

Schumpeter for the Economist

The look of a leader

Getting to the top is as much to do with how you look as what you achieve

IN GORILLA society, power belongs to silverback males. These splendid creatures have numerous status markers besides their back hair: they are bigger than the rest of their band, strike space-filling postures, produce deeper sounds, thump their chests lustily and, in general, exude an air of physical fitness. Things are not that different in the corporate world. The typical chief executive is more than six feet tall, has a deep voice, a good posture, a touch of grey in his thick, lustrous hair and, for his age, a fit body. Bosses spread themselves out behind their large desks. They stand tall when talking to subordinates. Their conversation is laden with prestige pauses and declarative statements.

The big difference between gorillas and humans is, of course, that human society changes rapidly. The past few decades have seen a striking change in the distribution of power—between men and women, the West and the emerging world and geeks and non-geeks. Women run some of America's largest firms, such as General Motors (Mary Barra) and IBM (Virginia Rometty). More than half of the world's biggest 2,500 public companies have their headquarters outside the West. Geeks barely out of short trousers run some of the world's most dynamic businesses. Peter Thiel, one of Silicon Valley's leading investors, has introduced a blanket rule: never invest in a CEO who wears a suit.

Yet it is remarkable, in this supposed age of diversity, how many bosses still conform to the stereotype. First, they are tall: in research for his 2005 book, "Blink", Malcolm Gladwell found that 30% of CEOs of Fortune 500 companies are 6 feet 2 inches or taller, compared with 3.9% of the American population.

People who "sound right" also have a marked advantage in the race for the top. Quantified Communications, a Texas-based company, asked people to evaluate speeches delivered by 120 executives. They found that voice quality accounted for 23% of listeners' evaluations and the content of the speech only accounted for 11%. Academics from the business schools of the University of California, San Diego and Duke University listened to 792 male CEOs giving presentations to investors and found that those with the deepest voices earned \$187,000 a year more than the average.

Physical fitness seems to matter too: a study published this month, by Peter Limbach of the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology and Florian Sonnenburg of the University of Cologne, found that companies in America's S&P 1500 index whose CEOs had finished a marathon were worth 5% more on average than those whose bosses had not.

Good posture makes people act like leaders as well as look like them: Amy Cuddy of Harvard Business School notes that the very act of standing tall, with your feet planted solidly and somewhat apart, your chest out and your shoulders back, boosts the supply of testosterone to the blood and lowers the supply of cortisol, a steroid associated with stress. (Unfortunately, this also increases the chance that you will make a risky bet.)

Besides relying on all these supposedly positive indicators of fitness to lead, those who choose bosses also rely on some negative stereotypes. Overweight people—women especially—are judged incapable of controlling themselves, let alone others. Those who “uptalk”—habitually ending their statements on a high note as if asking a question—rule themselves out on the grounds that they sound tentative and juvenile.

The rise of the giant emerging-market multinationals has yet to make much difference to all this stereotyping. Such firms’ bosses often suffer from the corporate equivalent of a colonial cringe. They wear Western business suits. They litter their conversations with Western management-speak. And they pack their children off to Harvard Business School, where they will learn how to look and sound like Western-style managers. High-tech companies merrily abandon Mr Thiel’s rule once they reach a certain size and recruit a besuited outsider as CEO. Female leaders have reacted in different ways. Some have defined themselves by wearing power suits and working long hours. Others have celebrated motherhood: in her book, “Lean In”, Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook’s chief operating officer, writes about delousing her children aboard a corporate jet.

Can anything be done about this predisposition for promoting people of a certain type? Ideally, those selecting a new boss would conscientiously set aside all the stereotypes, and judge candidates purely on their merits. However, given a plethora of candidates, all with perfect CVs, selection committees continue to look for the “X” factor and find, strangely enough, that it resides in people who look remarkably like themselves. Another solution is to introduce quotas for CEOs and board members. But the risk is that this ends in tokenism rather than a genuine equalising of opportunity. So, some management experts suggest we just accept that stereotypes and prejudices cannot be wished away, and simply help those born outside the magic genetic circle project a sense of power and self-confidence.

Ms Cuddy gave a talk on “power poses” to the 2012 TED Global conference which has since become TED’s second most downloaded talk. In her recent book, “Executive Presence”, Sylvia Anne Hewlett of the Centre for Talent Innovation in New York urges young women to lower the register of their voices, as Margaret Thatcher did, eliminate uptalking and other vocal tics, and look people in the eye when giving presentations. She advises every would-be manager to work out regularly and look as fit as possible. This may sound like a bit of a cop-out. But the evidence is strong that candidates for top jobs can still be undermined by superficial things like posture and tone of voice. More than a century ago, Oscar Wilde quipped: “It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances.” Unfortunately those who choose leaders still seem to think this way.