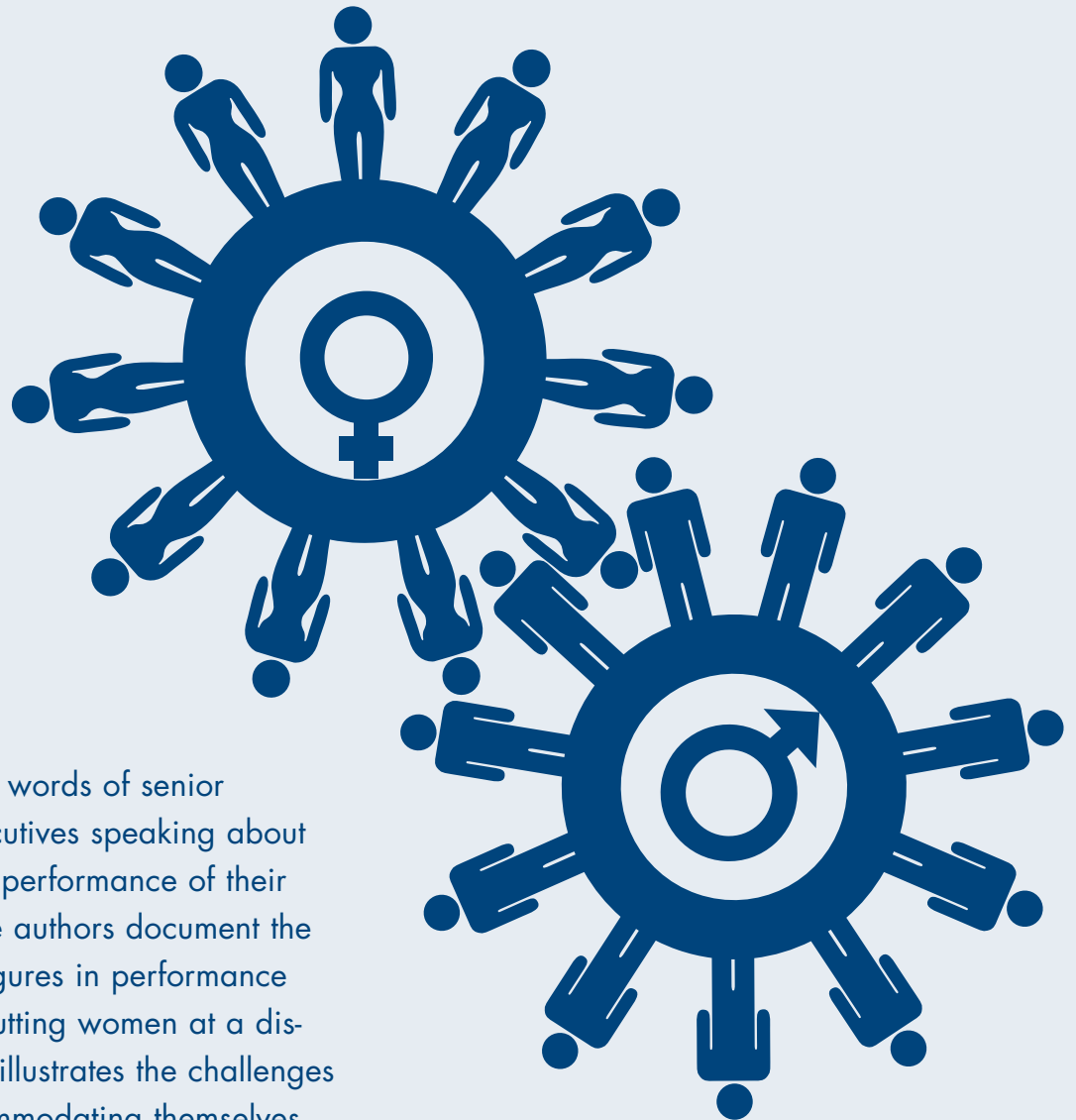# Gender's Unspoken Role in Leadership Evaluations

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Using the actual words of senior corporate executives speaking about the leadership performance of their colleagues, the authors document the extent to which gender figures in performance evaluation at this level, putting women at a disadvantage. The research illustrates the challenges that women face in accommodating themselves to male-defined executive roles and suggests how corporate leaders—men in particular—can make these detrimental effects discussable within their own executive suites.

