



# The traps that keep women from reaching the top and how to avoid them

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Received 28 October 2009  
Accepted 9 March 2010

## Abstract

**Purpose** – First, this paper aims to demonstrate that there are specific obstacles to the progression of women to top positions. Second, it aims to give advice to individual women leaders and to organizations how to go about removing such obstacles.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper reviews current research on gender differences in leadership, career progression of women, gender diversity in organizations, and leadership development methods such as 360° evaluations. It also refers to case studies of successful women leaders as evidence.

**Findings** – Women on their way up the corporate ladder get caught in two traps: the assumption that women and men have the same leadership qualities and the belief that they must imitate male leadership behavior in order to succeed. These traps not only prevent women from reaching their full potential but also prevent organizations from maximizing available talent.

**Practical implications** – To avoid these traps, the business community must recognize that women and men have different leadership competencies, use those differences to their advantage, and learn how to effectively manage the variety of perceptions of women as leaders. At the same time, the paper identifies often used, yet ineffective strategies to develop women's careers.

**Originality/value** – The paper questions assumptions about gender diversity in leadership and methods about how to improve gender balance at the top of organizations. It identifies specific and tangible obstacles to women's career progression and offers concrete advice on how to remove those obstacles.

**Keywords** Gender, Leadership, Women, Leaders, Competences

**Paper type** Viewpoint

## Introduction

Qualified women and men currently enter organizations and move up the career ladder in comparable numbers, but most women are still barred from the highest levels of leadership, most notably in Europe (Broughton and Miller, 2009, European Commission, 2008). Hence, the debate continues about how women can best reach the top.

Are leadership qualities gender neutral? Do women and men need to have the same qualities to be successful? A recent article in *Harvard Business Review* suggests that the answer is yes (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2009). When the authors analysed the results of 360° evaluations of 2,816 male and female executives enrolled in executive education courses at INSEAD, they found that women received better ratings than men in nine out of ten dimensions considered important for effective leadership. The exception was “envisioning,” a critical dimension. The authors concluded that if women could rise to

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The author would like to thank Karsten Jonsen, Sowon Kim Crettex, and Avivah Wittenberg-Cox for their help with this article.



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the same level as men in that competency, too, their chances of reaching the top as business leaders would improve significantly.

Perhaps unwittingly, however, the article reinforces the dangers of two traps that prevent women from reaching the highest levels of leadership: the assumption that the success of women and men leaders is based on the same qualities and the belief that imitating male behavior is the key to success. If women are truly to succeed, they must avoid falling into those traps.

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### **The “men and women are alike” trap**

The assumption that men and women have and need to have the same leadership competencies has been reinforced through the use of 360° evaluation tools like INSEAD's, which is well established and examines dimensions that are not unlike those measured by similar, equally well-validated instruments. Such questionnaires are widely used to assess how leaders are perceived by others – a critical piece of information that executives should monitor during their progression to the top.

The problem is that these popular evaluation tools are not, in fact, gender neutral. Of the executives and MBAs who identified and validated the INSEAD dimensions, for example, 253 were men and only 47 were women (Kets de Vries *et al.*, 2004). It is no wonder, therefore, that today's evaluation instruments may be biased toward what men believed to be effective leadership dimensions many years ago[1]. As Carmen Breeveld, a successful executive recruiter from The Netherlands[2], remarked during a 2006 television interview, “I see the masculine tests and assessments as the main hurdle for women to enter top jobs. They are one-sided and geared toward finding typically male qualities. These tests have not evolved for the past 40 years, while the whole economy and the world around us have” (van der Haak, 2006, translation by the author).

That men and women are supposedly alike when it comes to leadership, however, is more myth than reality. Two recent studies, for example, support the view that male-dominated organizations themselves are not gender neutral (O'Neil *et al.*, 2008) and that leadership historically has been defined primarily in masculine terms (Eagly, 2007).

Moreover, a large, in-depth study of 360° results by Management Research Group has demonstrated that women are perceived as focused more on tasks, while men are seen as focused more on strategy (Kabacoff and Peters, 1998; Kabacoff, 1998). It also showed that while women are considered, to be more expressive, and motivating in their leadership style, men are seen as unemotional and objective in manner. Interestingly, in addition to measuring perceived behavior, the MRG study also assessed perceived leadership effectiveness. The results showed that, despite their differences, men and women are generally seen as equally effective leaders at all levels of the organization. Another recent study shows that men and women expect male and female leadership styles to differ (Vinkenburg *et al.*, 2009). When asked specifically, top leaders distinguish between male and female dimensions and recognize that both are important for success at the top (Vanderbroeck, 2009).

So when we look further, it seems that women and men tend to have different leadership qualities. Organizations, on the other hand, seem to have a tendency to measure all leaders based on qualities that apply to leadership in male-dominated organizations.

