Empowering Leadership: Counteracting Gender Bias Through Focus on Individual Strengths

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With the increase of women in leadership positions, steps need to be taken ensuring equal treatment and opportunity are available. Research has shown that gender bias still influences people's perceptions of leaders and social roles. Unconscious bias can prevent qualified individuals from advancing in leadership positions. Drawing on previous research, this article will address the barriers that gender bias creates for women seeking leadership opportunities. Recognizing personal bias is the first step to diminishing the influence of gender stereotypes. Solutions include maintaining an open dialogue about differences and focusing on building individual strengths. Women and men can empower each other to become more effective leaders by stepping away from gender bias and enhancing their valuable leadership traits.

While steady progress has been made for women's rights since the early 1900s, the year 2018 was a monumental leap in the right direction for women in leadership. There have been an unprecedented number of women elected to Congress in the United States, and more women than ever are entering positions of influence. Although women have become increasingly involved in leadership positions, representation and opportunities in business, politics, and education remain nowhere near equal to that of men (Rhode, 2017). The extent of the barriers women face is well documented in other research. While recognizing the complexity of issues contributing to the scarce

number of women in leadership roles, this article will present solutions to counteract the negative effects of gender stereotypes and bias that stifle progress for women's advancement. Proposed solutions endeavor to remove gender stereotypes for both men and women by developing each individual's leadership potential.

Unconscious gender bias left unchecked not only prevents qualified women from advancing in positions of authority but prevents diversity from enhancing the quality of organizations. Gender stereotypes and personal bias place harmful expectations on both women and men to act in accordance with stereotyped social roles, with no regard to whether an individual's personality and valuable characteristics align with those roles. As more women assume leadership roles, it is critical for leaders, as well as those they lead, to intentionally address personal biases and then place their focus on developing and appreciating the traits an individual can contribute to leadership roles. This will support the increase of women in leadership positions and allow diversity to enhance economic, educational, and governmental systems.

Barriers

With recent progressive movements advocating for gender equality, gender stereotypes would presumably decrease and have no influence on workplace cultures or opportunities for advancement. However, a meta-analysis collected by university researchers found that over time there has been no significant decrease in gender stereotypes (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). These stereotypes influence perceptions and actions, one of which is that men are more likely to be accepted as leaders than women (Rhode, 2017). This may be due to the majority of women in the workforce occupying "domestic" jobs traditionally perceived as feminine, such as receptionists, nurses, teachers, and retail associates (Koenig et al., 2011). Consequently, women who pursue leadership positions are entering an environment that has long been male-dominated. Societal expectations of leaders force women to conform to traditionally masculine approaches. As Patricia Jones, CEO of the Utah-based Women's Leadership Institute describes, "Our system, our corporate and business environment, is a structure that was built by and for men. Historically, women have had to navigate around that" (P. Jones, personal communication, August 10, 2018).

Some research indicates that gender stereotypes and perceived social roles have been shown to change with the increased presence of female leaders (Koenig et al., 2011). As more women enter leadership positions, stereotypes have slightly weakened (Rhode, 2017). However, even the current unparalleled amount of female representation is not enough to make real change when only 4.8% of CEO positions are held by women (Catalyst, 2018), and 20.6% of representatives serving in Congress are women (CAWP, 2018). This contradiction creates a negative feedback loop— the presence of women leaders diminishes gender stereotypes, yet women are excluded from leadership positions as a result of these suppressive gender biases and stereotypes.

Persisting gender stereotypes specifically affect how leadership traits are viewed. There seems to be a disconnect between what is expected of a leader and what actually makes a leader effective. Leadership has long been associated with masculinity (Koenig et al., 2011), thus requiring successful leaders to be "…aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful, independent, self-sufficient, and self-confident" (Zheng, Kark, & Meister, 2018, p. 585). Women are usually expected to show traditionally feminine, also referred to as communal, traits "such as being affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturant, and gentle" (Zheng et al., 2018, p. 585). Due to leadership roles being associated with masculinity for so long, those who display feminine traits are not viewed as being leaders (Badura, Grijalva, Newman, Yan, & Jeon, 2018). However, negative reactions occur when women are more assertive or dominant (Rhode, 2017). Thus, a situation is presented where masculine traits are required to excel in leadership roles, yet women must maintain feminine traits to align with their expected social roles. The reality is, some women may have personalities that are in line with traditional social roles, while others may have attributes characterized as masculine. This emphasizes the need to break away from stereotypes to allow women to utilize their individual strengths in leadership positions.

