A Battle of Gender Leadership in the Workplace

Internship Research Paper

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Many ask if certain jobs are gender-limited or gender-restricted. While the answer is "not necessarily," society may say otherwise. Don't believe me? What if I told you to draw a picture of a firefighter? What would your image look like? Maybe a tall, strong man holding an ax or fire hose. Now, draw a picture of a teacher. Does your drawing depict a woman with long hair and wearing a dress? In the United States, society tends to assign specific attributes, images, colors, and even occupations to males and females, which can sometimes communicate and promote negative gender stereotypes. Why do we associate some jobs with gender? The answer is not straightforward and is rooted in history and biology. Biologically speaking, it is a fact that males have more testosterone than women, typically making them stronger. Anthropologists have shown that while women were undoubtedly essential to the propagation of the species, the physical strength of men was a considerable advantage in survival. That being said, the scientific and historical facts of homo sapiens who began walking the Earth 300,000 years ago matter less in today's modern world. Professions have become interchangeable between men and women and are not associated solely with physical requirements.

Despite the fact that success in a career today is usually associated with education and personality traits, men still dominate the upper echelons of many fields. In 2013, only 14.6% of executive officer positions in the Fortune 500 companies in the United States were held by women, although women make up half of the workforce (Walker & Aritz 453). Even more shocking is that all 45 U.S. presidents – the leader of the country – have been males. Not a single female has held that office. Males outnumber females in leadership roles in the workplace because society tends to stereotype females as quiet and submissive communicators, while males are seen as more apt to dominate conversations. Thus – and in order for a woman to prove herself worthy of a leadership position – she must go against stereotypes and assert herself. At a

more holistic level, and in order to create an equilibrium among gender in the workplace, society needs to acknowledge and then address the existing stereotypes, and then work toward reversing the stereotypes by educating younger generations.

Prior to the Women's Rights movements, women had limited freedom and had to gain permission from a husband, father, or brother for most activities. For example, women were restricted from voting, owning land, having a credit card, and many other things one might today consider "basic" rights. Now 50 plus years later, these restrictions have been lifted and progress has slowly been made. For example, "since the 1980s women have increasingly entered sales jobs in traditionally male dominated fields – 20 per cent of the U.S. industrial salesforce is now female" (Lane 122). Nowhere near equality, but the statistics show improvements and that steps have been taken in the right direction. Further, "Women's participation in the U.S. labor force has increased from 33% in 1950 to 59.2% in 2012" (Paustian-Underdahl 1131). We have come a long way by increasing the number of women in the workplace as well as opening education opportunities for women – but more battles lay ahead to ensure there is 100% gender equality. Now that more women have gained the confidence to step out of the traditional "stay-at-home role" and join the workforce, the next battle is to encourage women to go beyond the entry-level and stereotypical occupations and reach for the tops ranks in their chosen career paths.

Toward that end – but despite the increasing number of women in the workforce – there is no correlating rise of women in leadership positions in the workplace. "Women constitute 4% of the five highest earning officers in Fortune 500 companies and 0.4% of the CEOs; 13% of senators, 14% of congressional representatives, and 10% of state governors; and 2% of military officers at the level of brigadier general and rear admiral or higher" (Eagly 573). There should be no excuse of why these numbers are not higher, yet the numbers cannot hide the facts. Yes,

certain skills/education are needed to be successful in some of these roles, but both males and females should have the chance to acquire and then exhibit those skills.

One of the most important skills in any and every workplace is communication. Whether stereotypical or biological-based, males and females have different preferred modes of communication. Studies show that "women are more inclined to use e-mails and social media as methods of communication with their colleagues while men prefer face-to-face and phone calls" (Tench 238). Specifically, 40.4% of female practitioners preferred method of communication was e-mail, while only 34.5% of male practitioners preferred this method. When it came to social media, 28% of females and only 25.4% of males preferred the use of social media for work-related issues. Concerning face-to-face communications, while 27.7% of males preferred that mode of communication, only 20.8% of females preferred it (Tench 238). And while in recent years e-mail has risen in popularity in the workplace, it has been found that males prefer more immediate feedback and responses to emails compared to women, who appear to have more patience while waiting for feedback or a response. Women are ahead of the game as communication via e-mail has become the staple of most companies.