### **The “do as the boys do” trap**

While recognizing that men and women have different leadership styles is an important step in the right direction, however, it does not necessarily lead to an

appropriate strategy for women's development. And, there lies a second trap: the belief that women must pattern their leadership behavior on the behavior of men.

Historically, it would seem that such a strategy has merit. Many women who have managed to break through the glass ceiling have done so by adopting male behavior – figuring, one might suppose, that since men were the ones who had the power, then doing as they do must be a good idea. That view is supported by the results of another Management Research Group study (Peters and Kabacoff, 2002; Kabacoff, 2000), which found that the differences between men, and women, diminished the higher up the organization one went. Unlike their counterparts in middle management, women leaders who broke through the glass ceiling were seen both as strategic and as willing to take risks as men. Another study based on 360° data aptly refers to “male-defined strengths that become the currency of promotion” (Myatt, 2007).

Further research shows that the issue is not so simple, however. Women are, in fact, in a double bind (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Since they are expected to be feminine, women who display too much “male” behavior (such as toughness, decisiveness, and assertiveness) are not well received by their peers at the top (see Broughton and Miller, 2009 and Vanderbroeck, 2009). Yet women who display too little of that behavior are perceived as not suited for the top job. In the words of one of my coaching clients: “You feel invisible boundaries on what is too ‘feminine’ and what is too ‘bitchy’. It’s a dance one is aware of all the time. They come to you in clear vibes if you are any good as a manager”.

What is more, “doing as the boys do” does not work in the long term. For instance, one could argue that Hillary Clinton, who repeatedly emphasized her ability to be commander in chief during the 2008 US presidential election, lost not because she was too much of a woman, but because she was desperately trying to be too much of a man. Perhaps learning from her mistake, Clinton apparently has since adopted a different style, and she is now recognized as an effective leader of the State Department (*The Economist*, 2009).

### **The pitfalls of perception**

Despite all good intentions, organizations in their talent management have unwittingly built in obstacles to women's progression to the top. Take for example 360° evaluations. Undergoing 360° evaluations at regular intervals in executives' careers is helpful. And if women are to reach the top, both they and the organizations they work for must take the results of those assessments seriously. Nevertheless, those evaluations are not perfect. A good 360° report alone will not guarantee promotion, for example, since it is only one of several determining factors. Promotions also depend on actual results, ambition, and windows of opportunity. Since 360° evaluations reflect only a perception of reality – not necessarily reality itself – leaders whose extensive expertise goes unrecognized for some reason might be better off improving how they are perceived rather than adding to their skill set.

One must also take into account which benchmarks are used by the respondents to 360° evaluations. Are women rated on their behavior as leaders or as female leaders (Eagly and Carli, 2007)? Stereotypes about men's and women's behavior still exist (Vinkenburg *et al.*, 2009, Prime *et al.*, 2008), and they continue to play a role when rating women in 360° feedback processes (Peters and Kabacoff, 2002).

Furthermore, perception, unless correctly interpreted, can hinder career progression. A 360° evaluation contains a great deal of hidden information that is worth uncovering, especially for women trying to get ahead in a male-dominated

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environment. Since assessments can be influenced by many factors – such as bias, recent events, the frequency of interaction with the respondents, and the business and organizational context – women would be well advised to consult a qualified internal or external 360° feedback coach to get the full picture.

Finally, it is important to be sure that the real obstacles to women aiming for the top have been identified. Could it be, for example, that women's tendency to under-communicate their performance results is a greater impediment to success than any perception of their leadership competencies (see Babcock and Laschever, 2003)?

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### **The message for women: leverage your differences**

If women and men differ in their leadership styles yet can become equally effective leaders, how can women best travel up the corporate ladder? The key to success seems to lie in leveraging the differences between men and women leaders rather than in seeking to highlight the similarities between them. Women must find and develop their own style in order to progress. They need to turn being different into a positive contribution that adds value to the business.

Rear Admiral Margaret Klein, who broke through the glass ceiling in the US Navy, exemplifies the value of that strategy. She is one of the most high-ranking officers in the US military and one of the few women to attain such rank in an organization that for centuries has been dominated by men. Moreover, unlike many senior women in the armed forces, she has not built her career serving in support functions: She led Navy personnel during combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Perhaps most important, however, is that she achieved her success by adopting a distinctly feminine leadership style.

In a recent online interview (Tyson, 2009), Klein outlined her views about the differences between male and female leaders. She believes that women and men have discrete leadership styles and that neither one carries either an advantage or a disadvantage. They both balance out in the end. Klein has been told that she has a maternal style of leadership – a label that she thinks not many men would appreciate, but which she certainly does. She says she is both demanding and nurturing because “you want the people you lead to do well”. To help male subordinates get used to a female leader, she tells them, “think of me as your mother in uniform”.

