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# #WECAN

## Women and Organisational Culture in SMEs

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# #WECAN



## European Union

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#WECAN (Women Empowered through Coaching and Networking) is a project led by Leeds Beckett University in partnership with Edge Hill University and SEYH (Social Enterprise Yorkshire & Humber).

The project has funding of £1.7m for a period of three years, partly funded by partners and partly from the European Social Fund as part of the 2014-2020 European Structural and Investment Funds Growth Programme in England. The Department for Work and Pensions (and in London the intermediate body Greater London Authority) is the Managing Authority for the England European Social Fund programme. Established by the European Union, the European Social Fund helps local areas stimulate their economic development by investing in projects which will support skills development, employment and job creation, social inclusion and local community regenerations.

For more information visit <https://www.gov.uk/european-growth-funding>

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## **Acknowledgements**

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## **A Summary of Findings**

This report is based on findings from a survey and interviews conducted in Leeds City Region regarding the organisational culture in SMEs. The survey had 46 responses, which did not enable statistical analysis and 11 interviews were conducted to supplement these findings and provide a more meaningful analysis. A descriptive analysis was used to analyse survey results and a thematic analysis was used to analyse interview data.

Findings show that personalities and character traits are seen as relevant for leadership and career success with most participants in the survey self-assessing themselves as having feminine characteristics but outlining masculine characteristics as the ones needed for career progression. Interviewee participants also outlined masculine characteristics as necessary for a career progression, thus showing that organisations, this time in the Leeds City Region and consistent with other literature, still function as a masculine habitus and that people do not always recognise oppression because oppressive practices are deeply engrained into everyday life to the point they became natural (Bourdieu, 2007).

Networking continues to present a barrier for women with many women outlining they do not like engaging in that activity despite its relevance, however, findings show the rise of LinkedIn networking and two women outlined that this form of networking is beneficial, opening a question whether this impersonal form of networking could at least solve the issue of harassment in networking events, which was reported in some advertising studies (Topić, 2020).

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## **Biographies**

**CARBERY**, Christine (Chris) is a senior lecturer at Leeds Business School, Leeds Beckett University, where she teaches in Economics, Analytics, and International Business subject group. Her research interests include political economy, economic history, and educational studies. Her PhD is focused on the differing conceptions of value within economics curricula. She is an academic lead at the #WECAN project where she co-leads the Calderdale industry cluster focused on providing leadership training and skills for women in the rural areas of Leeds City Region. In #WECAN, she co-authored reports on women and networking and women in SMEs and she is a part of the #WECAN book club. She participated, as a co-author, in the British Sociological Association's annual congress with two papers, both from #WECAN, a networking report and also a book club research paper.

**CARR**, Rachael is a second-year Public Relations with Journalism student at Leeds Beckett University with a passion for writing and communication. In her previous education (Newcastle Sixth Form College), she studied English Language, Media Studies, and Drama and Theatre Studies at A-Level, getting 2 A's and a B. Whilst she does not have any work experience in the field of public relations and communications, she does have experience when it comes to collecting data for a presentation to over 100 professionals. This was done in collaboration with Printed.com which asked her to come along to discuss how vital work experience is for students. She has also collaborated on a Missed Apex F1 web article in 2021 becoming one of the few people outside of their writing sphere to input her ideas on a particular moment in a Formula One race.

**COCKETT**, Sarah is from York and is currently a second-year student of Public Relations and Brand Communication at Leeds Beckett University. At 26, Sarah is a mature student, having previously worked as a hair and makeup artist in London for four years. While she does not have any experience in public relations, Sarah's work as a makeup artist combined with her

current role as a supervisor for a beauty retailer, means that she has a vast array of transferrable skills that she can bring to her future career. Sarah would ideally love to work in entertainment, beauty or social media communications.

**EAGLES**, Siobhan is a second-year Public Relations and Brand Communication student at Leeds Beckett University. She has completed an internship for a Hashtag Hyena company where she was responsible for social media writing and working with editors and photographers. She also worked for Hyper Crunch company where she worked as a growth and marketing specialist, and she has an extensive experience in the retail industry. Having lived in six different countries and with an interest in fashion and travel, she is passionate about the public relations industry and looks forward to placement and job opportunities in the future.

**FOWLER**, Madison, from Lincolnshire, is a second-year BA(Hons) Public Relations with Journalism student at Leeds Beckett University, focused on a career in the public relations industry. She has previously been a content writer for Hashtag Hyena, a company that explores social media trends, and creator of her very own small website design business, Platform Pages and blog, Stylish Escapades where she writes book reviews, fashion, and travel tips. Aside from this, she also plays Volleyball for Leeds Beckett University.

**GRIGGS**, Abigail is a second-year Public Relations with Journalism student. Prior to studying at the Leeds Beckett University, Abbi attended Bromley college of further and higher education specialising in digital media. Abbi is passionate about charity work and volunteers for social causes such as the fight against cancer, and she looks forward to a career in public relations.

**HUNTER**, Tamsin is a second-year student studying Public Relations and Brand Communication at Leeds Beckett University. She also completed a UAL level three extended diploma in creative media productions, allowing her to develop creative skills through cinematography, editing and design learning on how to use Adobe software such as Photoshop, Premiere Pro and Audition. It was her past education in creative media that led her to develop



a passion for public relations within the music and entertainment industries. Currently, she works for an events company running the social media and developing branding, attending wedding shows and liaising with clients to ensure they have the best experience with the company.

**JEKHINE**, Diane is a second-year student at Leeds Beckett University studying Public Relations and Brand Communication with interests in creative writing, graphic design, public relations, and communications. After studying Mass Communication at her previous university (Pan-Atlantic University) in Nigeria for two years in which she accumulated a 4.28 GPA, she decided to narrow the field down to her current studies. With her only experience being an intern at a PR agency in 2017 for two weeks, she hopes to encounter more opportunities to learn more about her interests.

**MALONE**, Sierra is a second-year Public Relations and Brand Communication student at Leeds Beckett University. She has work experience in the retail industry as well as a compliance coordinator. She has advanced digital skills such as knowledge of Canva, Adobe Lightroom and Photoshop. She also previously volunteered for a religious organisation in the United States, which is how she developed a passion for public relations and communications.

**ROUND**, Gabrielle is a lecturer in business management, with a key focus on marketing, leadership and entrepreneurship at Leeds Beckett and Salford universities, UK. Gabi is also a PhD candidate at Leeds Beckett University, with a key focus on the gender disparities that exist in succession planning in SMEs, with a passion to improve this practice. After she had obtained an MSc degree in International Events Management (University of Salford, UK), Gabi began her career in international events and marketing, working as a senior project lead on projects for many large clients across Europe, Asia and the United States before moving into higher education. Gabi's PhD is aligned with the #WECAN project and she has a bursary from the Leeds Business School.

**SHAW**, Katie is a second-year Public Relations and Brand Communication student at Leeds Beckett University who aims to work within the beauty and fashion public relations industry. Before starting her degree, she managed various social media accounts for small businesses and, over the summer, did freelance writing for the Oddfellows Society in Manchester. Alongside academia, she is an avid gym-goer and is training to begin her own lash business.

**TOPIĆ**, Martina is Reader at Leeds Business School, Leeds Beckett University, UK. She is a research lead for the #WECAN project and a lead of the EUPRERA research network 'Women in Public Relations' (previously a project, 2018-2021). Martina was also a project lead of the British Academy funded project on Women in the advertising industry in the UK. Martina is editor-in-chief of two international scholarly journals, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* (Emerald) and *Northern Lights: A Film & Media Studies Yearbook* (Intellect). She is also editor-in-chief of the book series 'Women, Economics, and the Labour Relations' (Emerald). She is the author of 'Corporate Social Responsibility and the Environmental Affairs in the British Press: An Ecofeminist Critique of Neoliberalism' (Routledge, 2021).

**YOUNG**, Molly is a second-year Leeds Beckett University student, studying Public Relations with Journalism. Outside of academia, undertaking various internships led to her current role as a freelance writer for numerous websites managed by a leading UK publisher named GRV media. Molly is a Carnegie Aviators cheerleader for LBU's Level 2 cheer team. She previously completed three A-Levels in English Language & Literature, Media Studies and Sociology.

**WAJAHAT**, Ali is 21 years old. Wajahat studied at Prestwich Arts College for Secondary School and went to Bury College after high school studies. The three subjects pursued in college were Law, Media Studies and History. Wajahat studies Public Relations and Journalism at Leeds Beckett University. Wajahat does not have any PR/Communications work experience, but he did undergo a Business Administration Apprenticeship for the University of Manchester

for a year where he worked alongside PR/Communications employees and was introduced to their way of working. His interests consist of 20th-century history, public perception in regard to ongoing news stories and pop culture articles.

## Introduction

This report is a result of the research in the #WECAN (Women Empowered through Coaching and Networking) project funded by the European Social Fund and the Department of Work and Pensions. The project is an enterprise project focusing primarily on delivering skills training to women working in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the Leeds City Region<sup>1</sup>, however, the project has large research agenda as well. The research conducted so far includes a systematic literature review report on women and networking (Topić et al, 2021), a systematic literature review on women and SMEs (Topić et al, 2021a), research report on women and succession planning in SMEs (Topić et al, 2022), and a women's book club that runs as part of the project, which is also underpinned by research and uses the method of the reflective cycle (Moon, 1999) to analyse benefits of networking within working hours and feelings and perceptions of book club participants. The results of the networking research have been presented at the annual congress of the British Sociological Association (both the networking report and the first book club results) and the papers are currently under development providing a debate on the benefits of networking during the office hours and historical issues with women and networking.

The literature reports that women working in SMEs and women entrepreneurs face a number of obstacles when trying to create a successful business notwithstanding barriers to accessing finance, networks, and support from family members due to social expectations of women to act as caregivers, etc. (Topić et al, 2021a; Hunt et al, 2019; Outsios & Farooqi, 2017; Landig, 2011). The findings of the research done so far as part of the #WECAN project are largely

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/leeds-business-school/wecan/>

embedded within general organisational literature, which has been arguing for decades that women face numerous obstacles in the organisational world. For example, there is a long-standing argument that social rules are set around masculine values and thus many scholars argued that women are oppressed in every aspect of society (Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1994; Daymon & Demetrious, 2010; Rakow & Nastasia, 2009). Some authors also argued that bureaucracy and hierarchy in organisations are “male-created and male-dominated structures of control that oppress women” (Acker, 1990, p. 141) and that “there was never a question that women would be able to move up the company ladder in the way men could, since it remained unfathomable for male executives to place women alongside them in managerial jobs (...) Men were allowed to think of themselves as middle-class so long as women, from their perspective, remained something like the office proletariat, took office jobs to help their families until they married” (Saval, 2015, p. 77-78).

What is more, many women were historically treated as office wives doing just supporting jobs regardless of their qualifications and doing the boss' job was seen as a more relevant factor to keep the role than stenographic skills, for example, notwithstanding sexual harassment women historically faced (ibid). Ferguson (1984) particularly criticised organizational rules and procedures as oppressive male power that only further re-enforces male domination, which leads to the argument of Burris (1989) that “organizational control always has been shaped by patriarchy, understood as a relatively autonomous system of domination based on gender differentiation” (p. 448). Burris (1989) also argued that “bureaucracy vested control in organizational rules and hierarchy, but its allegations of objective evaluation, promotion upward through the ranks, and meritocracy were from the beginning rendered problematic by gender barriers for female clerical workers” (p. 448).

Power in organisations thus also came to the agenda and researchers historically explored this topic. French (1985) defined power as “the process of the dynamic interaction. To have power means having access to the network of relations in which an individual can influence, threaten, or persuade others to do what he wants or what he needs (...) The individual has no power. It is awarded by a large number of other people to the one that dominates and such allocation is irrevocable” (p. 509; see also Vukoičić, 2013). Disch and Hawkesworth (2016) also argued that power over should be the term used because men historically had power over women and this power included denying autonomy to women, violence, hegemonic masculinity, and economic exploitation (e.g., through unpaid homework) and marginalisation. Thus, some researchers argued that men historically had the power, which was used as power over women, leading to the conclusion that women’s power is a contradiction in terms (French, 1985; MacKinnon, 1989; Pateman, 1988). Bourdieu (2001) linked the notion of power with bodily divisions among people by arguing that differences between men and women historically had too much importance because bodily differences are a biological fact but also socially constructed in terms of their relevance. MacKinnon (1989) argued that “inequality comes first, differences come after” (p. 219), with which inequality becomes an easily deconstructed process since inequality is justified by socially constructed differences. Bourdieu, using his habitus approach, also argued that social norms are embedded into individuals through the process of socialisation and because social values are deeply ingrained into individuals and become an everyday occurrence, they rarely challenge inequality (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

As a result of the lack of women’s power and the domination they historically faced, many organisational scholars argued that there is a gendered division of labour with men monopolising higher positions whilst women remain in lower positions (Alvesson, 1998).

Some scholars thus proposed to study organisational structures as gendered because advantages and disadvantages are understood as masculine and feminine (Acker, 1990). Therefore, scholars proposed that researchers start studying, “how organizational structures, processes, and practices material, behavioral, relational, ideational, and discursive may be viewed as (culturally understood as) masculine and, perhaps often less salient, feminine. Gendering organizations usually means paying attention to how they are dominated by culturally masculine meanings. Masculinity is a vague concept but can be defined as values, experiences, and meanings that are culturally interpreted as masculine and typically feel "natural" for or are ascribed to men more than women in the particular cultural context” (Alvesson, 1998, p. 972).