Most companies' HR policies these days teach that performance matters above all and that gender is not a factor in employees' evaluation and advancement. But listen to what executive men and women say in private about senior corporate leaders for a very different story, one in which gender plays a central role. The official position suggests a level playing field; the personal conversation reveals that gender-based assessment of leadership creates a tilt that works against women.

Many forces, organizational and personal, create these dual realities. Our purpose for writing is not to explain why the private and public stories differ; instead, we validate the *existence* of the personal story, which is normally hidden. The unearthing of this concealed story may help answer important questions about why, despite the good-faith efforts of so many, women remain scarce in the highest ranks of corporations (*The New York Times,* Dec. 17, 2006). Helfat, et al. (2006), report that roughly 50 percent of the firms in the *Fortune* 1000 had no women as top executives as recently as 2000 and that even those with women executives had only one or two per firm.

Many of the comments about women's gender were quite explicit. For instance:

> I see that the CEO and the COO are intimidated by her. If you peel it back, they are frightened by a senior, corporate, vice-president female that is the brightest in the company. They pinch up… They are trying to get better at how to manage senior-level, bright females; it is new to them. (*male speaking about a female peer and her male bosses*)

> There are people around here who don't treat each other well and especially don't treat women very well. She has had to put up with stuff that nobody should have had to put up with . . . We have a glass ceiling, failure mode for women. We have a mold of acceptable styles and an old-boys club, and women are held to a higher standard. I believe the stories she has told me and they are shocking. We are generally not a good place that models behavior for treating diverse

As we worked with more women, we noticed that the topic of gender came up repeatedly in discussions of their leadership, even though we had not asked about gender. No one commented explicitly on gender when discussing men's leadership.

Our research documents that male and female executives *know* that gender comes into play when they evaluate women's leadership; we have a record of their actual words speaking this truth. Our findings are not likely to surprise anyone who occupies the executive suite or, presumably, others familiar with corporate life. What is different about our research is that it reveals the extent to which gender figures in discussions of women's leadership, providing a glimpse of executives' true thoughts. Further, we point to the challenges that women face as a result of such gender-based conceptions of leadership and suggest that the path to correct these biases begins with having corporate leaders admit such biases exist and have constructive conversation about their meaning and effect.

We gained access to the private thoughts of these executives through our work as leadership consultants to men and women in the upper ranks of corporations that appear among the United States' most admired businesses. As part of a typical consultation, we interview our clients' bosses, peers, and subordinates, asking generic questions about leadership, such as:

1. What are the executive's strengths and weaknesses?
2. How good is she at strategic thinking?
3. How effective is he operationally?

We record their verbatim comments and feed back to our client the precise comments we heard. Interviewees know they speak for the record, but without personal attribution.

As we worked with more women, we noticed that the topic of gender came up repeatedly in discussions of their leadership, *even though we had not asked about gender*. No one commented explicitly on gender when discussing men's leadership.

styles well. (*male boss speaking about a female direct report*)

> I'll rate her performance a nine on a ten-point scale. The only reason I didn't give her a ten is that she could be more of a chameleon and fit in with the old guard, even though it would be hard because she is a woman. (*male direct report rating his female boss's effectiveness*)

> She is forceful. Usually I don't care for that in a woman, but I admire that in her immensely. *(male boss commenting on his direct report)*

The women receiving such feedback were not naïve, having worked their way up the corporate ladder. Nonetheless, they were shocked to see such unvarnished statements about the salient role their gender played in others' evaluation of their leadership performance.

Eventually our anecdotal evidence mounted, showing that these examples were not exceptions, nor tied to any one company. We undertook this study to determine systematically the extent to which feedback about women executives' performance included comments about their gender and to explore comparable data for men. We also wanted to understand the implications of any differences we might find.

Having done the research, we believe that we have in hand the first significant body of evidence from senior managers themselves about what they *really think* about gender and leadership. Our work builds upon and validates a body of experimental research on

leadership and gender, which was based primarily on experiments usually conducted with college students or with mid-level managers (Valian, 1998). In those studies and ours, the key findings point to gender-based criteria as powerful influences in the evaluation of women's leadership performance (Biernat, 2003; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fletcher, 2004; Heilman, 2001; Heilman, et al., 2004; Valian, 1998).

