THE GENDER GAP IN LEADERSHIP – ARE WOMEN UP FOR IT?

"I don't think that in my lifetime there will be a woman Prime Minister."

- Margaret Thatcher (1971), Prime Minister of Great Britain from 1979 – 1990.

This paper reviews contemporary research and explores some fundamental questions about gender and leadership. It looks at some prohibiting factors for women, namely stereotyping, unconscious bias, and the isolation of senior women, and asks "Are women really up to the challenge of leadership amidst all these obstacles?" The answer is a resounding – yes!

What is stereotyping and unconscious bias?

The nature of discrimination today is dramatically different from the pernicious, overt discrimination that existed decades ago, giving rise to the introduction of equal opportunity and affirmative action legislation back in the 1980s. These days, thanks to a large body of social science and more recently, neuroscience research, we are more aware of how unconscious biases affect judgement and behaviour and entrench stereotypes in the workplace.

Unconscious bias is a natural human response to the overwhelming amount of information our brains must cope with. From a biological perspective, our brain is a filtering mechanism. As it is impossible to process every bit of information bombarding us at every moment, our brain relies on taking cognitive shortcuts. That is, we make sense of the world by filtering out non-essential information and taking short-cuts in our thinking. When this thinking is about people or individuals our short-cuts often result in stereotyping.

When we categorise someone as male or female we perceive them through the filter of cultural beliefs and norms. This is usually unconscious and unintended but it is prejudicial nonetheless. Perhaps this explains why women continue to be disadvantaged when applying for top management and executive jobs, often thought to require characteristics such as ambition, aggressiveness and emotional toughness, which are stereotypical male qualities.

The presence of unconscious and unintended biases may be more pervasive than the old, intentional forms of discrimination that were much more obvious. It may explain, at least in part, why many companies have tried multiple initiatives to increase the number of women in their senior ranks or on Boards, spending millions on practices but achieving limited success.

Stereotyping in Employment

Audrey Lee (2005) describes stereotyping as likely to occur in the work context when a member of a previously omitted group assumes a job considered non-traditional for that group.

A meta-analysis of the employment prospects of fictitious job applicants shows that overall, men are rated more favourably than identically experienced women for "male" jobs. In one study (Steinprice et al, 2007 reported in Fine, C., 2010) over 100 university psychologists were asked to rate the CVs of Dr. Karen Miller or Dr. Brian Miller, fictitious applicants for an academic tenure-track job. The CVs were identical, apart from the name. Yet, strangely, the male Dr. Miller was perceived (by both male and female reviewers) to have better research, teaching and service experience than the female Dr. Miller. Overall, about three quarters of the psychologists thought Dr. Brian was hireable, while under half had the same confidence in Dr. Karen.

Another study by Shelley Correll (Correll et al, 2007) found that when applicants were evaluated for a job, the assessors viewed what it takes to be successful differently depending on whether the applicant was male or female. For instance, a criterion of toughness was considered more important than social skills when they evaluated male applicants, and vice versa for female applicants. They also found that stereotyping may be particularly strong against mothers. In a study of applications for a position as head of a marketing department applicants who identified themselves as mothers were rated about 10 percent less competent, 15 percent less committed to the workplace, and worthy of $11,000 less salary than women applicants who were non-mothers. Yet parenthood served as no disadvantage at all to men.

The Stereotype Threat and its effect

A stereotype threat is the threat of being judged or treated poorly in settings where a negative stereotype about your group applies. Take, for example, the stereotypical belief that women are inferior to men in maths ability. A study by Catherine Good (Good et al, 2008) found that if women and men were asked to complete a maths test on the understanding that it would measure their maths ability, women performed more poorly than men. However when women and men were told prior to completing the test that despite significant testing, no gender differences were found in the results of these tests, women actually outperformed men on the maths test. In other words, the way a test is presented significantly changed the outcome – women's ability was suppressed when the test was presented in a way that played to the gender bias, but when the same test was presented to women as being equally hard for both sexes, it seemed to unleash their potential!

Identifying with a negative stereotype can lower performance expectations, trigger performance anxiety and other negative emotions (Cadinu et al, 2003). Also, the more we

suppress that negative thought rather than deal with it, the worse the performance (Logel, C. et al, 2008).

