
How Women and Men Internalise the Glass Ceiling



By Benjamin Kessler, Asia Editor & Digital Manager

Received ideas about leadership can provoke a career-killing identity crisis in women attempting to climb the ladder.

The recent research on gender equality in business is perplexing. As evidence showing a link between gender-diverse leadership and higher performance continues to mount, the pace of women's advancement into top management positions remains slow, and may actually be slackening. Absent a rational solution to this puzzle, many researchers argue the glass ceiling of old has become unconsciously encoded within seemingly gender-neutral business norms, a phenomenon termed "second-generation gender bias".

An everywhere-and-nowhere bias can be difficult to pin down, let alone defeat. But in the working paper "Impossible Selves: Image Strategies and Identity Threat in Professional Women's Career Transitions" (a chapter in the forthcoming book *Advancing Women & Leadership: Moving the Needle Through Applied Theory Building*), INSEAD professors of organisational behaviour Herminia Ibarra and Jennifer Petriglieri use real-life examples to illuminate how tacit gender expectations within male-

dominated industries can undermine the careers of even the most capable and determined women.

Image and identity work

We might like to think that “leaders are born not made”, but it’s not quite that simple. In reality, one must be groomed, both inside and out, for leadership before being able to claim it legitimately. To be credible in a leadership role requires the crafting of a context-specific persona or public image—not as a uniform but a finely tailored suit—as well as a stable self-image to match. Contrary to cliché, image work never comes naturally but can be made easier with the help of role models and/or a good mentor.

Drawing upon in-depth interviews, Ibarra and Petriglieri explore how a group of 34 men and women across two male-dominated fields—management consulting and investment banking—managed the transition to a client-facing role. This is a pivotal juncture on the path to leadership because of the image work involved. Suddenly, technical expertise becomes mere table stakes and success depends on clients accepting you as one of the firm’s leading lights.

The majority of the male interviewees (13 out of 19) reported that they eventually became comfortable projecting authority, gaining enough confidence to lead client interactions into personal territory. As one said, “You need to develop a sense of maturity so that you can win over clients as a peer.”

By contrast, nearly all the women (12 out of 15) reported being uncomfortable projecting the necessary image, preferring to downplay client interaction in favour of long-term projects emphasising the same skill-set that brought them success previously. Instead of conveying authenticity as the women hoped, this approach left them feeling unprepared and out of place—as though they’d come to a costume party in street clothes. “I end up not being as active in meetings with clients”, one woman said. “I think to myself, ‘How can I tell this 55-year-old guy who’s been in the industry his whole life that his last investment was really stupid?’”

Gender biases

Ibarra and Petriglieri trace the women’s reluctance to assert themselves to previous encounters with unspoken gender biases in their industries. “I can’t

be 6'3", handsome, with a firm handshake. But that's the image people have when they think of power and influence", said one. The women believed that their mostly-male clients would hold similar biases. When meeting with clients, they felt they had to fend off unspoken challenges to their legitimacy. Falling back on technical competence seemed the best way to prove their credibility in the clients' eyes.

Similarly, cognizance of gender bias prevented them from even trying to emulate the aggressive behaviour of their male colleagues—or their firms' nearly all-male senior leaders. The women feared that if they did so, there would be backlash in keeping with the well-documented double standard that punishes women for the same assertive behaviours that garner praise coming from men. "I'm afraid to seem too whiny and aggressive whereas a man would be seen as fighting the battle", an investment banker said.

"Impossible selves"

While their male counterparts faced a steep but clearly delineated path to success, an informed terror of transgressing unspoken gender norms, coupled with a lack of female role models, appeared to set these women up for failure. The organisational models of success in disproportionately male industries amounted to what the authors call "impossible selves".

Worse, bias-averse behaviours end up strengthening stereotypes about women such as "competent but not bold" and "smart but quiet", entrenching them even more deeply into the organisational mindset.

What firms can do

The vicious cycle is breakable. The authors note that even one positive experience with a client while using a different interaction style can provide the kernel for a whole new identity. The bias aversion described above may make female professionals feel more comfortable experimenting with new styles when the client is another woman. "You hear that women aren't 'bold'. What turned my career around was that I got two accounts where the CFO was a woman", said one.

Also, shedding a confining professional identity sometimes requires changing one's environment, whether that be making a lateral move within an organisation or dusting off one's CV. Two of the three female interviewees who were rated as assertive were relatively new hires who said they acted

more stereotypically “feminine” in their previous organisations.

No firm wants to be the odd one out in its industry, but Ibarra and Petriglieri suggest that many could be doing more to make their internal representations of success less rigid. Socialisation and career development practices can help inculcate leadership role models that are more easily reconciled with women’s personal identities. If the current research is right, adding a bit of grease to the leadership track for women could pay off handsomely, or if you prefer, beautifully.

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Its mission is to create and disseminate knowledge that advances women leaders and optimises their contributions within and beyond their organisations. The Gender Initiative strives to engage both men and women in this effort, inspiring all to take action.