That leadership is conceived of in stereotypically masculine terms has been well documented in the literature for years (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Schein, 1973; Heilman, et al., 1989). This notion persists today, despite the somewhat greater representation of women in leadership roles and despite little compelling evidence that gender inherently offers a significant advantage, particularly in business settings (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Powell, et al., 2002; Vecchio, 2002, 2003). Women executives report that gender-based stereotypes continue to be a significant barrier to their advancement, although they note some improvement in recent years (Catalyst, 2003).

The bias toward a masculine model of leadership becomes especially pronounced in the corporate executive suite. There, men have always greatly outnumbered women, and men and women alike eschew "feminine" behavior, because it conflicts with and, perhaps, threatens time-honored ideas about "good" leadership. For senior executives especially, job expectations trump gender expectations, with the result that the behavior of male and female executives turns out to be more similar than it is different (Barnett & Rivers, 2004; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; McNatt, 2000); however, like behavior does not equate to like treatment. Men in society at

"shifting standards" model of stereotyping, as Biernat named it, may explain why gender bias is particularly problematic as women ascend to the highest corporate levels.

How We Conducted the Study

The Sample

We analyzed qualitative 360-degree feedback that was collected about 44 executives (22 women and 22 men) who were in the senior ranks of their businesses. We matched the men and women based on their company, organizational level (vice president and above), functional area, age, and experience. The median age for the group was 47 (ranging from 35 to 64). Two were women of color and 20 were white women. Twenty-one of the men were white; one was a man of color.

The 44 executives represent 11 global companies headquartered in the United States, located predominantly in the Northeast, Midwest, and Northwest. The companies represent eight industries:

1. Computer;
2. Computer software;
3. Consumer products;
4. Energy;
5. Financial;
6. Leisure and entertainment;
7. Network communications;
8. Telecommunications/cable.

Speaking privately, executive men and executive women reveal how the executive suite is often an inhospitable place for women. The idea appears to be a given among many of the interviewees, both men and women: The environment is tough on women, just because they are women.

large are more likely to be perceived as having higher status and being more competent than women. Such group-based evaluations ineluctably infiltrate the executive suite, embedded as it is in the wider culture, benefiting men and penalizing women, whose success contradicts the expected order (Alderfer, 1986; Ridgeway, 2001).

As the seat of power, the executive suite is closely guarded. Biernat (2003) demonstrated that gender-linked expectations become even more pronounced in such settings. At lower levels, women's performance may be evaluated more leniently: "for a woman, she is really good." This leniency effect is less likely to occur when judgments are made for hiring and promotion, so that when it comes to picking the senior team, women will be seen categorically as less able than men to succeed in (male-defined) executive roles. This

Data Analysis

We used data collected through phone or face-to-face interviews with 737 individuals commenting about the leadership performance of these 44 executives. We coded individual interviews by sex of the interviewee and their relationship to the subject (i.e., superior, peer, direct report, board).

To analyze the content of the transcripts, we used a content analysis software package to select passages with key words identifying "gendered comments." We selected words that denote gender (e.g., woman/man, feminine/masculine, husband/wife) or those that reflect cultural labels for men or women such as "cocky" or "bitchy." We matched pairs of words for each sex, although some words apply to both sexes, such as "sex" or "role model."

Three researchers (two women and one man) read the sorted data and independently identified key themes, analyzing female and male data separately. We counted the number of gendered comments that appeared in each of the interviews to determine the prevalence of gendered

EXHIBIT 1

Distribution of Interviewees by Role

Interviewees	Self	Superior	Peer	Direct Report	Board	Other	Total
Interviewed about women	22	70	112	120	18	3	**345**
Interviewed about men	22	70	119	150	19	12	**392**

EXHIBIT 2

Distribution of Gendered Comments

	Self	Bosses		Peers		Direct Reports		Board Members		Other	
		F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Female Executives (n = 22)	15	4	29	11	33	13	23	1	2	1	2
Male Executives (n = 22)	0	0	2	2	1	0	3	0	0	0	0

Note: 119 of 345 interviewees made 200 gendered comments about female executives; 8 of 392 interviewees made 8 gendered comments about male executives

comments in the men's data versus what appeared in the women's data, and to evaluate which level of interviewee—boss, peer, direct report—used gendered comments most often. We also noted the sex of the persons making the gendered comments and the sex of the interviewer. In determining the final number of comments, we eliminated "benign" comments that did not have significance when examined in context.

