



Leadership
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do it differently?*

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There's a popular belief that men and women lead differently. Is it true?

If it is more a myth than reality, what does this imply for organisations wishing to address gender inequity? We argue that being an effective leader is not related to being a man or a woman; leadership is leadership. Nevertheless underlying beliefs, attitudes and mindsets about appropriate gender roles influence perceptions about men and women's leadership performance and potential. In essence, if we expect difference, we apply different standards, and 'see' different behaviours.

What is needed is a rethink about how gender can be taken out of the leadership assessment equation to enable talent to be viewed individually and not according to latent gender stereotypes. This rethink will help organisations identify and grow the full talent pool of emerging leaders, and ensure that current leaders are judged objectively.

Getting back to basics – the difference between sex and gender

When talking about advancing women, 'sex' and 'gender' are often used interchangeably. There is, however, a meaningful difference between the two. Technically 'sex' refers to the biological differences between men and women (e.g. women can bear children), whereas 'gender' refers to differences which are socially constructed (e.g. women are more nurturing than men). Social conditioning creates deep seated beliefs and attitudes about how men and women should behave and can lead to advantages or disadvantages, depending on the setting. For example, the socially constructed view that 'men act' vs 'women care' has implications for leadership and people's views about what makes a good leader e.g. 'leaders are action oriented'.

When these two concepts (sex and gender) are blurred it leads to confused thinking, and moreover, as Cordelia Fine (2010) argues, fallacious thinking¹. Hence a long history of now discredited research on male/female brain differences was premised on a belief about women and men's 'proper' roles in society. This underlying belief system meant that researchers 'found' or 'manipulated' sex differences to suit their vantage point, but who would now accept the following argument:

"Seeing that the average brain weight of women is about five ounces less than that of men, on merely anatomical grounds we should be prepared to expect a marked inferiority of intellectual power in the former...In actual fact we find that the inferiority displays itself most conspicuously in a comparative absence of originality, and this more especially in the higher levels of intellectual work (Romanes)"².

¹ Fine, C. (2010) *Delusions of Gender*, Icon books, UK.

² George J Romanes, evolutionary biologist and physiologist (1887) cited in Fine, C. (2010) *Delusions of Gender*, Icon books, page 141.



Whilst we might laugh at the logic articulated by Romanes and relegate his view to a historical oddity, in fact there is a swathe of modern research or opinion which demonstrates the vestiges of such thinking³. More subtly these views have been transformed into seemingly innocuous beliefs that women are better communicators and are more consultative, whereas men are more driven and action-oriented. These beliefs might seem more generous than Romanes' views, but both suffer from the same problem, namely a logic that springs from a view that men and women are hard-wired differently. In fact the evidence supports much greater similarities between men and women than differences, especially in relation to communication⁴ and leadership⁵.

What's really going on? A different conceptual framework

Resetting to zero, if there are no sex-based differences between leaders, why do we 'see' differences? Is it just a matter of perception? There are two critical explanatory concepts and processes which offer significant insights and make sense of recent research on women in leadership. This research demonstrates that all else being equal (e.g. women and men were equally qualified, equally ambitious and not 'distracted' by children), decisions were still made at every stage of a career which slightly advantaged men and disadvantaged women⁶. What are the explanatory factors? The first concerns individual implicit assumptions and stereotypes, and the second identifies the impact of group dynamics on individuals.

At an individual level, the (Harvard) Implicit Association Test enables men and women to see that most of us operate consciously or unconsciously within a gender framework. We start from an implicit assumption, picked up through multiple cues in our society, that men and women are different and in fact more suited to different domains and different roles (e.g. women in caring roles, men in leadership roles).

This is not to say that these are our beliefs or values. Indeed the implicit associations are often at odds with our values and aspirations, and means that our good intentions can be unwittingly undermined by subtle underlying gender frameworks. Without a heightened level of awareness about the impact of assumptions, people are more likely to 'see' differences in male/female leaders in conformity with their world view, and may be tempted to justify these perceived differences as ones which are innate or sex-based.

At a group level the explanatory concepts are that of 'in-groups' and 'out-groups', and attribution error. In essence, social identity theory argues that our behaviours are influenced by groups we identify with, and one of the ways we mark out our identity groups (our 'in-groups') is by contrasting ourselves and our in-group to other groups (our 'out-groups'). Just like school days, we spend more time with, and know more about, our in-group members (our cliques), and this means that our judgements about the actions of our in-group members are likely to be more generous-spirited. The picture is often less rosy for those in the out-group. Not only do we give them less 'air time', but we are likely to emphasise points of perceived difference between the groups and attribute inaccurate explanations to behaviours we are uncertain about. In essence, this means that we are more likely to treat members of out-groups on the basis of our surface assumptions about that out-group, and most importantly we are motivated to emphasise differences and to minimise similarities between groups.

³ Brizendine, L. (2006) *The female brain*, Morgan Road Books, New York.

⁴ 'Myth 59 Men and women communicate in completely different ways' in Lilienfeld, S.O., Lynn, S.J., Ruscio, J. & Beyerstein, B.L. (2010) *50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology* Wiley-Blackwell, UK.

⁵ Ibarra, H. & Obodaru, O. (2009) 'Women and the vision thing' *Harvard Business Review* January pp. 62–70.

⁶ Carter, N. M. & Silva, C. (2010) *Pipeline's broken promise*, www.catalystwomen.org.

What does all this have to do with women and leadership? Instead of evaluating people individually in terms of their leadership capabilities and potential, talent can be viewed through a prism of implicit gender stereotypes, which are then reinforced by in-group and out-group processes. We expect to see gender differences – and that is what we do ‘see’, but this is likely to reflect more about the decision-maker’s world view and membership of an in-group than reflect an objective judgement.

Awareness about the influence of stereotypes, and in/out-group pressures is part of the change process, but there’s much more that can be done to accelerate the pace of change.

Practical steps organisations can take to advance women in leadership

Starting from an assumption that there is a spectrum of leadership capability that is not determined by sex, organisations can do a lot to level the playing field for women and leadership.

- **Review talent management systems** Review talent management documentation to ensure that bias is neither overt nor covert. Due diligence on decisions made using talent documentation (and selection processes) will help expose latent bias. For example, do men consistently receive higher ratings on technical competence criteria and women receive higher ratings on people management criteria?
- **Understand your female talent** Identify female talent throughout the organisation and ensure they have access to informal networks, influential mentors and stretch assignments (e.g. in a line role). Then track their careers and account for progress

- **Create a strong feedback loop** Create a feedback loop about decisions (and unwritten rules) which operate along the career pathway. Could it be that the design of roles and an expectation of a linear career path are acting as subtle filters? Are women subtly encouraged to take up support roles and men encouraged to take up line roles? A feedback loop will help identify barriers to leadership and thus widen the pool of talent
- **Educate decision-makers about the potential impact of assumptions and beliefs on decision-making** Educating managers about conscious and unconscious biases and holding them to account for diversity decisions is an important step in eliminating bias. A key aspect of such education is helping managers understand when they are most vulnerable to the influences of gender stereotypes
- **Resist stereotypes that appear to advantage women** Stereotypes that appear to benefit women (e.g. women are better people managers) come at a hidden cost because they reinforce unsubstantiated sex-based differences. At this point in the game a more prudent strategy is to resist stereotypes however they are framed.

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