

JOURNAL REPORTS: LEADERSHIP

Women Are Less Likely to Delegate Than Men—and That Might Hurt Their Careers

When women don't delegate, they have less time for big-picture work and mentoring

By Michelle Ma

Oct. 12, 2019 5:30 am ET



Women are more likely than men to view delegating work as aggressive and assertive, studies show. PHOTO: CARMEN SEGOVIA

Conventional wisdom says getting ahead means putting your head down and doing the work. The corner office goes to the one who puts in the hours. But what if it doesn't?

The key to workplace success might instead lie *not* in doing the work, but rather in passing much of it on to others. And new research suggests that women are at a big disadvantage on that delegation front.

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Do you find it difficult To delegate? Why or why not? Join the conversation below.

That's the main takeaway from a quintet of Columbia Business School studies that examine differences in the way men and women delegate. Led by Modupe Akinola, an associate professor of management at the business school, researchers found that women are less likely to delegate than men, are more likely to feel guilty about doing so

and tend to have less-courteous interactions with subordinates when they do pass on tasks.

The problem then is that women who don't delegate have little time for big-picture work, and miss opportunities to train and mentor their subordinates, the Columbia researchers found.

One study asked participants to respond to a scenario in which they were the vice president of marketing at a global company, with a busy schedule and a long to-do list, including interviewing a candidate for an important role in their organization. When participants were asked whether they would ask an equally busy junior employee to take on the interview, women were less likely than men to hand off the interview. They were also more likely to feel guilty if they did delegate the job and the employee they asked to take on the task did a subpar job.

Dr. Akinola says the studies show that women are more likely than men to view delegation as aggressive and assertive. Past studies suggest that women are judged more harshly than men for assertive, stereotypically male behavior like negotiating salaries.

Men, the Columbia studies found, tend to make pleasant small talk with employees when delegating tasks to them, while women tend to cut the interactions short, a symptom of discomfort with delegation, Dr. Akinola says. "If you're nervous and anxious about doing something, you just want to get it done and get it out of the way."

To get ahead, women should fight the inclination to do all the work themselves, Dr. Akinola says. Managers can encourage women to delegate more by emphasizing the mentorship and development aspects of giving people a chance to prove themselves, she says. "Not only are you saving time for yourself, you're giving other people an opportunity."

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WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE

This article is part of a Wall Street Journal special report on women, men and work based on a study by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Co.

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