The division in organisations on masculine and feminine, including allowed behaviours, power, and institutionalised means of maintaining and perpetuating divisions have led to a situation where a successful manager is almost a synonym with a man whereas women are left behind (Acker, 1990). The notion of masculinity being pervasive in organisations, as well as society functioning as habitus, also led to a situation where men dominate almost all aspects of the organisational world, and there is research, for example, examining communication differences between men and women demonstrating interruptions and domination in conversations by men whereas women use a more collaborative language (West & Zimmerman, 1983; Tannen, 1990; Merchant, 2012; Tench et al, 2017). There is a line of research arguing that women and men are different and that differences should be praised rather than used to marginalise women. In communication, women are seen as a good fit for communication roles because of the perception that women have good communication skills. Tannen (1990) argued that men speak in a way that encourages competitiveness, and independence and demonstrates status whereas women speak a relationship-building language that creates intimacy. Kanter (1977) argued that “the problems women have in large organizations are dead-end jobs at the bottom and exposed

as tokens at the top” (p. 250). These tokens often have no real power and are used, for example, to promote diversity and inclusion quotas but in reality, many women recognise the lack of power, which brings back the argument about women’s power being a contradiction in terms (French, 1985; MacKinnon, 1989; Pateman, 1988). For example, in studies on women in advertising, journalism and public relations Topić argued that only women who embrace masculine characteristics go ahead in their careers and those who become one of the boys then advance and hold power, however, there is a catch 22 because these women are then labelled as ‘bitches’ for being as tough as any man (Topić et al, 2020; Topić, 2020; 2020a; Topić & Bruegmann, 2021; Topić, 2021). However, if organisations function as a masculine world where only masculine meanings take one ahead, then it becomes natural that women must become tough because it is also obvious that women who embrace what is known as feminine characteristics, such as emotion and empathy, are not seen as a manager material. Topić, therefore, identified characteristics one needs to succeed such as toughness, aggression, directness, lack of emotion and empathy as a recipe for success and women who embrace these characteristics go ahead but are often perceived as tougher than men whereas women who show feminine characteristics either do not progress or they are tokenised and do not always have the real power to run organisations and affect change (ibid). The masculine characteristics identified in communications research are centred on being tough, giving as good as it gets, aggressive, not showing emotion and empathy and engaging with banter as well as having a work-first attitude and putting in extra hours, networking, etc. (ibid). However, results of these studies also showed that even when women are masculine they do not always have the real power, except in journalism where if one engages in masculine banter, these women tend to succeed in editorial positions, however, by the time they do so, they become “so-bloke-ified by the macho waters in which they swim that many younger women looking up don’t see them as role models for a kind of women they might want to become” (Mills, 2014, p.19). What is



more, some studies also argued that only narcissistic people ascend to power and because these personalities often have high levels of confidence, they get promoted over people with competence. Thus, as men are naturally more confident than women, it comes as no surprise that men get promoted more frequently despite not always being competent (Chamorro Premuzic, 2013).

Therefore, the organisational world is often seen as the “inequality regime” because “the persons at the top of most organizations are likely to be white men; they are very privileged and have great class power compared with most other people in the organization. The processes of exclusion that constitute a glass ceiling are class and race processes as well as gender processes” (Acker, 2009, p. 3). However, a study conducted in the advertising industry has revealed that women based in Leeds report less discrimination than women based elsewhere in the north of England, and particularly in the south of England (Topić, 2020), which warrants further research. There is generally a lack of literature on the position of women in SMEs, the existing research largely focuses on women in corporations or organisations generally, and then also on women entrepreneurs (Topić et al, 2021a). Researching organisational culture in SMEs is relevant since SMEs are considered the backbone of the UK economy (UK Government, 2018). Therefore, in this report, we report on the findings of research conducted in the Leeds City Region on the organisational culture and the position of women in SMEs. The report continues with an outline of the research method and then presents the findings of the study followed by the conclusion with recommendations.

## Method

In this report, we are analysing the results of a survey we sent to small and medium enterprise (SME) employees and managers based in the Leeds City Region as well as 11 interviews with women who work in SMEs in the region.

The survey is analysed first, and this is the second project report deriving from that SME survey. In the first report, we focused on analysing the succession planning data revealing which characteristics people find relevant for a successful successor (Topić et al, 2022). In this part of the survey, we are analysing questions about organisational culture and leadership including office culture, leisure facilities, meeting culture and office setup, power, and characteristics to succeed as well as a self-assessment of women as to whether they have these characteristics, a mindset one needs to have to progress, own mindset and how impactful in their careers, networking, etc. The survey questions derive from an interview questionnaire that is analysed in this report too. This is because we struggled to recruit #WECAN project participants to take part in the research and thus we decided to combine the interview questionnaire, which was the original research method, with a survey to increase participation and deepen insight into the organisational culture in SMEs.

The survey was disseminated to the #WECAN project participants, however, to ensure more transparency, we also disseminated the survey to the wider public using Facebook groups centred on small and medium sized businesses in the Leeds City Region. The latter was necessary because those who signed up to participate in the #WECAN project can already have a pre-conceived opinion that something is wrong with women's rights and thus we wanted to

target the public in the Leeds City Region too. In addition to that, we wanted to record views of other genders since the #WECAN project only targets women.

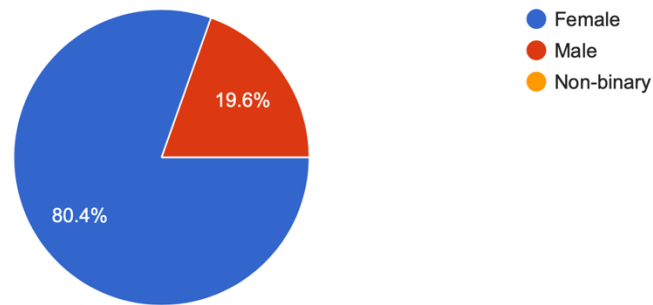
The response rate was low with only 46 responses, likely due to the online fatigue and the fact we could not access many Facebook groups because of admins who act as gatekeepers and would not release the survey. We have paid for a Facebook advert to target a larger response rate; however, it attracted the attention of trolls who started to post abusive comments (e.g., gifs saying ‘no annoying Facebook adverts’, or preaching comments about how we should use other means of advertising our business thus clearly not reading a description that this was a research survey for the University researchers, etc) and thus, the survey had to be deleted from Facebook to avoid any conflict with the University since it was originally released via one of the University pages.

Whilst the response rate is low and cannot justify a larger quantitative analysis, the findings have enough useful information for a project report as they offer insights into the feelings and perceptions of employees and managers who participated in a survey, about the organisational culture. As such, the findings can be useful to businesses as well as researchers who want to design further studies.

## Survey sample demographics

**Figure 1. Gender**

Your Gender  
46 responses

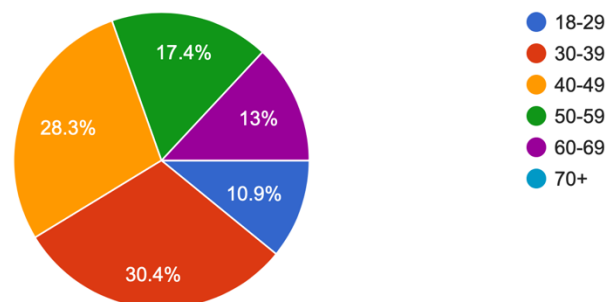


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The 46 study participants are predominantly female, with no non-binary responses received. 37 participants who partook in the survey are female with nine participants identifying as male. None of the participants identified as transgender.

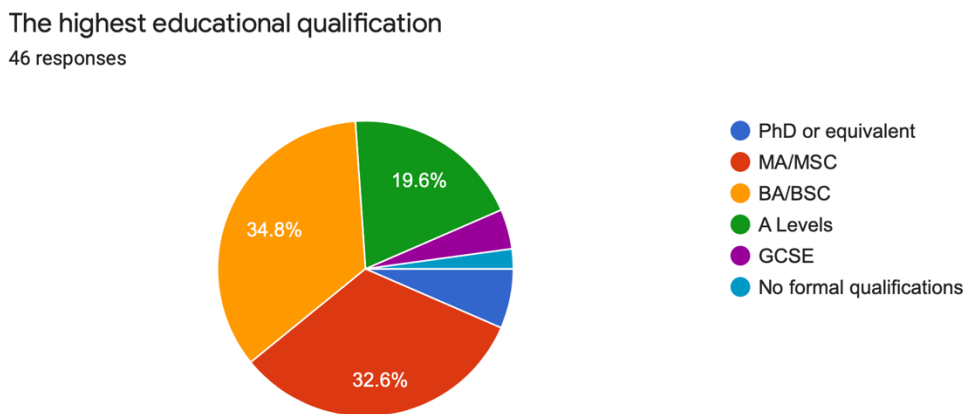
**Figure 2. Age**

Age  
46 responses



The 46 study participants are made up of various ages between 18 and 69, no participants were over 70 years old. The largest portion of responses came from those between 30 and 39, this was 14 of the participants, followed by 40-49 who made up 13 of the participants. Only four of the participants did not highlight white as an ethnicity. Making up the 42 white responses the study also included participants who defined their ethnicity as Eastern European and White international.

**Figure 3. The highest educational qualification**



Only one of the 46 participants stated that they had no formal qualifications, and the other 45 participants hold a GCSE grade or above. Only three participants are not University educated, with 98% of the participants holding an undergraduate or postgraduate degree.

From the basic demographics we can attain that this sample is predominantly well educated, white, 80% female and from various age groups, from 18 up to 69.

The survey answers are analysed using descriptive content analysis as the sample is too low to enable quantitative analysis. Therefore, these findings are mixed with interview findings and

present a mixed methodology approach to studying the organisational culture in Leeds City Region’s SMEs.

## Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 11 women based in the Leeds City Region. All the women who agreed to speak with us hold managerial roles and are between 26 and 60 years of age. They also hold a range of qualifications ranging from elementary school to a PhD. Of 11 interviewed women, six are participants of the project and five are not, thus providing a good balance in responses to tackle a pre-conceived bias. Women also come from a range of industries (table 1).

**Table 1. Interviewee demographics**

INTERVIEWEE NO	INDUSTRY	LOCATION	POSITION	AGE	QUALIFICATIONS	WECAN participant?
1	Demography industry	Leeds	Director	32	BA	Yes
2	Publishing	Barnsley	Editor	35	BA	No
3	Real estate	Leeds	Owner	60	PhD	No
4	PR and Marketing	Leeds	Head of department	26	BA	Yes
5	Manufacturing	Leeds	HR director	52	MA	Yes
6	IT Consulting	Leeds	Senior business analyst	40		Yes
7	Business consultant	Leeds	Managing director	42	Elementary school	Yes
8	Learning and development	Pontefract	Director	55	Registered nurse	No
9	Not-for-profit	Leeds	Managing director	50	MA	No
10	Executive coaching	Leeds	Managing director	38	PhD	Yes
11	Consultancy and events	Leeds	CEO	41	MPhil	No

The limitation of these interviews is that all these women hold senior positions and there are no employees, despite efforts to increase the diversity of the sample, thus this presents a limitation of the study. However, since previous studies show that senior women report more discrimination and that there is an issue of power with women often being tokenised or seen as

too tough, this sample still provides meaningful analysis and an insight into the position of women SME managers in the Leeds City Region.

Interview questions were developed using Topić's previous research into women in advertising, journalism and public relations (Topić et al, 2020; Topić, 2020; 2020a; Topić & Bruegmann, 2021; Topić, 2021) as well as a book by Mary Portas, British businesswoman, broadcaster and an author (Portas, 2018). In this book, Portas narrates her experience of climbing the ladder in a retail industry dominated by men and she particularly focused on the so-called alpha culture of the organisation. In that, she talks about common issues women face such as misogyny and sexism, which are well explored in research, however, she also tackled unexplored issues such as office setup, hierarchies, meeting culture and the general feeling and sentiment of the office culture and the way it works.

Therefore, we developed a research questionnaire asking women questions such as about a mindset one needs to have to progress in the organisation, what personalities go ahead in their career as well as a self-assessment of their own personalities of women who participated in this study, and whether their particular mindset and personality helped or hindered their careers. In addition to that, we asked about leisure facilities in the organisation, if any, whether there are weekend activities and if so, who organises them and whether women who participated in this study attend them and enjoy these activities. The latter was relevant because research shows that women fall behind especially because they do not participate in extra and after-work activities due to family and caring duties and historically, men worked whilst women stayed at home, which led to the culture of networking with clients and among each other after work (Saval, 2015). This also led to asking about networking since networking can also be seen as something that hinders women's prospects. In a #WECAN study on networking, authors

argued that networking has historically served as a barrier for women, and it still does (Topić et al, 2021). Due to the pandemic that has only recently been ended by the UK Government with society still not fully operational and normalised, we also asked questions on networking before and during the pandemic to explore whether the pandemic further hindered women's progress or perhaps helped due to the fact nobody was able to engage in anti-social working hours and network after work. We also asked questions on the office culture such as office setup and the meeting culture, which is something that strongly came across as masculine and hindering and demeaning for women in Portas' book (Portas, 2018).

Interviews were transcribed into a Word document, and we conducted triple coding. Firstly, we conducted an open coding that helped in identifying critical themes that emerged from data and this helped us compare, contextualise and categorise the data. After that, we conducted axial coding that interrogated the context and interaction of data derived from the interviewee's responses. Finally, we conducted selective coding that helped in identifying the most important themes and relating them across data to identify general themes that derive from data.

Thematic analysis was carried out next and codes were grouped and converted to themes. Thematic analysis is "a systematic approach to the analysis of qualitative data that involves identifying themes or patterns of cultural meaning; coding and classifying data, usually textual, according to themes; and interpreting the resulting thematic structures by seeking commonalities, relationships, overarching patterns, theoretical constructs, or explanatory principles (Lapadat, 2010, p. 926). Thematic analysis is mainly used as a sensemaking approach, which helps in reducing large datasets as well as helps in identifying recurrent themes, which then also identifies trends in data that can be explored in further research. Thus, this form of the analysis is more centred on identifying trends rather than building a theory,



which was convenient for this study since not much research has been done on women in SMEs and this exploratory approach helped in identifying trends and themes, which can be taken forward in further studies (Rowher & Topić, 2018). In the presentation of findings, we follow an approach by Braun and Clarke (2006) and visualise data and then analyse it according to themes and sub-themes, supported also by direct statements from participants.

# Findings

In the subsequent section, we present findings from the survey and interviews.

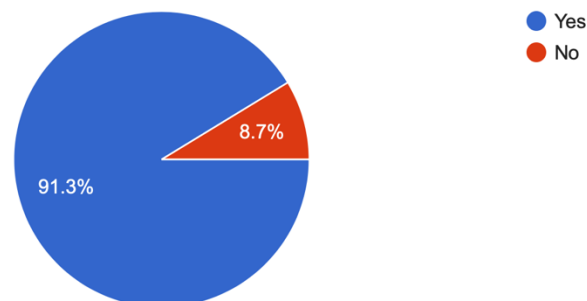
## The Survey

The survey findings show that people generally feel comfortable working in their current organisations, but participants also argue they do not feel they can be themselves in their organisation. Half of the participants manage their appearance and personalities to be accepted in the organisation, and participants mainly outline feminine characteristics (empathy, openness, people’s person, etc) as their own whilst rejecting the masculine characteristics (aggression, self-promotion, etc).

## The organisation

**Figure 4. Organisational sentiments**

Do you feel comfortable working in your organisation, generally speaking?  
46 responses



Of our participants, the majority feel comfortable in their current organisation, 42 of the 46. Interestingly, of the four within the study who answered they were uncomfortable in their organisation, two were male and two were female. Considering the overall sample size, this would suggest from this small study that 5.4% of the females questioned did not feel comfortable, in general. This compares to 22.2% of the males questioned who cite they do not feel comfortable in general.

