



Do We Really Promote on Merit? Be Honest!

Let's consider the facts:

- Women hold only 9.2% of executive key management positions in ASX 500 companies
- This drops to 6.2% if you only look at line management positions with P&L responsibility
- 63.1% of ASX 500 companies do not have any female executive managers

Is this evidence of discrimination? Well, yes, but it's not as simple as you may think. Firstly, how do you define merit. When we ask managers this question most often they can't give a detailed answer and struggle to move beyond generalisations.

When you add to this that merit differs for men and women - research shows men are primarily judged on their (future) potential, whereas women are more often judged on their (past) results - we start to see the inherent potential for a gender bias.

In addition, we view men and women through an unconscious set of gender stereotypes that are universally held. Males and females hold the same set of stereotypes; these are deep-rooted cultural norms that have persisted for hundreds of thousands of years. So what are they?

We see:

- Independence,
- Decisiveness,
- Dominance, and
- Ambition

as typically male traits. Men are seen as chasing opportunity and as being 'self-oriented'.

In contrast, our view of women couldn't

be more different:

- Selfless,
- Nurturing,
- Emotional, and
- Friendly

are the traits typically attributed to women. Women are seen as driven by constraint and as being 'other-oriented'.

Both men and women are penalised if they stray outside the gender norms.



"I get the feeling, gentlemen, that you don't take having a female boss that seriously."

We have heard women being called 'pushy' for demonstrating male traits and men called 'wimps' for demonstrating female traits. Men who use an autocratic leadership style are often judged as being effective managers whereas women who use the autocratic style are judged far less favourably.

The degree of penalty applied to behaviours seen as outside the gender norm depends heavily on the gender balance within the group in question. What constitutes 'acceptable' behaviour, in relation to female gender norms,

broadens significantly once the number of women, at a given level, is at least 35%.

This explains why we have made so little progress when it comes to senior executive roles. Although women now constitute 45% of the workforce and over 50% of university graduates, at the senior leadership levels the distribution is still heavily skewed towards males.

In groups with less than 15% female representation (i.e. in most senior executive teams) the penalty for operating outside of gender norms can go as far as outright hostility. Yet at the same time it is impossible for women to reach that level without adopting male leadership traits (confidence, self-promotion, strength, decisiveness). So it is in a female leaders interests to coach and mentor other women. Once there are at least 35% women at her level a female manager does not have to waste energy self-regulating to female gender norm stereotypes if her behavioural style fits more naturally into a male gender norm.

In themselves these gender stereotypes are not the reason women struggle to make it into senior executive roles. The problem in relation to progressing into those roles is that the stereotypes also still inform our perceptions of what 'leadership' means.

Historically we associate 'leadership' with male gender traits - dominance, strength, independence, decisiveness.



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These beliefs are still held unconsciously, even though most organisations have realised that, given the increased complexity of the business environment, teamwork, collaboration and coaching are highly effective in terms of producing desired business outcomes.

In addition to different judgement criteria for merit and different gender norms, there is a third component that impacts women's prospects of promotion in male dominated environments - the assumption of competing priorities.

When Bain & Company in 2011 asked men and women what stops women from reaching the top, there was a clear difference in response patterns. Women blamed the gender stereotypes (the difference in women's and men's leadership style), yet men overwhelmingly blamed 'competing priorities'.

It turned out that the vast majority of men simply assume that women progression is hampered by having to manage 'family commitments'.

Given that only a tiny minority of women hold the same views, and that

those women tended to be younger, it is quite clear that the men do not seek out the evidence that could easily dispel those beliefs. We all suffer from 'confirmation bias' when it comes to unconsciously held beliefs (we are literally blind to evidence that contradicts our beliefs), but in this case the consequences amplify the already unlevel playing field.

So what can and needs to be done that promoting on merit actually results in equal opportunity even at the executive level? Women can and need to adopt some of the male leadership traits and display confidence and promote their achievements. To not fall into the 'gender stereotype violation' trap they need to do this whilst maintaining 'likeability' at the same time. This is a tough ask and seems doubly unfair, but has proven in practice to be the most effective strategy for women.

Further, women need to point out their level of commitment to work and remind their managers and peers that they are getting the results. This is especially relevant for women with family commitments. Women typically make up for the interruptions or the time off work by working doubly hard

or late - but without pointing this out to their managers and peers. The result is that it won't be noticed and the effort is wasted - the 'competing priorities' belief stays in place.

Finally women need to insist on objective criteria for judging 'merit'. Organisations also have a role to play in ensuring that men and women are offered equal opportunities in reaching the top. This includes defining and measuring leadership capabilities in a way that includes both male and female traits and that is most linked to commercial outcomes. This should then lead to a review of promotion practices that looks for any hidden bias and implements objective criteria across all levels of the hierarchy.

In addition organisations need to invest in making the hidden biases and unconsciously held beliefs, such as gender stereotypes, conscious through educating their senior managers. Research is providing both male and female managers with insights and pragmatic ways of overcoming this unconscious bias. The first step is realising we don't know what we don't know.



Lynn Johnson, Managing Director
Lynn originates from the UK and immigrated to Australia in 1996. She holds a PhD in particle physics and has worked as a research physicist for ICI in the UK before embarking on a journey that led her from a career in management consulting to becoming the CEO of a charity and setting up Leadership Mastery in 2001.

Lynn has extensive experience in designing and delivering programs that help people learn more about themselves, make better choices and open their mind to new possibilities. Her focus over recent years has been to coach business leaders in gaining self-awareness, developing emotional intelligence and leadership flexibility. This extensive background in coaching has allowed her to develop the coaching tools and interventions for Leadership Mastery.

Lynn is qualified in Human Synergistics LSI, DISC, NLP, and other coaching tools. She has delivered in excess of 3,000 hours of individual coaching and over 1,500 hours of group coaching to business leaders over the past 11 years.



Peter Lanius, Director
Peter originates from Berlin, Germany and immigrated to Australia in 1996. He holds a PhD in particle physics. Peter spent the first ten years of his career as a consultant and project manager in the IT&T industry. He held senior project management positions in blue-chip companies including Hewlett-Packard, Telstra and Texas Instruments. Throughout this time Peter placed great

emphasis on coaching his staff and creating successful teams.

In 2002 Peter became a director of Leadership Mastery. Peter has a keen interest in human development, psychology, coaching, behavioural economics, neuroscience, advanced communication strategies and change management. These interests have led him to attend a broad range of trainings and seminars; he puts these learnings into practice in his coaching work.

He has attained qualifications in Human Synergistics LSI, DISC, NLP, Time Line Therapy, Hypnosis and a number of other coaching tools and techniques. He has delivered over 2,500 hours of individual coaching and over 500 hours of group coaching to business leaders and managers over the past 9 years.

For further information, please contact Peter Lanius from Leadership Mastery on 0405 213 264 or email: planius@leadershipmastery.com.au



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