



Enabling Productive Thinking to Develop Gender Balance



By [Zoe Kinias](#) , INSEAD

Subtle mental shifts can increase people’s responsiveness to the gender gap, and their commitment to doing something about it.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of advocates in recent years, few business leaders can now deny the extent and impact of workplace gender gaps. Acknowledging a problem exists is a precondition for solving it and thus, an achievement in itself. Moving beyond awareness to action, however, requires navigating a **systemic web of challenges** from biased hiring and recruiting practices to diffuse cultural resistance.

Organisational developers of gender balance must master a diverse repertoire of approaches and techniques. Fortunately, researchers are generating insights that may provide invaluable guidance. Among many questions being fruitfully explored is which of employees’ ways of thinking and talking are conducive to enhancing diversity, equity and inclusion, and

which ones may be a hindrance. Also: How can we create opportunities for people to switch their thinking?

We scholars who strive to answer these questions have found some surprises. At the inaugural [ASCEND Summit](#) in May, two esteemed colleagues and I presented some of our recent work on the topic. The event was co-sponsored by the Sanford C. Bernstein & Co. Center for Leadership and Ethics at Columbia Business School, Harvard Business School and INSEAD.

Share the opportunity

[Modupe Akinola](#) of Columbia Business School began by asking forum attendees, mostly women professionals, to mentally run through their to-do list for when they returned to the office. She invited them to ask themselves whether they could delegate at least one task. According to [Akinola's research](#), their gender would heavily influence whether they answered “yes” or “no”.

Akinola and her co-authors asked male and female managers how often they delegate and, via a role-playing exercise, gave those put in managerial roles a chance to either delegate a series of tasks or add them to their own jam-packed agenda. The researchers found that men delegated more often. Moreover, the women that did delegate reported more feelings of guilt and fear of backlash than the men.



Modupe Akinola at the ASCEND Summit.

This matters because delegation is a key career skill. It is more difficult to lead effectively when you are weighed down by work that can (and should) be done by others. If a woman's career path is already tougher than a man's by virtue of her gender, the adversity she faces can only be made worse by insufficiently delegating.

What makes delegation more challenging for women? It boils down to an underlying assumption that delegation is more aligned with men's **traditional gender roles** than with women's. It's an act perceived as agentic rather than communal. The researchers' early experiments demonstrated this clearly, and critically, they suggested that more women would delegate if the communal aspects of doing so were emphasised.

Akinola and her team tested the solution aspect of her theory through an experiment in which MBAs completed a task involving delegation and reported how they felt afterwards. Half of the participants read a short message about how delegating tasks to subordinates benefits the subordinate's career growth – which is communal in nature. Women participants who had read that message reported less negative emotion and

less guilt about overburdening their subordinate prior to delegating, relative to men and those who had not read the message.

Therefore, Akinola elucidates that women should think of delegation as a way to share benefits rather than burdens. Directing the message back to the ASCEND Summit attendees, Akinola asked, “Who may suffer if you don’t delegate? You. Who will grow and develop if you delegate? All those people you want to see rise to leadership levels.”

A storm cloud’s silver lining

At the summit, I presented new findings about what motivates people to work towards gender balance and other diversity-related objectives. Our research (led by INSEAD post-doctoral fellow [Clarissa Cortland](#)) focuses on a phenomenon known as stereotype threat, or the fear of confirming negative stereotypes, that often hangs like a storm cloud over members of under-represented groups (e.g. women in business leadership roles), dousing their ambition and performance with anxiety and self-doubt. Fortunately, there are methods for [bolstering resiliency against it](#).



Zoe Kinias at the ASCEND Summit.

Yet we hypothesised that stereotype threat, by virtue of its otherwise unfortunate prevalence, also held the potential to be leveraged for women's advancement. Women often show support for other women out of a sense of outsiders' solidarity. But some women who have attained positions of leadership may lose touch with the feeling of being an outsider. Their experiences of gender bias may be behind them or may have become part of the air they breathe. Recalling their earlier struggles with stereotype threat could revive their consciousness of bias and, by extension, their commitment to improve the situation for other women, e.g. by mentoring and sponsoring other women, or arguing for a more equitable distribution of career-advancing assignments.

Indeed, when female MBA students and alumnae of a global business school reported having experienced stereotype threat, they were more likely to want more women in leadership and to take actions contributing to gender balance.

Subsequent experiments showed that women who were explicitly asked to reflect upon situations that made them concerned about confirming gender stereotypes supported gender-balance initiatives more than did women asked to recall events unrelated to gender.

I concluded my talk by inviting the accomplished women at the ASCEND Summit to remain aware of how it felt to be "different". Those memories can be channelled into motivation to create lasting, meaningful change that benefits other women and our organisations more broadly, as rain fosters growth.

Curb your enthusiasm

Beginning her talk, [Aneeta Rattan](#) of London Business School asked the audience to recognise the remarkable women who had appeared on stage at the summit so far. After a spirited round of applause, Rattan announced her intention to explore the psychological consequences of celebrating women's success as they had just done. Singling out successful women for praise can be inspirational and empowering, to be sure. But [research](#) led by her PhD student, Oriane Georgeac, suggests it also has potential to distort the bigger picture of women's progress – or lack thereof – if it's framed as normative.

In their research, participants (comprised roughly equally of men and women, and spanning various political orientations) read simulated news articles reflecting different perceptions of women’s representation in top leadership positions. In one experiment, half the participants read an article describing Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg as “far from the norm” in terms of business leadership; the other half received an article describing Sandberg as “far from alone”. Participants then rated their emotional responses to actual statistics about gender inequality outside the realm of representation, e.g. “Women who work part-time earn 78 cents for every dollar a man earns”.



Aneeta Rattan at the ASCEND Summit. (All photography: Miller Hawkins)

Across all the studies, participants who read the good (fake) news about “strong representation” of women in leadership positions reported less concern with facts about gender gaps. Rattan explained that the belief that women were making large strides towards equality led both genders to exhibit more “modern sexism”, i.e. gender bias that ironically manifests as emphatic denial that sexism is an ongoing problem, thus diminishing their

responsiveness to evidence of inequality.

Despite good intentions, celebrating women such as Sandberg in ways that lead audiences to overestimate the actual representation of women in leadership can foster sexism. The answer, Rattan suggested, is to tell a less immediately uplifting but more accurate tale. “Try talking about gender inequalities, not ‘inequality’ as though it is one monolithic thing”, she said. “Highlight what remains to be achieved. Never assume that progress begets progress.”

The role of research

It was a pleasure and an honour to contribute to the incredible energy of the ASCEND Summit, including an inspiring fireside chat featuring the estimable Valerie Jarrett. Going forward, I encourage the event organisers to ensure it continues to integrate rigorous business research prominently towards its stated mission, “to identify and promote the best strategies for advancing women to the C-suite and boardroom, and to help foster specific commitments for action from leading companies and institutions.”

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/enabling-productive-thinking-develop-gender-balance>

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About the series

The INSEAD Gender Initiative

INSEAD launched "iW50" in 2017 as a year-long celebration of the anniversary of the first female students to attend the school's MBA programme. Our research reflects INSEAD's ambition to achieve a gender-balanced business world.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

In the wake of the tragic death of George Floyd in the United States and protests in over 60 countries, global attention to DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) has experienced a long-overdue resurgence. As the need for more inclusive forms of leadership and culture becomes apparent, we focus here on the informed perspectives of INSEAD experts focusing on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and their intersections. These thought leaders -- both faculty and their close collaborators with rich experience in practice -- inform understanding of how to develop DEI and address identified DEI development needs.

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