Non-verbal communication is also an area in which women do much better than their male counterparts. "Females of all ages have been found to be more accurate than males of similar ages at perceiving facial expressions of emotion" (Byron 719). Further, female managers – because of their ability to more accurately perceive non-verbal and facial expressions than male managers – received higher ratings of performance from their supervisors and higher ratings of satisfaction from their subordinates" (Byron 728). As various means of communication continue to evolve with changes in technology as well as the current forced remote working environment due to COVID, one might expect women's innate abilities at non-verbal

communication to increase their ability to lead over men. Such changes in technology and the physical work environment may favor women in leadership roles in the future.

Communications in the workplace can further be broken down to how – and for what purpose – males and females use communication. “Most studies found that men talk more than women in formal situations” (Walker 455). Women tend to talk less in formal situations, but “use communication to develop relationships.” In essence, “men use communication to establish dominance” (Tench 234). Another difference between men and women in the workplace is women tend to talk in a more interactive way than men. Women frequently ask questions when in a conversation in an attempt to be more interactive, while men ask less questions, thus stifling interaction. “While women’s voices combine and overlap, men take turns to hold court. Male friends prefer a one-at-a-time pattern of talking, with one speaker holding the floor for an extended period at any one time; overlapping speech is avoided and is viewed as contentious for seeking the floor” (Walker 454). The end result is males in the workplace are more apt to dominate conversations, possibly causing females to feel intimated and overpowered, and thus being quieter and more submissive. Further, this tendency among men to dominate relationships and conversations can reduce their ability to hear and understand different points of view – which could improve performance in the workplace.

Beyond the difference in communication styles of men and women leaders in the workforce, there is also the matter of everyone in the workplace having a different perception of qualities that deem a leader successful. Interestingly, while most agree on the qualities and characteristics of a successful male leader in the workplace, there is less agreement on what makes a female leader successful. Thus, it would appear there are differing metrics to measure a successful leader – one for males, and one for females. That hardly seems impartial, let alone

fair. While “honesty, intelligence and decisiveness are considered ‘absolutely essential’ leadership qualities by at least eight-in-ten adults” (Parker 16), role congruity theory (RCT) “builds upon social role theory by considering the congruity between gender roles and leadership roles and proposing that people tend to have dissimilar beliefs about the characteristics of leaders and women and similar beliefs about the characteristics of leaders and men” (Paustian-Underdahl 1130). This predisposition to judge men and women differently is due to that fact that gender stereotypes can be separated into two categories: communal and agentic characteristics. “Communal characteristics reflect a concern for others, include traits such as being kind and nurturing, and are more typically assigned to women; agentic characteristics reflect a concern for controlling and mastering one’s environment, include traits such as being aggressive and dominant, and are more typically assigned to men” (Byron 718). Further, RCT holds that “women in leader roles who fail to manifest communal characteristics, such as being interpersonally sensitive and caring, are evaluated less favorably than male leaders in general than females in leader roles who do display communal characteristics.” Thus – and according to RCT theory – “male leaders are not subject to the same expectations as female leaders, and do not receive negative evaluations for failing to exhibit communal characteristics” (Byron 718).

Despite significant differences in individuals’ perceptions of what makes a good leader, studies and statistics reveal that both genders equally share qualities of a successful leader. The individuals matters more than the gender. “Large majorities say that when it comes to intelligence and innovation, men and women display those qualities equally. And solid majorities see no gender differences in ambition, honesty and decisiveness” (Parker 17). Further, “more than eight-in-ten adults (86%) say intelligence is equally descriptive of men and women,” while “about six-in-ten (62%) say men and women are equally decisive” (Parker 18). So contrary to

perceptions, and even though men and women are innately different, both have the necessary intelligence, decisiveness, honesty, and ability to innovate in order to become successful leaders. That being the case, there is no reason why women should occupy a distinct minority in the number of leadership positions in the workplace.