Results

Women's Gender Stands Out

Time and time again, when asked to talk about a male executive's leadership, executives discussed only his leadership, with no explicit reference to gender. When asked to talk about a female executive's leadership, they explicitly discussed her gender—although, as stated, our questions never mentioned it. For instance, when a male CEO mused about possible successors, he made this comment about the only woman on his team:

> Does she have the personality to lead a bunch of unruly guys? She certainly does a good job of leading the guys that report to her. I think there may be a gender issue. Maybe some big tough woman could handle that better than a sweet little woman. I think it is a real question – it is a cultural question. It is part of the glass ceiling that gets talked about. It is an extra obstacle for her.

Gendered comments were 25 times more prevalent in the data about women than in the data about men. Substantive gendered comments were made about each of the 22 women. In contrast, gendered comments were made about only five of the men. In the women's transcripts, 40 percent of the interviewees made a comment like "because she is a woman." When being interviewed about a male executive, only one out of 50 interviewees made a gendered comment.

In the 370 interviews pertaining to men, we found a total of eight gendered comments, one of them made by a woman. In the 323 interviews about women, we found 200 gendered comments. Every gendered comment about a man was positive and spoke to a gender-related advantage. For example, these comments were made about men by their male colleagues: "Being a jock and a man among men, he probably feels like John Wayne," and "When he gets up in front of an audience people say, 'That's a real man.'"

The gendered comments made about executive women were more complicated to interpret. When the speaker was a woman, the comments pointed to the challenge of being female in a male environment: "I think the perception is that there is a great expectation of women executives to be outspoken in favor of women and to act as a representative." When men made gendered comments about women, their comments were either seemingly empathetic statements about the plight of women in a man's world, such as, "The CEO is very supportive of her. She is currently a tough fit . . . this is a good-ol' white-male bastion," or stereotypical judgments about women's capabilities as a leader, as in:

> She makes a great number two, a chief of staff to a powerful leader. She is capable of making decisions and leading, but she is better at being the administrative nuts-and-bolts behind a powerful leader. She was our mother making sure that we get up on time, do things on time, etc. She is very well organized. *(male describing his female peer)*

For five of the women, gender was a salient variable in the discussion of their leadership, in that between 54 and 75 percent of people interviewed commented on the woman's gender.

Fifteen of the 22 executive women spoke about their gender during the interviews; not one of the 22 executive men spoke about his gender. The women's comments were about their struggle to belong, the adjustments they make to accommodate the expectations of male colleagues, and how the environment seems geared toward men, not women.

If Only a Woman Could Be More Like a Man

If men are de facto members of the club, women are ambivalently welcomed guests. Speaking privately, executive men and executive women reveal how the executive suite is often an inhospitable place for women. The idea appears to be a given among many of the interviewees, both men and women: The environment is tough on women, just because they are women.

Although male executives sometimes find specific behaviors of their female colleagues troublesome (see later discussion), what seems to be more the issue is that being a woman is itself a handicap. A male direct report of one of the women in our study said it most plainly: "She is a woman and they are not. She will be viewed as different." Despite the corporate mantra of valuing diversity, this essential difference appears to get in the way, because being a woman *is not* the norm. Both male and female interviewees referred to the existence of the "old-boy network," the "old-boys club," the "locker room" atmosphere, and the "old, white-male bastion," and they commented that "being a man and an engineer is the gold standard here," "this arena is not very friendly to women," and "a lot of her background fits well except for her gender." One male peer said, bluntly: "The chairman clearly prefers boys." Revealing that gender-based rejection is not passive, a male peer remarked, "She is facing 1,000 percent resistance because she is a female."