**Figure 5. Personalities and organisations**

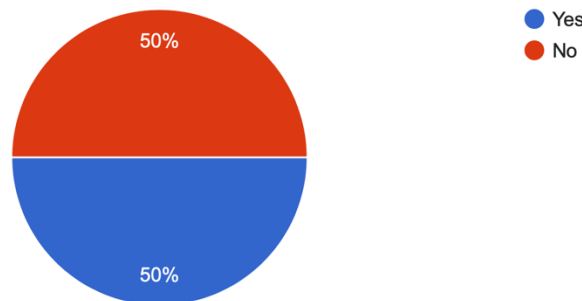


When considering whether our participants feel they can ‘be themselves’ in an organisation, 10.9%, 5 participants, stated that they feel they cannot. Interestingly this is one more participant who highlighted that they do not feel comfortable, suggesting more participants are comfortable than feel they can be themselves. When considering who these participants are, when compared to the group that felt uncomfortable, three of these people are the same participants. One (male) participant that had stated they felt uncomfortable however did state they can be themselves, in this follow up question. Two different participants that had previously said they feel comfortable selected that they do not feel they can be themselves, both of these participants are female. Of the five participants who state they feel they cannot

be themselves, one is male and five are female, the equivalent percentages, 20% male and 80% female, match almost exactly with the demographic makeup of this survey, highlighting that feeling you can or cannot ‘be yourself’ is not a uniquely male or uniquely female problem in an organisation.

### Figure 6. Personal appearance and organisations

Do you manage your personal appearance to be accepted in the organisation?  
46 responses



Looking further into the workplace setting, participants were asked if they manage their personal appearance for acceptance within the office, exactly half of the participants answered yes and half answered no, with 23 participants on each side. Of the 23 participants who stated that they do manage their appearance to be accepted, 20 are female and three are male. This indicates that 87% of those who feel they manage their appearance for acceptance are female and 13% are male. Looking at this against the overall sample over half of the women questioned, 54%, feel they manage their appearance to be accepted. This compares to 33.33% of males sampled who state they manage their appearance to be accepted. Interestingly, 2 of the 4 participants who did not cite their ethnicity as white selected that they felt they managed their appearance for organisation acceptance, making up 50% of the total of non-white participants, one of these participants identified as black (mixed) and one identified as Indian.

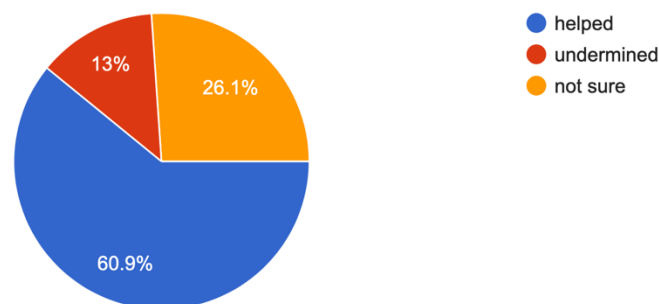
## The Organisation and Mindset

Participants in the survey were asked to rate how they would rate their mindset when it comes to working with people, with 1 being the lowest 5 the highest. Participants were then asked to rate the same mindsets, against which they believe to bring a top role in their organisation.

**Figure 7. Mindsets**

Has your mindset helped you or undermined you in achieving your career goals?

46 responses

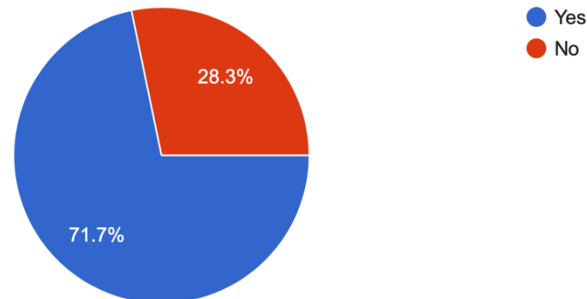


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60.9% of the participants felt that their mindset helped them to achieve their career goals, this is a total of 28 participants. A large portion of participants, however, 26.1%, which is equivalent to 12 people, were unsure if this was something that has affected their role. 6 of the participants (13%) believe their mindset had undermined their opportunities to achieve career goals.

## Figure 8. Personal self-assessment of an own mindset

Do you fit into a mindset one has to have to progress in your organisation and achieve a top role?  
46 responses



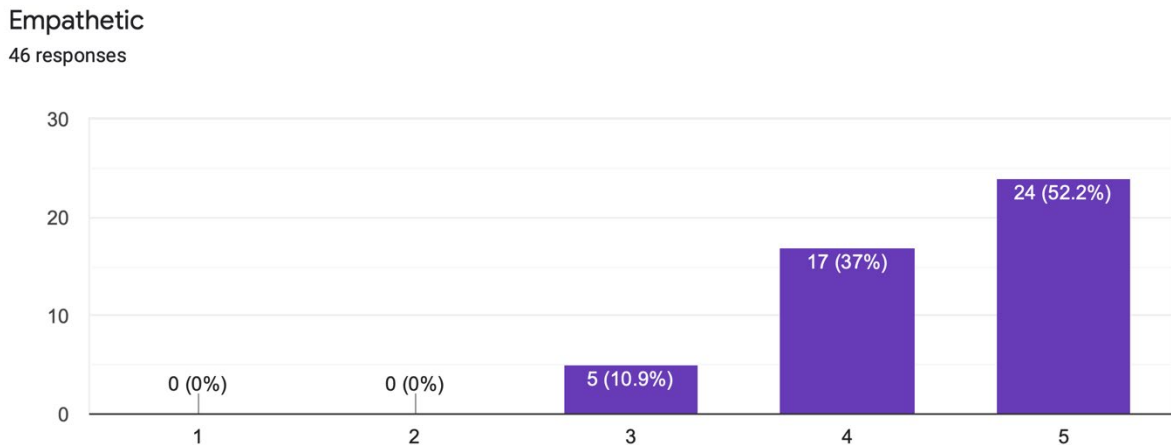
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33 of the 46 participants surveyed believe they have the right mindset to achieve a top role in their organisation. It is interesting that 13 participants do not believe this to be the case. There are interesting comparisons between this question and the previous question. Though 33 of the participants surveyed believe they have the right mindset to progress in their organisation, only 28, in the prior question, see mindset as helping their career goals thus far, this could be perhaps an indication of early career respondents who haven't yet seen their mindset pay off.

Which words would you use to describe your mindset when it comes to working with people?

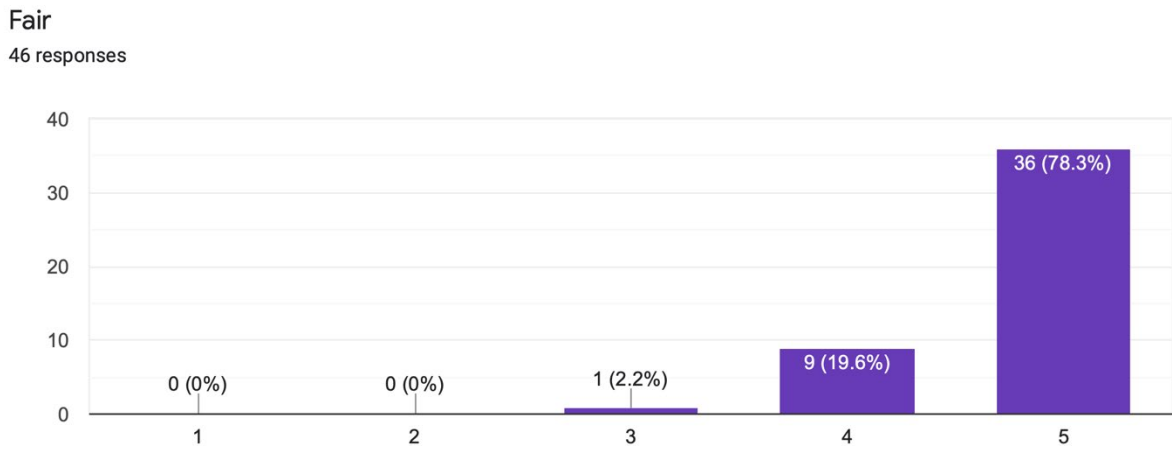
Please, rate where 1 means least likely and 5 means most likely.

**Figure 9. Empathetic**



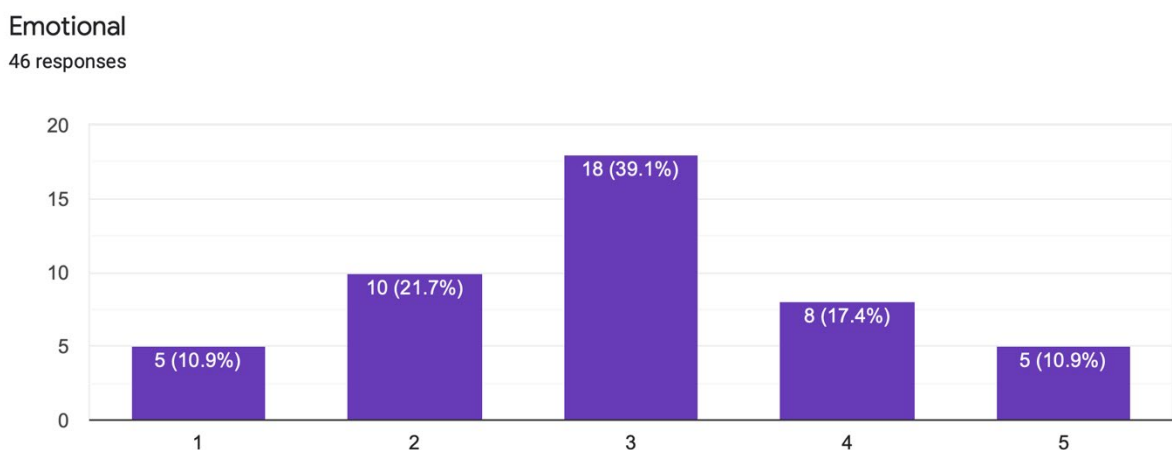
Over half of the participants surveyed believed that they had an empathetic mindset with people of the highest level, 5 of 5. Nearly 90% of the participants (41), placed their empathetic mindset in the top part of the scale, with only 5 participants placing their empathy in the middle section of the scale. This makes it the 4<sup>th</sup> highest of the mindsets when looking at the strongest reaction (level 5) alone. This is also one of the 6 mindsets of the 13 questioned, where no participants graded themselves a 1 or 2, showcasing the perception of having this mindset is very high.

**Figure 10. Fair**



Like empathy, fairness has been graded highly for the mindsets which the participants have. Of the 13 characteristics discussed, this has received the most 5 ratings. 45 of the 46 participants believe they have a fair mindset, at the high and very high end of the scale.

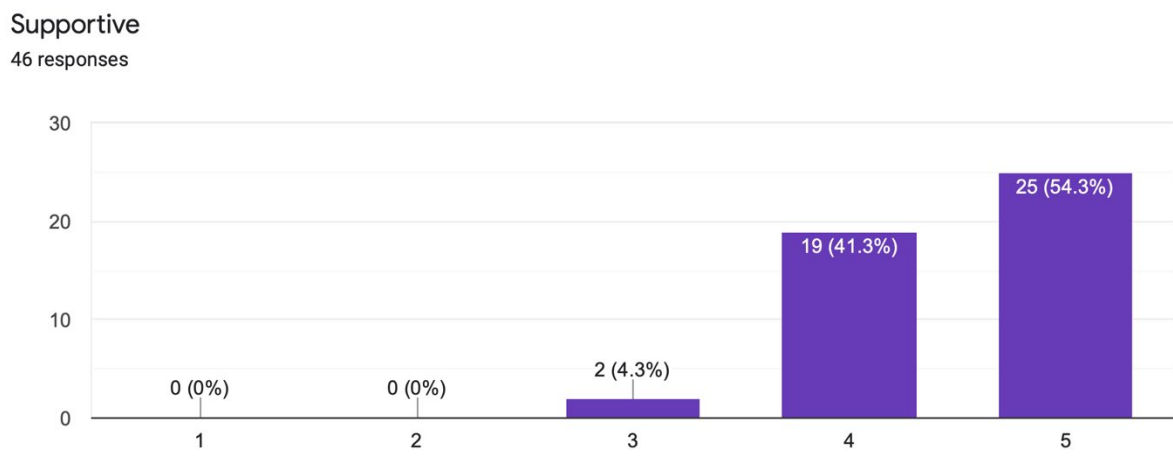
**Figure 11. Emotional**





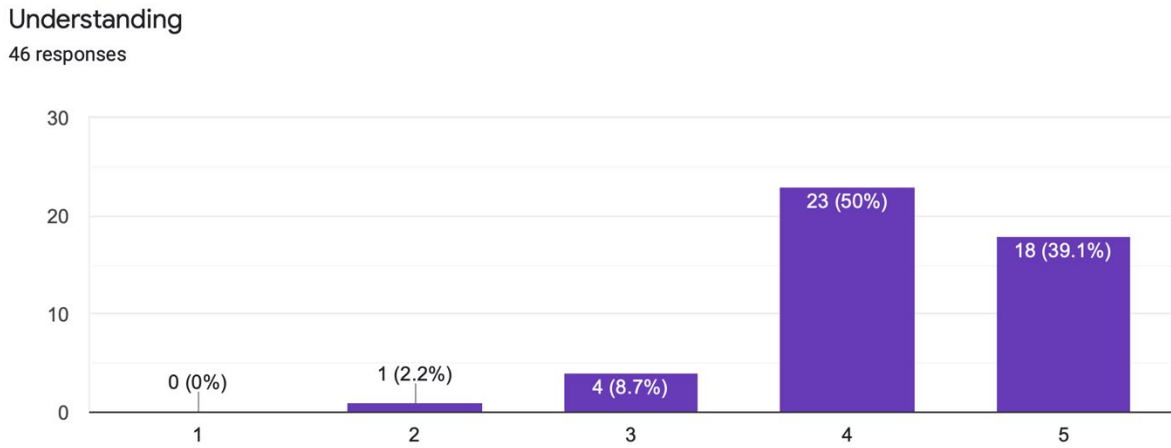
Unlike fairness and empathy, the picture of an emotional mindset is not as clear. Most participants rate themselves as a three for this mindset, a total of 18 participants. More participants place themselves as a three or under for this mindset, with only 13 participants rating this as a mindset that they have in a large capacity.

