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Who has to 'lean in' for equal gender representation in leadership roles?

Even though women surpass men in university graduation rates and other skill-based gains, the Conference Board of Canada (2011) found it will take over 151 years for women and men to achieve parity in middle management, let alone senior leadership. Sheryl Sandberg's book, Lean In (2013), invigorated a worldwide conversation about the representation of women in leadership roles. However, it focused on strategies to remove women's internal barriers to leadership. In our recent paper, we draw on three streams of gender stereotype research ('think manager-think male'; the glass cliff; and childcare) to argue that the who, what and when of 'leaning in' as presented in this book are problematic.

Sandberg acknowledges this is a 'chicken or the egg' problem (Sandberg, 2013, p. 8). Which came first: women's internal barriers to leadership, or society forming stereotypes restricting women because so few women held these positions? Whether we should focus on the chicken or the egg to increase the number of women in leadership is a key piece of the conversation missing from the book. Sandberg suggests we start with individual woman (the chicken). We believe the research shows that we will make more progress if we focus on the system (the egg).

We argue that it is mainly men who are senior leaders and need to be the ones 'leaning in' for change. We also argue that what women are leaning into needs to be questioned (often glass cliffs) and that only when more women in powerful positions are at the table will gender stereotypes begin to change – not the other way around. Women are associated with communal (caring) traits because they have been overrepresented in roles requiring these traits (e.g., childcare). Men are associated with agentic (leader-like) traits because they have been overrepresented in roles requiring agency.

Gender stereotypes create a double bind for both sexes: if a woman aspiring to leadership enacts masculine behaviours she will be penalised for a lack of femininity (and disliked). But if she behaves in feminine ways, she will not be seen as leader-like. Men who lean in to their home, especially caring for young children, can have their masculinity questioned. Anecdotal stories abound about men who take parental leave (from paid employment) being ridiculed, and men's reluctance to take substantial leave due to negative career repercussions.

Organisations that confront gender stereotypes 'head on' change the system. In 1970 about 10 per cent of orchestra members were women; by the mid 1990's it was 30 per cent. What happened? Blind auditions – orchestra applicants auditioned behind a curtain so the people judging competence could no longer filter their hiring decisions through a gender lens. This increased the probability of a women advancing from preliminary selection rounds by 50 per cent. Interesting and effective.

Training employees and leaders to recognise their own gender bias is becoming more common. However, we argue that organisations need to go further. McKinsey's annual Women in the Workplace study called for organisations (CEOs who are 95 per cent male; senior leaders) to make gender equity a priority; to actively measure gender breakdowns at all levels, and require mandatory female representation in candidate pools and leadership roles. Senior leadership roles are typically by invitation only. Those in power have to give you a key to the door before you can follow the Lean In (2013) advice to "sit at the table; not leave before you leave; or make your partner a real partner". Or, as the UN Women Executive Director put it (re: the Canadian Prime Minister making his cabinet 50/50 men and women): "those with authority and power…must lead from the front…the Prime Minister (of Canada) had the authority to appoint a 50-50 cabinet. Leaders must use the authority that they have". When men in power decide to 'lean in' for change they can redefine or rectify who sits at the table virtually overnight.

Seeing women do jobs typically reserved for men changes perceptions (i.e. leadership stereotypes) and begins to dismantle cognitive barriers for everyone. In 1993 India mandated that 1/3 of village council leaders must be women. This was implemented in randomly chosen villages – a true experiment – revealing causal effects. Women in local government increased from 5 per cent to 40 per cent by 2005. After having two female leaders, villagers with an initial bias against voting for women now rated male and female leaders equally or women as more effective than men. Seeing women in leadership roles changed their perceptions about women's competence! This is the kind of proactive change we need in organisations. Currently, meta-analyses confirm that although men rate themselves as significantly more effective leaders than women, others actually rate them as less effective. Sometimes our perceptions need to be challenged by data.

Organisational leaders need to address backlash clearly and decisively. It must be clear that representation is designed to address discrimination; is based on merit (women in the Canadian government example were highly qualified – a Rhodes scholar, U.N. legal advisor, Crown prosecutor, First Nation chief); and intended to leverage the value of diversity. Do we really believe that the current implicit quota of 95 per cent male CEOs is justified, or based on merit/leadership? Is it OK that the total number of female CEOs is the same as (or lower than) the number of CEOs named 'John'; or 'David'?

One of us was recently facilitating a session on gender equity for senior leaders and was asked 'what does gender equity in leadership actually look like?' In the ensuing discussion we identified three elements: (1) Representative numbers of women in leadership roles (i.e. if you start with 75 per cent women on the front lines you see 75 per cent women in senior leadership); (2) Equal barriers/catalysts for ascending to leadership roles regardless of gender; and (3) An inclusive culture where everyone feels able to aspire to leadership.

Equal gender representation in leadership roles can no longer be considered a promised future outcome; it is an INPUT to the creation of equity and inclusion. It is time for senior leaders (men and women) to 'lean in' and change the system (the egg), we think the chicken has done enough.

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Notes:

- *This blog post is based on the authors' paper Continuing the Conversation: Questioning the Who, What, and When of Leaning In, Academy of Management Perspectives, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2019*
- *The post gives the views of its author(s), not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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