A male direct report offered an explanation for such treatment, saying, "It has to do with women moving up through the glass ceiling. That threatens the guys, the old, white males. I think there are profound threats there." A male boss said, "This is a tough company

to start with anytime you are talking about women excelling here. It's not an overly hostile environment, but any woman must compensate in this environment. It works to her detriment."

Similarly, when speaking about their own experience, executive women said that they feel like outsiders at work. They are conscious of their gender and feel excluded from the inner workings of their corporate world because of how they are perceived as women. One remarked that she feels "left out of things." Another, revealing how basic the differences are and, perhaps, how daunting the challenge of fitting in feels, said that her peer relationships would improve if only she could, "grow a foot in height and have a sex change." Another woman described her situation in some detail:

> Except for the fact that I am a woman, I fit exactly. I am a big believer in the core values and beliefs which reflect the company in large part . . . The fact that I am a woman creates quite a wall. The wall I'm referring to is they pull their punches. I never get the really challenging assignment. I don't get recognition. They discount my views when I express them. They'll say, "That is nice now let's move on." There is an awkwardness in our hanging out. I showed up where they drink beer and created a cloud over the whole thing. I always feel different and that I am not part of the team.

A few women acknowledged exploiting their differences. One said, "There are pros and cons to this package that I come in: petite, female, nice, cute, energetic; all that kind of stuff. The pro is that I can be much more aggressive and demanding when done with a smile; no one takes it as threatening. I use that regularly to my advantage." Yet there was a dark side to using her charm: "The negative thing is when I am delivering a ton of results and "X product" is one of the best success stories this company has ever had, the way my boss described my role was as this cheerleader . . . but I was also doing the financials and running the business."

We found no comparable experience for men based on their gender. There are data about men not fitting because they were outsiders coming into an organization or because of a supposed "culture clash," such as when a New Yorker had to accommodate to a Midwestern company. But no one mentioned gender to explain why a man would not be an organizational match. Because their gender allows men to fit in, it might appear as if gender is not an active ingredient in men's ability to acclimate; in truth, assumptions about male gender operate implicitly to enable men to belong.

To Feel or Not to Feel; that Is the Question

A particular way in which women cannot seem to fit the mold is in their relationship to emotions. When male executives make judgments about how women deal with emotions, the disjunction between the female gender role and the idealized executive role is put in bold relief.

Just because they are women, female executives are expected to be adept at expressing their own emotions and at empathizing with others. Female executives who communicate their own emotions with skill or respond to someone else's emotional needs with sensitivity are judged as meeting a cultural standard for women, giving them an advantage over men. A male executive said about a female colleague, "She's quite empathetic. Women are better at that stuff than men." Another male executive described his female boss's openness with emotion as a distinctive strength. "She shows her feelings. She's not afraid to let herself be exposed, more so than anyone at that level. Being a woman allows that . . ."

Although women are credited with being emotionally in tune, their male colleagues also fault them for violating "appropriate" executive behavior. It may be that what Jamieson (1995) called the "competence/femininity double-bind" is at play, whereby women risk rejection for being both themselves and successful (see also Heilman, et al., 2004; Heilman, 2001; Morrison, et al., 1987). One male executive said about a female colleague, "She knows where the line is. In this company, if a woman goes past a point she is a bitch."

Women are criticized for being overemotional by some male colleagues, who find their emotional tenor "intimidating" or "overbearing," but also criticized for not being emotional enough, which is seen as a misguided attempt to be male. About a woman who was criticized for being emotionless, a male colleague allowed, "She grew up in the time that I think women at 'company X' put pressure on themselves to be one of the guys." About a female direct report, a male CEO said, "I've seen more emotion from men than she has shown me. If you are Ms. Cool you may not be able to develop relationships . . . In our largely male work environment she feels she has to be more macho than macho."

When women were interviewed about female colleagues, they had much less to say about emotion. One female interviewee connected the emotional expression of a female colleague with her gender. In this instance, it was to say that the executive was guarded with her feelings because she "like many women, does not want to be vulnerable." The few other comments by women about women on the subject of emotion suggested that they believed individual personality was most at play in determining a female executive's emotional style.

