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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.

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

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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

their leadership behaviors. In our initial study, 240 leaders (with an average of fifteen years of work experience) were assessed and information from over 1700 others (including bosses, direct reports, and peers) was collected on these leaders. The leadership behaviors that were measured were emotional and social competencies, which represent the ability to understand one's own and others' emotions and to use this knowledge to manage themselves and others more effectively. The results of this study revealed that under-prediction exists with women leaders. The greatest discrepancy between the others' ratings of the leaders' emotional and social competence and the leaders' predictions of those ratings occurred when women were asked to predict their bosses' ratings. Under-prediction was not an issue for the men who participated in the study.

Given that a leader's relationship with his or her boss is especially important in terms of advancement opportunities, we explored this prediction of managers' ratings in more detail to see what variables, besides leader gender, could be impacting this relationship. In our second study, we collected data via online survey techniques from a new sample of approximately 200 leaders and their respective bosses. Like in our first study, these leaders came from multiple regions across the United States and represented a diverse array of industries, from education to financial services. Instead of assessing emotional and social competence, we measured transformational leadership (i.e., intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation), which is an exceptional form of leadership that entails motivating employees to see beyond their immediate self-interests to accept and contribute to the group's purpose and mission. Transformational leadership has been shown to be positively related to a large number of important outcomes for the leader, followers, and the organization. For example, research has shown that transformational leaders positively impact the motivation, morale, and performance of their followers.

As in the initial study, this second study found that women leaders predicted that their bosses would rate them lower on their transformational leadership compared with men, even though they did not self-rate differently from the men. Women also significantly under-predicted their bosses' ratings of their leadership. As with our first study, this finding seems to suggest that women and men are not different in terms of their self-confidence of their leadership behavior; if this were the case, we would expect their self-ratings to be different. In this second study, we also predicted that the gender of the boss would play a role. That is, under-prediction would be greatest when the woman's boss was a man. We also asked the leaders' bosses how frequently they provided feedback to the leaders, and we asked the leaders how frequently they believed their bosses provide them with feedback. We did not find differences in feedback delivered (as reported by bosses) or received (as reported by the leaders) to affect under-prediction; however, the trend in the data did suggest that women leaders with male bosses tended to under-predict their transformational leadership competencies the most.

As a follow up to our second study, we took a more qualitative approach. To further understand what women leaders are thinking in terms of the second component of self-awareness, we questioned 76 women leaders, whose job

titles ranged from supervisor to senior executive, about predicting boss ratings. We first asked them, in general, whether they thought their self-ratings of their leadership would be higher, lower, or the same as their boss's rating. We also asked them about possible reasons for and possible consequences of under-prediction (please note that the women did not see anything about under-prediction until they had answered the first question about self and boss ratings being lower, the same, or higher). In terms of the first question, 53% believed their boss would rate them lower than they would rate themselves while only 8% said the boss would rate them higher on their transformational leadership competence.

When asked about possible reasons for the under-prediction phenomenon in general, one-third of the women listed issues involving a lack of self-confidence as the primary reason while another third reported that feedback issues (such as lack of feedback) were the culprit. The last third of responses was related to learned gender roles (e.g., an acknowledgment that leadership is still often perceived as a male domain), self-sexism, humility, and so forth.

We heard a number of responses like these:

"As a female, I do feel women lack confidence relative to men. I myself realized that with regards to a specific position; I felt I wasn't ready yet, but another male would have gone for it whole hog whether ready or not,"

"Women rely more on feedback and reassurance and when it doesn't happen they interpret it as not being valued or appreciated."

"I take responsibility for not bragging about my accomplishments enough to make my boss aware of what I was doing."

"Because of the role women have played as a housewife many women have been taught to believe that they are not male equals when this is not the case."

These answers were somewhat surprising given that our earlier survey results did not reveal feedback to be part of the problem, and given that self-ratings were not lower than boss ratings. We are continuing to explore these issues in terms of feedback and self-confidence for subtle influences.

We also asked this same sample of women leaders what possible consequences could result from this under-prediction. We found that women do not perceive that any positive consequences for either women or the organization will emerge from this perceptual discrepancy. All of the consequences that were suggested by the women leaders were negative. About 40% of the consequences included decreases in self-efficacy/confidence. For instance, one woman leader said, "The employee will feel powerless and shut down in an environment where they question their own competencies." It is interesting that women listed lower self-confidence as both a consequence and a reason. Perhaps there is some sort of reinforcement/self-fulfilling prophecy occurring where less self-awareness may cause some women to behave in ways that continue to lower their self-confidence. Some of the other consequences listed included lack of advancement/salary (20%), decreased assertiveness (14%), lower

performance (12%), gender inequality (9%), and negative emotional responses (7%).

