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The Unbearable Heaviness of Leadership: Why Some Women Decide Not to Bear it, and 5 Ways to Ease the Burden

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Last year we published an article in this journal about why so few women serve as top leaders in West Michigan, and the barriers that block them: gender stereotypes, different career socialization, and discriminatory mindsets. Certainly women, especially minority women, aspire to leadership, and are willing to apply for leadership positions if there are opportunities. And firms with more women in leadership have stronger returns, sales and invested capital, improved social responsibility, and smaller pay gaps (Tate & Yang, 2015).

Still, we wondered: why, in 2018, do gender stereotypes, institutional barriers, and discrimination stand in the way? We reached out to 1,700 men and women at six more Michigan colleges and universities. We found that many competent and experienced women choose not to aspire to top leadership positions. Competent women with more work experience are less likely to aspire to leadership, compared with equally competent men. And competent women with less work experience are more likely to aspire to leadership, compared with men. Why would this be?

Let’s review some facts. Gender diversity in organizations is good because firms with more gender diversity in top management show lower risk and better performance (Perryman et al., 2016). But in U.S. organizations, women hold fewer than 20% of top leadership jobs. In U.S. colleges and universities, women hold fewer than 25% of leadership positions (such as full professors, college presidents, and chief academic officers), although 43% of faculty and staff are women (Johnson, 2016). Women also earn 20% less than men in U.S. universities (Lennon, 2013).

So why don’t more women aspire to be leaders? We found that the more women associate leadership with negative aspects, the less likely they aspire to leadership. This isn’t the case for men. Many women perceive that leadership puts a high demand on family life, takes away from personal and work flexibility, comes with high costs, and provides insufficient rewards. These negatives don’t seem to matter to men, who aspire to leadership despite them.

Also, the amount of work experience they have influences women’s aspirations to leadership differently than it does for men. Despite what some say, it’s not that women underestimate their competency to lead or are afraid to “lean in” (Sandberg & Scovell, 2013). Rather, among competent men and women, women aspire to leadership based on the amount of experience they have – and not in the way you might presume. Competent women with less work experience are more likely to aspire to leadership, compared with men. And competent women with more work experience are less likely to aspire to leadership, compared with men. But don’t these results seem backwards?

It turns out that the same barriers — gender stereotypes, different career socialization, and discrimination — explain these counterintuitive results. Perhaps younger women with limited experience are not yet discouraged by the unbearably difficult road to leadership. But among senior women with more work experience, it is precisely their longer tenure, their greater experience that combines with the three barriers to dampen their aspirations to leadership.

In other words, as women gain experience and positions of greater responsibility, they become interested in the top roles. But often after serving in middle-management, something interesting happens. As they aspire to higher positions, women find more resistance than they thought. Many senior women say that the barriers to the CEO and other top management jobs are more deeply rooted in discrimination and persistently different socialization than they thought when they had less experience. For example, a female senior executive noted that she always had to perform better than everyone else to be considered equal. But when women do well and assert it so that it is noticed, men often react badly. Women who negotiate for promotions are 30% more likely than men to be labeled intimidating, bossy, or aggressive. Even when women are well-established in the upper management pipeline, they are often overlooked. One woman noted that the men in her organization received promotions in two years, while women had to wait three years, with the only explanation being “we’re not sure she is ready for the job” (Chira, 2017).

Then there’s sex discrimination in wages. Women working full time in 2016 made 81 cents for each dollar made by men (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). The gap is larger among college graduates, and more so in business, finance, and legal careers than in science and technology. So, the more professional the field, the larger the wage gap, which increases with age, when women marry, and start to have children.

Finally, there’s sexual misconduct. In its most egregious form, sexual assault of the kind practiced by some powerful men in politics, media, and technology happens so frequently that it chips away at a woman’s patience and sense of self, even among strong and successful women. Women often start their professional careers with optimism, but sexual misconduct in the workplace dampens women’s autonomy and influences the choices they make, including their aspiration for top positions. Women often deal with sexual misconduct by brushing it off, not calling it out, and internalizing it. This becomes tiring, then exhausting, as women gain more experience and wisdom about how their organizations work. While the men succeed in negotiating powerful deals for themselves - and are commended for being fierce and tactical - women must balance coming across as assertive but not too aggressive just to get their fair share. So women soldier on, often to exhaustion. After enduring decades of sex discrimination and misconduct, women get tired of fighting, and many opt out of the running for top leadership.

**What can organizations do to get more experienced women into leadership?**

Our study of Michigan universities suggests that organizations can do five things to lighten the burden, reduce the negatives, and encourage competent, experienced women to seek top leadership posts.

**Provide monetary and non-monetary incentives to women that make leadership more attractive and less burdensome.**

Pay women the same as men for the same positions and responsibilities. Make salaries transparent so that employees know what their male and female colleagues earn and begin to close the wage gap. Offer family leave to both women and men, knowing that it is especially important to women because they are often most responsible for juggling family responsibilities even when they hold positions of significant responsibility. Provide opportunities for flexible working hours and locations so women and men have options to manage careers, families, and other priorities. Such moves will help convince women that the positives of leadership outweigh the negatives.

**Proactively promote and sponsor women: do not expect them to always self-promote.**

Build formal mentoring programs that give mentors and mentees common goals to accomplish and remove the social awkwardness of expecting men and women to seek each other out. Institutionalizing a formal mentoring program discourages gossip and suggestive comments because it is part of the company’s culture. A leader at Google sent out regular “nudge” emails that explained promotion opportunities and urged women to nominate themselves. Women did, suggesting they perceived the support and saw more positive than negative aspects to leading.

**Require that women are seated at all the tables.**

For example, oblige corporate recruiters to bring diverse slates of candidates for the positions they want to fill. If they don’t, recruiters will tend to suggest candidates they have seen before and who look very similar to the current leadership – which is usually male. Require the boards and panels that executives are asked to serve on not be all-male. Formal inclusion practices such as these suggest to women that their experience and competence is respected and increases the positive attributes of leadership.

**Use “blind auditions” to help fill leadership positions with more diverse candidates.**

Have applicants complete a test that is evaluated by a hiring manager who knows nothing about the applicant: not gender, age, schooling, or name. Comedian Samantha Bee, producer and star of Full Frontal, did this to recruit writers. To level the playing field, producers created a detailed instruction packet for applicants so that every application received looked exactly the same with no way to tell men from women or whites from non-whites. As a result, Full Frontal’s writing staff was split evenly between men and women, and 25% were minorities. Women who see more female role models in their organizations begin to believe that leadership is desirable, and they will be encouraged to try it themselves.

**Speak out against gender-based misconduct in the workplace.**

Sexual misconduct ranges from demeaning “bro talk” among men about women to flip remarks signaling to women they are not respected or taken seriously to outright sexual assault against women. It occurs in most, if not all, industries. Men know it happens: they see it, they hear it, they watch it, and yet they often do little to stop it. Many say to call out other men is uncomfortable, embarrassing, emasculating, and bad for their careers. But men especially must speak up in their organizations to stop it. When someone makes an offensive comment about women, an observer’s gently-put question such as “what did you mean by that?” might jolt the person into changing their behavior (Lipman, 2018). Change is important because sexual misconduct often derails women’s careers.

Many competent women with lots of work experience who don’t aspire as readily as men to leadership positions can tell us something important about leadership. The road to leadership can be negative, perhaps unbearable, for women. Until that changes, there will be fewer experienced women in positions of leadership, which our organizations desperately need. Organizations can change by doing five things to convince women that leadership, while still a formidable burden, is less unbearable than many women have found it to be.
References


