



Women and the ‘vision thing’

The good news is that in a study of executives, women did better than men on several measures. The bad news is that women fell significantly behind in one key area: vision.

Research by INSEAD professor **Herminia Ibarra** and PhD candidate **Otilia Obodaru** shows that women leaders are not perceived to be as strong as men when it comes to articulating a vision of the future and translating that vision into a strategic direction for the organisation.

Whether true or just a perception, this may be keeping some women from the C-suite in some companies. Either way, Ibarra says there are concrete things women can do to change this.

“There isn’t a class on becoming visionary,” she says. Women need to get out and network more to see if their ideas have some real traction.

Ibarra says the image of a man sitting on a mountaintop and suddenly gaining business insight is pervasive but doesn’t really fit with reality.

“The way you envision the future is by being out there and trying to understand trends in the industry, in society and talking to people - that’s how you are able to formulate what are threats and opportunities in your business environment and how that might match up to capabilities in your organisation.”

Ibarra and Obodaru studied the 360 degree reviews of more than 2,800 women. In all, they looked at

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22,244 evaluations on a leadership assessment developed by INSEAD’s Global Leadership Center. They were surprised to find that women did as well or better than men in most categories. The exception was vision and that exception could be one reason why fewer women rise to the top jobs.

“It’s going to be hard to tease out what is perception and what is reality, although when it comes to senior management, perception is reality,” says Ibarra, a Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD.

To find some answers, Ibarra and her co-researcher dug deeper and uncovered three possible causes for the view that women aren’t as visionary.

First, women may have a vision but they may be using a different process to develop their long-term strategy. Women may work with teams and collaborate to find direction. In business, peers and managers may not value that collaborative process as much as they value someone who appears to come up with a vision independently.

Second, women may have a vision but may be hesitant to make audacious statements because they don’t have the analysis to back them up or because they are more frequently challenged in business settings.

Finally, women may not value visionary pronouncements. Some women are sceptical of visionary claims and may view them as little more than a sales job. Many women interviewed for the study said they believed that getting things done is what should matter in business.

“From their perspective, what was important was being able to execute, staying grounded, down to earth and making sure things happen without a lot of talk,” Ibarra told INSEAD Knowledge.

The good news is that women can learn to become visionary. Ibarra says women need good role models and they need to make an effort to network more. Networking exposes people to different views and different trends. Through networking, women can watch others develop their vision.

“We push people to get out and not think about how to set strategy in the safety of their own office, but how to start networking in a way that gives them a broader vision of the future,” she says.

The authors also believe women may also need to learn how to communicate their ideas more effectively.

“How do you take an idea and then learn to communicate it in a way that’s going to be compelling - and not just compelling to people with the same training as you, but compelling to a much broader audience?” Ibarra says.

One thing for both men and women to watch out for when they make a career transition is what Ibarra calls the ‘identity trap’.

She says what made someone successful in the past can be a recipe for failure in the future and that the skills that make you very good at one job, may not work in the next level up in management.

“Those aren’t just different skill sets - they are different conceptions of who you are, what you are good at, how you contribute, what you add value on and how you spend you time. So for both men and women there is that danger of an identity trap.”

Herminia Ibarra is the Programme Director for INSEAD's Executive Education open-enrolment programme, [Women Leading Change in Global Business](#).

You can find more on ‘Women and the VisionThing’ in the January issue of the Harvard Business Review (hbr.org).

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