As is evident from the women's responses, a majority of the consequences listed are disadvantageous to both women and the organization. For example, one woman leader said, "Self-efficacy may be negatively impacted which could result in lower performance." Hence, even a consequence that seems to only affect the woman leader (i.e., a decrease in self-efficacy) could be detrimental for the organization because it is negatively impacting her performance.

Some of the other possible consequences they listed were as follows:

"Women may be less likely to look for, fight for, or strategize for a possible promotion."

"Communication breakdowns that lower effectiveness in the workplace."

"Women will not fully express themselves and that full expression could lead to great results. Lack of expression can also lead to resentment. I often walk around feeling unsafe, suppressed, and resentful which has profound impacts on me and the organizations I work for."

"At some point women may begin to undervalue their worth/worthiness."

These negative consequences stemming from women's inability to accurately anticipate how others perceive them may be perpetuating possible problems for women leaders in the workplace. If women leaders are unaware of how others (e.g., their bosses) experience them and their leadership, then they may make decisions that do not reflect the reality they should be experiencing, such as resisting to pursue advancement opportunities and raises.

We feel confident in concluding that there is a tendency for women leaders to be less accurate at predicting how others experience their leadership, and this inaccuracy is almost always in the direction of under-prediction. We now discuss why this matters and what might be done about it.

WHY UNDER-PREDICTION MATTERS

The findings from our studies that women leaders show a perceptual discrepancy related to judgments of how they think they are viewed by others suggest that women leaders' self-awareness may be lacking when it comes to the second component of self-awareness. As noted earlier, women leaders were not rated any lower by others than men. Because self-awareness is considered to be one of the vital skills necessary for effective leadership, not being accurate in perceiving how their actions impact others can lead to adverse consequences for women leaders, such as holding them back from advancing to senior-level leadership positions in the organization. As suggested by the women in the third study, it seems that to some extent, women acknowledge that they may be their own worst enemy.

The negative impact of under-prediction does not seem to be reflected in women leaders' performance (i.e., competence as rated by others), but instead it is likely reflected in things we did not measure (e.g., the degree to which they

may be asserting themselves, asking for time off, requesting pay increases, etc.). It is precisely because women's under-prediction is not reflected in their performance that their perceptions are problematic and conceivably restraining their advancement.

Many of the women believed that the negative consequences stemming from under-prediction were in part due to women's lack of confidence and aggressiveness—only a few said that women get less credit. As a result, it seems that women may be partially responsible for holding themselves back from advancing within the organization because they think others perceive them as less valuable than they are actually perceived. This notion is also evident in the possible reasons that women listed for under-prediction; many of the reasons listed were internal to women, such as self-criticism, greater needs for feedback, or self-sexism (though a number of responses identified possible external reasons such as infrequent or inadequate feedback). As previously mentioned, the finding regarding feedback is interesting because women did not report receiving less feedback than men in the second study. Perhaps the same amount of feedback is not seen as adequate for women but it is for men.

An interesting side note about how women react to this information was obtained when one of the authors presented the results of this work to a large group of women financial managers. There was a tension in the room that seemed to be directed at the notion that the women did not want to attribute any of the responsibility for their lack of advancement to their own behavior. They were much more readily open to blaming discrimination against them. This group was from a large oil and gas company, and we did not actually collect data from them. We are not suggesting that discrimination has been eliminated, but merely that there may be other factors that contribute to women's under-representation in the higher ranks, such as the under-prediction phenomenon that we have found and consequences that may result from under-prediction.

In addition, the results reveal that women believe this under-prediction phenomenon is disadvantageous to both women and the organization because qualified women may be overlooked for promotions, they may not speak up, and their self-confidence may decrease, which can negatively impact their performance. Our future research will investigate if under-prediction has impacted women leaders' performance and, if so, in what ways.

Under-prediction and self-awareness are very important topics for employees (especially women leaders), managers, and organizations. By shedding light on how women leaders could be misinterpreting how others perceive them, we hope to encourage women leaders to strengthen their self-awareness as well as offer some ways in which organizations can better address the differing needs of men and women leaders.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

We now offer suggestions on what can be done to improve leader self-awareness in general, what women leaders can do to minimize their tendency toward under-prediction, and what organizations can do to aid women leaders.