What women had to say about their personal experience of finding the right emotional balance for the executive role was significant. When speaking about themselves, women executives made connections between their emotional expression, their gender, and the expectations of the executive role. A few women acknowledged that they might have an advantage, compared to male colleagues, because of their emotional capabilities. Yet women also talked about needing to rein themselves in for self-protection and to avoid offending their male colleagues. One said, "I have the typical girl problem that I cry too easily, so I am always fighting that one." Another said, "I would make myself less sensitive." And a third commented, "I think I am probably too open. I think I need to work on this. I need to have more of a poker face. People can tell what I am thinking. That is the danger point with me."

The only comments about men and emotion concerned a man's being "too nice a guy," suggesting that he is not tough enough to make hard choices—thereby, perceived as too "feminine." Most of these comments were empathetic in tone, as if the speaker excused or understood the behavior. For instance:

> He is a really nice guy and sometimes he does not want to play the bad guy. He is willing to make tough decisions but he tends to put the tough calls off until it is absolutely necessary. He likes consensus probably to a fault . . . this may contribute to his stress. It is his nature to be likable. *(male direct report on his boss)*

> Everybody likes the guy. He could not do much better in getting along with his peer group. He sometimes needs to be more assertive and not as much a gentleman. Be more vocal at meetings. Needs to initiate more. *(male direct report on his boss)*

Three of the comments about men were harsher and reveal the interviewees' mindset that ideal leadership requires stereotypically masculine, aggressive behavior. For instance, one male peer said about another, "He could have been more successful here if he had been a little more general-like and more command-and-control in a public fashion." Another male said about a peer, "The way he could be more effective is if he would get a flack jacket and learn to be an…. (expletive deleted)." A third peer said, "He will have to develop a more demonstrative in-your-face style in the future. He will have to learn how to hit his hands on the desk and say, 'This is not acceptable; go back and redo it!'"

These data support what some previous research has shown, that men, too, must respect the gender expectations of their role (Costrich, et al., 1975); yet, men appear likely to suffer less than women for gender-role violations. In our data, men who are "too nice" are not told that they do not belong in the executive suite, but are coached to toughen up.

attempt to fit in by adopting stereotypical male behaviors, their male colleagues may criticize them for trying to be like the men. One woman was described as trying to be "pseudo male." Others were said to be "overcompensating" for their natural tendencies. A female direct report acknowledged the risk of fitting in too well, "People like her, but she plays the game with these guys in exactly the same way they do, and they hate it."

It is not lost on these women that in contorting themselves to fit a male mold, they give up something about being a woman. One woman said, "I have worked with many men my whole career. To not make them fearful of me, I give a big piece of myself up." Another woman, describing her success in adapting to a male-defined corporate environment, said, "Many of the traits that make me a good fit were built over a lifetime in being in male dominated environments . . . I went to a college where the men are men and the women are men." About her female boss, a female direct report said, "You could call her willingness to take abuse a blind spot . . .

The constricted space in which women executives must operate seems to be located somewhere between fully embodying the qualities associated with being a woman and blatantly taking on qualities that are said to be male; being genderless, in a sense.

Women Are Expected to Accommodate, but Pay a Price for Doing So

Male and female executives agree that women do not readily fit in and that women must be the ones to adapt. A female boss said, "She knows how to mix it up with the men. At the end of the day you have to adapt somewhat to their environment." A male peer commented, "I think there is an adaptation that occurs in a female who is trying to break through a male culture. It is probably personality that is compounded by female status. It could be a behavior modifier." A female peer advised that her female coworker should emulate the boss and "go to the bar and hang out with the guys."

Interviewees acknowledged that women must perform a high-wire act to make this work. A male peer said, "It is hard for the female executive to find the behaviors that will be acceptable to her colleagues and that will support her fitting in. The behavioral bandwidth is narrow for executive women." Likewise, another male peer said, "She walks the narrow edge nicely. (It is) a very narrow operating range we give to women here."

The constricted space in which women executives must operate seems to be located somewhere between fully embodying the qualities associated with being a woman and blatantly taking on qualities that are said to be male; being genderless, in a sense. A female board member praised an executive woman for making her gender disappear, saying "I think one of her great strengths is her ability to function very well in that world without a sense of gender differentiation."

As the theory about gender roles and leadership roles predicts (Eagley & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001; Johnson, 2001), our data show that fitting in is a complicated task for a woman because to mirror the male executive culture she must violate the usual expectations for a member of her sex; however, when women

She is so used to it that she doesn't notice it."