There are a multitude of theories and reasons as to why women hold less leadership roles than men in the United States. In *Women and Leadership*, Parker et al contend that the top three reasons people use to explain why more women are not in executive/leadership positions are 1) women are held to higher standards than men, 2) many businesses aren't ready to hire women for top executive positions, and 3) family responsibilities don't leave time for running a major corporation (Parker 31). In *Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice Toward Female Leaders*, Eagly and Karau state that the "glass ceiling" is "a barrier of prejudice and discrimination that excludes women from higher level leadership positions," and that "the popularity of the glass ceiling concept may stem from the rarity of women in major leadership posts, despite the presence of equality or near equality of the sexes on many other indicators" (Eagly 573).

As to differing metrics used by individuals when "measuring" leadership qualities of men and women leaders, Parker et al delineate that "about four-in-ten Americans point to a double standard for women seeking to climb to the highest levels of either politics or business, where they have to do more than their male counterparts to prove themselves" (Parker 5). They also write that about "half of women (52%) say a major reason more women are not in top leadership positions in business is that women are held to higher standards and have to do more to prove themselves; one-third of men share this view" (Parker 34). Byron makes the point that experimental and applied research suggests that "women are judged using harsher standards than

are men, particularly when performing stereotypically masculine behaviors or when in a stereotypically masculine role such as a managerial position" (Byron 718).

In *You've Come a Long Way…*, Brescoll points to one study which "demonstrated that people were less likely to vote for a female leader who behaved in a dominant manner compared to a male leader behaving the same way, and a female leader who was not presented as dominant" (Brescoll 152). She explains that "when people encounter a dominant, agentic woman in a powerful role, they may feel a range of negative moral emotions toward her (i.e., contempt, disdain, disgust, and revulsion) because she is seen as someone who threatens the gender status hierarchy" (Brescoll 159). Thus, women are held to higher standards even if they hold the same position as a male counterpart. I believe the "glass ceiling" is a series of excuses and fictions used to explain why women don't occupy more leadership positions in the workplace, when the real reason is simply cultural.

One obvious solution to these cultural and stereotypical thought patterns – which tend judge a woman's value in the workplace as being less than a man's – is for women to continue pushing to fill leadership positions. Tench et al are correct when they state that "women should not be seen through stereotypes nor should their performance and leadership potential be judged according to alleged communication style. If anything, women should be seen as individuals and adaptive to changed circumstances of the industry and thus highly competent to take leadership roles" (Tench 241). Although Lane and Crane point out that "in many respects, the use of stereotypes, whether positive or negative, is fraught with ethical problems, and can be criticized on a number of grounds regarding fairness, equity, justice and rights" (Lane 126), Parker et stipulate that "three-in-ten adults (29%) say having more women in top leadership positions in business and government would do a lot to improve the quality of life for all women. An

additional 41% say having more female leaders would improve all women's lives at least somewhat" (Parker 29), and "having more women in top leadership positions would do a lot to improve the lives of all women" (Parker 30). What all of these studies show is that social scientists examining this issue see only positives to having more women in leadership positions in the workplace. With studies like these, why would anyone not want to consider increasing the number of women in leadership positions?

Another solution is through education – especially among younger generations – and modifying our language. "Stereotypes could be used in training sessions to illustrate and uncover sales professionals' gendered thinking, or perhaps be used to serve as examples of discriminatory decision making" (Lane 129). And because "boys and girls socialize in different ways and … learn to communicate in different ways which are largely conditioned by patriarchy," (Tench 235) then those differences need to be identified and addresses – hopefully at a young age. And beyond changing education as it relates to stereotypes, Liben et al report in *Language at Work* that "it may also be important to modify the language of work to expand the occupational choices that children consider" (Liben 826). Education and enculturation beginning at a young age are key to bringing equilibrium to leadership positions in the workplace. Children will only see stereotypes which are obvious, or when they are identified by others.

The battle for gender equality in the workplace is far from over. It may be impossible to break these gender stereotypes, but the least we can do is work on reducing them. It is vital to eliminate our perception of gender in the workplace and in issues relating to leadership. Although men and women are different biologically and genetically, they are not necessarily different when it comes to personality and traits which make a leader. Gender should not even be a consideration. As Women's' Rights advocate Gloria Steinem once said, "A gender-equal

society would be one where the word ‘gender’ does not exist: where everyone can be themselves.”

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