

CAREER PLANNING

# Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership

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FROM THE SEPTEMBER 2007 ISSUE

If one has misdiagnosed a problem, then one is unlikely to prescribe an effective cure. This is the situation regarding the scarcity of women in top leadership. Because people with the best of intentions have misread the symptoms, the solutions that managers are investing in are not making enough of a difference.

That there is a problem is not in doubt. Despite years of progress by women in the workforce (they now occupy more than 40% of all managerial positions in the United States), within the C-suite they remain as rare as hens' teeth. Consider the most highly paid executives of *Fortune* 500 companies—those with titles such as chairman, president, chief executive officer, and chief operating officer. Of this group, only 6% are women. Most notably, only 2% of the CEOs are women, and only 15% of the seats on the boards of directors are held by women. The situation is not much different in other industrialized countries. In the 50 largest publicly traded corporations in each nation of the European Union, women make up, on average, 11% of the top executives and 4% of the CEOs and heads of boards. Just seven companies, or 1%, of *Fortune* magazine's Global 500 have female CEOs. What is to blame for the pronounced lack of women in positions of power and authority?

In 1986 the *Wall Street Journal*'s Carol Hymowitz and Timothy Schellhardt gave the world an answer: "Even those few women who rose steadily through the ranks eventually crashed into an invisible barrier. The executive suite seemed within their grasp, but they just couldn't break through the glass ceiling." The metaphor, driven home by the article's accompanying illustration, resonated; it captured the frustration of a goal within sight but somehow unattainable. To be sure, there was a time when the barriers were absolute. Even within the career spans of 1980s-era executives, access

to top posts had been explicitly denied. Consider comments made by President Richard Nixon, recorded on White House audiotapes and made public through the Freedom of Information Act. When explaining why he would not appoint a woman to the U.S. Supreme Court, Nixon said, “I don’t think a woman should be in any government job whatsoever...mainly because they are erratic. And emotional. Men are erratic and emotional, too, but the point is a woman is more likely to be.” In a culture where such opinions were widely held, women had virtually no chance of attaining influential leadership roles.

Times have changed, however, and the glass ceiling metaphor is now more wrong than right. For one thing, it describes an absolute barrier at a specific high level in organizations. The fact that there have been female chief executives, university presidents, state governors, and presidents of nations gives the lie to that charge. At the same time, the metaphor implies that women and men have equal access to entry- and midlevel positions. They do not. The image of a transparent obstruction also suggests that women are being misled about their opportunities, because the impediment is not easy for them to see from a distance. But some impediments are not subtle. Worst of all, by depicting a single, unvarying obstacle, the glass ceiling fails to incorporate the complexity and variety of challenges that women can face in their leadership journeys. In truth, women are not turned away only as they reach the penultimate stage of a distinguished career. They disappear in various numbers at many points leading up to that stage.

Metaphors matter because they are part of the storytelling that can compel change. Believing in the existence of a glass ceiling, people emphasize certain kinds of interventions: top-to-top networking, mentoring to increase board memberships, requirements for diverse candidates in high-profile succession horse races, litigation aimed at punishing discrimination in the C-suite. None of these is counterproductive; all have a role to play. The danger arises when they draw attention and resources away from other kinds of interventions that might attack the problem more potently. If we want to make better progress, it’s time to rename the challenge.

## **Walls All Around**

A better metaphor for what confronts women in their professional endeavors is the labyrinth. It’s an image with a long and varied history in ancient Greece, India, Nepal, native North and South America, medieval Europe, and elsewhere. As a contemporary symbol, it conveys the idea of a complex journey toward a goal worth striving for. Passage through a labyrinth is not simple or direct,

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but requires persistence, awareness of one's progress, and a careful analysis of the puzzles that lie ahead. It is this meaning that we intend to convey. For women who aspire to top leadership, routes exist but are full of twists and turns, both unexpected and expected. Because all labyrinths have a viable route to the center, it is understood that goals are attainable. The metaphor acknowledges obstacles but is not ultimately discouraging.

If we can understand the various barriers that make up this labyrinth, and how some women find their way around them, we can work more effectively to improve the situation. What are the obstructions that women run up against? Let's explore them in turn.

### **Vestiges of prejudice.**

It is a well-established fact that men as a group still have the benefit of higher wages and faster promotions. In the United States in 2005, for example, women employed full-time earned 81 cents for every dollar that men earned. Is this true because of discrimination or simply because, with fewer family demands placed on them and longer careers on average, men are able to gain superior qualifications? Literally hundreds of correlational studies by economists and sociologists have attempted to find the answer.

One of the most comprehensive of these studies was conducted by the U.S. Government Accountability Office. The study was based on survey data from 1983 through 2000 from a representative sample of Americans. Because the same people responded to the survey repeatedly over the years, the study provided accurate estimates of past work experience, which is important for explaining later wages.

The GAO researchers tested whether individuals' total wages could be predicted by sex and other characteristics. They included part-time and full-time employees in the surveys and took into account all the factors that they could estimate and that might affect earnings, such as education and work experience. Without controls for these variables, the data showed that women earned about 44% less than men, averaged over the entire period from 1983 to 2000. With these controls in place, the gap was only about half as large, but still substantial. The control factors that reduced the wage gap most were the different employment patterns of men and women: Men undertook more hours of paid labor per year than women and had more years of job experience.

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Although most variables affected the wages of men and women similarly, there were exceptions. Marriage and parenthood, for instance, were associated with higher wages for men but not for women. In contrast, other characteristics, especially years of education, had a more positive effect on women's wages than on men's. Even after adjusting wages for all of the ways men and women differ, the GAO study, like similar studies, showed that women's wages remained lower than men's. The unexplained gender gap is consistent with the presence of wage discrimination.

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Similar methods have been applied to the question of whether discrimination affects promotions. Evidently it does. Promotions come more slowly for women than for men with equivalent qualifications. One illustrative national study followed workers from 1980 to 1992 and found that white men were more likely to attain managerial positions than white women, black men, and black women. Controlling for other characteristics, such as education and hours worked per year, the study showed that white men were ahead of the other groups when entering the labor market and that their advantage in attaining managerial positions grew throughout their careers. Other research has underscored these findings. Even in culturally feminine settings such as nursing, librarianship, elementary education, and social work (all specifically studied by sociologist Christine Williams), men ascend to supervisory and administrative positions more quickly than women.

