

To fight the slow pace of gender equality in the workplace, attack the root cause: invisible, unconscious bias.

*Gender diversity is correlated with better business results and enormous economic and business value. But unconscious bias continues to negatively affect women in the workplace in a number of ways, writes **Caroline Turner**. Those who manage teams must actively reveal and uproot these biases.*



This piece is part of a wider series on [Women in Academia](#) and coincides with [LSE Women: making history](#) – a campaign in celebration of #LSEwomen past, present and future.

McKinsey reveals in its annual [Women Matter](#) reports that even companies doing all the “right things” to achieve gender diversity get disappointing results. The reports blame company cultures that fail to address underlying “[mindsets](#),” which are “invisible, unconscious, and in the way.” McKinsey correctly identifies the cause, unconscious ways of thinking – or gender bias. To achieve and sustain gender diversity, we must uproot mindsets at the very deepest level. Beneath the many forms of unconscious bias is one root cause – the cultural preference for masculine over feminine ways of doing and being.

In *The Tao of Physics* (1975), Fritjof Capra put it in Eastern terms, describing a cultural imbalance of yin and yang. Our culture has consistently favoured yang or masculine values and attitudes and has neglected their complimentary yin or feminine counterparts. We have favoured:

- Self-assertion over integration
- Analysis over synthesis
- Rational knowledge over intuitive wisdom
- Science over religion
- Competition over cooperation

Capra argued that this imbalance is bad for society and pointed to the importance of regaining a balance between the masculine and feminine sides of human nature. Attacking this root cause enables us to change, if not the world, our workplaces. By learning to value feminine as well as masculine ways of working we can capture the documented business value of gender diversity.



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The [business case](#) for diversity and for gender diversity in particular is well established. Gender diversity is correlated with better [business results](#) and enormous [economic and business value](#). That's what drives most companies to do those "right things." But it's clear they are not enough. To create a culture that works for women as well as men requires eliminating or reducing those unconscious mindsets – the root one and those closer to the surface. I have identified a few forms of bias at the surface (see shaded area).

The "right things" to achieve gender diversity include:

- offering family-friendly policies,
- establishing a diversity initiative, inclusiveness committee, and women's networks,
- assuring that women get mentors and [sponsors](#),
- giving women training in business development and other key business skills, and, most important,
- providing top-down support and creating accountability for achieving diversity goals.

A few forms of unconscious mind-sets that arise from the root cause are:

- The "[double bind](#)" – judging a woman negatively for behavior acceptable or even admired in a man.
- "[Unconscious images](#)" – our mental pictures of how success and leadership "look," which tend to be gendered and so create challenges for women.
- The "[comfort principle](#)" – the natural tendency for people to form helpful business relationships with those who look and think like they do, excluding women when their management is primarily male.
- "Presumed vs. earned credibility" – the credibility more automatically given men and [male voices](#), making it more likely a woman will be interrupted and have her idea credited to a man who repeats it.

To value and leverage both masculine and feminine strengths, we must understand both. Imagine these differences along a [masculine-feminine continuum](#). Both men and women operate all along the continuum, using both styles. We can disrupt this negative cycle and replace it with a virtuous one. The virtuous cycle is driven by the balance that

Capra addressed. That balance will enable workplace cultures that value both masculine and feminine strengths. Such cultures are more likely to achieve and sustain gender diversity. Gender diversity and valuing both types of strengths go together. *Both* drive those better business results. The root cause drives a negative cycle. The cultural preference for masculine (the “yang”) leads to workplace cultures that prefer masculine over feminine styles of thinking and working. Such workplaces miss out on feminine strengths. And the preference creates obstacles for women and, therefore, for gender diversity.

Strengths of the masculine style include confidence, authority, decisiveness, competitiveness, and handling conflict directly. Examples of strengths of the feminine style are collaborating, seeking and gathering input in making decisions, valuing connection, and influencing through persuasion.

There are benefits of appreciating both at three levels – (a) individual effectiveness, (b) team effectiveness, and (c) organisational effectiveness.

Individuals that use both sets of skills have more tools. They understand where on the continuum to operate in order to be most effective in a given situation. Those who manage teams and understand and appreciate both will not judge or shut down behaviours and perspectives different from their own. Those managers will get the value of strengths all along the continuum and see greater engagement and productivity.

Leaders of organisations can do all of this. If they understand how masculine-feminine differences run afoul of unconscious mindsets, they will also help reveal and uproot those biases. They will build cultures of inclusion. They will start in motion the virtuous cycle, unleashing the business power of gender diversity.

This piece originally appeared on [LSE Business Review](#).

March is Women’s History Month and at LSE we’re celebrating the achievements of the women of LSE. Check out the LSE history blog <http://goo.gl/9R9m8m> for more and get involved using [#LSEwomen](#)



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About the Author

Caroline Turner is a workshop facilitator, speaker, consultant, and author. Through her company, [DifferenceWORKS, LLC.](#), she helps leaders achieve better business results by creating inclusive work environments. She is an expert in gender and generational differences in the workplace and the author of [Difference Works: Improving Retention, Productivity and Profitability through Inclusion](#). Caroline is the former senior vice president, general counsel of Coors Brewing Company. She was a partner in a law firm based in Denver, Colorado,

and served as clerk on the U.S. 10th Circuit Court of Appeals. Caroline is available at www.difference-works.com, caroline@difference-works.com and in Colorado at 303-320-1443.

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