



Morons and Oxymorons: Undermining Women in Leadership

Fifty years after legal changes in many countries ended discrimination on the basis of sex, many women are still being held back in their careers by stereotypical prejudices about the qualities required for leadership and their ability to fill leadership roles.

Here's some advice for women jostling with men for space on the rungs of the executive ladder: "Don't buy that grey trouser suit. It won't help."

The advice comes from **Natalia Karelaia**, INSEAD's Assistant Professor of Decision Sciences, and it's based on an extensive study of how women in corporate leadership roles fit – or fail to fit – with their male colleagues. All too often, she asserts, women leaders are trapped in an identity conflict created by stereotypes about how they should behave.



The stress of trying to live up to those stereotypes can weaken their performance, confirming negative views of women as leaders. Adopting typically male attributes like grey suits in such an environment

won't resolve the contradictions, she says, and may actually worsen the inner conflict between leadership identity and gender identity.

Instead, she advises stronger awareness and acceptance of the positive feminine qualities that they bring to their roles as leaders. "It's not so much what you wear as how you feel about your identity as a woman that is going to enable you to succeed," she affirms. "Having an appreciation of being a woman reduces stress and increases the chances of success."

Positive efforts

That doesn't necessarily mean following the example of English writer and explorer Freya Stark, who - on starting work in the early 1930s at the Baghdad Times - demanded of her male colleagues that they all stand up when she entered the room. ("Office women are to be thought of as queens," she proclaimed. Taken aback, they complied).

But it does suggest that companies should make more positive efforts to recognise and develop women's potential, both in their hiring and evaluation procedures and through mentoring programmes to help women advance in their careers.

There are sound business reasons for doing so. Though there are slightly more men than women in the world, women are moving ahead fast in many areas. According to OECD figures, 47 percent of women in OECD countries are now set to graduate from university, against only 32 percent of men. Among entrants to Harvard Business School's two-year MBA programme last October, 40 percent were women.

And yet, according to accounting and consultancy firm Grant Thornton, only just over 20 percent of senior management positions are held by women at a global level. In its 2012 International Business Report, the consultancy warned that "a growing body of research suggests that such imbalance in the boardroom can be detrimental to business growth prospects".

Seizing the baton

Citing a 2007 study by Catalyst, a non-profit organisation with a mission to expand opportunities for women and business, Grant Thornton noted that businesses with a higher proportion of women on their boards outperformed rivals in terms of returns on invested capital (66 percent higher), returns on equity (53 percent higher) and sales (42 percent higher). Another report, by McKinsey & Company, found that firms with higher proportions of women in leadership positions tended to perform better on

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stock markets than those dominated by men.

So why aren't women seizing the leadership baton and taking more businesses forward to a profitable and successful future? Family obligations, including the bearing and raising of children, are often cited as the main explanation.

According to Karelaia, however, the causes lie much deeper, in stereotypical attitudes to gender and leadership that are deeply entrenched among both women and men. Success in a leadership role is often perceived as requiring assertiveness and competitiveness, attributes that clash with a view of women as sensitive and caring. Even when women want to succeed as leaders - and many are put off from even trying - they are often thwarted by the feeling that they have to suppress their female persona, she explains.

That's definitely the view of **Sheryl Sandberg**, a former chief of staff for the U.S. Treasury who was appointed chief operating officer of Facebook Inc. in 2008, and who became the first woman on its board last year.

"We are all... judged and held back by very gender-determined stereotypes," she told participants in a panel discussion on women in business at the World Economic Forum in Davos earlier this year. "The main difference between men and women in the workplace is that success and likeability are positively correlated for men and negatively correlated for women. As a woman becomes more successful, she is less liked... by women and men."

An uncomfortable burden

"Women get punished for violating the stereotypes," echoes Herminia Ibarra, Cora Chaired Professor of Leadership and Learning and Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD, who moderated the Davos panel discussion. "If you are competent and successful and you're a woman, you're not likeable," she says. "If you are likeable, you are not thought to be successful."

Since most of us, men or women, would like to be both competent and liked, that's an uncomfortable burden for women to bear. In a survey of 638 women in leadership positions in a range of industries and countries, INSEAD's Karelaia and co-researcher Laura Guillén, an assistant professor at the European School of Management and Technology, found that women who felt threatened in their gender identity found it harder to carry out their functions as leaders.

By contrast, those who succeeded best were those who were at ease with their gender identity.

“Our results revealed that holding a more positive gender identity reduces women leaders’ perceived conflict between their self-views as women and leaders,” they reported. “By reducing identity conflict, a more positive gender identity increases the joy of leading and decreases the sense of obligation to do so.”

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