What is happening from a neuroscience perspective? A threatening situation will stimulate the release of the hormone epinephrine. Blood flow increases to the heart and to the limbic system in the brain, which spurs the fight or flight response. As all resources are deployed to the limbic system to respond to the threat, the ability of the brain to simultaneously tap into the logical, rational and cognitive part of the brain (the pre-frontal cortex) is compromised. Similarly, suppressing unwanted thoughts and anxieties is distracting, places an extra load on the working memory, and uses up mental resources that could be better used to remain focused on a task. Anyone who has been in a state of fear would recognise that you can't be both fearful and rational at the same time. Similarly, you can't be both distracted and focused.

Apart from disrupting our rational thought processes and confusing our focus, a stereotype threat can also stimulate a failure-prevention mindset. This means we focus on averting risk and preventing failure, rather than seeking success through being bold or creative. Extreme risk aversion is clearly detrimental to a rising career.

The Importance of Role Models

The lack of role models at the top is also a factor that creates a barrier to women reaching the top, and, to remain with maths as our example, research shows that the presence of a woman who excels in maths serves to alleviate that particular stereotype threat (Blanton et al, 2000).

However, the problem of few female role models at the top is far deeper than not being good at maths. As women become increasingly outnumbered by men they will progressively lose one very effective protection against stereotyping – safety in numbers, with other women as role models to aspire to. They lose their sense of belonging.

So can women truly succeed in male-dominated environments given the obstacles of stereotyping, unconscious bias, and their minority status at the top?

Yes, Women *are* Up for It

In a 2011 study into leadership competencies the researchers, Zenger and Folkman (Harvard Business Review Blog Network, 15 March, 2012.), asked people to score more than 7,000 'leaders' on sixteen leadership competencies. The respondents were people working with, for, or senior to, the identified 'leaders'. The imbalance between men and women grew with the seniority level, so that at the most senior level only 22% of the leaders being scored were women.

However, women were rated higher than the men for every competency except one, and for twelve of the sixteen they scored significantly higher. Interestingly, the higher the level (of the leaders), the wider that gap grows.

The stereotypically female 'nurturing' competencies such as building relationships, promoting and engaging in self-development or professional development, and exhibiting integrity, unsurprisingly, were scored more highly by the women then the men, so supporting the stereotype. But in another interesting outcome, the women also scored higher in two stereotypically male traits – 'taking initiative and driving for results'.

In 2010 Accenture surveyed over 500 senior executives from medium to large companies around the world. This survey indicated that resilience was considered extremely important when considering which staff members to retain. More importantly for this discussion, these leaders viewed women as being slightly more resilient then men, indicating a likelihood of choosing or retaining a female over a male if all other things were equal.

Conclusions

There are varied and complex factors at play when it comes to why women still struggle to make it to the top of organisations. This paper does not intend to simplify a complex situation, but intends to stimulate discussion on some of these factors in an attempt to shed some light on the problem.

Many women have impressive leadership skills. However, women still need to work harder than men to prove themselves if working in male-dominated domains of the business world.

Progress will be made when organisations move beyond merely 'accommodating' diversity in teams, to assimilating diverse thinking in everything they and their people do. This requires openness in leaders to continually confront their own biases, to pull the organisation's assumptions apart and test them, and to actively seek out different views.

Alfred Sloan, President, Chairman and CEO of General Motors in the 1950's once famously quipped: *"If we are all in agreement on the decision - then I propose we postpone further discussion of this matter until our next meeting to give ourselves time to develop disagreement and perhaps gain some understanding of what the decision is all about".*

With pervasive stereotypes, unconscious bias and isolation at the top, the mindset a woman brings to a senior role is also one of the factors that will be critical to her success – and overcoming women's own stereotypes and biases as well as those of her male counterparts will have to be part of the solution. Margaret Thatcher may have been feeling a little pessimistic in the early 1970s, but she was determined and by 1979 she was elected the first female head of state in Europe.

Organisations that understand why 100 psychologists can read totally identical CVs for an academic position, but more often then not choose the male over the female, and that recognise and build on the talent their women leaders possess, will reap the benefits over their competitors in the on-going war for talent.

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