



8 TIPS FOR MANAGERS

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Today, more than three decades after women became 50 percent of college graduates in the United States, women still hold only a small fraction of leadership roles.¹ Women constitute five percent of S&P 500 CEOs and have just 19 percent of corporate board seats, 25 percent of C-level positions, and 19 percent of Congressional seats.²

Closing the gender leadership gap is an imperative for organizations that want to perform at the highest levels. Leveraging the full talents of the population provides a competitive advantage; companies with more women in leadership roles perform better, and employees on diverse and inclusive teams put in more effort, stay longer, and demonstrate more commitment.³

In order to close the leadership gap, gender bias and stereotypes have to be understood and counteracted. Decades of social science research have proven that stereotypes are enormously self-reinforcing; as human beings, we feel comfortable when people conform to our expectations and we dislike people who do not. Men are expected to be assertive, confident, and opinionated, so we welcome their leadership. Women are expected to be kind, nurturing, and compassionate, so when they lead, they go against our expectations.

Surprisingly, gender bias can be even more pronounced in merit-based organizations. When institutions or individuals are confident about their own powers of objectivity, they often fail to correct for bias. All of us—men and women throughout the world—hold these biases, but they are hard to admit and discuss, which makes it difficult to take steps to counteract them.⁴

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1

CHALLENGE THE LIKEABILITY PENALTY

SITUATION

Success and likeability are positively correlated for men and negatively correlated for women. When a man is successful, his peers often like him more; when a woman is successful, both men and women often like her less.⁵ This trade-off between success and likeability creates a double bind for women. If a woman is competent, she does not seem nice enough, but if a woman seems really nice, she is considered less competent. This can have a big impact on a woman's career. Ask yourself: Who are you more likely to support and promote, the man with high marks across the board or the woman who has equally high marks but is just not as well liked?

This bias often surfaces in the way women are described, both in passing and in performance reviews. When a woman asserts herself—for example, by speaking in a direct style or promoting her ideas—she is often called “aggressive,” “ambitious,” or “out for herself.” When a man does the same, he is seen as “confident” and “strong.”

SOLUTION

Listen for the language of the likeability penalty, particularly when making hiring decisions and evaluating performance. When you hear biased language — such as “bossy,” “pushy,” and “shrill” — request a specific example of what the woman did and then ask, “Would you have the same reaction if a man did the same thing?” In many cases, the answer will be no. Remember that you can fall into the same bias traps, so think carefully about your own response to female coworkers.

DID YOU KNOW?

In a Columbia Business School study, different groups of students read a case study about a venture capitalist with one single difference—gender. Students respected both “Howard” and “Heidi,” but Howard was described as likeable while Heidi was seen as selfish and not “the type of person you would want to hire or work for.”

2

EVALUATE PERFORMANCE FAIRLY

SITUATION

Male performance is often overestimated compared to female performance, starting with mothers overestimating boys' crawling ability and underestimating girls'.⁶ This bias is even more pronounced when review criteria are unclear, making individuals more likely to rely on gut feelings and personal inferences.⁷ Over time, even small deviations in performance evaluation have a significant impact on women's careers.⁸ This difference in the perceived performance of men and women also helps explain why women are hired and promoted based on what they have already accomplished, while men are hired and promoted based on their potential.⁹

SOLUTION

Look for opportunities for gender-blind evaluations in hiring. When evaluating performance, make sure managers are aware of gender bias. Be specific about what constitutes excellent performance, and make sure goals are set in advance, understood, and measurable. Ask managers to explain the reasons for their evaluations — and do the same for yourself. When people are accountable for their decisions, they are more motivated to think through them carefully.¹⁰

DID YOU KNOW?

Gender-blind studies consistently show that removing gender from decisions improves women's chances of success. One study found that replacing a woman's name with a man's name on a résumé improved the odds of getting hired by 61 percent.¹¹

In another example, when a major U.S. orchestra instituted blind auditions, the odds of women making it past the first round improved by 50 percent.¹²

3

GIVE WOMEN CREDIT

SITUATION

Women and men ascribe their success to different things. Men typically attribute their success to innate qualities and skills, while women attribute success to external factors such as “working hard,” “getting lucky,” or “help from others.” Women and men also differ when it comes to explaining their failures. When a man fails, he attributes it to situational factors like “didn’t practice enough” or “not interested in the subject.” When a woman fails, she is more likely to attribute it to lack of ability.¹³

Moreover, women are often undervalued by others. When women and men work together on tasks, women are given less credit for successful outcomes and blamed more for failure.¹⁴

Because women receive less credit—and give themselves less credit—their confidence often erodes. As a result, they are less likely to put themselves forward for promotions and stretch assignments.

SOLUTION

Make sure women get the credit they deserve and look for opportunities to acknowledge their contributions. Push back when women say that they’re “not ready” or “not qualified” for an opportunity — or when others say that about a woman — and encourage women to take stretch assignments. Make sure success and blame are attributed fairly.

DID YOU KNOW?

Men will apply for jobs when they meet 60 percent of the hiring criteria, while women wait until they meet 100 percent.¹⁵

4

GET THE MOST OUT OF MEETINGS

SITUATION

Compared to women, men tend to talk more and make more suggestions in meetings, while women are interrupted more, given less credit for their ideas, and have less overall influence.¹⁶ This starts in school, where girls get less airtime and are interrupted more, even by the most well-intentioned teachers.¹⁷ If you watch men and women at the same level, you will notice that more of the men sit in the front and center seats, while women tend to gravitate toward the end of the table and edge of the room—away from positions that convey status.