The findings of correlational studies are supported by experimental research, in which subjects are asked to evaluate hypothetical individuals as managers or job candidates, and all characteristics of these individuals are held constant except for their sex. Such efforts continue the tradition of the Goldberg paradigm, named for a 1968 experiment by Philip Goldberg. His simple, elegant study had student participants evaluate written essays that were identical except for the attached male or female name. The students were unaware that other students had received identical material ascribed to a writer of the other sex. This initial experiment demonstrated an overall gender bias: Women received lower evaluations unless the essay was on a feminine topic. Some 40 years later, unfortunately, experiments continue to reveal the same kind of bias in work settings. Men are advantaged over equivalent women as candidates for jobs traditionally held by men as well as for more gender-integrated jobs. Similarly, male leaders receive somewhat more favorable evaluations than equivalent female leaders, especially in roles usually occupied by men.

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Interestingly, however, there is little evidence from either the correlational or the experimental studies that the odds are stacked higher against women with each step up the ladder—that is, that women’s promotions become progressively less likely than men’s at higher levels within organizations. Instead, a general bias against women appears to operate with approximately equal strength at all levels. The scarcity of female corporate officers is the sum of discrimination that has operated at all ranks, not evidence of a particular obstacle to advancement as women approach the top. The problem, in other words, is not a glass ceiling.

### **Resistance to women’s leadership.**

What’s behind the discrimination we’ve been describing? Essentially, a set of widely shared conscious and unconscious mental associations about women, men, and leaders. Study after study has affirmed that people associate women and men with different traits and link men with more of the traits that connote leadership. Kim Campbell, who briefly served as the prime minister of Canada in 1993, described the tension that results:

I don’t have a traditionally female way of speaking....I’m quite assertive. If I didn’t speak the way I do, I wouldn’t have been seen as a leader. But my way of speaking may have grated on people who were not used to hearing it from a woman. It was the right way for a leader to speak, but it wasn’t the right way for a woman to speak. It goes against type.

In the language of psychologists, the clash is between two sets of associations: communal and agentic. Women are associated with communal qualities, which convey a concern for the compassionate treatment of others. They include being especially affectionate, helpful, friendly, kind, and sympathetic, as well as interpersonally sensitive, gentle, and soft-spoken. In contrast, men are associated with agentic qualities, which convey assertion and control. They include being especially aggressive, ambitious, dominant, self-confident, and forceful, as well as self-reliant and individualistic. The agentic traits are also associated in most people’s minds with effective leadership—perhaps because a long history of male domination of leadership roles has made it difficult to separate the leader associations from the male associations.

As a result, women leaders find themselves in a double bind. If they are highly communal, they may be criticized for not being agentic enough. But if they are highly agentic, they may be criticized for lacking communion. Either way, they may leave the impression that they don’t have “the right

stuff” for powerful jobs.

Given this double bind, it is hardly surprising that people are more resistant to women’s influence than to men’s. For example, in meetings at a global retail company, people responded more favorably to men’s overt attempts at influence than to women’s. In the words of one of this company’s female executives, “People often had to speak up to defend their turf, but when women did so, they were vilified. They were labeled ‘control freaks’; men acting the same way were called ‘passionate.’”

Studies have gauged reactions to men and women engaging in various types of dominant behavior. The findings are quite consistent. Nonverbal dominance, such as staring at others while speaking to them or pointing at people, is a more damaging behavior for women than for men. Verbally intimidating others can undermine a woman’s influence, and assertive behavior can reduce her chances of getting a job or advancing in her career. Simply disagreeing can sometimes get women into trouble. Men who disagree or otherwise act dominant get away with it more often than women do.

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Self-promotion is similarly risky for women. Although it can convey status and competence, it is not at all communal. So while men can use bluster to get themselves noticed, modesty is expected even of highly accomplished women. Linguistics professor Deborah Tannen tells a story from her experience: “This [need for modesty] was evident, for example, at a faculty meeting devoted to promotions, at which a woman professor’s success was described: She was extremely well published and well known in the field. A man commented with approval, ‘She wears it well.’ In other words, she was praised for not acting as successful as she was.”

Another way the double bind penalizes women is by denying them the full benefits of being warm and considerate. Because people expect it of women, nice behavior that seems noteworthy in men seems unimpressive in women. For example, in one study, helpful men reaped a lot of approval, but

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helpful women did not. Likewise, men got away with being unhelpful, but women did not. A different study found that male employees received more promotions when they reported higher levels of helpfulness to coworkers. But female employees' promotions were not related to such altruism.

While one might suppose that men would have a double bind of their own, they in fact have more freedom. Several experiments and organizational studies have assessed reactions to behavior that is warm and friendly versus dominant and assertive. The findings show that men can communicate in a warm or a dominant manner, with no penalty either way. People like men equally well and are equally influenced by them regardless of their warmth.

It all amounts to a clash of assumptions when the average person confronts a woman in management. Perhaps this is why respondents in one study characterized the group "successful female managers" as more deceitful, pushy, selfish, and abrasive than "successful male managers." In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, people suspect that such highly effective women must not be very likable or nice.

### **Issues of leadership style.**

In response to the challenges presented by the double bind, female leaders often struggle to cultivate an appropriate and effective leadership style—one that reconciles the communal qualities people prefer in women with the agentic qualities people think leaders need to succeed. Here, for instance, is how Marietta Nien-hwa Cheng described her transition to the role of symphony conductor:

I used to speak more softly, with a higher pitch. Sometimes my vocal cadences went up instead of down. I realized that these mannerisms lack the sense of authority. I strengthened my voice. The pitch has dropped....I have stopped trying to be everyone's friend. Leadership is not synonymous with socializing.

It's difficult to pull off such a transformation while maintaining a sense of authenticity as a leader. Sometimes the whole effort can backfire. In the words of another female leader, "I think that there is a real penalty for a woman who behaves like a man. The men don't like her and the women don't either." Women leaders worry a lot about these things, complicating the labyrinth that they

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negotiate. For example, Catalyst's study of *Fortune* 1000 female executives found that 96% of them rated as critical or fairly important that they develop "a style with which male managers are comfortable."

## Is It Only a Question of Time?

It is a common perception that women will steadily gain greater access to leadership roles, including elite positions. For example, university students who are queried about the future power of men and women say that women's power will increase. Polls have shown that most Americans expect a woman to be elected president or vice president within their lifetimes. Both groups are extrapolating women's recent gains into the future, as if our society were on a continuous march toward gender equality.

