

Leadership models are built on male infrastructure

Head to head

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Do businesses need gender quotas?

Progress certainly hasn't been impressive, despite all the guidelines and good intentions. But the more pressing question is what is stopping more women from occupying the mid and senior levels of leadership? Childcare and flexible working arrangements cannot completely explain this enduring imbalance.

So what is holding women back?

Organisations have an unconscious male bias. Their leadership

infrastructure – competency models, assessment tools, development programmes and promotion processes – are designed around male behavioural data. More insidiously, this blueprint affects how we talk about successful leaders and our assumptions about what good leadership looks like. In my experience, today's organisations might be less inclined to recruit in the image of their male senior leaders but they still develop them in that mould.

How can women respond?

Many of my female clients acknowledge that at some point they have consciously or unconsciously tried to conform to the "leadership blueprint". One well respected senior partner at a leading strategy

consultancy confided that: "It worked pretty well but only up to a point. It never did feel like me and I found it draining to put on an act. Over time, and with the benefit of seeing other role models, I found the confidence to define my own business development approach that was based on my principles and personality. Finding my own authentic style was the key to my career taking off."

Can emulating men ever work?

A recent overview of more than 100 studies said that women were rated lower when they adopted stereotypically masculine authoritative leadership styles. It's difficult for women not to fall into the trap of trying to emulate male leaders, though, as female role

models are thinner on the ground. Even in the business schools, leadership theory is written from a male perspective and often informed by a male research base. Academics struggle to represent a balanced gender view because this balance simply doesn't yet exist in most businesses. In the workplace, in business schools and in society generally, our potential female leaders are accumulating their leadership learning from watching men in action.

How might businesses respond?

Businesses need to ask whether they are expecting women to jump through male oriented leadership hoops. More recent leadership theories stress more female leadership qualities such as interpersonal and relationship building skills. Emotional intelligence is a more recent addition. But defining male and female leadership qualities isn't helpful: while decisiveness, drive and risk-taking continue to be viewed as predominantly masculine attributes, softer skills can be relegated to optional extras.

Are there signs of progress?

Everyone needs to guard against adopting a development approach that isn't tailored to personal needs, aspirations and realities. If we believe that gender is a formative part of identity, then it must be a formative part of how we approach leadership.

Some organisations are taking brave steps by actively nurturing more diverse leadership styles and identifying where gender bias might unconsciously be part of their

leadership processes.

So is it an individual thing?

From an individual perspective, a regular "leadership health check" can help you stay alert to your true development needs. Taking the opportunity to pause, take stock, and ditch "borrowed" leadership behaviours can be incredibly cathartic.

Recalibrating your leadership approach to one that fits you is a personal prescription for long-term success. As the American scholar Warren Bennis said: "Becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It is precisely that simple, and it is also that difficult."