**Figure 12. Supportive**



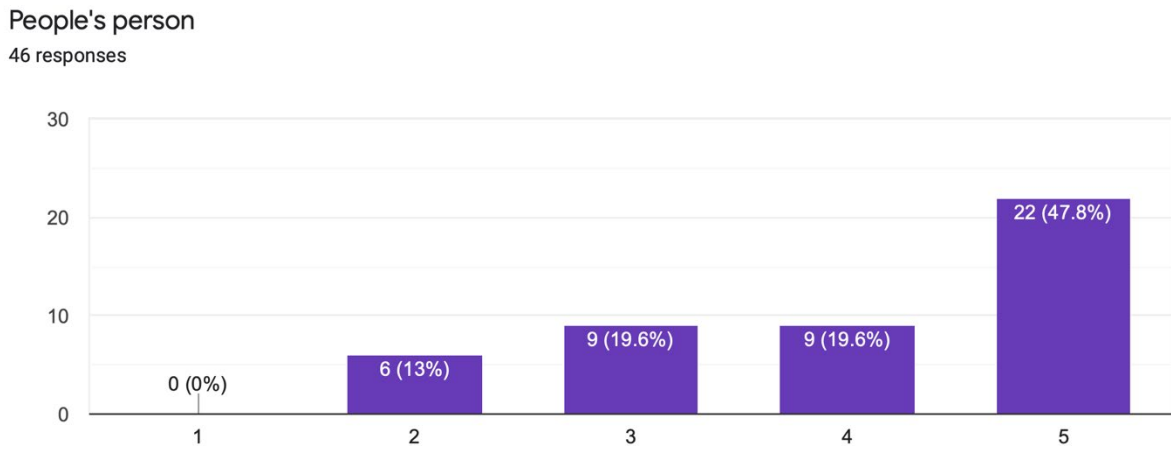
Like empathy and fairness, a supportive mindset has brought a clear picture of agreement. Only 2 participants do not believe they are at the highest end of the scale for fairness. 95.7% of the participants rate themselves a 4 or a 5 for this mindset function.

**Figure 13. Understanding**



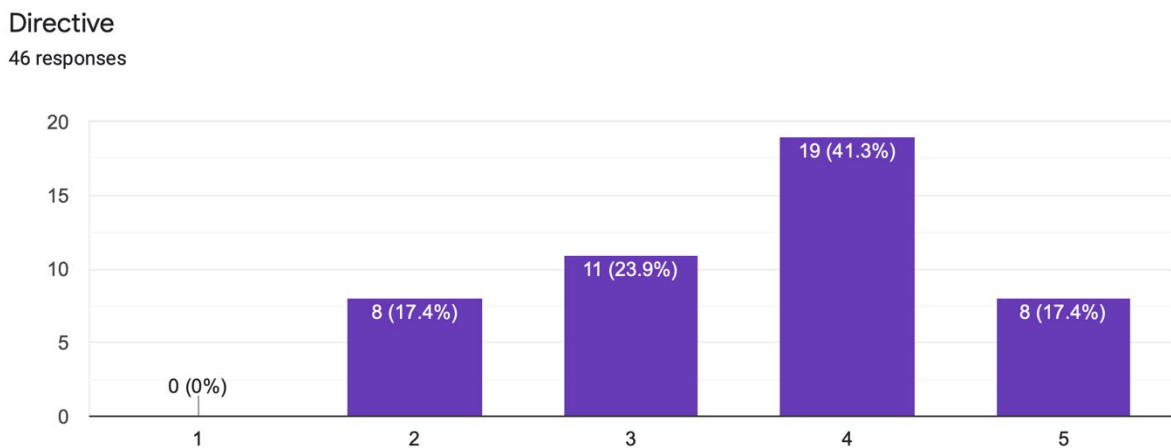
Interestingly, an understanding mindset does not follow the exact pattern of the other traditionally ‘positive’ mindsets, such as fairness and empathy. Though still a very high percentage of respondents rating themselves a 4 or 5 for this mindset 79.1%, most of these participants select a 4, rather than a 5. 5 participants have not rated themselves in this high level. Interesting we have one anomaly in this set, who grades themselves a 2 for understanding. No participants believe they do not have an understanding mindset to the strongest capacity (1).

**Figure 14. People's person**



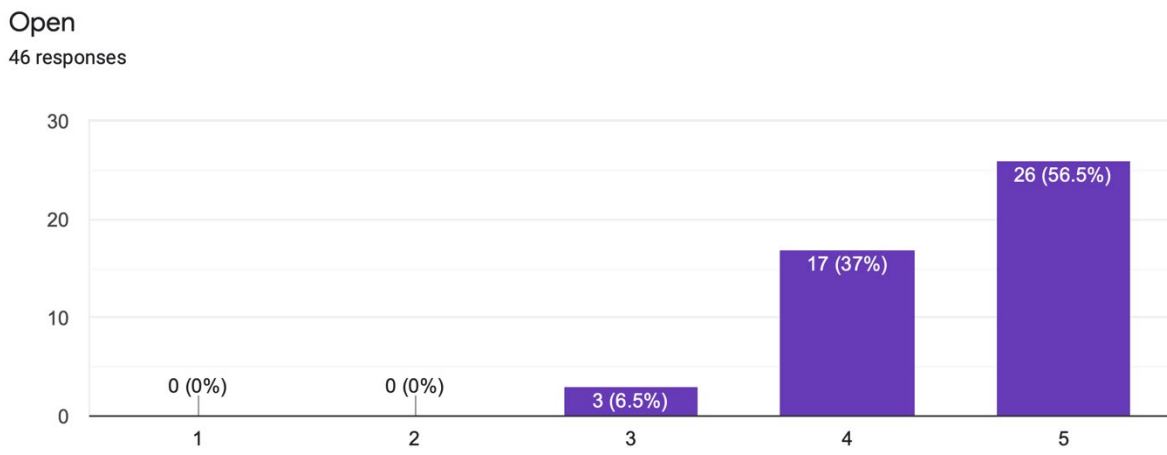
Amongst the 13 mindsets surveyed a 'people's person' mindset falls in the upper middle section in terms of 5 ratings. Just below half of participants believe they have the highest level of this mindset. This mindset has created an interesting spread of results, however, though the majority response is 5, the mid ranges get more responses for this mindset, totalling 24.

**Figure 15. Directive**



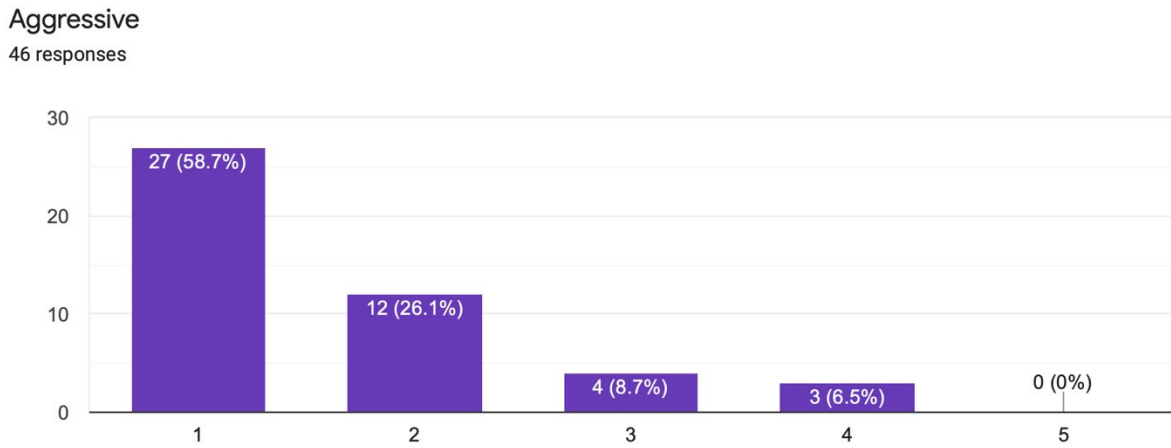
Like, understanding, the directive mindset splits participants, with fewer opting for the highest level of this mindset. None of the participants believes they do not have this mindset, but only 8 would suggest they have it to the highest level. There is still a positive direction for the perception of having this mindset, 58.7% of participants have rated themselves a 4 or 5.

**Figure 16. Open**



Another overwhelmingly positive result is the open mindset. All participants rate themselves above a 3 for this mindset, with a total of 93.5% rating themselves in the highest section. Following the pattern of Empathy and fairness, this mindset cascades down from the highest rating.

**Figure 17. Aggressive**

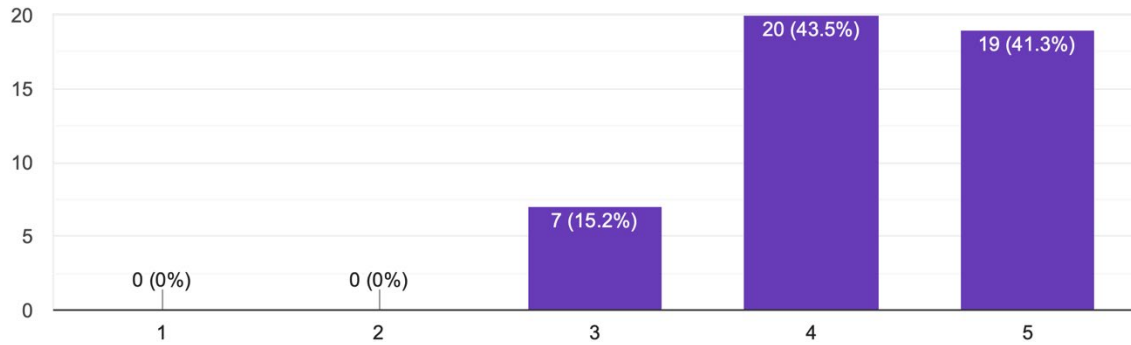


In complete contrast to some of the traditionally ‘positive’ mindsets, most of the participants did not agree that they had an aggressive mindset. The highest percentage 58.7% vehemently disagreed, rating their aggressive mindset the lowest possible score. These numbers then ease down towards the positive end of the scale. Interestingly no participants selected a 5 for this mindset.

**Figure 18. Straight forward**

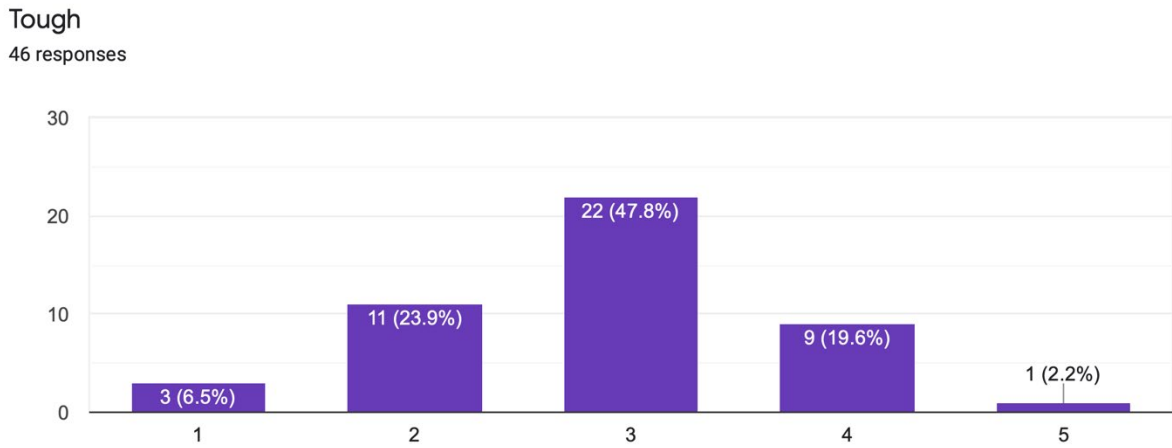
Straight forward

46 responses



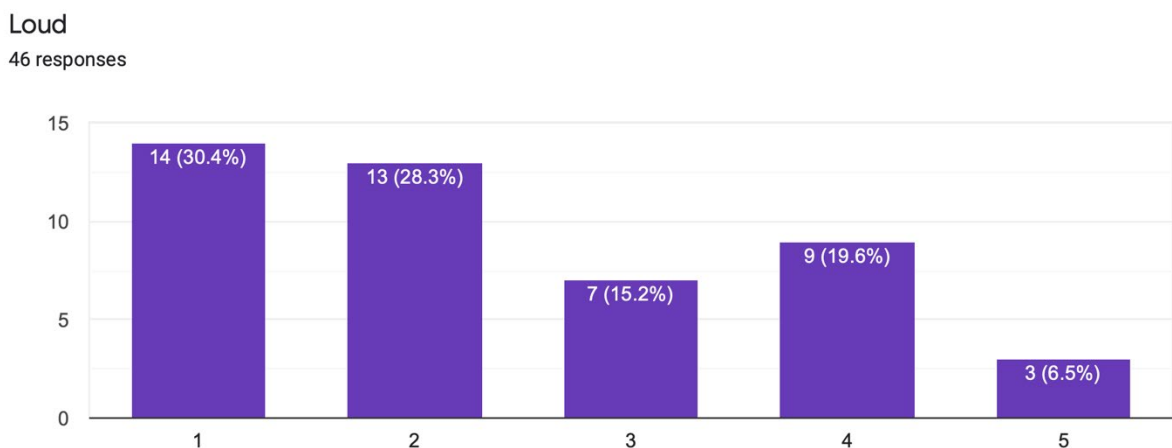
A 'straight forward' mindset has received an interesting result from our participants. 85.8% of participants rate themselves in the highest part of the scale, 4 and 5, however, 4 on the scale receives slightly more agreement. No participants rate themselves on the lower end of the scale for this mindset.

**Figure 19. Tough**



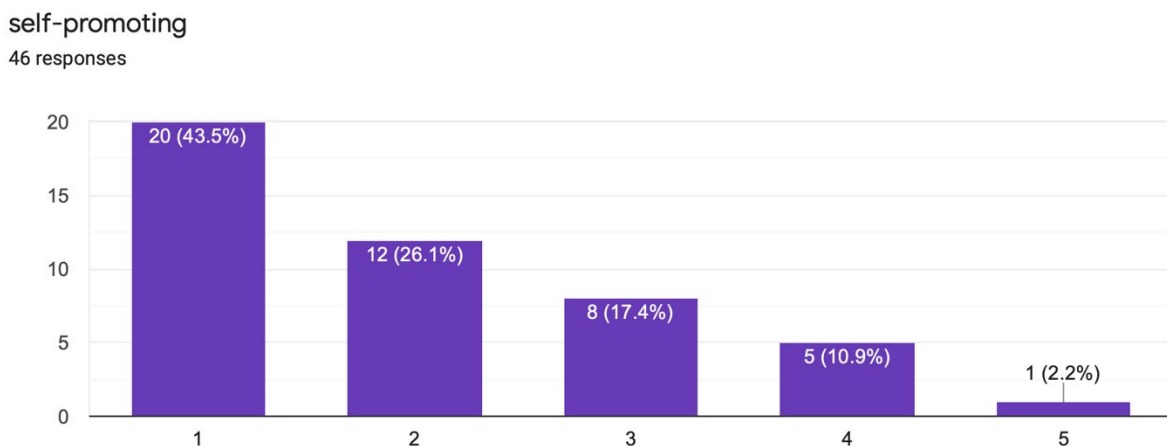
A tough mindset has received one of the most interesting results in the study, with the majority of the participants not agreeing that they really do or really don't have this mindset. More participants sit below the 3 lines, with 30.4% of participants grading themselves a 1 or 2 for this mindset, compared to just 21.8% who see this as a high-level mindset that they hold.