But social change does not proceed without struggle and conflict. As women gain greater equality, a portion of people react against it. They long for traditional roles. In fact, signs of a pause in progress toward gender equality have appeared on many fronts. A review of longitudinal studies reveals several areas in which a sharp upward trend in the 1970s and 1980s has been followed by a slowing and flattening in recent years (for instance, in the percentage of managers who are women). The pause is also evident in some attitudinal data—like the percentage of people who approve of female bosses and who believe that women are at least as well suited as men for politics.

Social scientists have proposed various theories to explain this pause. Some, such as social psychologist Cecilia Ridgeway, believe that social change is activating

Does a distinct "female" leadership style exist? There seems to be a popular consensus that it does. Consider, for example, journalist Michael Sokolove's profile of Mike Krzyzewski, head coach of the highly successful Duke University men's basketball team. As Sokolove put it, "So what is the secret to Krzyzewski's success? For starters, he coaches the way a woman would. Really." Sokolove proceeded to describe Krzyzewski's mentoring, interpersonally sensitive, and highly effective coaching style.

More scientifically, a recent meta-analysis integrated the results of 45 studies addressing the question. To compare leadership skills, the researchers adopted a framework introduced by leadership scholar James MacGregor Burns that distinguishes between transformational leadership and transactional leadership. Transformational leaders establish themselves as role models by gaining followers' trust and confidence. They state future goals, develop plans to achieve those goals, and innovate, even when their organizations are generally successful. Such leaders mentor and empower followers, encouraging them to develop their full potential and thus to contribute more effectively to their organizations. By contrast, transactional leaders establish give-and-take relationships that appeal

“people’s deep seated interests in maintaining clear cultural understandings of gender difference.” Others believe progress has reached its limit given the continuing organization of family life by gender, coupled with employer policies that favor those who are not hampered by primary responsibility for child rearing.

It may simply be that women are collectively catching their breath before pressing for more change. In the past century, feminist activism arose when women came to view themselves as collectively subjected to illegitimate and unfair treatment. But recent polls show less conviction about the presence of discrimination, and feminism does not have the cultural relevance it once had. The lessening of activism on behalf of all women puts pressure on each woman to find her own way.

to subordinates’ self-interest. Such leaders manage in the conventional manner of clarifying subordinates’ responsibilities, rewarding them for meeting objectives, and correcting them for failing to meet objectives. Although transformational and transactional leadership styles are different, most leaders adopt at least some behaviors of both types. The researchers also allowed for a third category, called the laissez-faire style—a sort of nonleadership that concerns itself with none of the above, despite rank authority.

The meta-analysis found that, in general, female leaders were somewhat more transformational than male leaders, especially when it came to giving support and encouragement to subordinates. They also engaged in more of the rewarding behaviors that are one aspect of

transactional leadership. Meanwhile, men exceeded women on the aspects of transactional leadership involving corrective and disciplinary actions that are either active (timely) or passive (belated). Men were also more likely than women to be laissez-faire leaders, who take little responsibility for managing. These findings add up to a startling conclusion, given that most leadership research has found the transformational style (along with the rewards and positive incentives associated with the transactional style) to be more suited to leading the modern organization. The research tells us not only that men and women do have somewhat different leadership styles, but also that women’s approaches are the more generally effective—while men’s often are only somewhat effective or actually hinder effectiveness.

Another part of this picture, based on a separate meta-analysis, is that women adopt a more participative and collaborative style than men typically favor. The reason for this difference is unlikely to be genetic. Rather, it may be that collaboration can get results without seeming particularly masculine. As women navigate their way through the double bind, they seek ways to

project authority without relying on the autocratic behaviors that people find so jarring in women. A viable path is to bring others into decision making and to lead as an encouraging teacher and positive role model. (However, if there is not a critical mass of other women to affirm the legitimacy of a participative style, female leaders usually conform to whatever style is typical of the men—and that is sometimes autocratic.)

### **Demands of family life.**

For many women, the most fateful turns in the labyrinth are the ones taken under pressure of family responsibilities. Women continue to be the ones who interrupt their careers, take more days off, and work part-time. As a result, they have fewer years of job experience and fewer hours of employment per year, which slows their career progress and reduces their earnings.

In one study of Chicago lawyers, researchers sought to understand why women were much less likely than men to hold the leadership positions in large law firms—the positions that are most highly paid and that confer (arguably) the highest prestige. They found that women were no less likely than men to begin their careers at such firms but were more likely to leave them for positions in the public sector or corporate positions. The reasons for their departures were concentrated in work/family trade-offs. Among the relatively few women who did become partner in a firm, 60% had no children, and the minority who had children generally had delayed childbearing until attaining partner status.

There is no question that, while men increasingly share housework and child rearing, the bulk of domestic work still falls on women's shoulders. We know this from time-diary studies, in which people record what they are doing during each hour of a 24-hour day. So, for example, in the United States married women devoted 19 hours per week on average to housework in 2005, while married men contributed 11 hours. That's a huge improvement over 1965 numbers, when women spent a whopping 34 hours per week to men's five, but it is still a major inequity. And the situation looks worse when child care hours are added.

Although it is common knowledge that mothers provide more child care than fathers, few people realize that mothers provide more than they did in earlier generations—despite the fact that fathers are putting in a lot more time than in the past. National studies have compared mothers and fathers on the amount of their primary child care, which consists of close interaction not combined with

housekeeping or other activities. Married mothers increased their hours per week from 10.6 in 1965 to 12.9 in 2000, and married fathers increased theirs from 2.6 to 6.5. Thus, though husbands have taken on more domestic work, the work/family conflict has not eased for women; the gain has been offset by escalating pressures for intensive parenting and the increasing time demands of most high-level careers.

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Even women who have found a way to relieve pressures from the home front by sharing child care with husbands, other family members, or paid workers may not enjoy the full workplace benefit of having done so. Decision makers often assume that mothers have domestic responsibilities that make it inappropriate to promote them to demanding positions. As one participant in a study of the federal workforce explained, “I mean, there were 2 or 3 names [of women] in the hat, and they said, ‘I don’t want to talk about her because she has children who are still home in these [evening] hours.’ Now they don’t pose that thing about men on the list, many of whom also have children in that age group.”

### **Underinvestment in social capital.**

Perhaps the most destructive result of the work/family balancing act so many women must perform is that it leaves very little time for socializing with colleagues and building professional networks. The social capital that accrues from such “nonessential” parts of work turns out to be quite essential indeed. One study yielded the following description of managers who advanced rapidly in hierarchies: Fast-track managers “spent relatively more time and effort socializing, politicking, and interacting with outsiders than did their less successful counterparts...[and] did not give much time or attention to the traditional management activities of planning, decision making, and controlling or to the human resource management activities of motivating/reinforcing, staffing, training/developing, and managing conflict.” This suggests that social capital is even more necessary to managers’ advancement than skillful performance of traditional managerial tasks.

