

What Fani Willis's Pyrrhic Win Teaches All Working Women

Willis entered the “warmth-competence” matrix and survived.

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Updated March. 17, 2024

Key points

- There is a measurable double standard that judges career women differently than men.
 - The warmth and competence key criteria for social cognition affect men and women differently.
 - For men to be successful, they need only one of those qualities. For women, they need both.
 - There are ways to overcome this dilemma but it takes some maneuvering.
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In his long-awaited ruling, Fulton County Superior Court judge Scott McAfee gave District Attorney Fani Willis a Hobson's choice: Either she quit leading the Trump election subversion case, or her former paramour and lead prosecutor, Nathan Wade, had to go. Soon after McAfee issued his ruling, Wade resigned, removing at least one layer of uncertainty from the Trump case.

Pyrrhic Victory

At best, Willis scored a Pyrrhic victory—a win on the surface but at such a significant cost that she may never regain her reputation.

Last month, when Willis stepped into the courtroom in Fulton County, Ga., to defend herself from charges of impropriety, she faced double jeopardy: Her lack of judgment put her case against Trump at risk. She also walked into a perilous gender labyrinth called the “warmth and competence” matrix.

This warmth and competence dynamic emerged at Judge McAfee's evidentiary hearing held on Feb. 15. Willis testified angrily and combatively for two hours, defending her reputation, describing the allegations as “lies, lies, lies,” and reminding the court that it was Trump and not she who was under trial.

I wrote a column in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, chronicling the dilemma Willis faced as she defended herself fiercely.

The hearing came on the heels of a [new study](#) by researchers at the University of Michigan and Carnegie Mellon University that shows that while men benefit from networking with high-status people, women lose status in the eyes of their colleagues and damage their careers.

Why? The study's authors, Siyu Yu and Catherine Shea, wrote, “People typically don't like dominant and ambitious female leaders.” Willis can certainly attest to that.

Warmth and Competence

In a conversation with me, behavioral scientist Christopher Graves, founder of The Resonance Code, listed some essential behavioral science research by the legendary Susan Fiske, a professor of psychology at Princeton University, that explains the dilemma that Willis faced. Fiske has spent decades doing [landmark research](#) studying how “stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination are encouraged or discouraged by social relationships, such as cooperation, competition, and power.”

“Susan Fiske’s research reveals that we assess others across two axes: warmth and competence. Warmth is accessibility and likeability,” Graves said. “From an evolutionary stance, warmth takes primacy over competence because before we stick around to find out how competent you are, we need to know if you are an enemy or a friend.”

Fiske and her behavioral science colleagues have determined that hardwired dichotomy continues to manifest every day in society and the workforce in terms of how men and women are perceived, [hired](#), promoted, rewarded, and positioned for influence.

They have uncovered that a man who is perceived to be competent can also be perceived as warm despite no evidence to that effect. But, when a woman is perceived to be competent, “warmth and competence become a zero-sum game,” says Graves. “That is, a woman perceived to be competent is unfairly also seen as incapable of being warm. So she will be labeled 'bossy,' or 'hard-edged,' or a 'b--ch.'”

In a 2009 research paper, “[Warmth, competence, and ambivalent sexism: Vertical assault and collateral damage](#),” Fiske and Harvard psychology professor Mina Cikara opened with examples of how presidential candidate Hillary Clinton was skewered for her perceived lack of warmth, among other things, being described on a [late night talk show](#) as an “Ice Sculpture.”

‘Likeability Trap’

Many cognitive researchers describe the punitive effects of the warmth vs. competent dichotomy on professional women in stark terms: a “double-edged sword,” a “dilemma,” and a “likeability trap.” They share some techniques to deflect and overcome these caveman-era biases, but the choices are grim.

Using humor could be one way to do it. Despite studies that indicate that humor can help male executives more than female executives (no surprise!), a Harvard Business Review article says that “funny women may be perceived more positively than pop culture stereotypes often suggest.”

Other than being the office clown, what else might work? Another Harvard Business Review article discusses six techniques to help women navigate corporate boards. Many of these suggestions, like "checking," "waiting," and "qualifying," are dehumanizing and reflect the depth of the challenge.

A *New York Times* “likeability trap” opinion piece says that savvy women “learn that they must often do a masculine thing (which establishes their competence) in a feminine way (to defuse backlash).”

In other words, women have to twist themselves into knots daily and orchestrate their every breath, syllable, and thought to navigate these minefields.

Daddy to the Rescue



Sometimes, says Graves, it helps to have a partner with the opposite trait in the warmth vs. competence dichotomy weigh in on your behalf and endorse your ideas in the conference room or boardroom or, as in the case of Willis, in the courtroom.

When Willis testified on the first day of her misconduct allegations hearing, guns blazing, Graves says she was likely perceived as “cold, competent.”

The next day, Willis’s lawyers put her dad, John Clifford Floyd III, on the stand. Though a fierce criminal defense lawyer and a father figure in the Black Panther movement, Floyd deliberately seemed to dial down his “competent” vibes and dial up his “warmth” vibes. He was folksy, disarming, apologetic at times, and, above all, a supportive dad.

On the plus side, Floyd’s cuddly dad persona may have defused some of the sizzling hostility that Willis projected. On the minus side, it showed that Willis, a powerful prosecutor and legal mind sharp enough to bring a criminal case against a former U.S. president, still needed a male to validate her and pull her out of the reputational rubble she had created for herself.

Perhaps even more troubling for Willis is the observation that Cikara and Fiske made in their paper: “One needs to lie only once to be seen as untrustworthy, but one must be honest over a long period before observers will confidently ascribe trustworthiness. Conversely, people more easily revise positive trait ascriptions but more reluctantly confirm them.”

With her Pyrrhic victory, Willis has just embarked on that long, hard road to refurbish her tattered reputation.