Organizational Dynamics (2016) 45, 132–138

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/orgdyn

Underestimating one's leadership impact: Are women leaders more susceptible?☆

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past 20 years, women have made significant inroads into the world of leadership and management in the U.S. In fact, it is estimated that nearly 50% of supervisory and management positions are currently held by women. Yet, when we look at the inroads into the very top positions (i.e., C-suite), these proportions fall off dramatically (under 5%). Many reasons have been proposed for this significant drop off, including self-selection and discrimination. Recently, however, research has examined more subtle reasons for such a drop. For example, the notion of "think leader, think male" is still alive and well. This stereotype is prevalent among both men and women. While there is no research to support the notion that men make better leaders than women, it is possible that this stereotype is influencing women's opinions of themselves as leaders. This led us to speculate about women leaders' self-awareness. Are women aware of their leadership capabilities and their potential to serve in senior positions? Is it possible that women are less aware of their leadership abilities than their male counterparts? Is it possible that they are failing to appreciate their own talents and impact?

Self-awareness is a critical skill for leaders. While self-awareness is most often thought of as an awareness of one's own strengths and weaknesses, it also involves the ability to accurately understand how one is perceived by others. This latter aspect of self-awareness, which has been referred to as meta-perception, is less understood. Perhaps women are less aware of how they are viewed by others in terms of their leadership skills? If so, could this contribute to their pursuits of (or reluctance to pursue) leadership positions? We set out to explore these questions.

☆ This article was accepted by the former editors, Fred Luthans and John Slocum.

SELF-AWARENESS

Self-awareness is critical to one's ability to learn, change, and develop. As the social psychologist, Roy Baumeister, states, "Self-awareness is an inherent part of belonging to any and every cultural society." Jonathan Brown adds that self-awareness is often regarded as the "sine qua non of psychological health." In the realm of leadership, self-awareness is considered one of the most essential interpersonal competencies that effective leaders must possess. Not surprisingly, self-awareness has been shown to be positively correlated with leader behavior and performance, interpersonal effectiveness, and managerial success and effectiveness, and it can help distinguish high and average performing managers. Clearly, self-awareness matters. There are actually two types of self-awareness, one of which has received most of the attention, yet both are critical.

The first component of self-awareness deals with knowing and understanding oneself and the self-resources one possesses. By "self-resources," we mean the aspects of the leader that make up her identity and self-knowledge, such as character traits, behavioral strengths and weaknesses, sense of purpose or calling, core values and beliefs, motivations and desires, and the like. This is the commonly known and understood component of self-awareness, the one presented in leadership development programs by human resource professionals, in management education, and through the popular press. It is what we refer to as the "awareness of who I am" component of self-awareness.

This first component of self-awareness is the repository of self-knowledge that helps leaders make difficult decisions, helps them know when to act versus when to reach out to others, and helps them to be authentic. This awareness is the *self-focused* aspect of leader self-awareness that gives leaders a clear sense of who they are, what they want, what limits they

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2016.02.007

have, and how to best assert themselves and self-manage for optimal outcomes. This type of self-awareness is related to self-efficacy and self-esteem, as it allows one to understand themselves and their strengths.

In addition to the first component described above, psychology has long presented a definition of self-awareness that has two components. We consider the second component of self-awareness the ''forgotten'' component because somehow it was lost in how we define, evaluate, measure, and teach self-awareness. Its influence in how we function in everyday life is rarely discussed. This second component is what we call the *other-focused* component of self-awareness. Specifically, the second component is our ability to anticipate how accurately others perceive us (e.g., being aware of and anticipating the implications of our emotions and behaviors on others). This component deals with how aware we are of how others experience us and our leadership.

From a leadership perspective, the second component is critical. Leaders may be clear in how they see themselves, know their strengths, their aspirations and goals, and even be aware of their weaknesses, but they may have little awareness of how their actions influence others. This is the aspect of self-awareness that may be impacting women and how they see themselves as leaders. The forgotten component is represented in the following true story from the life of Charles Francis Adams.