One study suggests that social capital is even more necessary to managers' advancement than skillful performance of traditional managerial tasks.

Even given sufficient time, women can find it difficult to engage in and benefit from informal networking if they are a small minority. In such settings, the influential networks are composed entirely or almost entirely of men. Breaking into those male networks can be hard, especially when men center their networks on masculine activities. The recent gender discrimination lawsuit against Wal-Mart provides examples of this. For instance, an executive retreat took the form of a quail-hunting expedition at Sam Walton's ranch in Texas. Middle managers' meetings included visits to strip clubs and Hooters restaurants, and a sales conference attended by thousands of store managers featured a football theme. One executive received feedback that she probably would not advance in the company because she didn't hunt or fish.

## **Management Interventions That Work**

Taking the measure of the labyrinth that confronts women leaders, we see that it begins with prejudices that benefit men and penalize women, continues with particular resistance to women's leadership, includes questions of leadership style and authenticity, and—most dramatically for many women—features the challenge of balancing work and family responsibilities. It becomes clear that a woman's situation as she reaches her peak career years is the result of many turns at many challenging junctures. Only a few individual women have made the right combination of moves to land at the center of power—but as for the rest, there is usually no single turning point where their progress was diverted and the prize was lost.

What's to be done in the face of such a multifaceted problem? A solution that is often proposed is for governments to implement and enforce antidiscrimination legislation and thereby require organizations to eliminate inequitable practices. However, analysis of discrimination cases that have gone to court has shown that legal remedies can be elusive when gender inequality results from norms embedded in organizational structure and culture. The more effective approach is for

organizations to appreciate the subtlety and complexity of the problem and to attack its many roots simultaneously. More specifically, if a company wants to see more women arrive in its executive suite, it should do the following:

**Increase people's awareness of the psychological drivers of prejudice toward female leaders, and work to dispel those perceptions.**

Raising awareness of ingrained bias has been the aim of many diversity-training initiatives, and no doubt they have been more helpful than harmful. There is the danger they will be undermined, however, if their lessons are not underscored by what managers say and do in the course of day-to-day work.

**Change the long-hours norm.**

Especially in the context of knowledge work, it can be hard to assess individuals' relative contributions, and managers may resort to "hours spent at work" as the prime indicator of someone's worth to the organization. To the extent an organization can shift the focus to objective measures of productivity, women with family demands on their time but highly productive work habits will receive the rewards and encouragement they deserve.

**Reduce the subjectivity of performance evaluation.**

Greater objectivity in evaluations also combats the effects of lingering prejudice in both hiring and promotion. To ensure fairness, criteria should be explicit and evaluation processes designed to limit the influence of decision makers' conscious and unconscious biases.

**Use open-recruitment tools, such as advertising and employment agencies, rather than relying on informal social networks and referrals to fill positions.**

Recruitment from within organizations also should be transparent, with postings of open positions in appropriate venues. Research has shown that such personnel practices increase the numbers of women in managerial roles.

**Ensure a critical mass of women in executive positions—not just one or two women—to head off the problems that come with tokenism.**

Token women tend to be pegged into narrow stereotypical roles such as "seductress," "mother," "pet," or "iron maiden." (Or more colorfully, as one woman banker put it, "When you start out in banking, you are a slut or a geisha.") Pigeonholing like this limits women's options and makes it

difficult for them to rise to positions of responsibility. When women are not a small minority, their identities as women become less salient, and colleagues are more likely to react to them in terms of their individual competencies.

### **Avoid having a sole female member of any team.**

Top management tends to divide its small population of women managers among many projects in the interests of introducing diversity to them all. But several studies have found that, so outnumbered, the women tend to be ignored by the men. A female vice president of a manufacturing company described how, when she or another woman ventures an idea in a meeting, it tends to be overlooked: “It immediately gets lost in the conversation. Then two minutes later, a man makes the same suggestion, and it’s ‘Wow! What a great idea!’ And you sit there and think, ‘What just happened?’” As women reach positions of higher power and authority, they increasingly find themselves in gender-imbalanced groups—and some find themselves, for the first time, seriously marginalized. This is part of the reason that the glass ceiling metaphor resonates with so many. But in fact, the problem can be present at any level.

### **Help shore up social capital.**

As we’ve discussed, the call of family responsibilities is mainly to blame for women’s underinvestment in networking. When time is scarce, this social activity is the first thing to go by the wayside. Organizations can help women appreciate why it deserves more attention. In particular, women gain from strong and supportive mentoring relationships and connections with powerful networks. When a well-placed individual who possesses greater legitimacy (often a man) takes an interest in a woman’s career, her efforts to build social capital can proceed far more efficiently.

### **Prepare women for line management with appropriately demanding assignments.**

Women, like men, must have the benefit of developmental job experiences if they are to qualify for promotions. But, as one woman executive wrote, “Women have been shunted off into support areas for the last 30 years, rather than being in the business of doing business, so the pool of women trained to assume leadership positions in any large company is very small.” Her point was that women should be taught in business school to insist on line jobs when they enter the workforce. One company that has taken up the challenge has been Procter & Gamble. According to a report by Claudia Deutsch in the *New York Times*, the company was experiencing an executive attrition rate that was twice as high for women as for men. Some of the women reported having to change

companies to land jobs that provided challenging work. P&G's subsequent efforts to bring more women into line management both improved its overall retention of women and increased the number of women in senior management.

### **Establish family-friendly human resources practices.**

These may include flextime, job sharing, telecommuting, elder care provisions, adoption benefits, dependent child care options, and employee-sponsored on-site child care. Such support can allow women to stay in their jobs during the most demanding years of child rearing, build social capital, keep up to date in their fields, and eventually compete for higher positions. A study of 72 large U.S. firms showed (controlling for other variables) that family-friendly HR practices in place in 1994 increased the proportion of women in senior management over the subsequent five years.

### **Allow employees who have significant parental responsibility more time to prove themselves worthy of promotion.**

This recommendation is particularly directed to organizations, many of them professional services firms, that have established “up or out” career progressions. People not ready for promotion at the same time as the top performers in their cohort aren't simply left in place—they're asked to leave. But many parents (most often mothers), while fully capable of reaching that level of achievement, need extra time—perhaps a year or two—to get there. Forcing them off the promotion path not only reduces the number of women reaching top management positions, but also constitutes a failure by the firm to capitalize on its early investment in them.