When asked to talk about the personal trade-offs they make to succeed in their corporate roles, executive women report the pain of relinquishing important parts of themselves to conform to a role designed for men. Often they compartmentalize themselves and their lives with the hope of achieving acceptance in the corporate world. Even those women who have achieved high status as executives feel insecure about ever really fitting in and sad about the compromises they make attempting to do so (Lyons, 2001).

Summary

The results of our study suggest that gender is an active variable in the assessment of male and female executive leadership. Our findings validate theoretical research on the effects of gender-based assumptions about leadership, particularly at the executive level, and support empirical research done mostly on nonexecutive populations. More research in this vein is recommended, especially using data gathered from executives themselves, to increase confidence in the transferability of these results and to deepen insight into the dynamics that underlie them. The critical themes that emerged here are:

1. Male executives, in particular, associate good leadership with stereotypical notions of male behavior, consistent with Valian's (1998) "gender schemas" and Schein's (1973, 2001) "think manager-think male."
2. Both men's performance and women's performance are evaluated according to gender expectations—to a different effect. A man's gender is an unacknowledged or tacit factor that makes him a seamless fit in senior corporate roles, whereas a woman's gender is salient and a perceived obstacle to her belonging in the executive group.

3. When executives evaluate the leadership performance of male and female colleagues, they are far more likely to comment on a woman's gender (in our research, 25 times more likely) than they are to comment on a man's gender, without any prompting to do so.

4. No matter how she behaves, the fact that a woman is a woman puts her at odds with prevailing norms for leaders at the top of corporate organizations. A woman executive may exhibit many of the behaviors expected of someone in her role; nonetheless, her gender stands out and often works against her success.

5. Men and women alike agree that it is up to women to adapt to fit in; however, women's attempts to adapt are not unequivocally welcomed and may, in fact, backfire. It is challenging for women to live up simultaneously to role expectations for their gender and their job.

6. Women acknowledge the emotional price they pay as they attempt to adapt to the executive leadership role. Some men also recognize the challenge women face in the executive suite.

Advice for CEOs, in Partnership with CHROs
- Know thyself; enhance your gender IQ.
- Raise the awareness of the executive team and the board of directors about gender dynamics.
- Develop rigorous selection, succession, and development processes; set goals for selecting women into top jobs and hold the executive team accountable for results.
- Shine a light on unconscious gender assumptions and facilitate open, candid conversations to explore gender biases; ask questions when you suspect gender bias is in play—not to blame, but to learn.
- Make selections for top positions using a team approach.

Discussion

This study shows that women who claim that their gender is being held against them may have a basis in reality for their complaints and that any woman's struggle to be accepted at the highest levels in business is not idiosyncratic. These are group-level phenomena that are not merely reflective of the performance of an individual woman—they are patterns that exist across companies, industries, and personalities.

In drawing such conclusions, we feel concerned about discouraging executive women and male corporate leaders who are committed to their success. Because there have been many well-intentioned efforts to create a level playing field for women, the news that gender continues to cloud their experience at work cannot be welcomed. These *in situ* reports, as disturbing as they may be, provide guidance about where change efforts need to be directed.

Corporate leaders need to recognize how a masculine model for leadership shapes the evaluation of women's performance and threatens their success, even in companies with rigorous diversity policies and programs. All of us, men and women, have been socialized to think about gender in restrictive terms; as our study shows, not just men have attitudes and behaviors reflect such limitations. Men more often have the power to influence women's careers, so hope lies in their leading the way to talk more openly about these phenomena.

Moreover, redefining what constitutes good leadership would benefit men too (Eagly, 2002). Just as women are thwarted by the gender-based attitudes described here, men's development as human beings and as executives is limited when they do not express qualities associated with the "feminine" realm, such as listening, facilitating, and encouraging others (Lyons, 2001). It has been shown that executives who strike the right balance between "forceful" and "enabling" leadership behaviors receive higher effectiveness ratings for their performance (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003, 2006).

