

Women as Leaders: The Paradox of Success

Scarcity at the top. For more than 30 years women have been moving into organizations in increasing numbers. They have gradually populated the “windowed” offices and the middle levels of the hierarchies. Women now make up 50% of managerial and specialized professional positions in organizations in the United States.¹ Yet, even with these positive trends, the dearth of women in top leadership roles is striking. Catalyst, a research organization on “glass ceiling” issues, recently released their 2000 census of Fortune 500 companies.² It revealed that women comprise only 12.5% of corporate officers and 6.2% of the highest ranking corporate leadership positions with titles such as chairman, vice chairman, chief executive officer, or chief operating officer. Women of color make up only 1.3% of corporate officers. There are only two women CEO’s in the 500 largest corporations and six among the top 1,000. Women are even more sparsely represented in top leadership positions in companies of the new economy.³ While the percentage of women in leadership positions has certainly increased over the years, the trend is disconcertingly slow. Catalyst predicts that, at the current rate of change, the percentage of women in top leadership positions in the largest companies will not exceed 25% until 2020.

Paradox of success. How do we explain these trends? A common explanation for the lack of women in lead-

ership roles is that they simply lack the experience and skills needed to be effective leaders. Yet, recent studies comparing the leadership and managerial performance of men and women across a wide range of organizations challenge this conclusion and surface a fascinating paradox. These studies suggest that, on the basis of leadership skills alone, men could beneficially learn from women.⁴ Numerous studies of leadership skills and competencies among executives, as assessed by the peers, direct reports, and supervisors in 360° performance evaluations, reveal that generally women are rated as well as or higher than their male counterparts on a majority of critical leadership measures. As conventional wisdom would lead us to assume, women typically scored higher in interpersonal, relational, developmental, and communication skills — areas often associated with feminine strengths in the literature on women in management.⁵ But, interestingly, the studies also showed that women were rated favorably with men on a much broader range of leadership competencies.

For example, Irwin International, a consulting firm specializing in managerial performance evaluation, carried out a gender analysis of their database of 915 executives with performance feedback from over 6,000 observers.⁶ Women comprised 30% of both samples. While the overall pattern of relative strengths and weaknesses in leadership and

managerial competencies was the same for men and women, the study showed that women outperformed men in 25 out of 31 of the specific skill areas. Importantly, these include skill areas often perceived as directly linked to the “bottom line,” such as maintaining high productivity, producing high quality work, meeting project deadlines and commitments, and generating new ideas. The researchers conclude that as leaders and managers, “women and men share the same strengths and weaknesses, however, the women in this study are seen as more effective at the positive end of the scale and not as weak at the other end.”

Similar, but more narrow, gender differences were found by Barry Posner and James Kouzes in a review of a much larger sample of 5,300 leaders and 31,000 observers, with women as 30% of the sample.⁷ They found that female leaders were rated higher than men in two leadership competency areas. The first, which conforms to gender stereotypes, is what they call “encouraging the heart” — giving feedback and recognizing, rewarding, and motivating individuals and teams. The second competency where women excelled, “modeling the way,” is more challenging of conventional wisdom. It includes the behaviors of acting with integrity, demonstrating competence, organizing and moving projects forward, meeting commit-

ments and milestones, and persevering through problems.

A third example is an interesting study by Robert Kabacoff that focused exclusively on men and women in senior leadership positions — Senior Vice President and CEO.⁸ He analyzed 360° performance assessment of leadership behaviors for a sample of 86 men and 86 women. The male and female senior executives were matched on the type of industry, years of management experience, and organizational level. While men and women were ranked the same on many behaviors, some important gender differences emerged.

The specific skills and competencies identified as important for effective leadership in performance evaluations and leadership training often do not mirror the assumptions and images people hold of effective leaders.

Many of these were similar to those documented in the Posner and Kouzes study. Direct reports described female executives as operating with higher energy and intensity and having greater capacity to keep others involved. They also saw women as setting higher expectations for performance than male executives. Supervisors and peers ranked women higher than men on setting deadlines, monitoring progress, and following through to ensure the completion of tasks. Supervisors also described women as more assertive in their pursuit of goals and in pushing for results. In turn, supervisors described men as focusing more on minimizing risks and learning from past experience. Men

were also perceived by all groups to exhibit more emotional restraint.

