

Gender

In Search of a Less Sexist Hiring Process

by Avivah Wittenberg-Cox

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The hard truth is that the gender balance at the top of the business world won't change until the gentlemen currently in power want it to — and learn how to do it. The challenge is that both men and women seem to buy into the mistaken notion that business today is built on meritocracy. A recent study by three business school professors illustrates why this is so rarely true.

Several managers were asked to recruit people to run some mathematical tasks. The talent offered to them was an equal mix of men and women, with equivalent skills. The researchers found four things that exactly echo what I have seen in countless companies:

- Male and female managers were twice as likely to recruit men, based on paper applications.
- When interviewed, the male candidates inflated their abilities while the women downplayed theirs. But recruiting managers failed to compensate for that difference, and were still twice as likely to choose the man.

- Even when provided with data that the women were just as capable, the managers still preferred men (who were 1.5 times as likely to be hired).
- When managers knowingly chose a candidate who had performed worse on the test, they were two-thirds more likely to choose a male candidate.

Until hiring and promotion practices change, women can “lean in” all they like, graduate in record numbers from top universities, and dominate buying decisions — but they still are much less likely to make it to the top. The corporate world is led by men confident that they are identifying talent objectively and effectively. The reality, underlined by this and many other reports, is that decision-making about talent is rife with unconscious assumptions and personal biases.

Leaders are routinely identified based on perceived ambition, self-confidence and charisma. Yet they are doing little more than self-replicating a masculine, Anglo-Saxon management style that may have outlived its utility in today’s highly complex, global and multi-cultural business world. Consider: Ambition is usually laced with hubris (hasn’t the financial crisis taught us this?). Self-confidence is a poor proxy for competence. And charisma is often a polite way of saying “loud” and “dominant” – something many of our Asian colleagues are happy to quietly point out.

In Western companies, a preference for a masculine style of leadership is deeply ingrained, largely unconscious and reliably self-reinforcing. The only hope of overcoming anything unconscious is to make it conscious. So self-awareness and understanding is the key challenge for any organization that really wants to change its very human and natural preference to reproduce itself in its own image. This is just as true for shifting away from the dominance of any group in power – whether it’s all men, all engineers or all people born in the home country of your corporate headquarters.

This kind of change takes leadership, and lots of it. This requires a number of steps, mostly to do with getting the majority in power to be responsible and accountable for leading the change. They are the only ones that can do it. Expecting women to be responsible for gender balancing organizations — either by setting up a corporate “women’s network” or asking them to try harder — is a set-up-to-fail design error. Instead, corporations need to take several steps to redesign how they’re hiring and promoting talent. I discuss this in detail in my latest book, *Seven Steps to Leading a Gender Balanced Business*, but here is the short version of the steps that apply to hiring:

- **Reframe** the issue so that it is seen as a business issue and not a women’s issue. If managers are choosing less qualified men over more qualified women, the company is clearly losing valuable talent. Even if hiring managers are choosing equally qualified men, if they’re doing it in dramatically greater numbers (as the study above shows they do), the company is still missing an opportunity to build the kind of balanced workforce that we know produces more creative results.

- **Build the skills of the majority**, rather than the minority. Most companies spend more effort “fixing” women than on educating managers. You can expect all your women to suddenly change their behavior and start over-selling their skills, as the men in the study above did — but frankly, do you really want them to? Research also shows that when they do, they are judged negatively for it. Instead, get leaders to understand their own unconscious preferences in gender issues and learn how to achieve the balance they say they want. Educate all managers – both male and female – using studies like this one to make sure they understand well-researched behavioral differences between genders and can manage effectively across them.

- **Get hiring systems to match.** The biases shown in the above study are also at work within many systemic HR processes. For instance, it’s common practice in large companies to have “ambition” be an explicit criteria for leadership. Many studies have shown that men tend to over-promote themselves and women tend to do the contrary. So leadership selection and assessment panels (that are often neither

gender balanced nor gender aware) naturally give preference to the classic existing profile, convinced that they are objectively evaluating the “best.” This does not make room to develop the majority of today’s talent for tomorrow’s world. Nor allow a variety of leadership styles to co-exist.

Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting the same result. Companies that continue to use biased talent management systems — unwittingly or not — will continue to get exactly the same results. Equally competent women will learn from the system that others are considered better — and believe it. “People don’t even learn that they are equally capable,” as one of the study’s coauthors, Luigi Zingales of the Booth School of Business at the University of Chicago, told the *New York Times*. Research pointing to women’s supposed “lack of self-confidence” overlooks this point: Men and women are born with similar ambitions, talents and ideas. Then we teach them bias.

Companies get the women — and leaders — they *design*. Ignoring our biases simply lets the dominant group continue to dominate. The only way out is embracing our unconscious judgements. Learn to lead, and don’t let your bias get the better of your talent.

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