

## Must women be likable to succeed? It's not that simple, a new book argues.

Alison Fragale's "Likeable Badass" explores the relationship between likability and power for women. In an interview, she explains her research.

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By Anne Marie Chaker

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As a woman navigating middle age, menopause and being a mom (and professional bodybuilder), I like to think I'm a likable-enough badass. So my initial reaction to Alison Fragale's book "Likeable Badass" was skeptical, to say the least. Why must women be likable to succeed?

Assertive women, especially those in public roles, are often perceived less favorably compared with men who exhibit the same traits, Fragale says. Think, for instance, of the recent moment when Kamala Harris embraced a teary voter in Pittsburgh, a display of maternal warmth that gave the presidential candidate a boost on social media. (By contrast, recall how then-candidate Barack Obama famously told Hillary Clinton, "You're likable enough, Hillary," in a 2008 debate). Time and again, female leaders face a likability litmus test in ways their male counterparts rarely do.

How big a factor is (or was) "likability" in the ultimate outcomes for these women? We may never know the tipping point. But research indicates it does matter. Three studies on anger, gender and status, for instance, found that "male and female evaluators conferred lower status on angry female professionals than on angry male professionals." On top of that, these studies showed that emotional reactions by women were "attributed to internal characteristics (e.g., 'she is an angry person,' 'she is out of control')," whereas similar emotional reactions by men were attributed to circumstances outside their control.

Fragale, an organizational psychologist who teaches at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, delves into these issues in her book, exploring the dynamic between status and power. She also offers suggestions on how women can use the former to gain the latter. Traditional power — control over resources and decision-making — is still something many women can't fully access on their own, regardless of skill or negotiation. We know that women hold a small fraction of top leadership roles and that the pay gap is still stubbornly persistent.

Fragale's insight is that status — the esteem others hold us in — is the untapped channel many women can leverage. Unlike power, it's something we can actively shape through warmth and likability. The book lays out how these qualities, often undervalued, can actually enhance influence.

The art is in the balance, Fragale argues. Mixing the right amount of warmth and assertiveness can lead to what she calls the “likeable badass.” In a wide-ranging phone interview, she explained how. Here are a few takeaways from our conversation. *(This interview has been edited for length and clarity.)*

**I’ve always thought of being likable as something that you just happen to be because you’re nice. By thinking of it in this strategic, self-interested way, are we just being manipulative?**

Authentic and strategic are not opposites. For starters, we’re already talking about people who care about other people. But often, we’re leaving good currency on the table. I’ll give you an example. Someone I was talking to had a very high opinion of my publicist. He was very complimentary when referring to her and said she always recommends excellent guests. I said, “Have you ever told her that?” And the answer was no — and so then, he did.

The result was that she was grateful, and now they will probably mutually refer to each other more often. And so that move raised his status with her.

**One of the things that the book touches on is that warmth can look different depending on your own traits and personality. You don’t want it to look fake by pretending to be someone else’s type of warm if it doesn’t feel like you. What’s your brand of warmth?**

I’m not a good smiler. Other people have pointed this out to me. I used to be told for years, “What’s wrong?” and I’d be like, “Nothing!” and they’d say, “Oh, you have this look on your face.”

But I don’t want to smile artificially. I also don’t want people to think I’m happy when I’m not.

So I have learned to lean more into humor. But I have to be careful to avoid self-deprecating humor. Self-deprecating humor is warm — but it cuts you down. You don’t want to be seen as the flaky friend.

**Do women have an in with one another in the likability department, because of what we have in common? Or are we harder on one another?**

Similarity is a huge basis of liking and attraction. We like people who are like us. You can ask a woman where she bought her clothes. That’s not a thing you do cross genders so much. That does build relationships — and so in that sense we have an advantage.

The disadvantage is that people who are insecure about their power and their status are often aggressive, competitive and hostile. They’re fighting to protect their territory. Because the world has made it so hard for us to get power and status, of course it stokes insecurity.

**So what should women do in that case?**

The best thing you can do is lean in, build their status, talk them up, praise them. If someone starts doing that for you, you want to reciprocate. You realize they are not in competition and you behave better.

**You say in the book that fast talkers get more status. I've always been a slow talker. I didn't think that was necessarily a bad thing. Should I speed it up?**

You do not have to change who you are, but you should be aware of it. People who talk faster get more credit — it's a signal of confidence. But it's not the only signal of confidence. Maybe smiling is for you; for me, smiling is not working. So I've had to find something that works for me. Maybe you're a great writer.

*Anne Marie Chaker is a former newspaper reporter who writes about women and strength. Her book "Lift: How Women Can Reclaim Their Physical Power and Transform Their Lives" will be published next spring.*

## **Likeable Badass**

**How Women Get the Success They Deserve**

By Alison Fragale

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