What can we learn from this research? These data challenge the common assumption that women have not yet garnered the skills to be effective leaders. Quite to the contrary, when assessed on specific skills that both organizations and management consultants consider important for effective leadership in today's world, women are perceived to do as well as men or even outperform them. Moreover, they excel not only in "people" and interpersonal skills commonly associated with feminine styles of management and increasingly recognized as important for leadership success in today's organizations,⁹ but also in skills that traditionally have been perceived as directly linked to getting "bottom line" results and associated with masculine norms of leadership.

So herein lies the paradox of success. While women are succeeding in applying a broad range of leadership skills to work and are achieving positive results, they are having considerably less success in being promoted to top leadership positions.

Understanding the paradox. How can we understand this paradox? One useful approach is to examine the gender norms at play in organizations.

First, it is important to recognize that the concept of leadership remains a masculine notion, defined by subtle and deeply rooted cultural norms and values in organizations. The specific skills and competencies identified as important for effective leadership in performance evaluations and leadership training often do not mirror the assumptions and images people hold of effective leaders. While companies might say they want leaders who are stewards, team builders, or good alliance partners, the widely held, yet often unrecognized, cultural assumption

persists that good leaders are "heroic," autonomous, disciplined, emotionally restrained, command-and-control figures.¹⁰ When leaders are selected for the top positions, it is often these more informal, subtle, and masculine assumptions that come into play and influence the selection decisions. This is illustrated by a study carried out by Cochran of 2,800 high-potential senior human resources managers. She found that while supervisors rated women somewhat higher than men on their current leadership and managerial competencies, they rated men significantly higher with respect to their perceived potential as leaders in the long term.¹¹

Findings of an in-depth leadership survey we carried out at the Center for Gender in Organizations in a global financial services firm illustrate this disconnect between the implicit assumptions people hold about effective leadership and the explicit competencies that are identified for leaders in an organization. Even though these high potential men and women assessed themselves equally on the majority of leadership competencies defined by the organization, many more women (51%) than men (34%) reported that they did not identify with current leaders or with the image of leaders in the firm. Significantly, more women than men also questioned whether the firm was able to accurately judge their capabilities to perform in a leadership role. The survey data also challenged a widely held, and gendered, belief in the organization that women were simply not interested in taking on leadership roles. The impact of this belief was that women were often passed over in selections for leadership positions. Yet, the survey responses showed that women were just as likely as men to accept a leadership role if offered.

Second, gender norms also shape which leadership skills are most val-

ued and recognized in organizations. Even though many of the critical changes organizations are undertaking today — flatter structures, self-managed teams, greater workforce diversity, and strategic partnerships and alliances — require strong relational and interpersonal leadership skills, these have yet to be valued explicitly as corner office skills. Hence, when women excel in these leadership skills, they are often perceived as doing something desirable, but not essential, for achieving positive business results. Moreover, often these skills are construed as something women naturally do and are, thus, not seen as skills at all.¹² We found this as well in the financial services firm mentioned above. A quarter of the women reported that they felt the skills they were good at would not be valued in a leadership role within the firm.

Finally, we need to recognize that many critical leadership skills are perceived through the lens of gender stereotypes and are valued differently when they are enacted by men or women. For example, Kabacoff's study of senior executives revealed significant gender differences in the extent to which supervisors, who are usually key players in promotion decisions, see specific skills as contributing to overall leadership effectiveness. Most striking was the observation that supervisors (of which 81% were male) saw the behaviors of focusing on results, taking charge and directing others, striving for high levels of achievement, and seeking out positions of influence as positively related to leadership effectiveness for men. Yet, they saw these same skills as negatively related to overall leadership effectiveness when enacted by women. This differential valuing between men and women of specific skills as contributing to assessments of leadership potential can shut women out of the corner offices. It also raises the stakes

and the risks for women who take up leadership roles. Paradoxically, when women competently demonstrate the leadership behaviors that are traditionally associated with "bottom-line results" and conform most closely to masculine norms of leadership, they are often perceived as less rather than as more effective as leaders.

