Resolving the Conflict Between "Woman" and "Leader"

Women may face more barriers to leadership if there is a perceived conflict between their professional role and their gender. Organisations must detect any gender bias and promote a positive view of women leaders.

Two generally agreed-upon facts characterise the state of gender equality in today's workplace. The first is that despite increased attention paid to gender disparities, society's archetypal business leader is still a man. The second is that, thanks to enormous, painstaking efforts by women and their advocates, this situation is changing, but very slowly.

This is despite the **tangible benefits** of gender-diverse leadership. One might expect the curve of change to get steeper with each year, but that hasn't happened. According to the **International Labour Organisation**, if the current rate of progress holds, we won't see pay equality between men and women until 2086 at the earliest.

It seems there are hidden factors gumming up the gears, at least some of which can presumably be ascribed to **second-generation gender bias**. Unlike overt discrimination, this bias often operates in ways that are hard for women to define and easy for men to deny. The current state of play also has other consequences which may continue to restrain female advancement. My research shows it can also affect women's self-perceptions, forcing an internal conflict between their identification as a woman and taking on a leader identity. One key to resolving this conflict—and likely launching more women into the upper echelons—is to make sure the "think-leader-think-male" stereotype is not reinforced though company policies and practices. Another is to allow women to feel positive about their gender identity.

Identity Conflict

It is important to remember that stereotypes are not fixed things; they can self-perpetuate. An organisation secretly in thrall to gender stereotypes delivers to its members the implicit message that men, and the assertive behaviour traditionally associated with being male, are a more natural fit for leadership. This works against even those women for whom such behaviour comes easily, as they may be judged harshly for the same actions and attitudes that draw praise coming from a man. Identity conflict starts to develop, as women begin to see their gender and leadership identities as incompatible.

In the paper **Me, a Woman And a Leader: Positive Social Identity And Identity Conflict**, Laura Guillén, an Assistant Professor at the European School of Management and Technology, and I found identity conflict is linked to increased stress and lowered levels of life satisfaction. Furthermore, it causes women to construe leading as less enjoyable and more as a duty. The study also looked at how

identity conflict can be resolved in order to aid the successful adaptation of women leaders to their professional roles.

In three separate studies we surveyed a total of approximately 900 women leaders and leaders-to-be on their feelings about themselves as women and about their working lives. The surveys presented women with statements such as, ''I feel that other managers do not take me seriously because I am a woman", "In general, others respect women'', and ''In general, I'm glad to be a manager'' and asked to rate each statement according to how true it was for them. Across all three surveys, we found that women with a more positive gender identity reported less identity conflict and, as a result, greater psychological well-being. On the whole, the link with reduced identity conflict was far stronger for positive gender identity than for positive leader identity, suggesting that the ''woman'' half of the equation may be a crucial point of focus.

Our study also found that gender identity isn't tucked away in a zone of privacy, but rather responds to social manipulation. After participants completed a writing exercise designed to make them see their female identity in either a positive or a negative light, the positive group reported lower levels of identity conflict than the negative group.

Private vs. Public Regard: Identifying potential gender biases

There are two sources of positive gender identity: private regard, the regard women hold for other women in general, and public regard, the belief that others value and respect women. The latter dimension is where organisations can make a difference.

Any instance of potential gender bias – in remuneration, career development, opportunities, recognition, participation in decision making, or even in being invited or left out of informal events - may generate an impression that female talent is undervalued by the organisation – with all the negative consequences for female leaders identified by our research, such as identity conflict, stress, less pleasure of leading and more feeling of doing it out of ''duty'' and thus more likely drop-outs, etc. Organisations caring about gender equality – as well as their reputation – should monitor all hiring, promotion, and remuneration decisions to detect any potential gender bias.

Organisations should also take a hard look at their policies and practices - both formal and informal - to determine whether any of them reinforce the ''think leader-think male'' stereotype. It's essential organisations look beyond the official rhetoric and ask themselves:

- If your company offers flexible hours, telecommuting, childcare assistance, or other measures to improve work-life balance, do you value employees who use them less than those who do not?
- Does your organisation tolerate humour that implicitly delegitimises women and their leadership attempts?
- Who are your organisational ''heroes''? Are there women among them? If not, why not? And if there are, are they being respected as much as male ''examples to follow''?

Finally, organisations looking to kickstart change should also assess what leadership characteristics and capabilities they look for and value. Is there enough emphasis placed on interpersonal qualities such as collaboration, care, inspiration, and sensitivity? (Both women and men can possess these qualities, of course, but society more readily associates them with women.) And it is not just a question of gender equality and organisational reputation, it's also a question of effectiveness: Contemporary theories of leadership propose that these characteristics are crucial for leaders to succeed in modern organisations.

Be Mindful of Your Identity

For both organisations and women leaders, mindfulness can be a helpful tool in the battle against bias. As I pointed out in **an earlier article**, mindfulness can help leaders bring clarity to every stage of decision-making, from information-gathering to implementation. **INSEAD colleagues** have shown that just 15 minutes of mindfulness meditation makes one less likely to succumb to a widespread decision-making bias, the sunk cost bias, i.e. the tendency to throw good money after bad. Practicing mindfulness is also likely to make leaders less prone to second-generation gender bias, and more likely to spot it behind the façade of gender-neutral rhetoric.

For women who may be experiencing identity conflict and its psychological after-effects, mindfulness may help restore balance and filter out any external cues that fuel negative gender identity. However possible, our research strongly suggests, women must find a way not merely to accept but to celebrate their femininity, if they are to thrive in the workplace.

__Natalia Karelaia__ is an Assistant Professor of Decision Sciences at INSEAD.

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