
Shattering the Glass Labyrinth of Female Leadership



By [Caroline Rook](#) , Visiting Scholar at INSEAD, Europe Campus

Leadership development programmes play an important role in forging an equal opportunity path through the complex business world to the C-Suite.

With as many women as men in [middle management positions](#) and with women achieving [more high quality degrees than men](#), finally, after decades of waiting, one would think that we'd have diversity in boardrooms and senior management teams. Indeed, there are some hopeful signs that women are beginning to find their way out of the [glass labyrinth of leadership](#).

In a recent empirical investigation of 1,167 female and male C-suite executives, from different industries, we found no meaningful differences between the way men and women rate themselves on 12 leadership [behaviours attributed to successful global leaders](#). (There were minor aberrations in some industries with women, in fact, rating themselves higher on emotional intelligence and team building than men). This is an indication that women have the confidence in their abilities to make it to the top. And yet, only 5 percent of [Fortune 1000 CEO positions](#) and just under 17

percent of corporate board positions are currently held by women.

So, if we want to progress successful leadership for the contemporary complex and diverse business world, we need to enable gender diversity not just in the workforce but in the leadership domain and recognise the disparity of leadership practices – adopted by men and women based on their unique strengths. I argue that leadership development programmes have to play a role in promoting this diversity of leadership.

Trapped in the glass labyrinth

Leaders in our contemporary organisations are not diverse; the typical leader is still a white male. The New York Times' Glass Ceiling Index of S&P 1500 CEOs found there were more CEOs named John than there were women in total. The same for David, with men named Robert and James only slightly lower in the ranking.

The glass walls parting women from senior management and C-suite positions are upheld by second generation bias, lack of sponsorship, smaller networks, challenges of work-life-balance and the reality that many women still lack the confidence of men and are less likely to apply for leadership positions. On average only 37 percent of women are in (open-enrolment) executive education programmes even though 50 percent are in middle management positions.

The reasons cited above go some way to explaining why a **gendered pyramid** remains where women hold 60 percent of junior management positions, 50 percent in middle management, 20 percent in senior management and less than 10 percent in the C-suite. If the described conditions do not change, then the International Labour Office forecasts, women will not reach equal representation globally for another 200 years (80 years in developed countries).

As these conscious and unconscious biases are unlikely to be changed in a matter of decades, patterns must be broken. The gender quota for boardrooms is one example of how to increase gender diversity in the C-suite. But to create a long-term pipeline of women with the experience, confidence and know-how to lead from the top, we need to shatter the glass labyrinth, take a gradational approach, and find ways to promote women into senior management positions and make sure we have women in executive education programmes.

The conscious and unconscious processes that influence leadership

Leadership development has to play a role in encouraging current and future leaders to pursue organisational cultures which accept a multitude of approaches to leadership practices and an environment where men advance women and women advance men.

Companies with more women on the board are more successful in terms of return on investment (ROI), sales (ROS) and invested capital (ROIC). One of the reasons might be that women tend to have higher levels of emotional intelligence than men. Emotional intelligence is a core characteristic of successful leaders. So why are we shooting ourselves in the foot by not facilitating having more women on leadership positions and in senior leadership development programmes? How can we make sure that biases and lack of sponsoring for women cease to exist?

Learning to engage in leadership through being a reflective observer and facilitator (rather than a micro-manager) enables leaders to become more effective individually and helps to create a work environment that acknowledges individuals for who they are, in all their complexity rather than in stereotypical roles. Reflective practices can be triggered in leadership development programmes by using 360 degree feedback, for example. This 360 degree feedback from peers, subordinates and family effectively holds up a mirror to the leader, showing them how they behave in different contexts and with different people, highlighting any inherent biases they may not even realise they possess.

Furthermore, leaders can learn that within groups (i.e., teams, departments, boards, organisations) various conscious and unconscious processes are at play. We all have conscious roles as line managers, sales representatives etc. but also unconscious roles created and attributed to us based on past experiences and biases. As the second generation bias is still present, women are easily put into specific roles such as the administrator or caretaker. If leaders understand and keep watch of these processes, they can change the capacity of the team as a whole by drawing on a person's individual rather than the stereotypical strengths (attributes which a particular woman might not, in fact, possess).

Beyond addressing conscious and unconscious processes in leadership development programmes, we also need to find ways how business schools' executive education programmes can create more parity in senior leadership

development programmes. Professor Manfred Kets de Vries who runs a senior leadership development programme at INSEAD notes: “I make a special effort to have women on Challenge of Leadership not just to help women but to help men to become comfortable with women, comfortable with the diversity of leadership practices. Also, the quality of decision-making is better in the group. We would have higher quality programmes if we had more women on them. Over the last 22 years of running the programme, the highest number of women I had in the Challenge of Leadership was seven, but most years it is only one or two.”

Diversity sensitivity and a holistic approach to change

Effective working practices are created by leaders who are able to recognise and tap into their own, and their employees’ diverse range of abilities, roles and experiences. Diversity, sensitivity and an ability to take a holistic approach to individuals are necessary qualities to becoming a **successful global leader**. A psycho-dynamic approach to leadership development promotes this integrated and comprehensive attitude to managing organisations and highlights the benefits of a gender-diverse senior management team, helping to shatter the persistent glass labyrinth of female leadership.

Dr. Caroline Rook is currently a Visiting Scholar at INSEAD, working with Professor Manfred Kets de Vries.

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on [**Twitter**](#) and [**Facebook**](#)

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/shattering-glass-labyrinth-female-leadership>

About the author(s)

Caroline Rook is a Lecturer at Henley Business School.

About the series

Gender Initiative

The **INSEAD Gender Initiative** integrates research, business and pedagogy to engage the full potential of both women and men.

Its community of gender researchers conduct cutting-edge research on the experiences and impact of women in business and society. The initiative builds relationships with organisations to enhance their commitment to gender balance and their ability to fulfil this goal. It further strives to create a pipeline of future business leaders who are passionate and equipped to drive gender balance within their existing and future organisations.

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.