
The Sexual “Cloud” in the Executive Suite



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Are sex and man’s unconscious drive for survival keeping women locked out of the C-suite?

Nobody talks about sex in the boardroom. However, the dynamics between men and women are age eternal and hover above like a cloud, motivating individuals at both a conscious and an unconscious level. I recall one executive who recounted: “Whenever I have to deal with sexual desire, I can imagine a tragedy-in-the-making. I have been married quite a few times. Two of my wives I met at work. In both cases while we were working together on a project. At the time, I knew I was playing with fire. Now, looking back, I wonder were all my struggles with desire worth it?”

Recalling many other conversations I have had with executives, this person is not an outlier. There are a large number of men like him who struggle under the sexual cloud in the workplace.

Given the large body of research that has shown men think about sex much more often than women, and far more frequently report sexual fantasies and

feelings of sexual desire, we may ask ourselves, how does the sexual dimension affect male-female relationship in a business setting? And what role does the sexual cloud play concerning a very delicate issue in senior management: the lack of women in the C-suite?

The differences between the sexes

One of the key explanations for the under-representation of women in upper echelons of corporate is the lack of fit between women's "natural" strengths and the qualities needed for leadership. Women are stereotyped as being more "communal," and associated with qualities such as friendliness, selflessness and emotional expressiveness. In contrast, men are viewed as being more "agentic", independent, assertive and competent, qualities that are also more congruent with today's image of an effective executive.

When women leaders do display agentic-type behaviours, instead of being admired for their boldness and initiative, they are typecast as pushy, bossy and uncaring.

From an evolutionary, developmental and psychodynamic point of view, the evolutionary mating game has set different rules for the sexes. Male desire is about the survival of the species with the primary driver being to ensure reproductive success. Not only are we driven by what has been labelled as the "selfish gene" (a gene-centered view of evolution focused on reproduction), most of the time we are not even aware of the extent to which this hard-wired desire to reproduce, by necessity, drives how we think, feel and behave. At an unconscious, biological level, men are still driven to maximise their genetic legacy.

Women's relationship vis-à-vis sex is quite different. Given their limited supply of eggs, our female ancestors had to be extremely careful in selecting their mates, and exercise much more discretion to ensure the commitment of their partner's economic, emotional and sexual resources. While we may see ourselves as being far more evolved today, the 'civilisation' of homo sapiens is a very recent phenomena and 200,000 years of genetic legacy cannot be ignored.

What I am suggesting is that this primal sexual desire in men and anxiety about the consequences of sexual attraction (especially in a professional context), is an additional contributing factor to the reluctance of men to allow women entry into the upper echelons.

Desexualising organisations

While a tremendous effort has always been required to deflect men's attention from their sexual feelings, this "management process" is made even more challenging by the fact many men falsely assume that women think like them - a perception which can make for a very volatile cocktail.

From a psychodynamic point of view, men's ambivalence about the seductive powers of women has been present through the ages, symbolised by a very archaic, masculine fear of women in general perceiving them as seductresses who lure men into destruction. These concerns manifest themselves in many different cultural contexts. In the Hindu religion, the goddess Kali is not only associated with motherly love, but also with death, sexuality, and violence. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, stories of devouring, castrating, even spider-like women are ubiquitous. Whilst in the Islamic culture, there is also an implicit and explicit fear of the sexual power of women, explaining the need for their seclusion and surveillance.

It's not unrealistic to think there remains a fear (conscious or otherwise) that having to work too closely with women may not only disrupt organisational processes but also lead to trouble, as the opening account illustrates. Has this sexual "cloud" hovering above male-female interactions been addressed in corporate life by keeping women out?

Efforts to desexualise organisations have become a form of subtle sex discrimination with most corporations continuing to reinforce a male-friendly design, imposing on women behavioural frameworks that are more suited to men. No wonder then that change in the male-female mix in senior management is occurring at a glacial pace.

If senior executives are really serious about fair process in organisations, it's better to be upfront to understand how the sexual dimension affects organisational dynamics. Given the "selfish gene" effect, men and women should avoid becoming mere pawns of evolutionary drivers. To create organisations in which both men and women may thrive, subtle gender discrimination needs to be tackled on three fronts:

Awareness: Senior executives need to first acknowledge that most organisations are not women-friendly and that men and women have different needs, including career specific needs. To enable change, both men and women need to become more consciously aware of their biases and how

implicit gender norms (consciously or unconsciously) are keeping women out. They also need to pay attention to how the sexual “cloud” clutters their own reasoning and behaviours.

Systemic, structural interventions: In most contemporary organisations, the organisational structure is still very hierarchical in nature, characterised by top-down leadership, individual achievement and task orientation. To make organisations more gender neutral, performance indicators, compensation and benefits systems, and career track systems need to be put into place that are more equitable. In particular, this will imply a greater respect (not just lip service) for life balance by providing flexi-time, alternative schedules, part-time, working from home, compressed workweeks and job sharing.

Furthermore, top management needs to nurture an inclusive, supportive, and respectful cultural environment. Inappropriate sexual innuendos should not be part of such a culture.

Androgynous development: Of course, from a developmental point of view, putting such practices in place can be viewed as a delayed, stopgap measure. The real starting point for any change needs to take place much earlier when gender roles are established and reinforced with early child-rearing practices. Gender dynamics start with the role models that parents provide. Children who develop more flexible, androgynous gender identities will be better prepared to cope with the stresses of contemporary life.

Only until the social expectations for men and women are equal – until there is equal respect and opportunities for both sexes – will we surpass our social prejudices and their limitations, so that women may take up their place in the C-suite. Senior executives who are truly serious about fair process in organisations have the obligation to manage the sexual “cloud” more effectively. They need to realise that in spite of the “selfish gene” effect, sexism is also a social – and hence curable – disease. They need to engage in more systemic measures to counteract deeply embedded assumptions about gender and role expectations and to create more inclusive organisations in which both men and women may thrive.

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