

GUEST ESSAY

Kamala Harris Is Walking a Tightrope That Few Women Survive

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Given that Kamala Harris is running for the world’s most powerful elected office, it’s no surprise to see voters and pundits commenting on her “power moves” and “boss energy.” What’s remarkable is that they mean it as a compliment. That’s a far cry from the experience of many women — in politics and beyond — who have dared to assert themselves.

It’s even a far cry from Ms. Harris’s experience four years ago. In the crowded Democratic presidential primary field of 2020, she and other female candidates were mostly criticized for lacking warmth. When she joined Joe Biden’s ticket, the warmer Ms. Harris seemed, the more positive impressions people formed of her — especially if they were conservative. But overall, people viewed her primarily as assertive and ambitious. Attempts to soften her image, such as the “We did it, Joe” video clip that the campaign released after the election was called for Mr. Biden, were sometimes mocked for seeming contrived.

Seeking power has always been a maddening tightrope walk for women. Show up as too dominant and they’re seen as cold; reveal too much vulnerability (or, God forbid, cry) and they seem weak. Over time Ms. Harris has figured out how to

navigate these double standards, and her playbook may help other women do it, too.

One of the clearest markers of her evolution as a candidate has been her ability to convey both strength and sympathy, and to do so in ways that come across as authentic. An early triumph came during the 2020 vice-presidential debate. When Mike Pence interrupted her, Ms. Harris didn't get flustered — and she didn't get steamrolled, either. She stood firm and said: "I'm speaking."

But then she softened that power move.

Ms. Harris prefaced a strong interjection with a respectful honorific: "Mr. Vice President, I'm speaking." Next, she smiled warmly, tilted her head and nodded. She tempered her statement with a polite tag question: "I'm speaking, K?"

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Psychologists find that these kinds of adjustments can make strong language more palatable and more persuasive. With both verbal and nonverbal cues, Ms. Harris played up her warmth without compromising her toughness. Four years later, "I'm speaking" is still a rallying cry among her supporters — Donald Trump even tried to co-opt it during his recent debate with her.

Now, in her second attempt at the Oval Office, Ms. Harris has continued to balance forcefulness with friendliness. Think about how she started that debate: She strutted across the stage, introduced herself and shook her opponent's hand. That boss move was a way of unilaterally setting the terms of engagement. At the same time, she smiled and her words were friendly and civil: "Kamala Harris. Let's have a good debate."

In a similar vein, Ms. Harris tends to begin pivotal communications with praise for others. When Mr. Biden announced his withdrawal from the race in July, her statement to a nation that didn't know her very well led with gratitude to her boss: "I thank Joe Biden for his extraordinary leadership as president of the United States and for his decades of service to our country." It wasn't until two days later that she highlighted her own record. Research suggests that this "dual promotion" of herself and Mr. Biden is an effective way to convey both competence and care, circumventing the gender stereotypes that punish women for anything that smacks of self-promotion.

Ms. Harris has managed to display warmth even when anger would be a reasonable response. When Mr. Trump claimed that she had only recently decided she was Black, she could have taken umbrage; instead, her tone was sorrowful. With a softened voice, she labeled it a "tragedy" that a presidential candidate would attempt to "use race to divide the American people."

People tend to associate male anger with power and competence — but if it's a woman who's expressing that emotion, she is likely to be dismissed as "hysterical." The risk of backlash is even more extreme if a Black woman dares to be incensed: She's perceived as downright hostile and penalized by being deemed unfit to lead. (Sometimes the penalty is literal — just ask Serena Williams.) Sadness can reveal warmth, and when it's an expression of passionate restraint, it demonstrates strength, too. Ms. Harris's quiet lament registered loudly.

At the other end of the emotional spectrum, Ms. Harris's laugh has been front and center this election season. Although Mr. Trump has criticized it, it's generally working for her — and science can explain why. Looking at people's faces, we make judgments of their warmth and competence within a tenth of a second. You can probably guess the results: Whereas men are rewarded for looking tough, women are judged more favorably when their faces convey compassion and support.

In an analysis of the 2020 election, people who saw Ms. Harris's face as "feminine" were more likely to support her — and the effect was strongest among those who saw her other behaviors as more assertive. Along with illustrating the barriers

women continue to endure, these findings illuminate why Mr. Trump's attempts to mock "Laffin' Kamala" haven't landed. Laughing makes her look affable.

Jokes do, too. During the debate, she quipped that "Donald Trump was fired by 81 million people," making light of the irony that he rose to fame by doing the firing. Humor turns out to be a useful tool for gaining influence — especially for women, as long as the humor isn't at their own expense. Psychologists find that when leaders make self-deprecating jokes, we judge them as more capable if they're men but less capable if they're women. Some women have threaded this needle by "humorbragging," or joking about their strengths.

But all these strategies have limits. Some voters are frustrated that Ms. Harris is offering them more sweet childhood stories than concrete plans. As she has leaned hard into establishing her relatability, she has sometimes sacrificed clarity about her policies. To sustain her momentum, she may need to devote as much time to her vision as her likeability.

Of course, she doesn't have to do it alone. It's more credible when someone else toots your horn. But as much as we love Taylor Swift, the best surrogates aren't always the biggest celebrities. When Ms. Harris was disparaged as a childless cat lady, it was her husband's ex-wife who came to her defense.

We want to live in a world where women don't have to balance so precariously on a tightrope to leadership. But even if these complex biases and pitfalls vanish, projecting care along with competence will still be a winning combination — for women as well as for men.

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