



Unshackling the 'double bind'

Few women have succeeded in shattering the glass ceiling. Even those who have achieved phenomenal success in their respective fields have taken a few hard knocks along the way.

One needs to look no further than Hilary Clinton and her recent quest to become US president. Touted as the more experienced of two Democrat candidates, she eventually conceded defeat to her charismatic opponent.

According to **Robin Ely**, a Professor of Organisational Behaviour at Harvard Business School, women often end up in a 'double bind'. "If they try to enact the traits that are seen as 'leaderly' – and these tend to be the traits that are more associated with idealised images of masculinity – they tend to be respected for that, but not necessarily liked. Whereas if they take up a more stereotypically female role of being nurturing and caretaking, they may be liked but not necessarily respected.

Barriers to success

This may very well account for the dearth of female leaders. But the bad news doesn't stop there. With fewer women at the top, women have fewer role models for mentors, and "less access to information that might come through from networks that are primarily populated by women. We know that people tend to network with people who are similar to them." Ely identifies this as a structural barrier and says that if allowed to stand, it will continue to block some semblance of equity in the top echelons.

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Another type of barrier, an attitudinal one, is just as insidious. Ely says there exists a cultural assumption about gender roles and what it takes to be a competent leader. "Unfortunately, the stereotypes that we tend to hold about women run counter to we think of as the traits that would make for a successful leader. So we think of women as caretaking and nurturing and, very often and more recently, we think of leaders as taking up those roles as well. It looks different when a woman takes them up. It's something that is seen as supposedly coming naturally to women, it's not really seen as leadership competence in the way that it is when men do it."

Needs vs. image

So it seems like an almost impossible situation for women, where managing the double bind can be self-defeating. Instead of fighting a lost cause, Ely suggests a focused approach, saying that the task of leadership should be about advancing a collective goal, regardless of gender.

"I believe that women's competence is going to be measured by how much they get done. And I think by being attentive to the needs of followers, understanding when they need one kind of leadership versus another, and really enacting that in the service of something that leaders and followers are there collectively to accomplish. This

isn't a popularity contest, this is about getting work done. And at the end of the day, really good leaders – whether they are men or women – they advance a collective goal.”

Ely believes that the gender leadership gap can be narrowed by a strategic fit of diversity programmes to pave the way for effective women leaders at the top. “There is real value to just bringing women together and having them connect with each other and share their experiences ... All leaders need to learn how to embrace the kind of mission of the group that they are leading and figure out the way to mobilise that group toward that collective goal. So that's not different for men and women.”

Ultimately, she says, women should not worry so much about image because it can be draining. Public image issues just get in the way of exercising good leadership.

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