to prevent her from progressing because she hasn't run a campaign of self-promotion – we are questioning if she really wants the promotion because she hasn't been very vocal about it.
>
> I think this is what we call an **authority gap moment**. Because of how we've all been socialised to associate certain behaviours with leadership and authority, we're at risk of preventing a talented and capable colleague from progressing, simply because she has not been as self-promoting as other individuals."

OUTCOME

The original questioner acknowledged the point directly:

> THE ORIGINAL QUESTIONER
>
> "This has been eye-opening. It hadn't occurred to me before, but now I see it. It would be completely counterproductive to hold Anna back, especially given everything we've said about wanting more women in senior roles."

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

The group reached consensus without further debate. Anna was moved onto the shortlist.

BUSINESS IMPACT

We believe that if there is good intent, a solid process, evaluation criteria, and an impartial trained moderator in the room, we ought to get the right outcome; however, as this case study shows, leadership judgement, decision-making and behaviour is absolutely critical in influencing who progresses and who stalls.

Anna's progress was almost stopped because of a conditioned default perception of what leadership and authority should look like. No individual in that room intended to hold a strong candidate back, yet this is a pattern that recurs, unnoticed and unchecked, in promotion and performance discussions across many organisations – even well-run, progressive businesses like this one, that genuinely care about, and have invested in, female progression.

This was not an issue with the individual. As the HR representative noted, she met all the criteria.

This was not a process issue. The group was following a rigorous and well-designed process.

Having an independent moderator in the room didn't work. Having an HR representative in the room did not affect the outcome – in fact, that HR representative was overruled by a more senior leader when proposing to place Anna on the shortlist.

What happened was that good, professional leaders almost allowed a solid process, with objective appraisal evaluation criteria, to be overridden by a perception of how authority and promotion-readiness should present itself. This was an entirely subjective judgement, with no basis in the evidence of the individual's performance.

This was caused by the fact that we all, men and women, carry preconceptions about what authority, leadership and promotion-readiness should look, sound and behave like. It is not something we are consciously aware of; it is a patterned reflex formed by how we have all been socialised, and by the fact that the majority of leaders and people with authority are male – men hold 85% of FTSE 350 executive director roles and 92% of CEO roles.

FTSE 350 executive director and CEO roles. *FTSE Women Leaders Review*.

This shapes our judgement and decision-making, and unless we take steps to address it we continue to apply a filter that means we tend to promote more from one half of the whole talent pool. It is a hidden and unintentional dynamic that exists in most organisations. We call it the **authority template**, and unless steps are taken to recalibrate it – as all measurement devices need to be recalibrated from time to time – it will continue to skew our judgement and decision-making.

It took a senior leader, educated and equipped to spot this kind of judgement in the moment and intervene in an effective way, to prevent Anna's progression being derailed. No bar was lowered, no quotas were discussed; there was simply a leader in the room who had recalibrated his **authority template** and was motivated and able to influence his fellow leaders.

A single intervention changed the outcome for one individual. Applied consistently across every promotion round, performance review and resourcing decision, this intervention changes who an organisation retains, develops and ultimately places in senior roles.

WHAT THE CONFER PROGRAMME DOES

The CONFER programme trains leaders to recalibrate their own **authority templates** so they can identify moments like this as they happen. We give them a clear, evidence-based way to intervene and change outcomes, as demonstrated here.

Ten contact hours over four to six months, across seven points of contact.

READ NEXT *What Leaders Did Differently, The changes senior leaders made during and after the* CONFER *programme – in the day-to-day, not only at the promotion round*

A FEW QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON

1. How confident are you that this is not going on, silently, unnoticed and unchecked, in your organisation?
2. What interventions have your senior leaders taken – the people whose judgement is exercised – to ensure that it is not?
3. How do you know if they have been successful?
4. Of the investment made to improve female talent progression in your organisation, what proportion has been aimed at the individual and changing them, versus aimed at leadership judgement, decision-making and behaviour?
5. This is just one example – a promotion decision – but where else is this happening in your organisation? Decisions and judgements on who gets the career-defining opportunities? Who gets the informal sponsorship? Whose voice carries most weight? Who just looks and feels like top talent?
6. What impact would there be on female talent progression, leadership development and organisational performance if all your leaders were consistently behaving in the way that Paul behaved?
7. What happens to talented women whose progression is stopped in the way Anna's was almost stopped? How do they feel about being told they didn't make the shortlist because they didn't self-promote enough? Will they even get that feedback? Do they become disengaged and demotivated – and might that be interpreted as evidence that the decision not to shortlist them was correct: "she didn't respond well to feedback", "she is not demonstrating resilience"? Do they leave because they can't see a route to career progression?

KEY TERMS

authority template

The stored reference point judgements about authority and promotion-readiness are made against – a sense of what authority should look and sound like, built from a working life of examples.

authority gap moments

Something that was said or done that typically happens more to women than men, e.g. being interrupted, not being credited for a contribution, not being offered microboosts.