**Figure 20. Loud**



Another interesting result, when asked if they would identify as ‘loud’ in their mindset the 46 participants have given a very mixed result. Though the majority state 1, the lowest option, this is not a sizeable majority. It can be seen, however, that most participants are on this lower side of the scale, with 27 of the 46 (58.7%) choosing a 1 or 2. This result does not steadily cascade towards the other end of the scale however, following the pattern of the other mindsets, we have a larger number identifying as a 4 than a 3. This mindset has created very mixed views.

**Figure 21. Self-promoting**

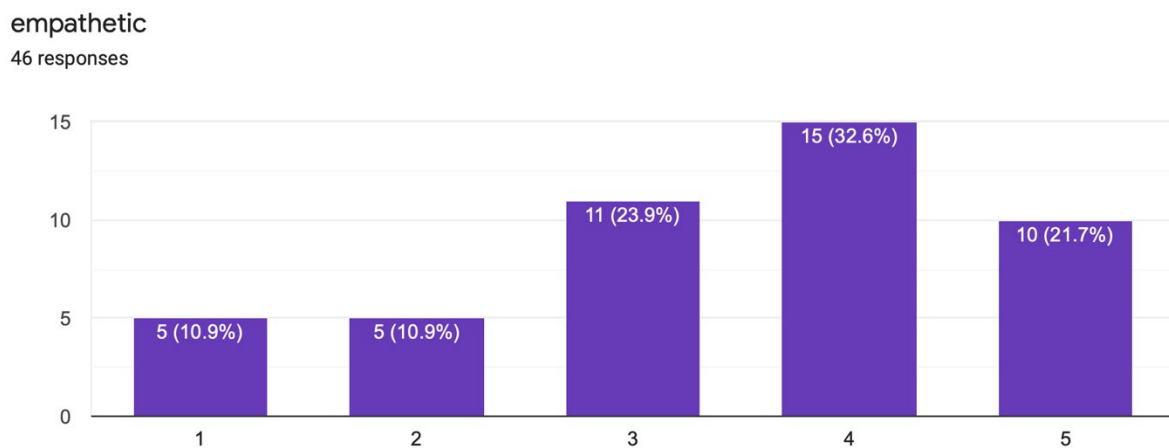


Following a traditional cascade, like aggressive and empathetic mindsets, self-promoting is majority perceived as a mindset the respondents do not have, with 69.6% of respondents selecting a 4 or 5. Only one of the respondents selects that they have the strongest level of self-promotion within their mindset.



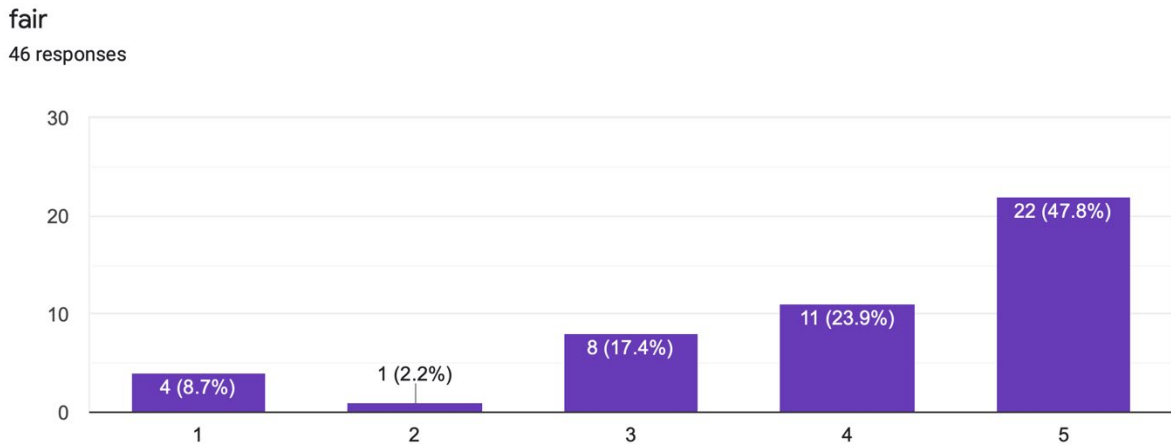
How would you describe a mindset one has to have to progress in your organisation and achieve a top role? Please, rate where 1 means least likely and 5 means most likely.

**Figure 22. Empathetic**



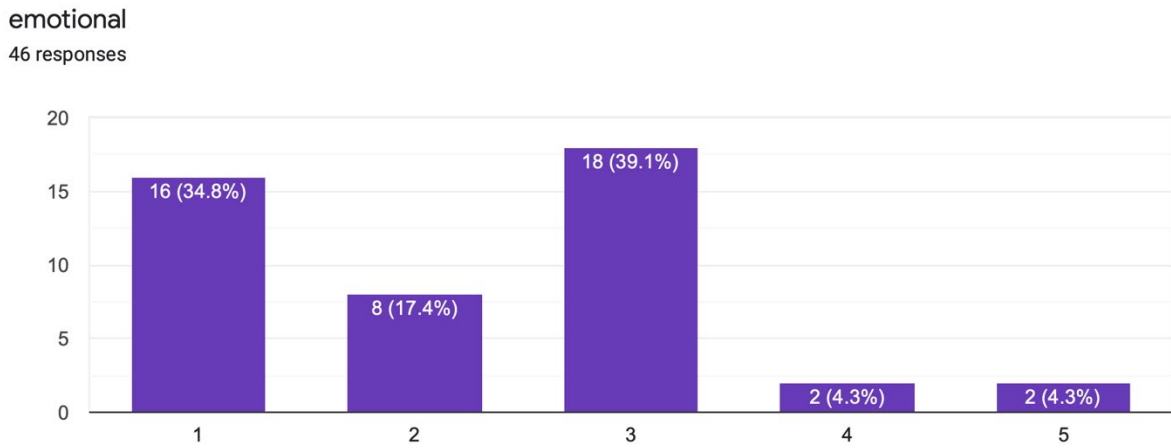
In the consideration of whether empathy is a mindset that can help progression within an organisation, the participants have given a very mixed response. The majority of these responses are on the positive side of the scale, with just over half stating a 4 or a 5, (54.3%, 25 participants) however, this is not a unanimous decision, with 10 participants 21.8% of participants believe this does not play a role to the highest (5) and second highest (4) degree.

**Figure 23. Fair**



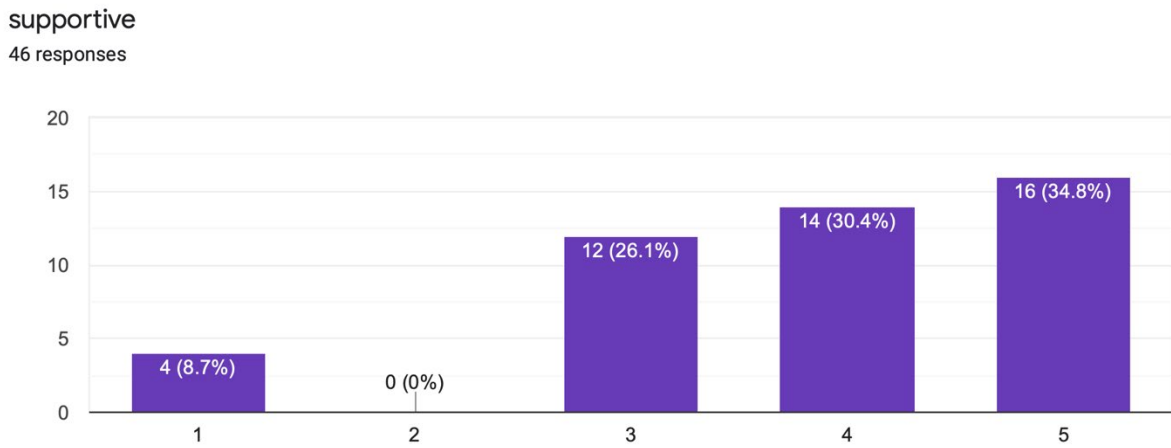
Interestingly, 10.9% of respondents do not believe fairness brings progression in an organisation, rating it a 1 or 2, with 80% of these negative responses selecting a 1. A large percentage, but less than half of participants believe that a fair mindset brings progression to the strongest level. A total of 71.7% selected 5 or 4, for the how much a fair mindset affects progression positively.

**Figure 24. Emotional**



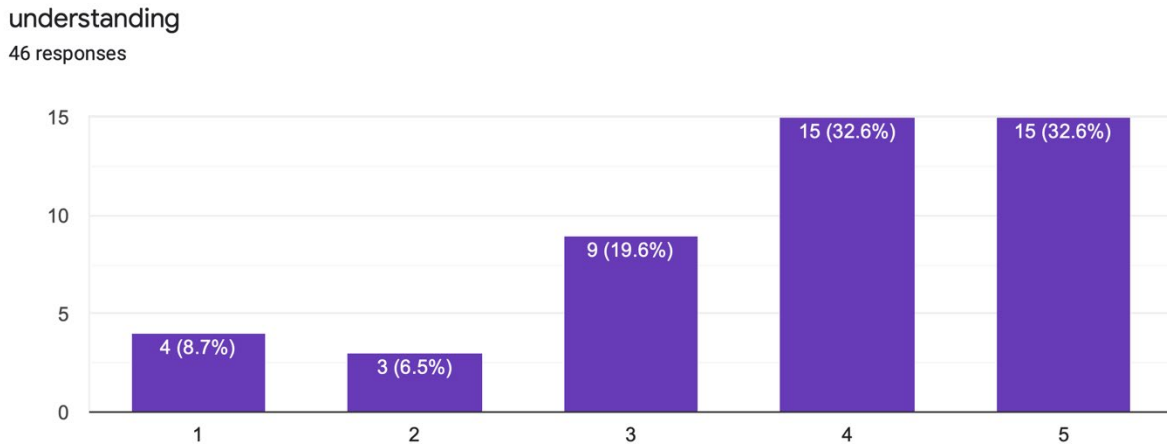
When considering whether an emotional mindset is conducive to progress in an organisation, the participants give a mixed response. Though the majority of participants, 39.1% rate this a 3, highlighting they may not think it has an impact, either way, the largest section of respondents is on the lower side of this scale. Just over half, a total of 52.2% of respondents rate emotion as a mindset in the lower section of the scale, stating it is a 1 or 2 when it comes to progressing a career to top roles. This result, however, is not unanimous, 8.6% of respondents disagree with this selection that it does in fact progress a career to the highest roles.

**Figure 25. Supportive**



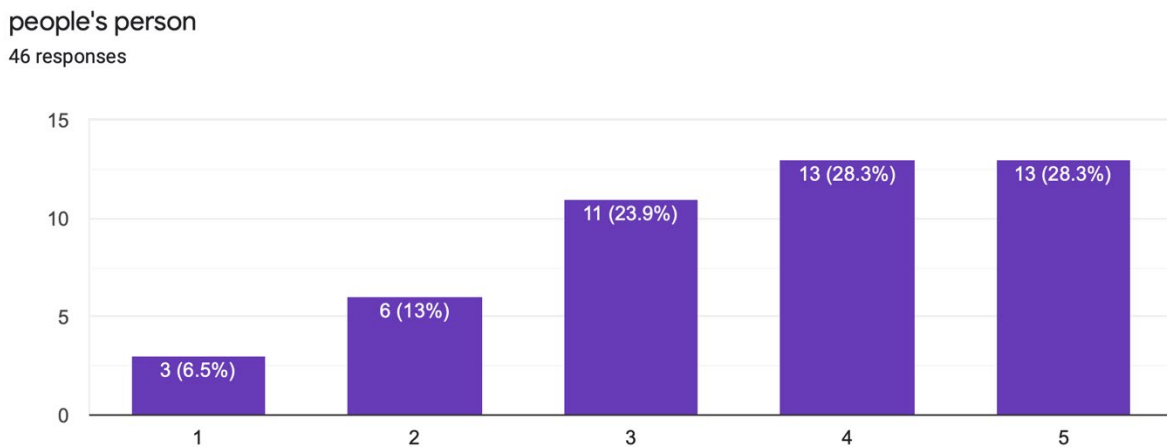
Another interestingly split result, the majority of respondents believe a supportive mindset brings progression in an organisation, however, 8.7% of respondents disagree to the strongest level, with no participants selecting 2, breaking the cascading pattern. The idea of a supportive mindset being conducive to career progression is still the belief of the majority of participants, however, 91.3% rating 3 and above and 65.2% rating 2 and above.

**Figure 26. Understanding**



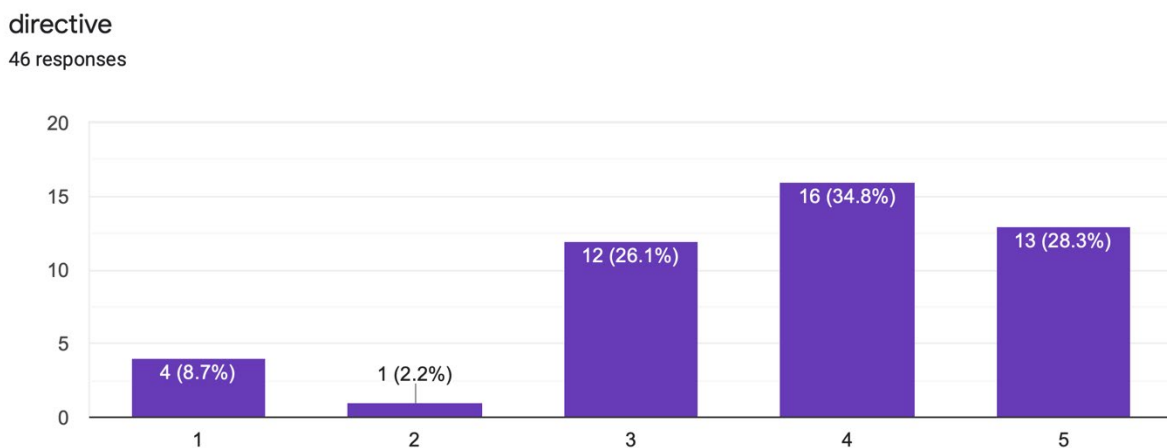
Like, a supportive mindset and understanding mindset gives a mixed set of results. Again, more respondents disagree with the strongest level, 1, that this does not bring progression, despite 3 respondents selecting level 2. Overwhelmingly, however, most respondents are on the positive side of the scale, with 84.8% of respondents rating this a 3 or above.

