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Merit versus maleness: How strategic positioning can mitigate external gender bias

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Abstract

Despite the proactive efforts of many firms to combat gender bias within their organizations, societal prejudices still disadvantage women leaders and the firms who employ them. This external gender bias shapes outside stakeholder evaluations of women leaders' efforts in various ways, and firms need strategies to cope with this external gender bias. We examine the conditions that might alleviate this burden of external bias and what women leaders and top executives can do to leverage these conditions—from a strategic positioning perspective—that will effectively allow female leaders to differentiate their work. To do this, we synthesize and build upon evidence that the external gender bias against women leaders diminishes when they lead in areas that are unconventional rather than mainstream. We then propose a two-step process based on (1) identifying the likely threat of external gender bias, which is stronger in some industry contexts than others, and (2) leveraging unconventionality to circumvent male prototypical comparisons, thereby reducing the hazards of external gender bias.

Keywords: External gender bias, Women leaders, Role congruity, Unconventional roles, Perceived capability

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1. The threat of external gender bias

External gender bias toward women in leadership positions is problematic for both women leaders and the organizations they serve. In this article, we examine the nature of this threat, particularly in terms of how and when external stakeholders evaluate women leaders differently—and often more harshly—than their male counterparts. We address this issue by building on recent empirical evidence to elaborate how executives of any gender can (1) identify the nature and magnitude of the external gender bias threat in their industry, and (2) counter the hazards of this threat by aligning their human capital with the firm's portfolio of activities. We draw on the concept of strategic positioning (Porter, 1980, 1996) to emphasize how women leaders who work on projects that are differentiated from male-based prototypes might circumvent external gender bias. We also examine the implications for women leaders navigating their own career paths and how they can effectively differentiate the nature of their work and avoid bias-inducing spaces.

1.1. A fair share of women in leadership? We're not quite there yet

It is widely acknowledged that women have historically been underrepresented in high-ranking and visible leadership roles (Lyness & Heilman, 2006). Amid growing awareness and attention to this issue, firms are taking active measures to address this disparity. As of 2019, women occupied over one third of board seats, held more Fortune 500 CEO positions, and were better represented in both C-suites and the U.S. Congress than ever before (Catalyst, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Center for American Women and Politics, 2020; Hinchliffe, 2020). Yet women who have risen to these positions face new and old hurdles, and unlike their male counterparts, they report having to work harder to explicitly demonstrate that they are capable leaders who deserve these positions (Horowitz et al., 2018). Part of the problem is that simply having greater female representation in leadership roles does not immediately undo the deeply entrenched societal norms that underpin gender bias. In fact, deliberately adding more female leaders can sometimes aggravate the external bias these women leaders face, resulting in both real and perceived issues of unqualified token women hires (Getchell & Beitelspacher, 2020).

1.2. Role congruity theory and external gender bias

At the heart of underrepresentation is the persistent and unconscious bias that makes women seem unfit for leadership. The source of this bias is explained by role congruity theory, one of the most well-established perspectives on gender bias, which argues that men and women are stereotyped into certain kinds of roles that are thought to fit best with their gender (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The notion is that women are expected to be submissive and passive, while men are expected to be assertive and decisive. Since men have set masculine norms for leadership because they have historically held most of the leadership roles and thus are seen as in-role, women leaders find themselves in a double-bind where they cannot both “act like leaders” and also “act like women” without seeming out-of-role on one or both of these dimensions. Furthermore, from a strategic positioning perspective (Porter, 1980, 1996), this perception is likely stronger in contexts where men have long dominated leadership posts (Parker et al., 2020).

This means that women who fill these types of leadership roles will face hazards for doing so, and so will the firms who employ them. This raises the questions of what executives can do to circumvent the bias against their women leaders, and how might women leaders cope. This is not to imply that women leaders cannot be executives; rather, we focus on the fact that the women leaders serving below the C-suite often face unique and pervasive challenges in the form of external gender bias. Hereafter, we use “executives” and “women leaders” to refer to these respective groups, and we explore each of these issues in the subsequent sections of this article.