Strategies for success. How do women who aspire to be leaders challenge this paradox? First, it is important for women to realize that it takes more than competence and well-honed skills to make it into the top positions. Leadership selection decisions are not based on objective criteria alone. Women need to invest in building relationships with influential advocates who can sponsor them for positions of leadership and make their leadership competencies visible and explicit to others. Once in a leadership position, they also need a constellation of allies who will continue to support them and advertise and reaffirm their leadership contributions publicly.

Second, to develop their careers and navigate effectively in their organizations, women need to arm themselves with an understanding of how gender norms shape perceptions and assumptions of leadership and effectiveness in organizations. This allows women to anticipate challenges emerging from gender norms and circumvent them. It also helps women to interpret the challenges they experience as derived from gendered assumptions within the organization rather than from personal inadequacies. With this perspective, women can work with the challenges from a position of strength and act more strategically. For a simple example, we draw again on the financial services firm we studied. Here it was assumed that women with families would be significantly more reluctant than men to relocate to take on a leadership role. Hence, they often were

not asked. Armed with this knowledge, women aspiring to leadership roles could challenge this gender stereotype and be very explicit about their willingness to relocate.

Third, understanding how gender norms can mask the value and visibility of women's leadership skills can help women to claim their value and make their leadership skills and contributions more visible.¹³ We describe seven strategies for claiming value for leadership skills in the text box on the back page.

And, finally, women need to work to challenge and interrupt these gender assumptions, not in ways that will set them at odds with their staff, peers, and bosses, but in ways that are thoughtful, deliberate, and constructive.¹⁴ This is not simply self-serving; it can benefit the organization as well. Women pushing back constructively on organizational norms and assumptions will help organizations to bring greater diversity to their leadership pools, cultivate and retain more leadership talent, and give greater recognition and support to leadership competencies that are critical for their success but remain undervalued. At the same time that this helps the organization be more effective, it also creates more opportunities for women to advance into leadership positions.

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Reclaiming Your Leadership Value

Women's leadership skills can be invisible for many reasons. The challenge is to claim value for those skills. Claiming that value involves negotiation, not in the traditional sense of making deals — although that might be a possibility — but rather in changing perceptions about you and your skills and accomplishments. Here are seven strategies that have been used effectively by other women:

Recognize your value. Sometimes we are our own worst enemy. We fail to see how we get in our own way, how we diminish our contributions or jump in to help other people and let them claim all the credit. Stop and look at your assets—what do you bring that others cannot.

Make your value visible. What we contribute to our organizations is not always obvious—performance does not generally speak for itself. For people to appreciate your contributions, you need to make them visible—to show clearly how your efforts made a difference.

Withdraw your value. Sometimes your contribution increases in value when you withdraw it. Such a move can carry some risks so it is usually best to talk through with people the consequences of withdrawing from a project, not actually doing so.

Enlist support to bolster your value. Touting one's value directly may be difficult. Allies can help by attesting to your value and contributions.

"Turn" statements that diminish your value. In negotiations, particularly when one's 'fit' for a leadership job is at stake, there may be a natural tendency to downplay or minimize the value you are claiming, because it does not fit the norm for a potential incumbent. Be prepared to name this tendency when that is happening, correct it with another version of your skills and talents or divert it to focus on a fresh discussion of what skills and experience are best for the job.

Build your value into your job. Sometimes women's leadership skills are seen as a 'free commodity' that goes under the name of helping or being a team player. That value will be invisible unless you negotiate it as part of your job that gets evaluated in the same way as other responsibilities.

Claiming your value is a strategic campaign. Change never comes over night. Having your leadership skills recognized is a slow process built from individual steps. Each opportunity to claim value contributes to changing perceptions of your leadership skills and suitability for significant leadership jobs.

Adapted from Deborah M. Kolb and Judith Williams, The Shadow Negotiation: How Women Can Master the Hidden Agendas that Determine Bargaining Success (Simon and Schuster, 2000)

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