**Figure 27. People's person**



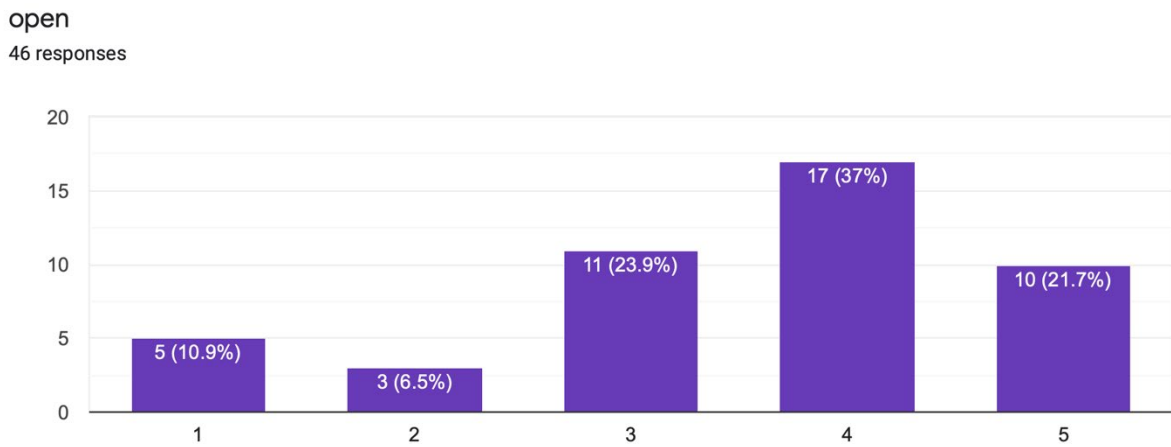
Creating a more traditional cascade, a ‘people’s person’ mindset, receives mostly positive results for progressing the route to a senior role, though there are still several participants who disagree (20 participants select 3 or below, a total of 43.4%). 19.5% of participants are in the lowest and second lowest part of the scale, disagreeing that this mindset brings progression.

**Figure 28. Directive**



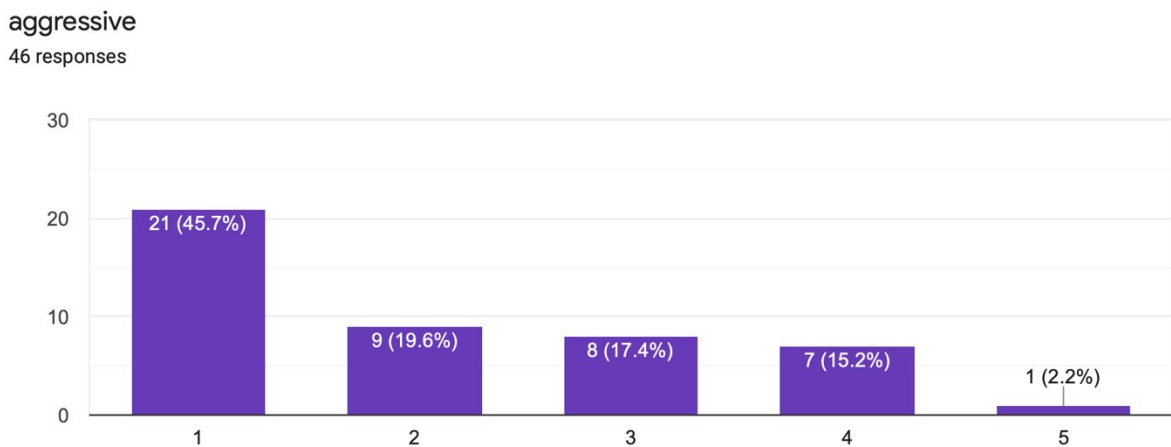
A directive mindset receives an interesting spread of results from participants when asked if it is a mindset which helps career progression within their organisation. The majority of participants are on the higher end of the scale 29 participants, or 63.1% select 1 or 2. It cannot be ignored however that 36.9% of participants rate this 3 or below, highlighting this is not considered as important as some of the previous mindsets.

**Figure 29. Open**



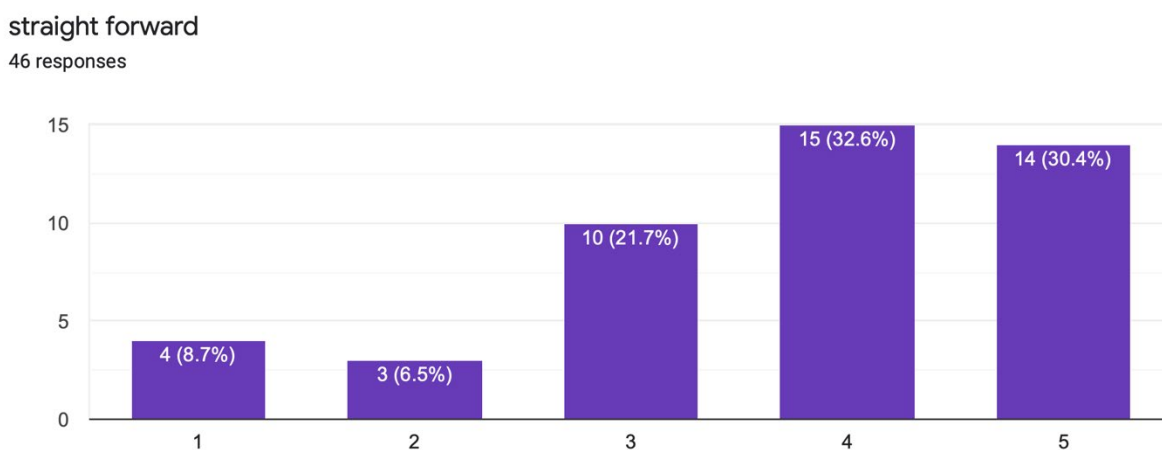
An open mindset is rated in the higher end of the scale, when considered important for progression by the respondents, with over half, 58.7%, of respondents, grading this a 4 or 5. Interestingly, more participants grade this a 4 than 5, highlighting it is not considered of the utmost importance for progression.

**Figure 30. Aggressive**



There is a strong response rate for participants disbelieving that aggression is a useful mindset to bring progression in an organisation. 65.3% of participants select the lowest levels 1 and 2, with 45.7% selecting 1. This mindset comes out with the strongest response for being considered negative for progression. It must be said, however, that 8 participants (17.4%) do believe to levels 1 and 2 can progress a route to key roles.

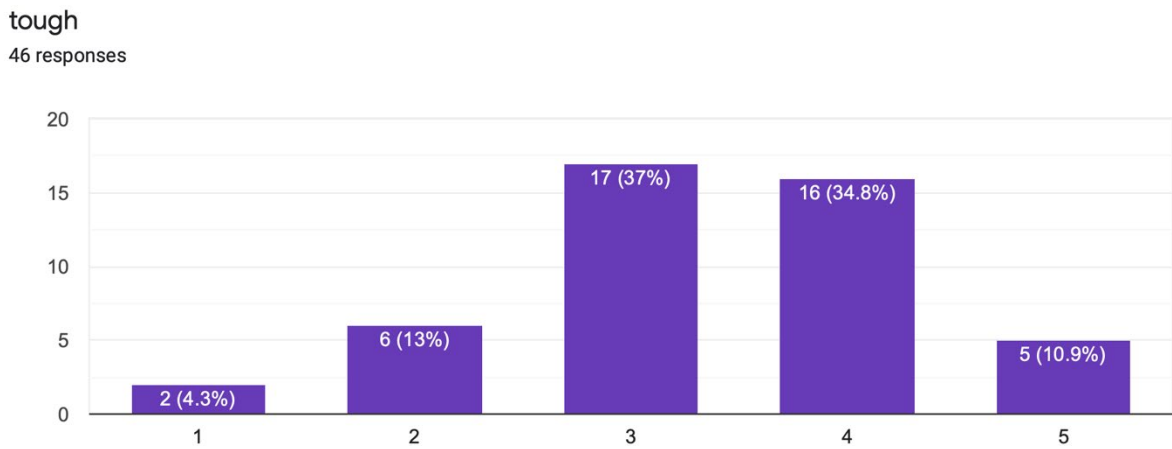
**Figure 31. Straight forward**



Another mixed result, a straightforward mindset is seemingly looked at as positive for our participants, when considering a route to progression in their organisation, but this is not unanimous. 7 participants believe strongly (2) and very strongly (1) that this does not help progression. Interestingly, most respondents, though by only a small margin of 2.6%, believe this is a 4, not a 5 on the scale, highlighting it is not the most important mindset, but still holds importance.

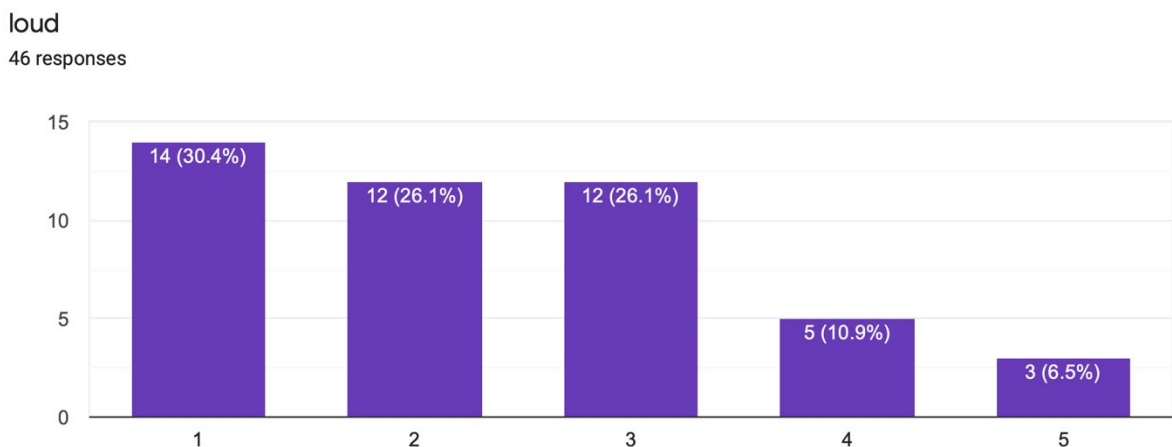


**Figure 32. Tough**



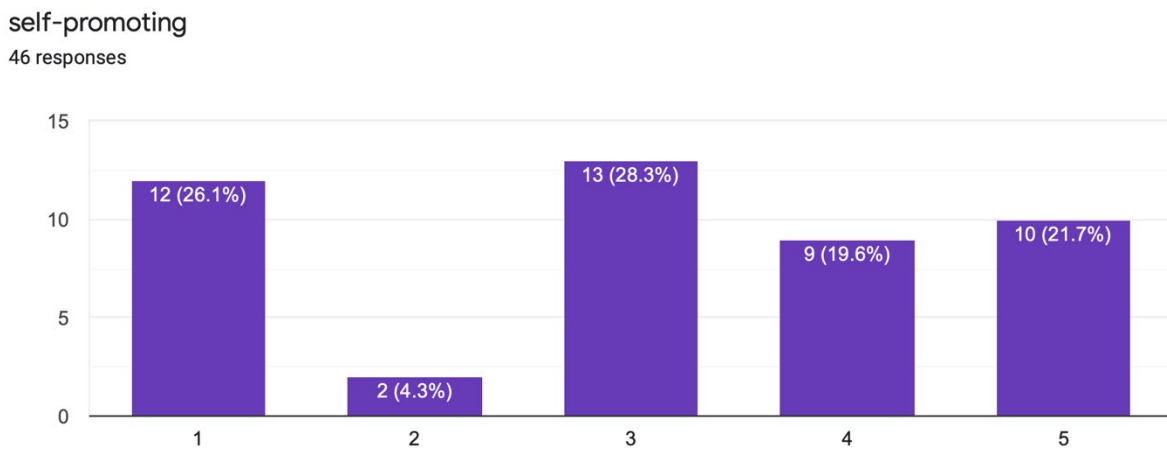
A tough mindset has created a mixed set of results for our participants, with the majority residing in the middle of the table. Only 7 respondents, 15.2% feel very strongly that this mindset does or does not help with progression.

**Figure 33. Loud**



Much like an aggressive mindset, a loud mindset creates a cascade towards the negative side of the scale, but to a lesser extreme as there are still a number of participants in the positive end. More than half of participants, 56.5% of respondents rate this a 5 or 4, showing a strong correlation that this is not perceived as a mindset that brings success.

**Figure 34. Self-promoting**



Self-promotion brings an interesting response, with mixed views across the scale. There are slightly more responses above 3, 19 respondents, 41.2% compared to the 12 below 3, 30.4%, but this is not a strong result. The majority of respondents select 3, neither disagreeing or agreeing that this impacts progression.

## **A comparison of the mindsets that participants believe they have and the mindsets participants believe progress one's career in their organisation**

### Empathetic

When considering the mindset of empathy, between what participants believe they have and what our participants believe brings a top role we can see a mismatch of responses. 89.2% of participants believe they have an empathetic mindset to the highest or second highest scale, but only 54.3% of participants believe this will bring progression in a role to the highest level. Interestingly, 21.8% of participants believe that empathy does not bring progression, despite no respondents rating themselves as not having an empathetic mindset. This mismatch indicates participants do not unanimously see the benefits of an empathic mindset on progression, thus rejecting what is commonly perceived as a feminine characteristic as conducive to ascending to leadership positions.

### Fairness

Like the empathetic mindset, there is a mismatch between what mindset participants believe they have and what mindset participants believe brings progression. No participants rated that they had the lowest levels of a fair mindset, with 78.3% of participants rating their fairness a 5. However, when looking at what the participants believe brings progression, 10.9% of participants give a 1 or 2 rating to whether fairness helps with progression. Like empathy, this indicates that despite having a fair mindset, our participants do not unanimously agree that it is important for progression. This can also be reflected in the participants who selected 3, 4 and 5. When looking at personal traits, 78.3% of participants rated their fairness at the highest level.

When contrasting this with the level at which it brings progression, the level 5 responses dropped to 47.8%, the number of 3s selected rose by 15.2% (from 1 response to 8 responses) and the number of 4s selected rose by 4.3% (from 9 responses to 11 responses).

### Emotional

When looking at the difference in responses between how much of emotional mindset participants believe they have, compared to how much they believe an emotional mindset helps progression within an organisation, there is a strong relationship, 39.1% of participants (18 people) grade this a 3 for both questions, keeping the majority of responses neutral. There is however a noticeable shift toward a negative impact on the organisational question. 34.8% of respondents (16 participants) have graded an emotional mindset as the lowest level (1) when considering how much it helps in career progression in their organisation. In comparison with how many participants believed their emotional mindset to be at this lowest level just 5 selected this, this is a huge jump. This clearly highlights that despite 13 participants (28.3%) assessing that their emotional mindset is a 4 or 5, the participants do not believe this helps with progression in their career. Only 4 (8.6%) participants in total believe an emotional mindset helps to the level 4 or 5. This may allude to why so many participants do not believe they can be themselves in their organisations and it also again rejects a traditionally feminine characteristic as suitable for progressing to a managerial role.

