Exposing Gender Stereotypes

An Invisible Barrier to Women’s Advancement

Stereotypes affect the experiences of women leaders and of women who aspire to leadership positions. Because our culture equates stereotypically “masculine” behaviors and traits with effective leadership, men are viewed as “natural” leaders, and women have to constantly prove that they can lead. These perceptions are even more salient when women try to advance in traditionally male-dominated fields, such as IT and engineering.

Gender stereotypes also create different standards for evaluating women compared to their men colleagues. For example, when Catalyst asked senior-level executives in the United States and Europe to independently rate the effectiveness of women and men leaders on ten key leadership behaviors, both men and women respondents cast women as better at stereotypically feminine “caretaking skills” such as supporting and rewarding. And, both men and women asserted that men excel at more conventionally masculine “taking charge” skills such as influencing superiors and delegating responsibility. These perceptions inhibit women’s advancement because ‘taking charge’ skills and stereotypically ‘masculine’ behaviors often are seen as prerequisites for top-level positions.

Gender stereotypes held by men are especially problematic in occupations where women are outnumbered and men’s views predominate. U.S. men believe that men are most superior to women in their problem-solving skills. Because leaders who command respect for their problem-solving expertise can use this respect to influence their followers, this stereotype means that women have to work even harder to get their followers to buy into their plans/instructions.

Recommendations

Learning about how stereotypes operate can increase awareness of our biases. Awareness can also help limit automatic thinking and stereotyping when evaluating others. Another way to intercept stereotypes is to hold individuals accountable for bias. External pressure to be fair and deliberate can motivate individuals to become more aware of their thinking patterns. Organizations can use this knowledge in a number of ways.

Managerial training and diversity education.

Educating managers and employees about the origin and consequences of gender stereotypes is an important first step. A comprehensive training program should include information about

- Ways to recognize bias
- Inconsistencies between values (e.g., gender egalitarianism) and actual behavior
- Causes and effects of gender inequality in the workplace

Performance and evaluation management.

HR practices, such as recruiting and performance evaluations, should employ objective and unambiguous evaluation criteria. When evaluation criteria are not clearly defined or are based on individual (rather than standardized) estimates, there is more room for assessments to be influenced by stereotypes. Well thought-out human resource practices also increase managers’ accountability to avoid bias.

What are Stereotypes?

Stereotypes can be defined as “cognitive shortcuts” or generalizations that we use to make sense of our complex social world. These shortcuts help us differentiate among different groups of people and, in the case of gender stereotypes, between women and men. Gender stereotypes are widely shared within our culture. This can be problematic as they tend to over-simplify reality, especially when it comes to complex social behaviors. Gender stereotypes emphasize “essential differences,” but the empirical literature tells us otherwise. Through the extensive research on gender differences and similarities, we learn that women and men are actually more similar than different and that there is more variation among women and men than there is between women and men. By creating false perceptions that women and men are “planets apart”, however, stereotyping results in women being overlooked for the top jobs – no matter how strong their actual credentials.
**Company Practice – Rigor in succession planning decisions at Wellpoint, Inc.**

Stereotypes are automatic thought processes, so organizations may not be able to prevent these processes from occurring on the front end. Instead, they can provide “checks and balances” to monitor decision-making processes as they are occurring. Wellpoint, Inc, a healthcare company and 2003 Catalyst award winner successfully adopted a “bias safeguard” to prevent bias in succession planning decisions. Wellpoint’s succession planning system provides a searchable database of resume’ information and career aspirations profiles of its top 1400 leaders. These profiles are created by the leaders themselves and then reviewed by their supervisors. From these data, executive leadership can generate summary profiles, produce succession plan reports and perform special queries to generate lists of top candidates. Succession candidates are then presented at “talent calibration sessions” where teams of executives
- Explain why they have identified specific individuals as succession candidates
- Collaborate on the development of identified succession candidates
- Review and discuss the diversity of the talent pool

For a detailed description of Wellpoint’s award winning talent management initiative, see [http://www.catalyst.org/award/files/winners/WellPoint%20FINAL%205%20PAGER.pdf](http://www.catalyst.org/award/files/winners/WellPoint%20FINAL%205%20PAGER.pdf)

As part of its larger talent management initiative, Wellpoints’ succession planning strategy contributed to an increase in the number of women in executive ranks. The company went from zero women among top corporate officers in 1997 to 3 in 2002. In 2005, women constituted 33 percent of the total number of directors in the company.

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**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

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**Company Practice – Avoiding gender bias through education: Gender Dialogue Workshop at BP p.l.c.**

One strategy to reduce or intercept the influence of gender stereotypes on our judgment is education. For people with gender egalitarian values, diversity education can increase awareness of stereotypes as well as individual motivation to be unbiased. A winner of the 2006 Catalyst award, BP’s “Global Paths to Diversity and Inclusion” initiative includes different programs that help address barriers to women's advancement, including career advancement programs, diverse selection panels, and specialized conferences on topics related to gender and diversity (for a more detailed description of the initiative, see [http://www.catalyst.org/award/files/winners/2006BP.pdf](http://www.catalyst.org/award/files/winners/2006BP.pdf)).

Gender – A Dialogue is an interactive DVD program that educates employees about gender bias within the workplace. The program includes interviews with BP employees, facilitation guidance for managers, and discussion points that encourage a frank discussion about gender.

As part of the larger inclusion initiative, this educational strategy contributed to a marked increase in the number of women in senior leadership positions. Between 2000 and 2005, women's representation increased from 9.2 to 17.3 percent in the U.K and from 14 to 20.3 percent outside the U.K.