

Divided by Gender, United by Chocolate: Differences in the Boardroom

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Blue Ocean Publishing

Chapter 2: Women-only Shortlists Don't Work

In the previous chapter, we explored the major gender stereotype that we have regarding how we expect men and women to behave. Stereotypes can be a useful heuristic; that is, a rule of thumb or mental shortcut to our thinking which helps us to manage our lives and make our daily decisions without having to expend too much cognitive effort. Heuristics regarding gender are particularly useful because they allow us to make certain assumptions about the kind of thinking and actions we expect people to take. This is most likely to be a social evolutionary device designed for survival; for example, males with higher baseline levels of testosterone tend to have broader brows, broader shoulders and more muscle mass. They are also likely to be more aggressive. A stranger exhibiting these physical qualities would therefore potentially have been more of a threat and more dangerous. So, heuristics can be useful, particularly gender ones.

The problem with heuristics and stereotyping is that once we have one, we then unconsciously look for confirmation of our expectations. Psychologists call it 'confirmation bias'. This is why we expect women, particularly mothers, to be nurturing and kind, gentle and considerate. Because the majority of women, especially mothers, are indeed this way, it is an enormous shock to the collective social psyche when they are not¹. The same is true of men. Stereotypically, we expect them to be decisive, charismatic, dominant, aggressive if threatened or needing to protect their family, and competitive. Of course, we all know both men and women who fit these stereotypical portrayals of the genders. However, we also all know people who *don't* fit them.

Why do we need women-only shortlists in the first place?

The short answer is because it's not a level playing field and the world isn't fair! The reason it's not a level playing field or a fair one is because of things like gender stereotyping, confirmation bias, the think manager, think male paradigm, stereotype threat, the lack of fit leadership model, the glass cliff and the glass escalator. And that's before we add testosterone, status threat and hostile stereotyping into

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the mix! Add to this some statistical data on the actual position in the UK and the reason why women-only shortlists were brought in becomes clearer.

We know that diversity is a good thing. It encourages broader perspectives, increases creativity, innovation and effective problem-solving, positively impacts on well-being and makes groups more productive. This is true of all teams and groups by the way, not just senior leadership ones. Power and status appear to be of universal interest, therefore the gender balance within the Boardroom also continues to be of interest globally to organisations, politicians, the media and the public, and we now have international targets for female leadership representation². The UK Davies Report³, commissioned in 2010 to research the gender imbalance in UK FTSE Boards and published in 2011, recommended a target of 25% female representation on all UK FTSE 100 organisations by 2015.

By January 2015, the target figure had not been achieved. However, the Women on Boards Davies Review, a Five Year Summary⁴, published in October 2015, details two landmark results: firstly, the percentage figure of women on FTSE 100 Boards has now reached 26.1%. Secondly, there are now no all-male Boards in any of the FTSE 100 companies. There are still 15 all-male Boards within the FTSE 250 companies where female representation stands at only 19.6% however, and the new report calls for 33% female representation within all FTSE 350 companies by 2020.

Outside the Boardroom, according to the 2015 Cranfield Female FTSE Board Report, despite progress being made on FTSE 100 companies, in 2015, only 8.6% of UK Executive Directorships were held by women⁵. That's a staggering 91.4% of them being held by men.

Why is there such a huge division of male and female leadership at this level? There are a number of different theories. At one end of the spectrum there is the suggestion that, as women still bear the majority of caring responsibility in the home for children, managing the

household and ageing parents, they simply don't want the added stress of a senior position as well. At the other end of the spectrum is the suggestion that women are simply unsuited to senior leadership positions as they are somehow inferior to men at that level, although, thankfully, we have moved beyond the Victorian assertion that this is because women's brains are smaller than their masculine counterparts!⁶

As much as you may either laugh or gasp in horror at this outrageous and blatantly ridiculous statement, there is a growing body of research to suggest that, regarding gender and leadership stereotyping, many people do indeed think that way, even if their bias is unconscious⁷.

Gendered leadership

Are all leader stereotypes masculine? The answer to that, very simply, is that yes, they are!⁸ Historically, because men have traditionally occupied the leadership roles in the military, the church and in politics, their generally agentic leadership style has become the benchmark that has come to define leadership. It has also therefore become the standard by which leadership, and all the managers and leaders who practise it, both male and female, are judged⁹. This explains the 'think manager, think male' paradigm. Even today, in studies of implicit association, women are more associated with the liberal arts, domesticity, family, low status and low authority roles, whereas men are associated with science and maths, high status, high authority, hierarchy and careers¹⁰. Effectively, there is a 'lack of fit' between women and leadership that we are not consciously aware of. If you pay some attention to media advertising, particularly on the television, you will see these gendered leadership roles played out in the stereotypical roles which even quite young children pick up on and absorb culturally as the way things are. But more on that later.

The discussions around gendered leadership centre on two key themes: firstly, do men and women lead similarly or differently? And therefore, secondly, which gender tends to lead 'better' than the other?