### Supportive

When comparing how the participants view their supportive mindset vs how much they think this helps in an organisation there is a clear relationship, with both responses weighing heavily

towards the positive side of the scale, suggesting most participants believe they have a supportive mindset (95.6% answered 4 or 5), and most believe this helps progress in their organisations (65.2%). There is however a small movement toward the negative side of the scale when it comes to organisations. None of the participants believed they did not hold a supportive mindset, with 0 responses for 1 or 2. However, 4 participants (8.7%) believe that a supportive mindset does not help progress, to the furthest impact (1), though not a huge shift, this is a notable and interesting difference.

### Understanding

Like a supportive mindset, the understanding mindset remains highly ranked as a trait the respondents have and as a trait, the respondents believe brings progression. However, there is again a small shift towards the negative side of the scale of organisations. Only 1 participant did not rate their understanding mindset above a 2, with 89.1% of respondents saying they had a level 4 or 5 understanding mindset, with the majority stating 4 (50%). When considering how an understanding mindset helps with organisational progress a small but notable 15.2% of participants rated a 1 or 2, highlighting that there is not a unanimous view that this is a useful mindset for progression, despite 89.1% of respondents stating they have this mindset.

### People's Person

Though not a huge variation, more participants believe they are a 'people person' than believe being a 'people person' helps with work progression. 28.3% of participants believe that being a people person has the top level of influence on job progression rating it a 5 and 47.8% of participants believe to the top level, 5, that they are a people person. There is a small but

noticeable shift towards being a ‘people person’ not helping progression in their organisations, with 13% of respondents stating they are not a people person (rating a 2, so not the most impact, but still low). When examining whether this helps progression, 19.5% rate a 1 or 2, with 3 people (6.5%) rating 1, strongly disagreeing that being a people person helps with progression.

### Directive

When looking at the correlation between a directive mindset as a trait our participants believe they have and how much they believe it impacts career progression in their organisations, the results are very similar. 58.7% of participants believe they have a very directive mindset (rating 4 or 5), and 63.1% of participants believe this helps with career progression to a strong level (rating 4 or 5), in real terms this is a difference of just two participants. There is a small but notable change to the number of participants who believe a directive mindset doesn’t help in progression compared to how many believe they are not directive. 8 participants, 17.4% believe they are only a 2 in terms of a directive mindset, making them not particularly directive. When looking at the organisational results, only 5 respondents do not believe this helps with progression (10.9%). Though only a small difference, it can be assessed that a directive mindset is believed to bring progression, but not all participants believe they have this mindset.

### Open

Interestingly, despite all participants rating themselves at least a 3 for an open mindset, 7 participants (17.4%) actively believe this does not help progression. Again, this highlights areas respondents may not ‘be themselves’ about. Looking at the positive side of the scale, 56.5% of participants (26) believe they have the highest level of an open mindset, rating it 5, this is in

comparison to only 21.7% of participants who believe an open mindset helps career progression to the highest level (rating it 5).

### Aggressive

There was no notable contrast in views around an aggressive mindset, with 45.7% of respondents stating it does not help with progression and 58.7% of participants stating they do not have this mindset. The scale is still heavily weighted toward the negative side of the scale. Highlighting that most of our respondents do not feel they have an aggressive mindset and do not feel an aggressive mindset helps progression. There are very small anomalies, 1 participant chooses 5, for an aggressive mindset helping in progression in comparison to 0 participants rating themselves 5 for this mindset. Level 2 selection, jumped from 3 participants rating their aggressive mindset like this, to 7 rating it as helpful to level 2. Though these are small enough to consider not crucial, it is still an interesting change.

### Straight Forward

Much like the aggressive mindset, the straightforward mindset remains highly graded amongst traits that bring career success and highly rated amongst traits the respondents believe they have. No participants believe they had a 4 or 5 straightforward mindset, all believing they are neutral (3) or on the higher side of the scale, with a total of 83.8% stating 1 or 2, similarly, 63% believe this mindset brings business progression. There is a slight contrast in that 15.2% of participants do not believe a straightforward mindset brings career success, rating it a 1 or 2, again showing a mismatch between mindsets participants have and mindsets they believe bring success, though this is not a very large contrast.

## Tough

Perhaps the biggest contrast is the tough mindset. Only 1 participant believes their tough mindset is the highest level 5. Five times more participants (5 participants or 10.9%) believe this mindset has the largest impact on success. This number is amplified when we include those who select level 4. 30.4% of participants believe they do not have a tough mindset selecting 1 or 2, and 45.7% of respondents believe a tough mindset brings progress to the highest levels 4 or 5. This highlights this is a mindset that participants believe they need to have to progress, despite the majority not strongly believing they have it.

## Loud

The results for the loud mindset remain stable across mindsets the respondents have, and mindsets the respondents think bring progress. There is a small shift towards this mindset being damaging to progress, with slightly more participants believing they are loud than believing it is helpful, but overall, this is much the same, participants agree they are not for the most part 'loud' and this does not bring progression.

## Self-promoting

Self-promotion shows one of our most interesting results. Only 1 participant believes they are self-promoting to the highest level 5, however, 10 participants believe this helps progression to the highest level, this is a jump of 19.5% of participants. Looking at the participants who chose the level 4, strengthens this finding. Only 6 participants 13.1% believe they have a high



level of self-promotion mindset. 41.3% of participants believe a high level (4 or 5) of self-promotion brings progress, a jump of 28.2%. This highlights most participants do not believe they are self-promoting, despite most believing it is helpful for progression, thus embracing a traditionally masculine characteristic as relevant for a progression.

### Summary of comparisons

To summarise the mismatch in mindsets the participants have and the mindset the participants believe brings career progression the below table and chart showcase the data.

There are a number of traits that more respondents believe that have than a number that believe bring progress, these may be mindsets the participants feel they need to hide, linking to the earlier results. These mindsets are empathetic, fair, emotional, supportive, understanding, people's person, open, straightforward and loud. A number of traits were the opposite, these mindsets were cited as good for progress more time than they were cited as mindsets the respondents had these mindsets were, directive, aggressive, tough and self-promoting.

We can also look at the opposite side of the data and consider mindsets participants do not believe they have, compared to if they believe they don't help progress.

Empathic, fair, emotional, supportive, understanding, people's person, open, straight forward are all mindsets that more participants believe do not bring success than the number of participants who believe they lack these mindsets. In contrast, less people believe directive, aggressive, tough, loud and self-promoting mindsets, do not bring success, compared to the numbers who believe they do not have these mindsets.

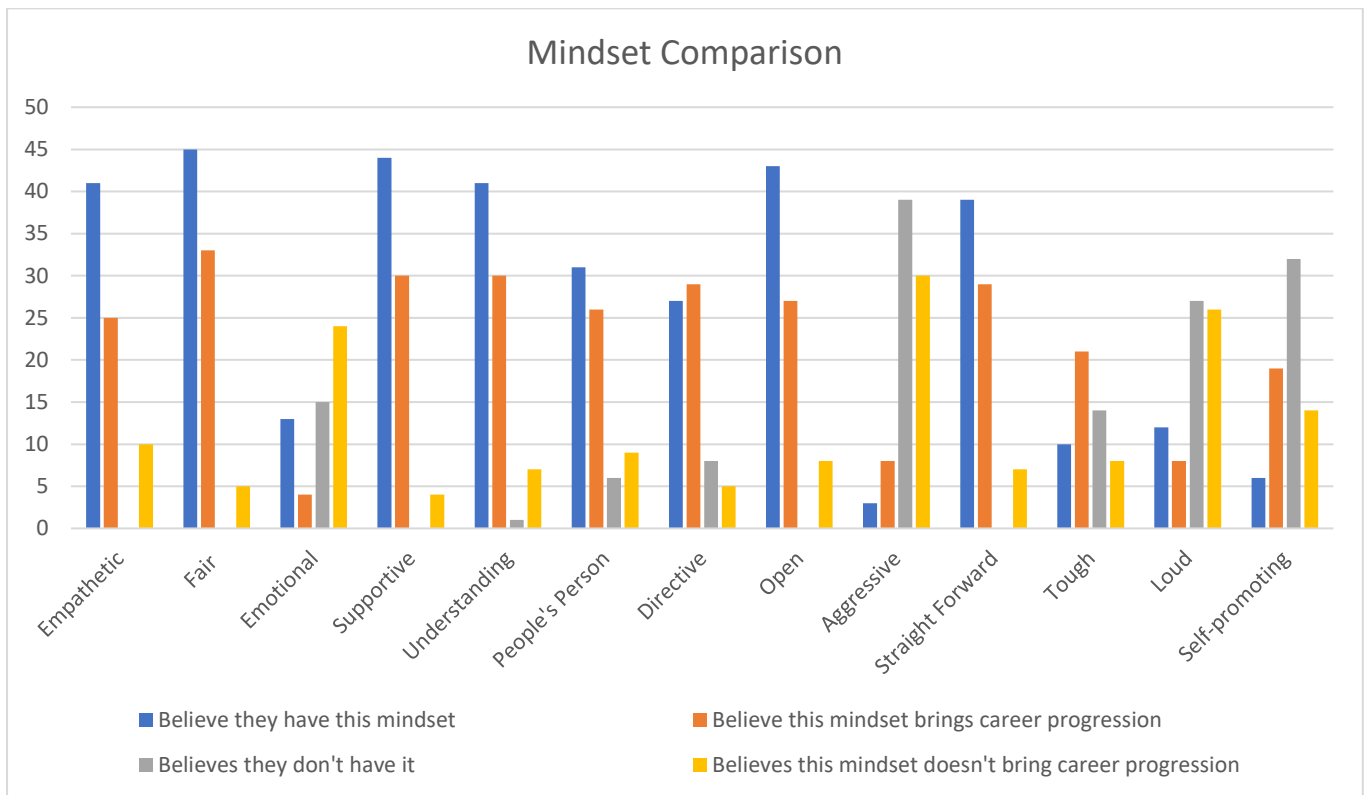
From the earlier comparison, only loudness is an anomaly, all other traits create a relationship, highlighting the traits respondents believe they have that do not directly bring success are empathetic, fair, emotional, supportive, understanding, people’s person, open and straight-forward mindsets. The mindsets respondents believe bring success but they do not directly have are directive, aggressive, tough and self-promoting mindsets (table 2).

**Table 2. Mindset and career progression**

	Believe they have this mindset	Believe this mindset brings career progression	Believes they don't have it	Believes this mindset doesn't bring career progression
Empathetic	41	25	0	10
Fair	45	33	0	5
Emotional	13	4	15	24
Supportive	44	30	0	4
Understanding	41	30	1	7
People's Person	31	26	6	9
Directive	27	29	8	5
Open	43	27	0	8
Aggressive	3	8	39	30
Straight Forward	39	29	0	7
Tough	10	21	14	8
Loud	12	8	27	26
Self-promoting	6	19	32	14

This data can also be visualised to show, more clearly how characteristics of mindsets compare (figure 35).

**Figure 35. A comparison of mindsets**

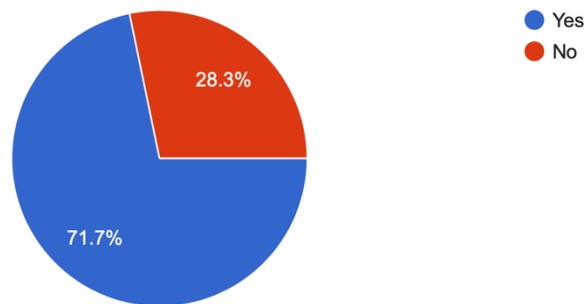


Emotions and links to mindset

**Figure 36. Emotions at work**

Do you feel comfortable showing emotions at work?

46 responses



Most of the respondents believe that they can show emotions at work, with only 13 participants stating that they do not feel comfortable doing this. This is interesting when considering the above analysis around participants who believe emotions and empathy bring progress within an organisation. The above highlights that more participants believe they are empathetic than believe it is a benefit to progression, this correlates with the 38.8% of participants who do not feel comfortable showing emotions.

## **Interviews**

After analysing data from all 11 interviews, it appears that some organisational positivity is visible in answers from interviewed women, e.g., the majority report feeling comfortable in their organisations and do not worry too much about their appearance or talking about children and thus being perceived too focused on their role as mothers. Women also do not report a very strict hierarchy when it comes to office setups or meetings and generally, it seems that organisational culture is relaxed in this way, thus showing some progress from the reported experiences of Portas (2018) who argued that a strict meeting and office hierarchy linked to the office setup also perpetuates an alpha culture in the organisation and impedes women's progress. In addition to that, women do not report an expectation to attend weekend leisure activities, which has historically impeded women's progress.

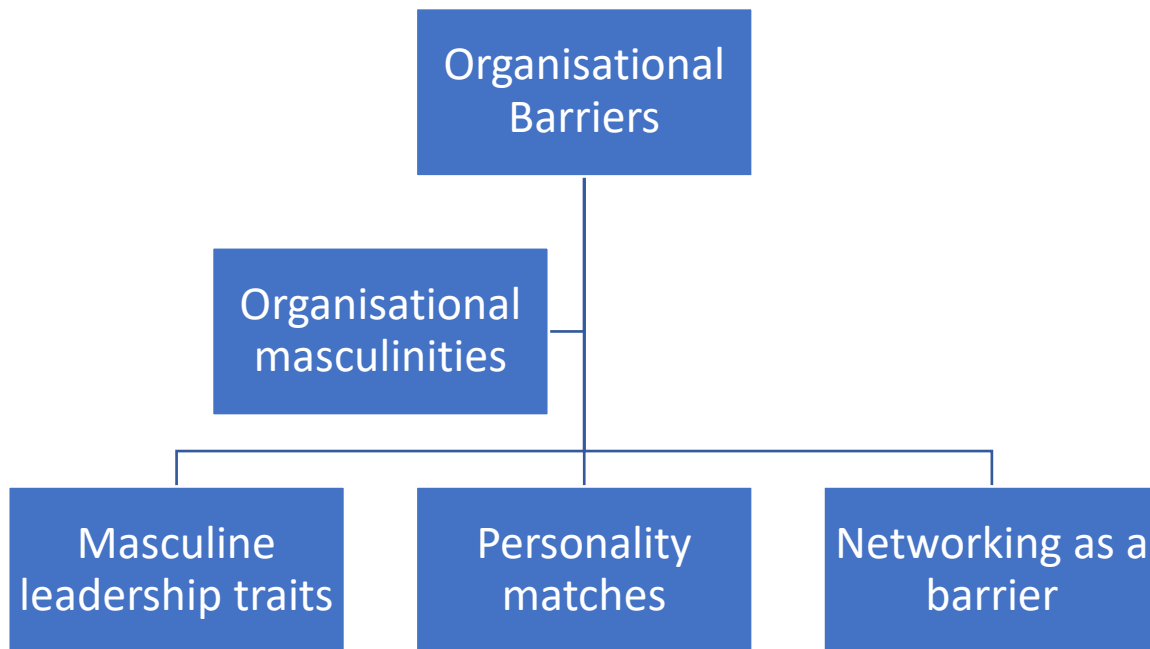
Most women do not seek power or domination in their organisations, which fits within existing research that largely argues that men historically had power and that power is a contradiction in terms when applied to women (French, 1985; MacKinnon, 1989; Pateman, 1988). In this case, it appears that women do not aim to have power and are committed to teamwork with

many women demonstrating supportive leadership traits such as wanting to work as a team, and support staff in their daily work as well as when struggling. For example,

“...like that cohesion is there that we all feel part of one and the same team (...) ethics kind of thing, we all work together (...) the same core values, I think, for us are really important (...) You can't say that I'm not coping with something and it's not going to be taken against you that we've got this very sort of supportive environment” (interviewee 1).