In general, we need to do a better job of teaching and assessing both components of self-awareness in leadership and management education and development. In our

management and leadership development classrooms, which aim to increase manager and leader capability, the curriculum and textbooks overwhelmingly ignore the other-focused component of leader self-awareness. Instead, they focus primarily on the self-focused component of self-awareness with several deferring to Daniel Goleman's work on emotional intelligence as the source for defining self-awareness. In contrast, in a review of business education in their book *Rethinking the MBA*, Srikant Datar, David Garvin, and Patrick Cullen of Harvard Business School found that "Virtually all of the top business schools aspire to 'develop leaders,' yet their efforts in this area are widely viewed as falling short ... Executives [have] cited a number of concrete steps that MBA programs could take to further their students' development as leaders. Perhaps the most important was the need to foster heightened, and more accurate, self-awareness." As a result, if we are to help all leaders, we must begin to focus on both components of self-awareness in education as well as in training and development.

Many organizations like Fifth Third Bank, Sherwin-Williams, and Toshiba Medical Systems assist with the first component of self-awareness by administering multi-source feedback (MSF) assessments that allow leaders to compare their self-ratings with ratings provided by others. While this does assist leaders with their self-awareness, our findings suggest that women and men will not differ in terms of congruence between self- and others' ratings, so this may not be the best solution. On the other hand, as part of the MSF process, leaders are seldom asked to predict others' ratings and to compare these ratings with those actually provided by others. This could contribute greatly to enhancing the other-focused component of self-awareness. In addition to MSF, fostering peer coaching and encouraging developmental networks will increase the flow of feedback exchange that occurs among employees and should help them develop more accurate self-awareness.

A good starting place for organizational consultants and human resource professionals would be to expand the way MSF is conducted to not only include self- and others' ratings, but also predicted ratings (particularly predicted boss ratings). When leaders actually see in a feedback report how they believe they are perceived and how they are actually perceived, enlightenment can begin. In addition, if a leader learns that he or she is not aware of reality as seen by his/her boss, efforts can be made to increase congruence and to behave in accordance with reality rather than misperception.

A caveat is in order here. It is possible that managers are over-rating women (i.e., they are inflating the ratings of women for some reason). As such, their **actual** assessments are not being reflected in their ratings of women. It is possible that women are sensing the manager's "true" feelings. This is another call for increased communication and feedback.

Our finding that women leaders under-predict also calls for several actions women can take to increase their awareness of how others actually view their leadership capability. First, women can seek sufficient feedback from others to gain an

accurate perception of how others experience their leadership. We recommend that women seek feedback that includes specific examples of what they are doing and its impact rather than general evaluative feedback. As they hear the specific examples of what they are doing well and its impact (and what they need to improve), they will have a stronger awareness of how others experience them, and it will assist them in believing those perceptions of others rather than discounting them. In addition, we recommend more conversations with their bosses on the type, style, and amount of feedback that will enable them to be most effective. This improved quality and quantity of feedback will aid women in better defining their impression management strategies.

Women can attend more career development workshops, such as one on positive self-promotion. We are now starting a new set of studies looking at the root causes of under-prediction in women leaders. We suspect that negative attitudes around self-promotion and women's ineffectiveness at self-promotion may be at play in contributing to the overall under-prediction trend. Women need to become more comfortable with helping others see their impact and learn how to do it in an acceptable way. This will boost women leaders' confidence such that others recognize their value to the organization in a more complete way. Finally, as women leaders understand where their own cognitive biases lie, they may be better able to define how they self-impose restraints on demonstrating leader behavior in their organizations to achieve further success in the workplace.

Managers should investigate whether the findings in this study are replicated in their own organizations. Managers should consider how they might be contributing to women leaders' under-prediction. Organizations can create forums for discussion among women leaders about topics such as women leaders' under-prediction, self-promotion, and self-confidence in the workplace. Although the women we studied came from multiple industries and had varying job titles and responsibilities, the nuances of under-prediction could also have unique catalysts specific to their respective organizational culture. As women discuss these issues and share their individual experiences, patterns that are representative of one's particular organization will likely emerge and can be used to inspire action steps to improve prediction accuracy.

As a final word of caution, our work does not suggest that women just need to be more assertive. Research has shown there is a backlash that women face when they are seen as too aggressive. Instead, our interest and contribution here is to invite organizations to better understand what constitutes leader self-awareness and work to improve this important leader capability for all leaders. Next, given the realities of women's under-prediction, it behooves women leaders and those who manage and develop them to find ways that increase their accuracy in predicting the positive impact they are having in the workplace. At this point, we are not convinced that women leaders, on average, believe others see how effective they really are as leaders.



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