### **Welcome women back.**

It makes sense to give highperforming women who step away from the workforce an opportunity to return to responsible positions when their circumstances change. Some companies have established “alumni” programs, often because they see former employees as potential sources of new business. A few companies have gone further to activate these networks for other purposes, as well. (Procter & Gamble taps alumni for innovation purposes; Booz Allen sees its alumni ranks as a source of subcontractors.) Keeping lines of communication open can convey the message that a return may be possible.

### **Encourage male participation in family-friendly benefits.**

Dangers lurk in family-friendly benefits that are used only by women. Exercising options such as generous parental leave and part-time work slows down women's careers. More profoundly, having many more women than men take such benefits can harm the careers of women in general because of the expectation that they may well exercise those options. Any effort toward greater family friendliness should actively recruit male participation to avoid inadvertently making it harder for women to gain access to essential managerial roles.

Managers can be forgiven if they find the foregoing list a tall order. It's a wide-ranging set of interventions and still far from exhaustive. The point, however, is just that: Organizations will succeed in filling half their top management slots with women—and women who are the true performance equals of their male counterparts—only by attacking all the reasons they are absent today. Glass ceiling-inspired programs and projects can do just so much if the leakage of talented women is happening on every lower floor of the building. Individually, each of these interventions has been shown to make a difference. Collectively, we believe, they can make all the difference.

## **The View from Above**

Imagine visiting a formal garden and finding within it a high hedgerow. At a point along its vertical face, you spot a rectangle—a neatly pruned and inviting doorway. Are you aware as you step through that you are entering a labyrinth? And, three doorways later, as the reality of the puzzle settles in, do you have any idea how to proceed? This is the situation in which many women find themselves in their career endeavors. Ground-level perplexity and frustration make every move uncertain.

When the eye can take in the whole of the puzzle—the starting position, the goal, and the maze of walls—solutions begin to suggest themselves.

Labyrinths become infinitely more tractable when seen from above. When the eye can take in the whole of the puzzle—the starting position, the goal, and the maze of walls—solutions begin to suggest themselves. This has been the goal of our research. Our hope is that women, equipped with a map of the barriers they will confront on their path to professional achievement, will make more informed choices. We hope that managers, too, will understand where their efforts can facilitate the

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progress of women. If women are to achieve equality, women and men will have to share leadership equally. With a greater understanding of what stands in the way of gender-balanced leadership, we draw nearer to attaining it in our time.

A version of this article appeared in the September 2007 issue of *Harvard Business Review*.



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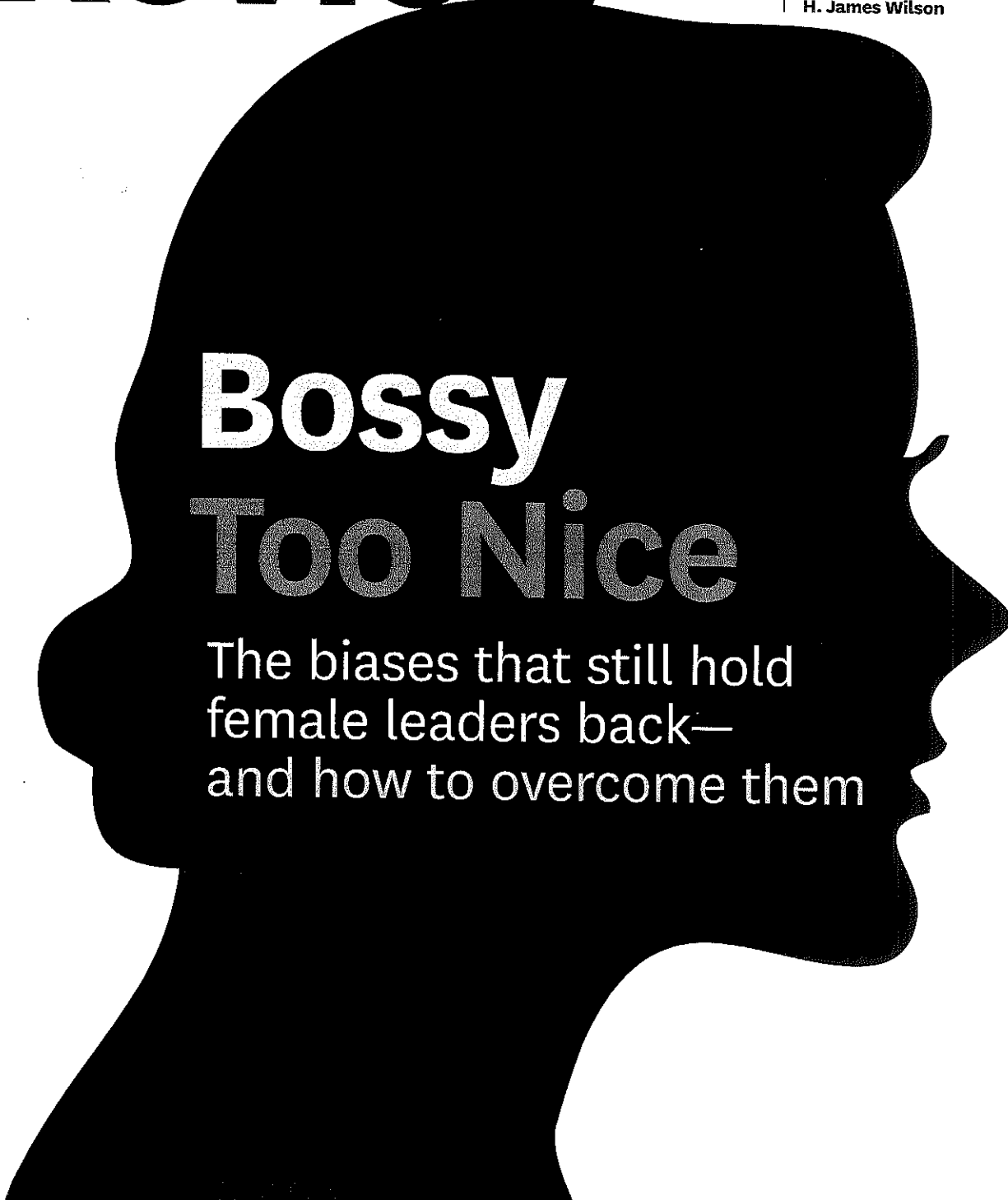