These perceptions are not only harmful to women but can also adversely affect men who possess traits viewed as feminine. Even though masculine attributes have become the normalized approach to leadership, they are no more beneficial than feminine ones (Rhode, 2017). Interestingly, a combination of traditionally masculine and feminine traits is found to

be most effective when implemented in leadership roles (Rhode, 2017). Researcher Grijalva (2018) states, "Because of this unconscious bias against communal [feminine] traits, organizations may unintentionally select the wrong people for leadership roles, choosing individuals who are loud and confident but lack the ability to support their followers' development and success" (as cited in Biddle, 2018, para. 7). If current leaders are not conscious of these biases, the most qualified person may be denied the right leadership position, regardless of gender.

Solutions

Addressing negative gender stereotypes begins with validating the reality of this issue in leadership. With the knowledge that stereotypes still influence perceptions of leaders and followers, it is each individual's responsibility to recognize when their personal bias is present. Traits associated with a specific gender should not be assumed; women can naturally be assertive and men can have a natural tendency to be nurturing. It would be unrealistic to expect immediate change when society has reinforced these deep-rooted gender roles for so long. Rather, practical improvement involves being aware of how personal biases influence the treatment or perception of others. Appreciating the unique personalities of individuals rather than projecting harmful stereotypes will initiate lasting change.

Remove Gender-Specific Labels

One specific action that can be taken to lessen gender bias is consciously striving to remove gender labels from character traits. Zheng and colleagues (2018) illustrate this by replacing masculine and feminine with the terms agentic and communal. Although most people don't necessarily use the words masculine and feminine to describe people, these attributes can unconsciously influence how other's actions are viewed. The deliberate effort to use neutral terms when describing character traits encourages awareness of gender bias. This cultivates the idea that any man or women can develop both agentic and communal styles of leadership.

Gender and leadership scholar Deborah Rhode (2017) lists the top traits that successful leaders display, such as "vision, ethics, interpersonal skills, technical competence, and personal capabilities such as self-awareness and self-control" (p. 6). An interview with Patricia Jones (personal communication, August 10, 2018) identified additional characteristics

contributing to successful leadership. These include communicating effectively, expressing ideas clearly through writing, thinking critically, and problem-solving. Each of these valuable leadership traits can be developed and refined through persistence and proper training, regardless of gender (P. Jones, personal communication, August 10, 2018). By recognizing personal bias and removing gender specificities with character traits, a growth mindset can become more common in leadership positions as individuals are promoted based on their relevant traits.

Develop and strengthen individual leadership traits

Diversity in leadership approaches tends to be more effective than a singular dominating style (Nadolska & Barkema, 2014). Having many personality types, perspectives, and viewpoints can strengthen a company or political board. Women and men can capitalize on these differences by maintaining honest communication about their perspectives. Patricia Jones suggests that having an open dialogue about rules and barriers in the workplace can accomplish this (P. Jones, personal communication, August 10, 2018). Recognizing and building on unique traits will result in new solutions to issues, as well as encouraging more authentic leadership.

Along with opening up the conversation about individual differences, stepping away from gender bias allows women and men to fully embrace their individual leadership abilities. Organizations have the potential to become more collaborative, diverse, and interpersonal as communal traits are more widely accepted within leadership roles (Rhode, 2017). Women can pursue more leadership roles without concern of social expectations, while men will be more comfortable displaying their strengths if they differ from traditional masculine roles. If this became a reality and individuals were allowed to refine their most beneficial traits, leadership would become more effective.

Conclusion

Women have much to contribute to leadership in our society with diverse ways of thinking and approaches to leading others. To allow for this, it is necessary to step away from harmful stereotypes that marginalize women and prevent them from reaching or maintaining leadership positions. Men also suffer from gender bias dictating their expectations

and job performance as leaders. Qualified candidates for leadership positions are withheld from promotions when labeled with traditional stereotypes that do not properly reflect their abilities. Women and men can help each other in this cause by recognizing their personal biases and focusing on building each other's personal leadership traits. As women and men cultivate their strengths in these areas and help each other build them, more focus can be directed towards training individuals for leadership roles in which they can thrive.

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