Having an awareness of an unwanted bias and being motivated to correct it are the first steps to making such a change (Wilson & Brekke, 1994). Doing so will require corporate leaders to come to terms with what is lost and what is gained by changing, and to understand how a system that elevates men and maleness has been perpetuated, sometimes despite their good intentions. Cultivating a new model for leadership requires courage and emotional maturity as much as it does skill and effort. Given what is at stake for companies and their leaders, we urge CEOs to take up that challenge, which we know will not be easy. Fortunately, more so than ever before, CEOs recognize that it is the company's responsibility to meet the needs of women in management and they are less inclined to expect women to change to fit into the corporate culture (Catalyst, 2003).

The recent experience of two elite universities may shed light on which roads to take—and which to avoid—in bringing such gender dynamics to light. Lawrence Summers, Harvard's former president, received broad criticism for his remarks about the innate capabilities of women in the sciences, which he made at a professional meeting. Should other leaders conclude from his experience that open discussion about gender would lead to personal censure? We think not: Consider how MIT's former president responded more constructively to a provocative situation.

In 1999, MIT's then-president Charles Vest, when presented with a report about the gender bias experienced by women faculty, released the findings publicly and published his reactions on the university website. He said, "I have always believed that contemporary gender discrimination is part reality and part perception. True, but I now understand that reality is by far the greater part of the balance." His response was a pleasant surprise to many people who applauded Vest's courage and candor (*The New York Times*, Dec. 7, 2003).

These examples from academia show that conversations about gender dynamics—when based on data, not personal speculation, and when conducted in the right setting with the right intention—can help people talk authentically about what they are thinking and experiencing, and, ideally, take constructive action.

Advice for Executive Coaches
- Know thyself; enhance your gender IQ.
- Understand the gender dynamics of the organizations in which your clients work.
- Deal with gender biases and dynamics openly; do not minimize or explain them away.
- Help women executives to avoid taking gender-skewed feedback personally.
- Involve the boss and other key leaders to address the problem systemically.
- Help women accept and leverage their strengths.

Recommendations for Action

Our research leads us to conclude that corporate leaders must acknowledge a similar reality in their own organizations, make it discussable, and guide efforts to correct it. Senior leaders can start by admitting that such conversations do not occur openly in their workplaces and then creating safe conditions for these exchanges to begin. In doing so, America's corporate chiefs can demonstrate their personal commitment to turn the companies in their charge into places where all executives can lead to the best of their ability.

1. For a CEO, there are several specific ways to raise gender consciousness in the organization—perhaps beginning with one's own education—and set a constructive tone for airing issues raised by this study. Ensure that the board and the management team have a sophisticated understanding of how gender can be an unspoken and unconscious variable in performance assessment. This might be seen as raising the Gender IQ of the top leadership. Meetings on executive selection and succession planning are ideal settings for such a discussion, when the organization's leaders are making judgments about the past achievements and potential of their colleagues. In such instances, a CEO can take the lead in pointing out examples of potential bias, not for the purpose of blaming anyone, but to illustrate how restrictive thinking about gender skews the evaluation of a woman's performance. (Especially when done by a male CEO, such an intervention is potent). Also, when selecting the senior team or recruiting board members, CEOs can choose people who are "gender wise." Finally, CEOs can make it clear that ideally the gender profile of the company's leadership should mirror the gender make-up of the general population.

2. HR executives can support the CEO in the efforts just outlined and also ensure that selection, succession, and development systems are based on a holistic competency model. In this way, they can help to broaden the capabilities of all the company's leaders and shine a light on the tacit assumption that executive jobs are inherently for men. Perhaps most important, HR leaders can be instrumental in making sure that "political correctness" or unwarranted concerns about legal liability do not stifle open, constructive conversation about sensitive topics that need to be addressed.

3. Executive coaches should recognize that women's experience in corporations differs from men's in the ways described in this study. As explained, our data came from actual feedback reports prepared for coaching clients. Coaches can anticipate how a woman leader who reads such comments might feel and recognize that even a seasoned executive will be sensitive to similar judgments being made about her. The coach can play a critical role in helping women to make sense of their feedback, discerning what relates to the actual performance of the individual and what reflects a gender bias. Making sure that women take full account of their strengths can serve as a counterweight to unjustifiable criticism. (See Ruderman & Ohlott, 2005, for a guide to coaching women.)

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

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