# Harvard Business Review

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**ARTWORK** Janet Echelman  
*1.26 Sculpture Project at the  
Biennial of the Americas*  
July 6–August 6, 2010  
Spectra Fiber, high-tenacity  
polyester fiber, and lighting  
230' x 63' x 30'  
Denver Art Museum  
Denver, Colorado

# Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers

***Persistent gender bias too often disrupts the learning process at the heart of becoming a leader. Here's how to correct the problem.***

*by Herminia Ibarra, Robin Ely, and Deborah Kolb*

PHOTO COURTESY OF JANNI WATKINS EMMEN

Many CEOs who make gender diversity a priority—by setting aspirational goals for the proportion of women in leadership roles, insisting on diverse slates of candidates for senior positions, and developing mentoring and training programs—are frustrated. They and their companies spend time, money, and good intentions on efforts to build a more robust pipeline of upwardly mobile women, and then not much happens.

The problem with these leaders' approaches is that they don't address the often fragile process of coming to see oneself, and to be seen by others, as a leader. Becoming a leader involves much more than being put in a leadership role, acquiring new skills, and adapting one's style to the requirements of that role. It involves a fundamental identity shift. Organizations inadvertently undermine this process when they advise women to proactively seek leadership roles without also addressing policies and practices that communicate a mismatch between how women are seen and the qualities and experiences people tend to associate with leaders.

A significant body of research (see "Further Reading") shows that for women, the subtle gender bias that persists in organizations and in society disrupts the learning cycle at the heart of becoming a leader. This research also points to some steps that companies can take in order to rectify the situation. It's not enough to identify and instill the "right" skills and competencies as if in a social vacuum. The context must support a woman's motivation to lead and also increase the likelihood that others will recognize and encourage her efforts—even when she doesn't look or behave like the current generation of senior executives.

The solutions to the pipeline problem are very different from what companies currently employ. Traditional high-potential, mentoring, and leadership education programs are necessary but not sufficient. Our research, teaching, and consulting reveal three additional actions companies can take to improve the chances that women will gain a sense of themselves as leaders, be recognized as such, and ultimately succeed. (This article expands on our paper "Taking Gender into Account: Theory and Design for Women's Leadership Development Programs," *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, September 2011.)

### Becoming a Leader

People become leaders by *internalizing a leadership identity* and *developing a sense of purpose*. Internalizing a sense of oneself as a leader is an iterative process. A person asserts leadership by taking purposeful action—such as convening a meeting to revive a dormant project. Others affirm or resist the action, thus encouraging or discouraging subsequent assertions. These interactions inform the person's sense of self as a leader and communicate how others view his or her fitness for the role.

As a person's leadership capabilities grow and opportunities to demonstrate them expand, high-profile, challenging assignments and other organizational endorsements become more likely. Such affirmation gives the person the fortitude to step outside a comfort zone and experiment with unfamiliar behaviors and new ways of exercising leadership. An absence of affirmation, however, diminishes self-confidence and discourages him or her from seeking developmental opportunities or experimenting. Leadership identity, which begins as a tentative, peripheral aspect of the self, eventually withers away, along with opportunities to grow through new assignments and real achievements. Over time, an aspiring leader acquires a reputation as having—or not having—high potential.

The story of an investment banker we'll call Amanda is illustrative. Amanda's career stalled when she was in her thirties. Her problem, she was told, was that she lacked "presence" with clients (who were mostly older men) and was not sufficiently outspoken in meetings. Her career prospects looked bleak. But both her reputation and her confidence grew when she was assigned to work with two clients whose CFOs happened to be women. These women appreciated Amanda's smarts and the skillful way she handled their needs and concerns. Each in her own way started taking the initiative to raise



**About the Spotlight Artist**  
Each month we illustrate our Spotlight package with a series of works from an accomplished artist. The lively and cerebral creations of these photographers, painters, and installation artists are meant to infuse our pages with additional energy and intelligence to amplify what are often complex and abstract concepts.

This month we showcase the work of Janet Echelman, an American artist who specializes in large-scale public installations. Using fishing nets as her medium, she creates experiential sculpture that shifts with the winds and weather. Her 2011 TED talk "Taking Imagination Seriously" has attracted nearly 1 million views. See the artist's work at [echelman.com](http://echelman.com).

## Idea in Brief

### THE BASELINE

People become leaders iteratively: They shoulder increasingly challenging roles, learn from mentors, and experiment with new behaviors. Then, if their performance is affirmed, they repeat the process.

### WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

That process is often more difficult for women than for men because of subtle biases. For example, behavior considered assertive in a man is seen as aggressive in a woman and thus denigrated rather than rewarded.

### THE PATH FORWARD

Just naming those biases can help men and women alike to understand what's going on. That frees women to focus more on leadership purpose and less on how they're perceived.

Amanda's profile. One demanded that she be present at all key meetings, and the other refused to speak to anyone but Amanda when she called—actions that enhanced Amanda's credibility within her firm. "In our industry," Amanda explains, "having the key client relationship is everything." Her peers and supervisors began to see her not just as a competent project manager but as a trusted client adviser—an important prerequisite for promotion. These relationships, both internal and external, gave Amanda the confidence boost she needed to generate ideas and express them forthrightly, whether to colleagues or to clients. Her supervisors happily concluded that Amanda had finally shed her "meek and mild-mannered" former self and "stepped up" to leadership.

Effective leaders develop a sense of purpose by pursuing goals that align with their personal values and advance the collective good. This allows them to look beyond the status quo to what is *possible* and gives them a compelling reason to take action despite personal fears and insecurities. Such leaders are seen as authentic and trustworthy because they are willing to take risks in the service of shared goals. By connecting others to a larger purpose, they inspire commitment, boost resolve, and help colleagues find deeper meaning in their work.

Integrating leadership into one's core identity is particularly challenging for women, who must establish credibility in a culture that is deeply conflicted about whether, when, and how they should exercise authority. Practices that equate leadership with behaviors considered more common in men suggest that women are simply not cut out to be leaders. Furthermore, the human tendency to gravitate to people like oneself leads powerful men to sponsor and advocate for other men when leadership opportunities arise. As Amanda's story illustrates, women's leadership potential sometimes shows in less conventional ways—being responsive

to clients' needs, for example, rather than boldly asserting a point of view—and sometimes it takes powerful women to recognize that potential. But powerful women are scarce.