2. Acknowledging where the threat may exist

2.1. Gender bias may not be universal

Extensive research and numerous case studies chronicle the pervasiveness of external bias against women leaders. Firms often skip announcing new female executives because of the risk of stock price drops that have followed such announcements (Gaughan et al., 2016; Jeong &

Harrison, 2017). Publishing houses report selling fewer female-edited volumes (Flood, 2018), and authors who choose pseudonyms are disproportionately females writing under male names, ostensibly to avoid external gender bias before their audience has even read their work (Williams, 2020). But some evidence suggests that external gender bias is weaker under certain conditions. For instance, one study found evidence that greater female representation in top management teams improved firm performance—but only when the firm’s strategic focus was on innovation—owing to the positive effects of diverse thinking and different leadership styles (Dezsö & Ross, 2012). A study of the film industry further found that regardless of leadership style, women who directed films with less-conventional genre content experienced better film ratings than those who directed more conventional films (Parker et al., 2020). That is, while there is some evidence of gender-based differences in leadership style in some contexts (Eagly et al., 2003), in the film industry there was no statistically significant leadership style difference between men and women film directors, and yet there was still evidence of external gender bias in conventional films; however, this bias seemed to dissipate when women directed unconventional films.

Collectively, these findings suggest something compelling: Gender bias may not pervade all contexts. As such, there may be circumstances where women can lead without being forced to alter their behavior or leadership style to avoid external gender bias. This emphasizes a critical point: As firms move forward under the persistent threat of gender bias, executives can do more than just recognize the potential for external gender bias; they can also understand when gender bias is weaker and learn how they can strategically leverage these opportunities to utilize their women leaders more effectively.

2.2. How prototypical comparisons encourage external gender bias

The insights derived from the studies discussed in the previous section are important for any context in which (1) the leader is visible to the public and other key external stakeholders, and (2) the subjective perceptions of those stakeholders matter to the organization. We contend that although gender bias may not prevail everywhere, it is a salient external threat in certain contexts, and executives should therefore be aware of it.

The inevitable presence of a male leader prototype in conventional contexts provides a simple reference point against which the public can compare women leaders. Maleness norms are likely to encourage mental shortcuts that result in direct, cognitively effortless (bias-prone) comparisons between male-based prototypes and female-led initiatives. After all, people are pattern seeking, and we favor mental shortcuts for efficient information processing (Arkes, 1991).

Within the context of filmmaking, where men outnumber women in directors' chairs in Hollywood by about 20 to 1 (Parker et al., 2020), little cognitive effort is needed to recall any number of great male film directors and the types of prototypical films associated with them. The architecture industry is also dominated by a handful of big (male) defining names that designed skyscrapers, corporate offices, and other edifices that constitute the conventional pinnacle of architectural success, despite women making up half of architectural graduates (Tether, 2017).

In both scenarios, women who want to make a career in the industry must carve out niches for their work, lest they be overshadowed by conventions that are rooted in male-led traditions. For instance, women directors who direct films in less common categories (e.g., *The Hurt Locker*, a war thriller directed by Kathryn Bigelow—a director known for pushing the limits of genre conventions; Jermyn & Redmond, 2003) are better positioned to avoid bias-inducing direct comparison to the more common genre categories, such as sci-fi thriller (e.g., *Iron Man*, directed by Jon Favreau). Similarly, women architects who focus on niche clients and other segments often circumvented by conventional architecture firms—as chronicled by a *New York Times* opinion piece (Arieff, 2018)—can “rethink what success means” and build extraordinary careers despite working in an industry with powerful, entrenched male prototypes.

The implications of these findings and illustrations from the film and architecture industries are not confined to women directing films and designing buildings. In many other industries, top executives and the women leaders spearheading important initiatives are likewise burdened by this problematic external bias, especially when conventionality seems unavoidable (Thompson- Whiteside, 2020). Given that unconventionality may be a key strategic positioning factor to combat external gender bias, how can top executives—and women leaders as well—leverage this information?

Executives need to think carefully about how to navigate external gender biases if they want to get the best return from women leaders. Thus, to address this issue in a manner that recognizes the added burden that women leaders face in conventional spaces—and the potential opportunities available in unconventional spaces—we propose a two-step process (see **Figure 1**). The first step is to identify the likely threat, and the second is to mitigate it by leveraging these insights about the benefits of unconventionality and avoiding hazardous male prototypical comparisons using a strategic positioning perspective.

3. Step one: Identifying the gender bias threat

3.1. Hot spots of gender bias against women leaders

Much like how an entrepreneur must come to terms with legitimacy issues owing to liabilities of smallness or newness, women leaders must unfortunately come to terms with external legitimacy threats attributable to their gender. But a strategic positioning perspective may shed light on spaces where there is less external gender bias. When women leaders are positioned—by their supervisors or by their own choices—to circumvent the conventional conceptual spaces in which male-leader prototypes are more entrenched, they are freer to be judged on their own merits. How, then, might top executives and women leaders identify possible hot spots of external gender bias?