Because they constitute a minority, women at the top or on their way up have few role models to follow. A woman leader needs to determine what tools and resources she needs to excel – and then go to her superiors and ask for them.

Even so, however, it is important to recognize that most individuals do not possess a complete set of leadership qualities. When I and my colleagues conducted assessments of high-potential people at Royal Dutch/Shell in the early 1990s, for example, we were looking for leaders who could both rise above the fray to see the big picture and, when necessary, land at any location to drill down into the detail. This combination of leadership skills was called “helicopter,” and we found that it was almost impossible to identify in any given individual. Groups of people working together, however, often do develop such essential combinations, particularly if anyone has a natural propensity for one or the other side of the dimension. According to INSEAD's Global Leadership Centre: “Usually alignment (between different styles) is only achieved within a leadership role constellation when it is constructed of team members with complementary ... leadership styles. A group of carefully selected individuals can become a highly effective team that delivers much more than the sum of its parts” (Kets de Vries *et al.*, 2007).

Leaders' self-awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses is a key success factor. They must surround themselves with people who offer complementary qualities. And, aside from the obvious, there is good reason to do so: If there is one thing we have learned from the recent financial crisis and corporate scandals, it is not to put our faith into a single individual anymore.

### **The message for organizations: become “gender bilingual”**

Organizations need to celebrate the different leadership styles that women and men offer and help women leverage their unique strengths. Companies that are able to harness the strengths of both sexes may be said to be gender “bilingual” rather than gender neutral (Wittenberg-Cox and Maitland, 2008). Organizations with gender diversity at the top are more successful than others (Mendoza, 2008) and will find their way out of the current economic crisis into sustainable profitability (Desvaux and Devillard, 2008). Conversely, those that reject women who cannot – or will not – imitate their male counterparts will inevitably lose out.

Organizations that want to become gender bilingual should start by choosing the right assessment methodology. Since companies have a tendency to try to “fix” women to make them “suitable” for leadership positions (Wittenberg-Cox and Maitland, 2008), measuring them by male standards – falling into the men-and-women-are-alike trap – is not helpful in creating gender-balanced leadership at the top. Similarly, organizations should make sure that as our economic systems evolve, so do effective leadership dimensions. For example, the rise of the knowledge worker and the shift in expectations between employer and employee over time has increased the relative importance of transformational leadership dimensions such as empowering and motivating. Women leaders seem to display such behaviors more easily than men (Eagly and Carli, 2007; see also, Desvaux and Devillard, 2008). Thus, the truism that “what gets measured, gets done” applies. If women are measured by outdated, male-oriented standards, then they will be developed in the wrong direction and encouraged to acquire leadership skills that turn out to be less relevant going forward. Clearly, that is not a prescription for success. Furthermore, organizations should work to create a gender bilingual culture so that perceptions measured by 360° evaluations are not influenced by unconscious biases against women (see also, Desvaux and Devillard, 2008).

The leadership failures that have brought about the latest economic and financial crisis seem to indicate that traditional talent management, including the leadership competencies that have been part of it, has passed its sell-by date. Developing leaders individually, using a uniform set of leadership competencies, is just not working. This is not to say that women and men should have separate sets of leadership competencies for their development. Going forward, organizations would be better off working with groups of high potentials whose complementary strengths cover the portfolio of skills needed. Similarly, when choosing successors for top positions, organizations should make sure that candidates not only meet the specific requirements for the job but also add to the portfolio of skills that the management team currently needs. A more gender-diverse pool of candidates helps make this task easier.

There is one, final, challenge that organizations must face. Once companies start recruiting from *all* the available talent, there will be less room at the top for men. Unavoidably, some good men will find – with a shock – that they are now no longer good enough, despite years of hard work and dedication. To retain that talent, organizations will need to craft gender-diversity strategies that include effective

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methods of dealing with those individuals' anger, frustration, and disappointment so they can continue to add value.

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## Conclusion

Men and women tend to have different leadership qualities. When organizations do not recognize those differences, they develop women leaders in the wrong direction. As a result, women find themselves barred from the top. To avoid getting caught in those traps, talented women need to discover, develop, and leverage the specific leadership skills that will help them progress in their unique ways.

Organizations that want to maximize the opportunity of gender diversity at the top need to ensure that behavior by women leaders is perceived in its true light and appreciated for its true value. They must also update their talent-management processes – such as leadership competency frameworks, assessment, leadership development, and succession planning – if they are to benefit from a gender-balanced, and therefore high-performing, leadership team.

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## Notes

1. The research to determine the ten dimensions was conducted about ten years ago, when organisations were led, mostly, by men. Respondents offering their views about what they considered, to be the most effective dimensions for leadership, therefore, based their answers on their experiences in those male-dominated organisations.
2. Breeveld was elected European Black Business Woman of the Year 2003.

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