Despite a lack of discriminatory intent, subtle, "second-generation" forms of workplace gender bias can obstruct the leadership identity development of a company's entire population of women. (See the sidebar "What Is Second-Generation Gender Bias?") The resulting underrepresentation of women in top positions reinforces entrenched beliefs, prompts and supports men's bids for leadership, and thus maintains the status quo.

The three actions we suggest to support women's access to leadership positions are (1) educate women and men about second-generation gender bias, (2) create safe "identity workspaces" to support transitions to bigger roles, and (3) anchor women's development efforts in a sense of leadership purpose rather than in how women are perceived. These actions will give women insight into themselves and their organizations, enabling them to more effectively chart a course to leadership.

### Educate Everyone About Second-Generation Gender Bias

**For women.** More than 25 years ago the social psychologist Faye Crosby stumbled on a surprising phenomenon: Most women are unaware of having personally been victims of gender discrimination and deny it *even when it is objectively true and they see that women in general experience it*.

Many women have worked hard to take gender out of the equation—to simply be recognized for their skills and talents. Moreover, the existence of gender bias in organizational policies and practices may suggest that they have no power to determine their own success. When asked what might be holding women back in their organizations, they say:

## WHAT IS SECOND-GENERATION GENDER BIAS?

Research has moved away from a focus on the deliberate exclusion of women and toward investigating “second-generation” forms of gender bias as the primary cause of women’s persistent underrepresentation in leadership roles. This bias erects powerful but subtle and often invisible barriers for women that arise from cultural assumptions and organizational structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently benefit men while putting women at a disadvantage. Among them are:

**A PAUCITY OF ROLE MODELS FOR WOMEN.** Aspiring leaders need role models whose styles and behaviors they can experiment with and evaluate according to their own standards and others’ reactions. Fewer female leaders means fewer role models and can suggest to young would-be leaders that being a woman is

a liability—thus discouraging them from viewing senior women as credible sources of advice and support.

**GENDERED CAREER PATHS AND GENDERED WORK.** Many entrenched organizational structures and work practices were designed to fit men’s lives and situations at a time when women made up

only a very small portion of the workforce. For one example, formal rotations in sales or operations have traditionally been a key step on the path to senior leadership, and men are more likely than women to have held such jobs. Yet requirements like these may be outdated when it comes to the kinds of experience that best prepare a person to lead. For another, career-enhancing international posts often assume a “trailing spouse” who has no career and can easily move—a family situation much more common for men than for women. How work is valued may similarly give men an advantage: Research indicates that organizations tend to ignore or undervalue behind-the-scenes work (building a team, avoiding a crisis), which

“It’s nothing overt. I just feel less of a connection, either positive or negative, with the guys I work with. So sometimes I seem to have difficulty getting traction for my ideas.”

“I look around and see that my male colleagues have P&L responsibility and most of us are in staff roles. I was advised to make the move to a staff role after the birth of my second child. It would be easier, I was told. But now I recognize that there is no path back to the line.”

“My firm has the very best intentions when it comes to women. But it seems every time a leadership role opens up, women are not on the slate. The claim is made that they just can’t find women with the right skill set and experience.”

These statements belie the notion that gender bias is absent from these women’s work lives. Second-generation bias does not require an intent to exclude; nor does it necessarily produce direct, immediate harm to any individual. Rather, it creates a context—akin to “something in the water”—in which women fail to thrive or reach their full potential. Feeling less connected to one’s male colleagues, being advised to take a staff role to accommodate family, finding oneself excluded from consideration for key positions—all these situations reflect work structures and practices that put women at a disadvantage.

Without an understanding of second-generation bias, people are left with stereotypes to explain why women as a group have failed to achieve parity with men: If they can’t reach the top, it is because they “don’t ask,” are “too nice,” or simply “opt out.” These

messages tell women who have managed to succeed that they are exceptions and women who have experienced setbacks that it is their own fault for failing to be sufficiently aggressive or committed to the job.

We find that when women recognize the subtle and pervasive effects of second-generation bias, they feel empowered, not victimized, because they can take action to counter those effects. They can put themselves forward for leadership roles when they are qualified but have been overlooked. They can seek out sponsors and others to support and develop them in those roles. They can negotiate for work arrangements that fit both their lives and their organizations’ performance requirements. Such understanding makes it easier for women to “lean in.”

**For women and men.** Second-generation bias is embedded in stereotypes and organizational practices that can be hard to detect, but when people are made aware of it, they see possibilities for change. In our work with leadership development programs, we focus on a “small wins” approach to change. In one manufacturing company, a task force learned that leaders tended to hire and promote people, mainly men, whose backgrounds and careers resembled their own. They had good reasons for this behavior: Experienced engineers were hard to find, and time constraints pressured leaders to fill roles quickly. But after recognizing some of the hidden costs of this practice—high turnover, difficulty attracting women to the company, and a lack of diversity to match that of customers—the company began to experiment with small wins. For example, some executives made a commitment to review the

women are more likely to do, while rewarding heroic work, which is most often done by men. These practices were not designed to be discriminatory, but their cumulative effect disadvantages women. A vicious cycle ensues: Men appear to be best suited to leadership roles, and this perception propels more of them to seek and attain such positions, thus reinforcing the notion that they are simply better leaders.

**WOMEN'S LACK OF ACCESS TO NETWORKS AND SPONSORS.** Informal networks are a precious resource for would-be leaders, yet differences in men's and women's organizational roles and career prospects, along with their proclivity to interact with others of the

same gender, result in weaker networks for women. They cite as a major barrier to advancement their lack of access to influential colleagues. Moreover, the connections women do have tend to be less efficacious: Men's networks provide more informal help than women's do, and men are more likely to have mentors who help them get promoted. Meanwhile, men in positions of power tend to direct developmental opportunities to junior men, whom they view as more likely than women to succeed.

**DOUBLE BINDS.** In most cultures masculinity and leadership are closely linked: The ideal leader, like the ideal man, is decisive, assertive, and independent. In contrast, women are expected to be nice,

caretaking, and unselfish. The mismatch between conventionally feminine qualities and the qualities thought necessary for leadership puts female leaders in a double bind. Numerous studies have shown that women who excel in traditionally male domains are viewed as competent but less likable than their male counterparts. Behaviors that suggest self-confidence or assertiveness in men often appear arrogant or abrasive in women. Meanwhile, women in positions of authority who enact a conventionally feminine style may be liked but are not respected. They are deemed too emotional to make tough decisions and too soft to be strong leaders.

job criteria for leadership roles. One male leader said, "We write the job descriptions—the list of capabilities—for our ideal candidates. We know that the men will nominate themselves even if they don't meet all the requirements; the women would hold back. Now we look for the capabilities that are needed in the role, not some unrealistic ideal. We have hired more women in these roles, and our quality has not suffered in the least."

