

Bragging rights

The Principal of **Queen's Gate** on why we need to teach girls to talk up their achievements, not talk themselves down

Go on, I dare you.” The 11+ interview candidate pauses, and then breaks into a smile. In her hands are the gymnastics medals she has brought to show me – our standard starting point to offer our young visitors the chance to begin on familiar ground. I’ve just asked her if she’s good at gymnastics, and she’s given a shy little shrug. Her Head has warned me just how anxious she is – unnecessarily so as the girl is visibly terrified.

“You see,” I’ve just explained, “at Queen’s Gate, we take pride in our successes. We own our achievements. So, if you are good at gymnastics, you should say so”. The girl breaks into a grin and concedes that yes, actually, she is an accomplished gymnast. Nerves dissipate, and the rest of our conversation passes like a dream – smiling, laughing, articulate, confident.

Thanks to writers like Sheryl Sandberg and Mary Ann Sieghart, we are no longer oblivious to the mindsets and behaviours that women unwittingly deploy – to our own detriment. We are familiar with the oft-quoted statistic that a man will apply for a role when he has 60% of the required characteristics, while women hold off until they have 100%. We know how easily women slip into grindstone adjectives (hardworking, committed, diligent) to describe themselves. That is at least a small improvement on ‘I had great mentors’ or, worse still, ‘I was very fortunate’ when complimented on an achievement.

It’s a hard thing to fix. Owing one’s success, declaring one’s capability, is but a small step away from bragging, a behaviour we are taught from childhood is undesirable. Though by ‘we’, once again I mean the female of the species. To quote Sieghart: ‘They [men] have been socialised from childhood to blag, to boast, to speak up and self-promote, while girls have been penalised for exactly the same behaviour’. It’s true that unfettered self-aggrandisement is unappealing. Timing, context, tone, balance – all are crucial. But



ABOVE
Queen's Gate
students

“Owning one’s success is but a small step away from bragging, a behaviour we are taught is undesirable”

if we don’t start teaching young women of the future to start railing against excessive modesty, how can we ever expect them to go off into the world ready to effect the change we wish we had already seen.

At Queen’s Gate, we are tackling this head on by encouraging our girls to take pride in their achievements and to feel safe in stating their successes. We talk about this in assembly, referencing moments like Miley Cyrus standing on stage at the Grammys, defiantly challenging the audience with the question “why are you acting like you don’t know this song?”

We apply the same thinking when pupils reflect on their own progress, asking them to identify the steps that have brought about a positive outcome. We discuss it when speaking with the girls one-on-one, such as with a recent Oxbridge candidate who had listed that her application process would include an interview if she was lucky, rather than because of her own success in the admissions test and her strong academic profile.

We do, of course, remind our girls to apply this principle with caution. As exam papers are returned, we ask them to be mindful of those who may not be feeling as buoyant. We insist on being able to

laugh at ourselves. We take responsibility for our mistakes.

Our hope is that by promoting these behaviours when our girls are young, they will carry them on into their adult life and continue the fight against the gender inequality that remains so persistent – and so pernicious. So, to the women reading this, if you are good at something, please say it. Go on, I dare you. 🗨️



AMY WALLACE
Principal
Queen's Gate School