

Women and Leadership

Your name

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In this class, we have learned a great deal about the various social and cultural barriers that exist with regard to gender in the American workplace. While women have made tremendous strides in most of the professions in the last few decades following the “women’s lib” movement, many female professionals nonetheless complain of a “glass ceiling” that exists at many organizations. For these female professionals, the “glass ceiling” represents their perception of an unspoken rule in the American workplace that women are unfit for leadership positions. No matter how hard a woman works, excels in terms of performance, or exhibits exceptional talent, the top rungs of leadership seem to be closed off permanently. One of the most important things I learned in class is that the “glass ceiling effect” is not the result of a widespread political and business conspiracy to permanently “hold women down,” but that it is rather the result of unconscious gender schemas that we all hold about the proper roles for women. Secondly, there are many social structural barriers in place that hold women back; often, women can be penalized for things such as taking time off to raise a child. Finally, I learned about intersectionality, which describes the special challenges faced by women who also happen to be a member of a racial minority. While women have made tremendous advances in the American workplace in recent history, the battle has not yet been won, and thus it is important to enter the workplace with a strong philosophy of leadership.

While the relative lack of women in leadership positions in the United States may well have to do with the relatively brief time that women have participated in the labor force *en masse*, it is certain that our society and cultural expectations for women are even slower to change, and this impacts women in many negative ways. For instance, Valian (1999) observes that “a set of implicit, or nonconscious, hypotheses about sex differences plays a central role in

shaping men's and women's professional lives." To begin with, it is often seen as "natural" in many organizations that women are hired for "supportive" roles such as customer service and human resources, and that men take the more "aggressive" sales and leadership positions in a corporate structure. When a woman succeeds in obtaining a traditionally "male" position, she often runs the risk of being perceived as "not assertive enough" for the position, or if she does behave in an assertive manner, she is often marginalized and disliked by her fellow co-workers. Similarly, managers have a marked tendency to presume that all women want to have children, and that they will eventually ask for extensive time off for maternity leave, which often holds women back on the professional career track. One of the most frustrating aspects of such systematic discrimination is that, as Valian (1999) notes, it is not conscious, and so it is difficult to fight against it, or file a discrimination complaint, as unconscious biases are often impossible to prove.

In addition to the external, cultural biases women face in many American workplaces, there is also the issue of internalized gender expectations that women enact, and thus reduce their chances for obtaining a leadership position. Women are often socialized as girls to be nurturing, supportive, emotional and passive, all of which are qualities that do not make them competitive in the American workforce. As the American workplace has evolved around the assumption that men will be the primary workers, traditionally "masculine" traits are more highly valued in the office, such as assertiveness, dominance, and risk-taking. However, as Eagly and Carli (2007) observe, "Trends in women's reports of their own assertiveness suggest that shifts in their access to various life roles underlie the observed changes." As women are provided with opportunities to take on roles of leadership and responsibility in the American workforce, they are adopting the requisite personality traits to ensure that they will succeed in these roles. As women learn that

assertiveness, competitiveness, and dominance will help them succeed, they take on these personality characteristics. However, the need to behave in a traditionally “masculine” way in the workplace raises many questions with regards to American cultural expectations.

While both Valian (1999) and Eagly and Carli (2007) argue that personality traits are not biologically determined, but rather instilled into us through socialization and acculturation, it is curious that women are expected to take on traditionally “masculine” traits in order to succeed in the workforce. Indeed, there is an expanding body of literature that suggests that American organizations now look for strong interpersonal skills, the ability to empathize with others, and high “emotional intelligence” in leaders. Arguably, all of these traits are most strongly associated with women and with traditional femininity. However, this cultural shift has been slow to take hold in American organizational culture, and women are often penalized in the workplace for not being assertive or aggressive enough. Women are expected to take on a “masculine” persona in the office, and this raises questions about the low valuation of traditionally “feminine” personality characteristics in the American workplace. Additionally, women who are perceived as being overly aggressive, assertive, or demanding are often given low ratings by their supervisors and co-workers, and are judged as being too “harsh” or “strident” (Lee, 2014). As it seems, women cannot win in the broader organizational culture of the United States. If they behave “like a man,” they are penalized, and if they act “too feminine,” they are also penalized.

While being a woman in today’s workforce can be difficult, and offers a complex cultural road to navigate, the challenges are even greater for women who are also members of racial minority groups (Nanton, 2015). As multiple discussions on intersectionality attest, minority women feel pressure to not only behave in a traditionally “masculine” way in the workplace, but also in a way that is widely perceived as “white.” Again, there is no evidence that there is a

broad political effort to hold racial minorities back in the workplace, but these biases are often unconscious and implicit. Hopefully, in the next generation, we will see the disappearance of these biases against people who are not white, but in the present day, they are still making success difficult for members of minority groups in the American workplace.

As the readings and lectures in this course have demonstrated, achieving success in the American workforce can be extremely tough for women, despite the fact that women have been in the labor force in large numbers for several decades. As the evidence demonstrates, many of the reasons behind the lack of women in top leadership positions can be attributed to unconscious biases that we all have with regards to women's role in society. Thus, it is important to enter the workforce with a strong leadership philosophy that encourages assertive behavior but also acknowledges the high value of traditionally "feminine" traits such as empathy and strong interpersonal ability. As it appears, women have to work twice as hard as a man to achieve the same results, and this creates an atmosphere in which women feel pressured to adopt traditionally "masculine" traits such as assertiveness and aggressiveness. Hopefully, these paradigms will shift in the upcoming decades.

References

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