Without full participation in meetings, you cannot tap everyone’s skills and expertise, and this undermines team outcomes.

SOLUTION

Encourage women to sit front and center at meetings. If a female colleague is interrupted, interject and say you’d like to hear her finish. Openly ask women to contribute to the conversation. Be aware of “stolen ideas” and look for opportunities to acknowledge the women who first proposed them.

DID YOU KNOW?

In an eight-member team, three members will make 67 percent of comments. In a five-member team, two members will make 70 percent of comments.¹⁸

5

SHARE OFFICE HOUSEWORK

SITUATION

Women take on more “office housework”—service and support work such as taking notes, organizing events, and training new hires. These tasks steal valuable time away from core responsibilities and can keep a team member from participating fully; the person taking diligent notes in the meeting almost never makes the killer point. In keeping with deeply held gender stereotypes, people expect help from women but not from men, so when women do favors at work, they earn no points for doing so—but when they say no, they are penalized. Men, on the other hand, gain points for saying yes and face minimal consequences for saying no.¹⁹

Moreover, many women—including two-thirds of executive women in Fortune 200 companies—are in support roles, but line roles with profit-and-loss responsibility more often lead to senior leadership positions.²⁰ Together, these dynamics can have a serious impact on women’s career trajectories.

SOLUTION

Audit who’s doing service work and make sure it’s distributed evenly between women and men—and that women are not doing additional work without additional reward. Encourage rising stars to pursue line roles and celebrate the women who do to set an example for more junior women.

DID YOU KNOW?

In a performance evaluation study, men who stayed late to help prepare for a meeting were rated 14 percent more favorably than women who did the exact same thing. When both men and women failed to help, the women were penalized with a 12 percent lower rating than the men.²¹

6

MAKE WORK WORK FOR PARENTS

SITUATION

Many studies show that the pushback — or “maternal wall” — women experience when they have kids is the strongest gender bias. Motherhood triggers assumptions that a woman is less competent and less committed to her career. As a result, she is held to higher standards and presented with fewer opportunities.²²

This also impacts women who aren’t mothers — and men, too. Women often face pushback as soon as they’re engaged to be married, and fathers who leave work early or take time off for family pay a higher price than mothers. Studies show that fathers receive lower performance ratings and experience steeper reductions in future earnings after taking time away from work for family reasons.²³

Women also often “leave before they leave,” compromising their careers in anticipation of family responsibilities they do not yet have. They turn down projects, don’t apply for promotions, or choose more flexible paths to accommodate families they plan to have someday, closing doors to opportunities and limiting their options even before they become parents.

SOLUTION

Don’t make assumptions about mothers’ willingness to take on challenging assignments or travel. Avoid messages like “I don’t know how you do it,” which can signal that good mothers should be at home. Let the women — and men — in your organization know you support their decisions to start families and take maternity or paternity leave. Establish an open-door policy for discussing pregnancy and adopt family-friendly policies, which increase productivity and employee retention. If you’re a parent, be vocal about the time you spend away from work with your children; this gives other parents in your organization permission to do the same.

DID YOU KNOW?

A recent study found that a job applicant with “PTA coordinator” on her resume was 79% less likely to be recommended for hire compared to an equally qualified woman without children.²⁴

7

MAKE NEGOTIATING A NORM

SITUATION

Women are less likely to negotiate for themselves than men, often because they are concerned they'll be viewed unfavorably.²⁵ They are right to worry. We expect men to advocate on their own behalf and be rewarded for their accomplishments, so there's little downside when they negotiate. In contrast, we expect women to be communal and collaborative, so when they negotiate or advocate for themselves, we often react unfavorably.

SOLUTION

Review compensation to ensure that you are paying women and men fairly and communicate to all members in your organization—especially women—that it's important for them to negotiate for themselves. Research shows that women will negotiate at comparable rates to men when given explicit permission to do so.

DID YOU KNOW?

Women are four times less likely to negotiate than men. When they do negotiate, women typically ask for 30 percent less money.²⁶

8

SUPPORT MENTORSHIP AND SPONSORSHIP

SITUATION

Mentorship and sponsorship are key drivers of success, yet women can have a harder time finding mentors and sponsors, especially ones with influence. Mentoring relationships often form between individuals with common interests, and junior women and senior men often avoid mentoring relationships out of concern that time spent together will look inappropriate. In fact, according to a recent report, almost two-thirds of male senior leaders are hesitant to have one-on-one meetings with a more junior woman.²⁷ As a result, men end up mentoring other men, and women miss out.

SOLUTION

We need more male managers to mentor and sponsor women, and we should reward them when they do. Establish formal mentorship and sponsorship programs and encourage informal interactions between the women and men in your organization—it's these personal connections that lead to relationships that can propel careers. Start Lean In Circles (www.leanin.org/circles) at work to tap into the power of peer mentorship. LeanIn.Org provides the materials and technology to run a successful Circles program, and 75 percent of Circle members attribute a positive change in their life to their Circle.

DID YOU KNOW?

Sponsorship makes women more likely to aim high. Women with sponsors are 8 percent more likely to ask for both a stretch assignment and a pay increase than women without sponsors.²⁸

JOIN THE CAMPAIGN.

In for equality? Pass it on with #LeanInTogether

Men, post a photo or video to your favorite social media channels showing how or why you lean in for equality, and, women, celebrate a man who leans in with you!

Additional Resources

Want to learn more about the benefits of leaning in for equality together? Find informative videos, activities, articles, and more at leanintogether.org/resources

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