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Some studies indicate that women, consistent with the female leadership stereotype, do indeed tend to adopt more relational, participative and communal styles, characterised by a selfless, nurturing, caring approach with the well-being and welfare of others at its core. In comparison, men are more likely to take a more transactional, directive style, and be more agentic. This approach is characterised by a task/goal orientation, assertiveness, control, social domination and a desire to master¹¹. This is consistent with the gender stereotyping which we encountered in Chapter 1 and the Empathising/Systemising theory of Baron-Cohen. Remember though, that the important words here are tend to and generally. The research doesn't suggest that all men are agentic, nor that all women are communal.

A meta-analysis of 162 separate leadership studies found that men tend to be more autocratic and directive, whereas women tend to be more democratic and participative¹². Out of a choice of Transformational, Transactional and Laissez-faire leadership styles, women will tend to be much more Transformational in their style¹³. Interestingly, where women do use a more Transactional and assertive style, even within it they tend to use more positive and rewarding language and strategies compared to men, who tend to use more negative and threatening strategies and language¹⁴. Recent research suggests that the most effective leadership style sits in the middle ground between being participative and directive¹⁵. Consistent with my proposition in Chapter 1, could this be an argument for leadership balance, where the best leaders sit comfortably in the middle of the People/Task, Empathising/Systemising continuums, but with the flexibility to move up and down the scales, as the situation and circumstances require it?

Unfortunately, as is so often the case with research where the answer isn't clear, other studies show contradictory rather than confirmatory evidence. In contrast to the previous research finding that there is a difference in the way that men and women lead, a 2010 study found no significant gender differences between male and female German

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managers where culturally, a Transformational leadership style was preferred¹⁶. A subsequent 2011 research study also found no significant gender differences either between the management and leadership styles of public sector managers in Sweden¹⁷. These findings do rather beg the questions though as to whether it was gendered leadership which was being explored by these studies, or rather cultural differences in leadership style between the UK and Europe, and whether the level which was investigated is also significant. Might there be a difference between middle management and senior leadership in terms of style?

But this isn't the whole picture. There are other, invisible factors implicitly present in the gendered leadership domain that are also relevant to the debate. Have you heard of 'the glass cliff' or 'the glass escalator'? Analysis of UK companies confirms that a senior woman executive tends to be appointed in situations where, historically, performance has been poor, or where the leadership position itself is precarious¹⁸, leading to the term 'glass cliff'. In comparison, a man is more likely to experience an almost invisible pressure to be promoted upwards in traditionally female roles such as nursing and teaching, even if they do not actively pursue advancement. There seems to be an imperceptible underlying assumption that higher status roles, with greater responsibility and of course, a higher salary, should be theirs¹⁹, as if they are standing on an invisible glass escalator and being propelled upwards.

Where a woman displays more agentic and masculine traits, she is less likely to be appointed. She is even less likely to be appointed if she is perceived as being aggressive or status enhancing, i.e. less communal and classically feminine²⁰. The same behaviours that are accepted in a man and will enhance his status will be penalised in a woman²¹. This situation of hostile stereotyping, is also true when, for example, a woman tries to negotiate greater compensation. Unlike a man, she will generally be disliked for it²². Is it any wonder then that a recognisable gender pay-gap exists within the UK so that women, on average, receive less remuneration than a man does, for fulfilling the same role²³?

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Hostile sexism is the explanation given to the blatant bullying of women in traditionally male environments such as construction and engineering. For some reason it appears to be acceptable to some men to subject female colleagues to aggressive verbal, physical and sexual behaviours they would not find tolerable if those same behaviours were directed at their own wives, sisters or mothers. No Authentic Leader would ever behave in such a way, or would even entertain such thoughts, attitudes or behaviours as being in any way appropriate. I can only think that these men are particularly susceptible to feelings of status threat and to the effects of testosterone and power. What happens to culture within these organisations when such men are promoted?

As promised earlier, let's think about social and cultural influence. Prior to seeing a particular media advert, both male and female students expressed equal interest in taking on a leadership role once they had finished their studies. After viewing an advert in which the leadership role was portrayed by a man, the female students expressed less interest in choosing to have a leadership role. The same effect was found after the advert portrayed the woman as ditsy or in a traditional domestic, housewife role²⁴. How can a simple advert affect the career aspirations of an intelligent woman? The answer is stereotype threat. Where our natural inclination is to think or behave in ways which do not match the social and culturally accepted stereotypes, our very psyche is threatened, unconsciously leading us to try to fit in with the stereotypes, even if we consciously reject them.

In an emerging leaders' study, some interesting findings were uncovered. In both laboratory and real leadership situations, in initially leaderless groups where the groups and team working was going to be short-term, in situations which didn't require complex social interactions, and in predominantly task-oriented situations, male leadership emerged as the most likely outcome. In contrast however, where the objectives were slightly longer-term, more complex and where social relationships were likely to affect the outcomes, women tended to emerge as leaders to a greater extent than men²⁵.

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Remember, this research isn't suggesting that in 100% of cases, complex and social group requirements mean that female leadership will emerge, or that short-term and task-focused objectives means the emergence of male leadership; however, it is a thought-provoking study.