However, most women report organisational barriers respective to masculinities in the organisation or what culturally and in terms of socialisation comes more naturally to men than women (Bourdieu, 2007; Alvesson, 1998; 2013). Therefore, the main themes from these interviews appear to be organisational barriers as the main theme, which are described as organisational masculinities as its main descriptor, and the main sub-themes that appear from data are masculine leadership traits, personality matches and networking as a barrier (figure 37).

**Figure 37. Thematic map 1**



Whilst women reported progress, as outlined above, they also reported issues. The main one and this is consistent with the literature and available research on organisational culture is that what is perceived as a masculine trait is still needed to progress in the career, and nevertheless, many women name these characteristics as that one need to have to succeed. For example, some women named regular characteristics and personality traits such as “no cutting corners and delivering high-quality work” (interviewee 1). However, other interviewees outlined determination and putting yourself forward (interviewee 4), competence, knowledge, ability, drive and speed (interviewee 5), hard work, ambition, can do attitude, resourcefulness, ability to cope with change and fast paced work (interviewee 8), intrapreneurial, loving the challenge and a willingness to learn (interviewee 11), etc. These findings show that women themselves often outline masculine characteristics as those one needs to succeed which goes with the

existing literature (Topić et al, 2020; Topić, 2020; 2020a; Topić & Bruegmann, 2021; Topić, 2021).

Previous studies (Topić et al, 2020; Topić, 2020; 2020a; Topić & Bruegmann, 2021; Topić, 2021) identified characteristics one needs to succeed such as toughness, aggression, directness, lack of emotion and empathy as a recipe for success and women who embrace these characteristics go ahead but are often perceived as tougher than men whereas women who show feminine characteristics either do not progress or they are tokenised and do not always have the real power to run organisations and affect change (ibid). The masculine characteristics identified in communications research are centred on being touch, giving as good as it gets, aggressive, not showing emotion and empathy and engaging with banter as well as having a work-first attitude and putting in extra hours, networking, etc. (ibid). However, results of these studies also showed that even when women are masculine they do not always have the real power, except in journalism where if one engages in masculine banter, these women tend to succeed in editorial positions, however, they become “so-bloke-ified by the macho waters in which they swim that many younger women looking up don’t see them as role models for a kind of women they might want to become” (Mills, 2014, p.19).

But, these findings showed that interviewees outline masculine characteristics as necessary to succeed in one’s career, and this leads back to the argument that the division in organisations on masculine and feminine, including allowed behaviours, power, and institutionalised means of maintaining and perpetuating divisions have led to a situation where a successful manager is almost a synonym with a man whereas women are left behind (Acker, 1990). What is more, this confirms Bourdieu’s (2007) argument that masculine domination is so ingrained into everyday life that people do not see it as problematic and thus, fail to challenge it.

In addition to that, personality matches seem to hinder the career and some participants reported issues with not having the right personality to go ahead in their careers. For example, interviewee 2 said her organisation has a very corporate mindset marked also by groupthink and particular behavioural styles, e.g., promoting the organisation even when not agreeing with their policies and having to be a type of person that fits into the team and the groupthink, calling also her organisation cliquy. As a result of not being seen as a good fit, this interviewee suffered career barriers and was not promoted despite being highly qualified and having joined her current organisation from a more senior position where she took a step down and then faced barriers, based on her personality, in progressing in her career. As a result, she changed her behaviour and tried to be more upbeat about the organisation, but issues remained due to the cliquy nature of the organisation,

“I needed a job, so I took basically an entry level role when I’ve been above that for years. That was quite hard for me. Like psychologically, quite hard to do that, so I was obviously as soon as any opening came up, I was very keen to go for it. I had four internal interviews over three years, all of which I was rejected from. I always felt that it was because it’s sort of already made a decision on who was going to fill those roles. And there was one time where I was told that the role was basically a promotion within my team. The same team that I’ve been working with, it was a little bit of a step up. It’s gonna be a little bit more to do and I was told that they didn’t think I was a good fit for the team. It was nothing to do with all like the extra stuff were done because that is what I did. I went and did lots of extra stuff and I made a big point about it. But I was told that so after that I sort of put a bit of a façade on and became a bit of a cheerleader” (interviewee 2).

Finally, and this is the main issue that arises from the data is networking. Women report networking as something they do not particularly enjoy because it requires self-promotion and



shouting about achievements, and it is too artificial for some who then avoid these events. For example,

“...personally, I always feel so artificial, and everyone is so self-promoting and it’s like I just have it feels so unnatural to me (...) Like everyone is trying to like, what’s your angle? What do you try to gain from here? I’m not that sort of person. Uh, it’s just so superficial and really puts me off personally” (interviewee 1).

This opens a question opens whether women are hindering their own career progress by not engaging with networking, so it feels like self-inflicted harm, however, there is a different way of looking at this. Networking is historically seen as a masculine practice because men worked whilst women stayed at home and thus, it was possible for men to network after work and develop this informal work culture that takes them ahead (Saval, 2015), however, at the same time, literature reports that many women do not enjoy these forms of socialising either because of caring responsibilities or because they face harassment (Topić et al, 2020; Topić, 2020; 2020a; Topić & Bruegmann, 2021; Topić, 2021). In this study, networking also contributes to character and personality differences and shows that many women do not like this form of self-promotion, the latter also often being seen as a masculine characteristic more natural to men than women, thus opening up a question that since some women do not like this historically masculine practice, is this a reason perhaps they fall behind? Other research studies have shown that women also dislike networking, not just because of the usual family and caring constraints, but because of masculine practice and harassment, they often face from clients and bosses. In studies on women in advertising and public relations, Topić (2020; 2020a) quoted women saying they face sexual harassment such as groping in office parties as well as sexual advances from clients. Therefore, we can argue that organisational structures are gendered because advantages and disadvantages are understood as masculine and feminine (Acker, 1990). It is

indeed essential to study “how organizational structures, processes, and practices material, behavioral, relational, ideational, and discursive may be viewed as (culturally understood as) masculine and, perhaps often less salient, feminine. Gendering organizations usually means paying attention to how they are dominated by culturally masculine meanings. Masculinity is a vague concept but can be defined as values, experiences, and meanings that are culturally interpreted as masculine and typically feel "natural" for or are ascribed to men more than women in the particular cultural context” (Alvesson, 1998, p. 972).

However, some women also showed a transactional approach to networking where they saw it mainly as a way of closing sales and they expressed a negative attitude toward the social aspect of networking albeit they recognised this has changed during the pandemic. For example, interviewee 8 said she did not always believe that networking was beneficial for her personally nor did she think she is a particularly good networker in the past because networking had to be about closing sales rather than a social event, but because of the pandemic she changed her view due to LinkedIn networking,

“I didn’t believe that networking was beneficial for me personally. I didn’t think I was a particularly good networker and I certainly didn’t engage in networking (...) For me, networking had to be purposeful and when it becomes, when it starts to feel like a social, I disengage from it. I probably see greater value in it now than I did before (...) I think I have a greater application of the value of a network (...) It doesn’t always have to be a quick win, and I think historically I felt that networking had to be quick and quick when it needed to be purposeful. It needs to be sales oriented and I think I’ve moved away from that thinking (...) I’ve also had some experience of social networking on LinkedIn, where I’ve probably been more engaged during the pandemic. On LinkedIn, for example, and commenting and liking on people’s post and actually got work through very little effort just being engaged and just being present in a social network. ‘Cause because your name just keeps getting put in front of people, doesn’t it? And then it’s

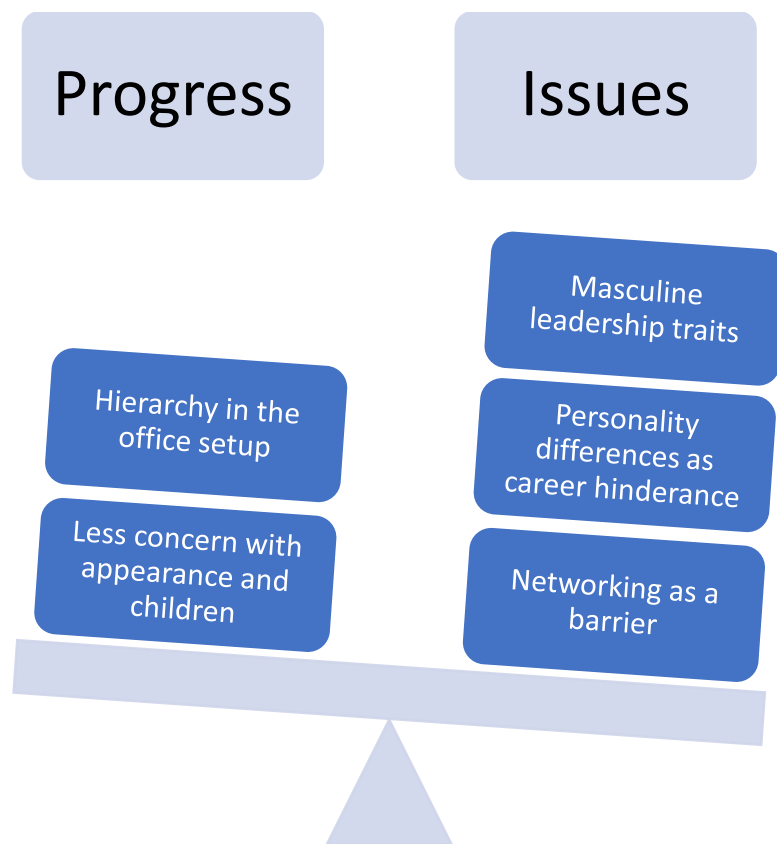
like, oy, yeah, I know somebody who could help us with that. It's one of those scenarios" (interviewee 8).

LinkedIn also came up in another's participant response. For example, interviewee 11 also said that LinkedIn has taken over face-to-face networking and that people are sharing more than what they would normally share in a face-to-face networking event and this interviewee also said that she does not prefer personal networking anymore,

"LinkedIn is really taken off. And people are using it almost to replace face-to-face engagement. So, they are sharing more things that they will normally share when you're sat in front of them and sitting in front of people as much, they are sharing those things online. And I also find that people are less reluctant, and even in my case, reluctant to just meet up for or, you know, before, I could easily have lots of lunch, networking meetings and just go out and meet people. I don't do that anymore. I don't have a need to do that. Because I feel we can easily achieve the same thing with a zoom call" (interviewee 11).

Therefore, as a summary of these findings, we can conclude that there is some positivity and progress from the organisational and popular literature reports, but there are also issues with masculinities in the organisations, which are illustrated in figure 39.

Figure 39. Thematic map 2



## Conclusion

The findings of this study show that women self-inflict harm by recognising masculine characteristics as ones that people need to succeed and positively assess masculine leadership characteristics such as the lack of emotion and empathy, etc. This clearly shows that Bourdieu's (2007) arguments on masculine habitus continue to stand because organisations function as a masculine world, but women fail to recognise this oppression because these practices are deeply ingrained into organisational lives. As a result, women report barriers such as networking and personalities, the latter going in line with existing research arguing that only masculine women go ahead, or women who become so bloke-ified that other women cannot accept them as role models anymore (Mills, 2014). Thus, personality and behaviour in the organisation influence career progressions not just in corporations and organisations generally, as per previous research, but also in SMEs.

If we link these findings with findings from the advertising industry where women in Leeds reported less discrimination than women elsewhere in England, particularly from the south (Topić, 2020) question remains why is this the case? When looking into data from this study it appears that women, and participants generally, say they feel comfortable in their organisations, do not bother with refraining from speaking about children, do not get asked to attend leisure activities over the weekend and do not need to bother with personal appearance such as looks. The conclusion then emerges that organisational culture in the Leeds City Region might be more relaxed than elsewhere in England. This is particularly the case if we look at reports of harassment and groping from the south of England in advertising studies (ibid). However, it still remains open as to what kind of participants feel more comfortable, e.g., not just regarding personalities but also perhaps class and race.

When it comes to race, the participation of Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) was very low, due to a failure in the recruitment, and only one Black woman was interviewed, however, this woman said she was affected by her gender but also race in her career whereas one white woman from the interviewee sample said she observed racial discrimination by white men of south Asian women, e.g., a white male manager mixing their names even though, according to the interviewee, these two women did not have similar names nor did they look alike at all. Thus, race in Leeds SMEs needs further exploration in research, as well as class. In terms of the latter, class is often analysed in the context of behaviour as there are indications that behaviour is class-conditioned, and thus perceptions of discrimination and a lived experience of a masculine habitus may be different between various social classes.

Equally, what is very interesting is that participants assess themselves in one way and then outline a direct opposite as necessary for career progression, or they assess themselves as having more feminine characteristics (e.g., empathy and emotion) but outline that traits needed for leadership are actually masculine and one needs to be tough for example. Equally, women reject traditionally masculine practices such as networking but admit this is important for a career progression, thus showing that the organisational world is not dressed into the feminine. But these findings also open a question as to whether people are willing to change to succeed or rather settle for a lack of career opportunities and preserve personal integrity. For example, one interviewee said she had to become a cheerleader for the organisation to fit in whereas many participants from the survey assessed themselves and prospective leaders differently. Since this was a quantitative part, it is not possible to know how participants feel about this, and thus further research should look into people's characteristics and traits, willingness to change to succeed and sentiments and feelings about fitting in. The concept of organisational cheerleader, as introduced by one interviewee, is also an interesting one to explore as it would

be relevant to establish gender differences in promoting the organisation and its impact on career progression.

Finally, another interesting finding is networking via LinkedIn. This was mentioned by two women only, however, in both cases, they outlined the benefits of this form of networking. Given that networking consistently appears as a barrier, in a networking research report conducted as part of this project (Topić et al, 2021) as well as in this study, the question opens up as to whether social media networking could at least address harassment many women face in face-to-face networking, as reported in some studies (Topić et al, 2021; Topić, 2020).

Organisations should introduce strict criteria for promotion that avoid bias and appointing those who are like us to senior positions, and one way of doing this is perhaps identifying, realising and abandoning masculinities in the organisation. Networking remains a barrier too for women as many object to this practice or argue they are not good at it, thus again opening up a question of personalities and behavioural characteristics as relevant for career progressions. It is clear that further behavioural research is necessary into employees of organisations to explore further how various behavioural practices affect career progressions.

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