

What Leaders Need to Know

The Necessity of Redefining Leadership

Focusing on gender equality was highlighted as a good place for companies to start given the preponderance of women in the healthcare workforce. The learnings provide critical input for effectively managing diversity, equity and inclusion for all employees.

HBA Honorable Mentors were emphatic about the business case for gender, and other forms, of diversity,

Diversity is good for business. It's pragmatic. I don't know how you could run a successful business without it.

Despite its importance, formidable obstacles prevent gender parity. This section outlines the root causes that stymie efforts to create gender parity in leadership.

MASCULINE WORK CULTURES PERSIST.

Male allies identified the deeply-embedded male construct of leadership as a primary barrier to strengthening gender diversity. The masculine style emphasizes competition, hierarchy, bravado and being in control. Vulnerabilities are taboo.

Masculine work cultures not only count fewer women leaders among their ranks but also benefit less from diversity given that women elevated to leadership roles tend to embody the masculine style. In truth, many men also do not resonate with workplaces characterized by stereotypical masculine norms.

GENDER DOUBLE STANDARDS ARE RAMPANT.

Male allies told story after story of situations where women and men demonstrating similar behaviors were judged very differently. Research indicates that women confront negative judgments about their leadership style regardless of whether it manifests as masculine or feminine. Women deemed as highly ambitious are perceived as unlikable while women perceived as highly nurturing are pegged as lacking leadership presence. Allies shared their experiences witnessing gender biases, "Mentoring ambitious women has almost become a marching call for me. A senior leader in my network will say, 'I've got a female employee who is viewed as abrasive. She's very ambitious and we have to find a way to bring those things together,'" and "A man takes charge and gets it done while a woman is bossy and annoying." Women walk a fine line seeking to find the ever-elusive right balance.

Parental status was highlighted as an area where double standards surface. While men were celebrated as involved parents, women managing substantial parenting demands received no such encouragement. Another double standard is men being excused for short-comings and having others 'provide cover' while women do not experience similar leniency and support.

BIAS IS NOT GENDER SPECIFIC.

Men often struggle to see the extent to which masculine norms color the perceptions of leadership behavior and the definitions of success in many corporate environments. Male allies highlighted that not only men but also women harbor gender biases they fail to recognize, as captured in research and in allies' workplace interactions. An ally described a female HR business partner messaging in multiple situations that he should be hiring men for open positions. For both men and women, unexamined biases give rise to biased decisions in which the decision-maker deeply believes the outcome is equitable.

AFFINITY PERPETUATES BIASES.

The biological tendency for humans to gravitate toward those like themselves explains the typical situation of men developing more, and deeper, relationships with other men at work, including men earlier in their careers who may remind them of themselves at an earlier stage. While these naturally-occurring relationships are not the problem, it is problematic when business decisions are driven by affinity rather than substance. Decisions related to hiring, promotions and assignments need to be based on clear criteria and consistent practices. Only with structured approaches to talent decisions can bias be mitigated and eliminated.

The bottom line is without redefining leadership, by broadening the stereotypical masculine success model, gender parity will remain out of reach: "If men do not adapt the environments they create and think differently about how they can be successful (in developing women), we have no shot at seeing any significant change in the workplace."

Unconscious bias remains one of the biggest challenges to accelerating women in leadership. The first step to overcoming unconscious bias is we all must accept it exists. It is real. Once we accept it exists, then we must take steps to overcome it including an open-minded, collaborative, and inclusive mission among diverse leaders to define and role model a modern form of best-in-class leadership.

- JACOPO LEONARDI partner, Agent Capital