In another case, participants in a leadership development program noticed that men seemed to be given more strategic roles, whereas women were assigned more operational ones, signaling that they had lower potential. The participants proposed that the company provide clear criteria for developmental assignments, be transparent about how high potential was evaluated, and give direction as to what experiences best increased a person's potential. Those actions put more women in leadership roles.

### Create Safe "Identity Workspaces"

In the upper tiers of organizations, women become increasingly scarce, which heightens the visibility and scrutiny of those near the top, who may become risk-averse and overly focused on details and lose their sense of purpose. (In general, people are less apt to try out unfamiliar behaviors or roles if they feel threatened.) Thus a safe space for learning, experimentation, and community is critical in leadership development programs for women.

Consider performance feedback, which is necessary for growth and advancement but full of tripwires for women. In many organizations 360-degree

feedback is a basic tool for deepening self-knowledge and increasing awareness of one's impact on others—skills that are part and parcel of leadership development. But gender stereotypes may color evaluators' perceptions, subjecting women to double binds and double standards. Research has amply demonstrated that accomplished, high-potential women who are evaluated as competent managers often fail the likability test, whereas competence and likability tend to go hand in hand for similarly accomplished men. We see this phenomenon in our own research and practice. Supervisors routinely give high-performing women some version of the message "You need to trim your sharp elbows." Likewise, we find that participants in women's leadership development programs often receive high ratings on task-related dimensions, such as "exceeds goals," "acts decisively in the face of uncertainty," and "is not afraid to make decisions that may be unpopular," but low ratings on relational ones, such as "takes others' viewpoints into account" and "uses feedback to learn from her mistakes." We also frequently encounter women whose performance feedback seems contradictory: Some are told they need to "be tougher and hold people accountable" but also to "not set expectations so high," to "say no more often" but also to "be more visible," to "be more decisive" but also to "be more collaborative."

Creating a safe setting—a coaching relationship, a women's leadership program, a support group of peers—in which women can interpret these messages is critical to their leadership identity development. Companies should encourage them to build



## FURTHER READING

**"Who Will Lead and Who Will Follow? A Social Process of Leadership Identity Construction in Organizations,"** by D. Scott DeRue and Susan J. Ashford (*Academy of Management Review*, October 2010)

**"Women and Leadership: Defining the Challenges,"** by Robin J. Ely and Deborah L. Rhode (*Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice*, Harvard Business Press, 2010)

**"Impossible Selves: Image Strategies and Identity Threat in Professional Women's Career Transitions,"** by Herminia Ibarra and Jenifer Petriglieri (Insead working paper, 2007)

**"Negotiating in the Shadows of Organizations: Gender, Negotiation, and Change,"** by Deborah M. Kolb (*Ohio State Journal on Dispute Resolution*, 2013)

**"Taking Gender into Account: Theory and Design for Women's Leadership Development Programs,"** by Robin J. Ely, Herminia Ibarra, and Deborah Kolb (*Academy of Management Learning & Education*, September 2011)

communities in which similarly positioned women can discuss their feedback, compare notes, and emotionally support one another's learning. Identifying common experiences increases women's willingness to talk openly, take risks, and be vulnerable without fearing that others will misunderstand or judge them. These connections are especially important when women are discussing sensitive topics such as gender bias or reflecting on their personal leadership challenges, which can easily threaten identity and prompt them to resist any critical feedback they may receive. When they are grounded in candid assessments of the cultural, organizational, and individual factors shaping them, women can construct coherent narratives about who they are and who they want to become.

### The Importance of Leadership Purpose

In a recent interview with members of Hillary Clinton's press corps, a veteran reporter noted, "The story is never what she says, as much as we want it to be. The story is always how she looked when she said it." Clinton says she doesn't fight it anymore; she just focuses on getting the job done.

How women are perceived—how they dress, how they talk, their "executive presence," their capacity to "fill a room," and their leadership style—has been the focus of many efforts to get more of them to the top. Voice coaches, image consultants, public-speaking instructors, and branding experts find the demand for their services growing. The premise is that women have not been socialized to compete successfully in the world of men, so they must be taught the skills and styles their male counterparts acquire as a matter of course.

To manage the competence-likability trade-off—the seeming choice between being respected and being liked—women are taught to downplay femininity, or to soften a hard-charging style, or to try to strike a perfect balance between the two. But the time and energy spent on managing these perceptions can ultimately be self-defeating. Overinvestment in one's image diminishes the emotional and motivational resources available for larger purposes. People who focus on how others perceive them are less clear about their goals, less open to learning from failure, and less capable of self-regulation.

Anchoring in purpose enables women to redirect their attention toward shared goals and to consider who they need to be and what they need to learn in order to achieve those goals. Instead of

defining themselves in relation to gender stereotypes—whether rejecting stereotypically masculine approaches because they feel inauthentic or rejecting stereotypically feminine ones for fear that they convey incompetence—female leaders can focus on behaving in ways that advance the purposes for which they stand.

Focusing on purpose can also lead women to take up activities that are critical to their success, such as networking. Connections rarely come to them as a matter of course, so they have to be proactive in developing ties; but we also find that many women avoid networking because they see it as inauthentic—as developing relationships that are merely transactional and feel too instrumental—or because it brings to mind activities (the proverbial golf game, for example) in which they have no interest or for which they have no time, given their responsibilities beyond work. Yet when they see it as a means to a larger purpose, such as developing new business to advance their vision for the company, they are more comfortable engaging in it.

**LEARNING HOW** to be an effective leader is like learning any complex skill: It rarely comes naturally and usually takes a lot of practice. Successful transitions into senior management roles involve shedding previously effective professional identities and developing new, more fitting ones. Yet people often feel ambivalent about leaving the comfort of roles in which they have excelled, because doing so means moving toward an uncertain outcome.

Second-generation gender bias can make these transitions more challenging for women, and focusing exclusively on acquiring new skills isn't sufficient; the learning must be accompanied by a growing sense of identity as a leader. That's why greater understanding of second-generation bias, safe spaces for leadership identity development, and encouraging women to anchor in their leadership purpose will get better results than the paths most organizations currently pursue. ▢

HBR Reprint R1309C

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