> ''*Charles Francis Adams, the grandson of the second president of the United States, was a successful lawyer, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, and the U.S. ambassador to Britain. Amidst his responsibilities, he had little time to spare. He did, however, keep a diary. One day he wrote, 'Went fishing with my son today—a day wasted!' On that same date, Charles's son, Brooks Adams, had printed in his own diary, 'Went fishing with my father today—the most wonderful day of my life*'.

When considering the second component of self-awareness, one might ask: could Charles Adams anticipate that his son would have considered the fishing expedition as the most wonderful day of Brooks' young life? Was Charles aware of how his choice to go fishing was experienced by his son?

Leaders may often be aware of the first component of self-awareness and yet struggle with the second component. Doing so is not without consequences, as can be considered with the story Charles Adams. For example, given the information in the story, and assuming Charles is not aware of what his son wrote in his diary, we might conclude it is very unlikely that Charles will want to take his son fishing again anytime soon.

How is this story and the forgotten aspect of self-awareness related to women and leadership? Many years ago, women were found to suffer from lower self-esteem than men, particularly in the workplace. This phenomenon, however, has virtually disappeared. Rarely do we see gender differences in self-esteem. Additionally, with the proliferation of multi-source feedback interventions where leaders are typically rated by themselves and others, women self-rate similarly to men. Women do not see themselves as less capable leaders compared to men.

But what about the second, forgotten component of self-awareness: our accuracy in how we think others see us? Our research has shown that this second component of leader self-awareness may be as important, or more so, to leadership than the first component. In fact, the second component is not just essential in recognizing the negative impact a leader may have on others but also in recognizing the positive impact a leader is having on those he or she leads.

Consider a leader who is providing inspirational leadership to a team and considers himself inspirational, but he does not believe his team sees him as an inspirational leader. He may not leverage that capability to its fullest and over time may withdraw his efforts to be an inspiration to others. Similarly, consider a leader who has been working hard to prepare herself to assume a higher level of responsibility in the organization. She feels she is ready to make that move, her peers and senior management feel the same, but she does not believe others consider her ready to make a move. The result . . . she does not seek out the new responsibility or communicate her wishes for advancement. Instead, she waits to be approached by others about advancing upward.

There are a number of reasons women may underestimate how they are seen by others. First, humility has been found to be a characteristic more important for women than for men. Women who brag about their success or capabilities are viewed more negatively than men who engage in the same behavior. Second, women are more sensitive to negative feedback and take it more personally. Men are more likely to discount the feedback or its provider. Third, men and women still harbor stereotypic views that leader characteristics are more masculine and thus are more suitable for men. This is consistent with what has been termed role congruity theory. That is, males and females have stereotypic masculine or feminine characteristics that have been deemed by society as more appropriate for particular roles. Simplistically, women are nurturers and are believed to be suited for care-giving roles, and men are assertive and are believed to be suited for leadership roles. Fourth, women have been subjected to inequalities in the workplace (which are declining, but nevertheless stories still abound). Taken together, we speculated that perhaps while women may recognize their own worth or value as leaders, they may not believe these opinions are shared by others.

In order to begin to understand this question, we embarked upon research that would enlighten us about not only how men and women view their own leadership, but how they think they are viewed by others. Interestingly, in three studies where we examined different aspects of leadership (e.g., emotionally intelligent leadership, transformational leadership, and leadership competencies) from experienced managers, women self-rated their leadership no differently than men self-rated. Additionally, the women were not rated lower than men were rated by their subordinates or bosses. But across our studies, women under-estimated how they were viewed by others (including their direct reports, peers, and bosses) while men did not. Below, we describe the results of these studies and our attempts to gain insight to the causes and consequences of this under-estimation phenomenon.

UNDER-ESTIMATION: WHAT WE FOUND

Across studies, we consistently found that women leaders under-estimated (i.e., predicted lower) how others viewed