Maybe we can make more sense of it if we turn it on its head. Perhaps it is the more relational, people-focused leadership style that is more effective in longer-term, complex, non-urgent, socially rich environments, whereas in shorter-term and more urgent situations and more task-focused environments, it is the more directive, task-oriented approach that is the most effective, *regardless of the gender of the leader*. This would certainly be true of Coastguard rescues, where the most effective leadership style in the Coastguard Station is a relational one, and where the leadership style switches immediately to a hierarchical approach as the most effective style literally the second the alarm is raised. The major concern for leadership development in the Coastguard, as it is in the military, then becomes one of the situational and environmental flexibility of its leaders to be able to adapt their leadership style between the two scenarios. Issues emerge when a predominantly directive leader cannot become relational and vice-versa: both are problematic and ultimately destructive.

Why don't women-only shortlists work?

Apart from the fact that in 1996 they were ruled to be illegal under the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975, one of the most important elements in the women's equality debate is: what kind of gender equality are we talking about? Do we want equality of opportunity, i.e. where anyone can apply if they think they are good enough; or do we want equality of outcome? i.e. where there is an equal gender split of men and women on Boards and in Parliament. By using women-preferred shortlists, we cannot, by definition, have equality of opportunity, if male candidates are discriminated against.

Equality of opportunity isn't the only issue here. Did you notice that I deliberately wrote, 'anyone can apply if they think they are good

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enough'. We now know that men and women generally rate themselves differently regarding their competence. In another meta-analysis of more than 95 studies, researchers found that there was no difference in the way that followers rated their male and female bosses: both were thought to perform equally as well. However, the male leaders themselves generally thought that they were better than their peers and over-rated themselves, whereas the women were more modest and generally under-rated themselves²⁶. In a culture that values confidence, is it any wonder that a woman is less likely than a man to put herself forward for promotion or to demand equal pay for doing the same job?

Here, once again, women are at a disadvantage. Men are more confident applying for roles that they are qualified for than women are. In fact, men are much more confident in applying for roles that they are not quite qualified for! Women are much less likely to apply for a role that they are qualified for, until they are 100% qualified, or even over-qualified for it; only then will they apply²⁷.

Female quotas, currently popular in the UK, have been instrumental in getting more women appointed to Board positions. However, all of the Senior Executive women I have met, and over the years I have met a great many of them, want to be appointed to a Board position because of the quality of their thinking and because of what they can offer, not because of tokenism or because they possess breasts and a vagina. From this perspective, female quotas and women-preferred shortlists are, at their worst, insulting to women and they offend both genders.

So over the past 20 years, there has been an increasing focus on trying to identify how women lead comparative to men. Perhaps because research both supports gendered leadership stereotypes and refutes them, there haven't really been any meaningful conclusions. We could say that this is surprising considering how much time, effort and resources have been invested to date. Yet from another perspective, the confusion of these findings isn't really a surprise at all. As I said

earlier, the whole gendered leadership debate as it is currently conceived is an enormous red herring and it's no wonder that, for a variety of reasons, female quotas and women-preferred shortlists don't necessarily work in terms of diversity and balancing the approach and outcomes of Boards.

*We don't need diversity of gender in the Boardroom,
we need diversity of thinking²⁸.*

What's the solution?

We are already slowly beginning to experience a culture shift towards a more balanced leadership style as seen in Europe²⁹. We need to become more consciously aware of such things as unconscious bias, stereotypes and stereotype threats, so that we see the person and not their gender. The more openness and transparency there is regarding equal payment for a role regarding salary, terms and conditions and bonuses, the less hostile reactions there will be by those who are particularly affected by power and concerns of status. We also need to stop seeing people like Jack Welch and Steve Jobs as acceptable, or worse, aspirational, leadership role models. They aren't. Both had deeply flawed leadership styles which damaged the well-being of many people, as we will go on to explore in Chapter 7 when we consider leadership derailers and the dark side of leadership.

If we know that some men 'think like women', and some women 'think like men', then judging people by their gender becomes as ridiculous as the Victorians measuring head size. Therefore, and rather obviously, we also need to understand the thinking style profiles of the people we appoint to senior positions in a more effective way than we currently do.

Whilst it may have a part to play, we cannot continue to use gender as the major factor that drives leadership style or leadership selection. By promulgating gendered leadership we have been viewing leadership through the wrong lens. Not only don't gender stereotypes work anymore, (if they ever did), gendered leadership stereotypes

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don't work either. We have to find another way, and I have come to the belief that I have found one.

I'm proposing that we take a biological look at personality and leadership³⁰. Considering the influence that dopamine, oestrogen, testosterone and serotonin have on our thinking, personality, behaviours and our leadership styles provides us with a much more meaningful and useful perspective on leadership and management. A more balanced perspective, which is beneficial for us as leaders and for those who are led and managed by us, is the result.

The next chapter introduces the four Leadership Temperament Types to you. We will learn about the dopamine-driven Charismatic Explorer; the oestrogen-driven Relational Negotiator; the testosterone-driven Transactional Director and the serotonin-driven Transformational Builder.