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Challenging masculine prototypes: how can we increase women's representation in the workplace?

Despite decades of effort, women are still severely underrepresented and undervalued in numerous professions around the globe, particularly in leadership roles. In the UK, only 43% of startups have any women in leadership. Majority-women leadership teams are even rarer, at only 15%.

This is representative of a broader trend – even in contexts where men and women are hired at an equal rate at entry level – fewer women get promoted to top management positions than men. Globally, the proportion of women in senior management roles is *as low as 29%.* This underrepresentation worsens the higher you go, with *only 5%* of chief executives worldwide being women.

With International Women's Day having recently taken place, it provides an opportune moment to re-examine what we know about why women are still so underrepresented in various professions, undervalued in leadership roles and, more importantly, what we can be doing about it.

Over the past several decades, researchers have identified numerous explanations for why women are still overlooked and underrepresented. In this article, I focus on the well-studied but persistent challenge posed by what researchers call, “masculine prototypes”.

The problem of masculine prototypes

Psychologists have shown that people make sense of the world by grouping people into categories. Once we have formed a category in our heads, we develop a “prototype”, a collection of features and traits that we associate with people in that category.

For example, when people think about the category of “firefighters,” traits like “strong” and “decisive” may come to mind. The more an individual possesses these traits, the more “prototypical” they will seem. Those who are seen as best fitting the prototype are rewarded, and will have an easy time succeeding in that category (for example, strong and decisive people are expected to succeed in firefighting), whereas those who are seen as less prototypical are treated with scepticism and struggle to fit in.

At a purely cognitive level, prototypes are extremely useful, helping us efficiently judge who is a good member of a social category and who is not. However, they can lead to inequalities when certain traits are encoded in a category that advantage one group in society over another.

For example, many of the traits associated with firefighting are, in many people’s minds, stereotypically masculine. As a result, people have an easier time picturing men succeeding in the fire service than women. Over time, an association forms in peoples’ minds between being a firefighter and being a man, meaning aspiring women firefighters face a high degree of scepticism about their ability to succeed.

Women in domains with masculine prototypes like firefighting often feel a pressure to act more masculine in order to get ahead. Accordingly, they experience a more precarious sense of belonging in contrast to men, who generally don’t have to worry that their gender will be a liability to them in their profession.

Masculine prototypes in leadership

Masculine prototypes are problematic because they hold women to standards in which masculinity is a key to success. This is true in professions like *firefighting* and engineering, but also in specific roles within professions.

The traits that people typically associate with success in leadership, such as assertiveness and strength, are also those that people typically associate with masculinity. In other words, the category “leaders” has a masculine prototype. As a result, it is typically easier for people to see men as a good fit for leadership roles than women. This, and a culture in which men already possess the majority of leadership positions, means that many people still hold a “leader = man” association in their brains.

As a result of masculine prototypes in leadership, women often have to work harder to be recognised as good leaders. In doing so, women may feel pressured to take on more masculine characteristics, something that can feel inauthentic. Furthermore, because women who act masculine are penalised for violating gender stereotypes, they can rarely achieve greater prototypicality in leadership despite their efforts. This speaks to the classic “double bind” many women face in leadership (i.e., “you can’t get ahead as a woman, but you can’t get ahead acting like a man either”).

How can your organisation combat masculine prototypes

One obvious solution to the penalties women face for having stereotypically feminine traits devalued in the workplace is to simply do away with gender stereotypes altogether. However, this has consistently proven incredibly difficult, as gender stereotypes are deeply ingrained in our societies.

A clearer path lies ahead in the idea of changing prototypes to be more inclusive. Whether you’re dealing with the prototype of a profession (like firefighting) or a role (like leadership), if people can recognise stereotypically feminine traits – like compassion or empathy – to be just as important as stereotypically masculine traits – such as decisiveness or assertiveness – then this can weaken between being masculinity and success. *Recent research* suggests this may be a promising way to combat gender bias.

Whether your organisation is a startup or a giant FTSE 100 firm, there are steps business leaders can take to create more inclusive prototypes. Although we learn them from our environment, prototypes are actually things we can control. In hiring, promotion, and evaluation procedures, organisations signal to employees what traits are valued and what traits aren’t. Essentially, this communicates to employees what the relevant prototype is. If the traits that you routinely reward are seen as stereotypically masculine, you’re effectively making it easier for men to get ahead than women. A more balanced set of criteria can ensure that people don’t use masculinity as a heuristic for potential success.

This is not a silver bullet, researchers have identified a myriad of other barriers to women's advancement that we must also address. Nevertheless, it's a relatively easy place for organisations to start making things more gender-balanced. My hope is that by recognising and correcting the challenge of masculine prototypes, come this time next year we will be a few steps closer to gender equality in the workplace.

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