

Gender Stereotyping A Key Barrier

November 19 2009 - A study published in the December 2009 issue of the *Psychology of Women Quarterly* shows that management stereotypes are likely to evolve as more women assume leadership roles in the workforce.

Despite improvements in female participation at management levels, women still fill less than 2% of CEO leadership positions in the Fortune 500. It is not surprising to find, therefore, that leaders continue to be thought of as men with the management levels in most industries considered to be 'male-typed'. But in a few industries women have moved into management positions. These industries have become more 'gender-neutral' and there are indications that stereotypes of leaders as men may be changing.

The study, *The Evolving Manager Stereotype: The Effects of Industry Gender Typing on Performance Expectations for Leaders and Their Teams* by Susan F. Cabrera, Stephen J. Sauer and Melissa C. Thomas-Hunt of the Universities of Cornell, Clarkson and Virginia respectively, investigates how male and female leaders and their teams are evaluated differently according to the gender-typing of the industry in which they work.

The researchers' findings were that people have higher expectations for the performance of teams when the leader's gender is consistent with the gender typing of the industry in which the team works. However, expectations for performance of leaders' own performance were not impacted by their consistency with industry gender typing. According to Susan F. Cabrera:

"This research demonstrates the power of stereotypes concerning what kinds of people should lead organizations in what kinds of industries. In addition, it suggests that, as more women move into certain sectors of our economy, stereotypes may be evolving in ways that create a more level playing field for women who aspire to leadership positions."

Gender Stereotyping

A survey published in 2007 found that gender stereotyping was a key barrier to the advancement of women in corporate leadership, leaving women leaders with limited and conflicting options.

The Double-Bind Dilemma for Women in Leadership: Damned if You Do, Doomed if You Don't was the third in a series of reports examining the effects of gender stereotyping in the workplace by Catalyst, a non-profit organization working to advance opportunities for women and business. The study surveyed men and women business leaders in the US and Europe. Of 1231 participants, 296 were US senior managers and corporate leaders (168 women and 128 men) and 935 were European managers and senior managers (282 women and 653 men). The second part of the study provided qualitative analysis of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 13 women leaders in a large US corporation.

The report argued that gender stereotyping results in organizations routinely underestimating and underutilizing women's leadership talent. The 2006 Catalyst Census shows that while women

make up over 50 per cent of management, professional and related occupations, only 15.6 per cent of Fortune 500 corporate officers and 14.6 per cent of Fortune 500 board directors were women.

Ilene H. Lang, Catalyst president said:

"When companies fail to acknowledge and address the impact of gender stereotypic bias, they lose out on top female talent. Ultimately, it's not women's leadership styles that need to change. Only when organizations take action to address the impact of gender stereotyping will they be able to capitalize on the 'full deck' of talent."

The report highlighted numerous previous studies demonstrating similar leadership styles in men and women. However, earlier research by Catalyst found that women business leaders faced persistent gender stereotyping frequently confronting them with double-bind "no-win" dilemmas not experienced by men. The current study found that men are still perceived as "default leaders" while women are considered "atypical leaders" and as violating accepted norms, irrespective of their leadership style.

The survey identified three common dilemmas currently experienced by women business leaders, supported by comments from participants:

1. **Extreme perceptions.** Women business leaders are perceived as "never just right". Those who act in a manner consistent with gender stereotypes are considered too soft, those who go against them are considered too tough.

"My observations show senior women to be at either end of the spectrum, drivers that do it themselves (even though they might have given it to someone). This type tends to give little recognition and is a perfectionist. The others are very effective delegators, giving lots of recognition and building loyal teams, but can be perceived as 'not tough enough'" (US man, age 35-44, level not specified).

2. **High competence threshold/lower rewards.** Women leaders face higher standards than their male counterparts and receive less reward. Often they must work doubly hard to achieve the same level of recognition for the same level of work and "prove" they can lead.

"Men and women are seen differently, and the difference in my experience and observation is that we (women) need to show it more times before they believe it. With a woman, they will want to see the behaviour repeated more frequently before they will say that this is really part of the women (sic) and her capabilities" (European woman, high-potential manager).

3. **Competent but disliked.** Women exhibiting traditional leadership skills such as assertiveness tend to be seen as competent but not personable or well-liked. Those who adopt a more stereotypically feminine style are liked but not seen as having valued leadership skills.

"...it may just be that people are more sensitive to how women behave in that regard. There does seem to be a little more tolerance for harsh behavior from men rather than women. Women are quicker to get labeled, and with men, it's easier to brush it off..." (High-potential woman, US-based manager).

"I have experienced in the past that women can be distrusted in leadership roles, especially when they use a dominant style of communication. On the contrary, if they use a collaborative style serving their organization and empowering people, they get more recognition and sincere appreciation from their male equals" (Spanish man, age 31-35, middle management).

The report suggested that organizations need to develop strategies to remove the pervasive and damaging impact of gender stereotyping from the work environment to take advantage of the expanding pool of female leadership talent.

Ilene H. Lang explained:

"While women may address double-bind dilemmas with individual strategies this is clearly about organizations shifting their norms and culture to meet marketplace demands."

The report argues that education about how stereotyping works and holding individuals accountable can decrease the negative impact of gender bias. Actions that organizations can take include:

- Providing all employees with tools and resources to increase awareness of women leaders' skills and the effects of stereotypic perceptions.
- Assessing the work environment to identify ways in which women are at risk of stereotypic bias.
- Creating and implementing innovative work practices that target stereotypic bias; particularly effective when specific areas of risk, such as performance management procedures, are addressed.

The report suggested ways in which organizations can apply this knowledge:

- Managerial training and diversity education - educating managers and employees about the origin and consequences of bias, inconsistencies between values and actual behavior, and causes and effects of gender inequality in the workplace.
- Performance and evaluation management - employing objective and unambiguous evaluation criteria