A variety of opinions exists regarding where women are more likely to experience bias because of their gender. In certain industries, the external gender bias and the subtle (or not-so-subtle) pushback against women leaders is particularly pronounced. We believe gender bias is most likely to manifest in contexts in which two hot spots coincide: (1) when the industry is masculinized, either in terms of being majority male or with male-dominated leadership; and (2) when pinnacles of past achievement are dominated by a small cast of recognizable figures, most likely to be men. We examine each of these hot spots of gender bias in turn.

Step 1	Key question	Factors to consider	The effects of external bias on women leaders	Implications for executives
<p>Threat identification</p>	<p>How do conventional male prototypes manifest in your industry?</p>	<p>Gender bias hot spots are more likely in some industries than in others; it is likely pronounced when there are entrenched male prototypes, most notably: (1) higher overall “masculinity” and (2) the presence of prominent male leaders/innovators</p>	<p>■ Wherever male prototypes are entrenched, the public will judge women leaders more by their gender and less by their capabilities ■ “Maleness” equals “merit” in such contexts, because of how bias shapes perceptions ■ This leads to underestimation of women’s efforts irrespective of their quality of work ■ If these facts are ignored, women will face far steeper paths to career success because their true capabilities will not be recognized</p>	<p>■ Executives should consider how gender bias shapes stakeholders’ perceptions of a leader’s efforts regardless of their objective merits ■ Executives should view gender bias as a critical threat to the firm and its women leaders ■ Executives should consider the possible threat mitigation remedies outlined in Step 2</p>
<p>Threat recognition must occur prior to threat mitigation. Consider the following three items to determine the level of external gender bias in your industry: (a) What is considered conventional? (b) Who is considered prototypical? (c) How visible are industry leaders? External gender bias against women leaders is higher amid male prototypes: i.e., celebrity male leaders, mostly male employment, or masculine norms.</p>				
Step 2	Key question	Remedies to consider	Practical examples for executives	Note to women leaders
<p>Threat mitigation</p>	<p>If external gender bias is subconscious and widespread, how can women leaders and their firms cope with these obstacles and leverage them instead?</p>	<p>➢ Recognize and adjust for external gender bias.</p> <p>➢ Reassign women to less conventional leadership positions/work.</p> <p>➢ Create flexible paths for advancement.</p>	<p>■ <i>Incorporate safeguards</i> when appraising performance using external evaluations ■ <i>Challenge the narrative</i> by celebrating women’s achievements in the industry’s history</p> <p>■ <i>Discuss with women leaders</i> their thoughts around hurdles to success in conventional vs. unconventional contexts ■ <i>Assign women leaders</i> to contexts with fewer entrenched male prototypes ■ <i>...but avoid marginalizing</i> women who want to lead in hot spot areas ■ <i>Make peace with the controversy</i> of pointing to the fact that male prototypes shape public bias</p> <p>■ <i>Orient your thinking</i> around maximizing human capital allocation and diversifying risk amid the ongoing threat of external gender bias ■ <i>Encourage women</i> to identify unconventional paths for advancement and reward accordingly</p>	<p>■ Exhibiting “male” leadership traits or changing your style may not help when entrenched male prototypes amplify gender bias</p> <p>■ Consider whether a reassignment will mitigate bias (or reinforce it by underscoring female prototypes) ■ The choices are not just (a) enduring bias or (b) staying in your lane by pursuing contexts with strong female prototypes ■ You can trailblaze in a space where merit outweighs maleness</p> <p>■ Rethink conventional success and consider the value of pioneering in new, unexplored spaces by adopting a strategic differentiation mindset</p>
<p>Combating external gender bias against women leaders requires more than token appointments. Both women leaders and their firms can leverage new, unconventional spaces to stay at the cutting edge of new leadership prototypes while mitigating the ongoing effects of gender bias.</p>				

Figure 1. Addressing external gender bias

3.1.1. Bias hot spot 1: The overall masculinity of an industry context

This hot spot of industry masculinization can manifest in two broad ways. First, and most intuitively, there are industries in which men comprise the majority of organizational members, such as the manufacturing (70.6% male) and construction (89.7% male) sectors (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2019; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). In these contexts, women leaders are seen as out-of-role by virtue of their rarity in the industry, and potentially because the core tasks of the industry are historically male-prototyped.

Second, some industries skew toward male leadership despite the overall gender demographics of the industry. In these contexts, women may be more represented—or may even form the majority—among rank-and-file employees, and yet examples of women leaders are rare. This exacerbates the unconscious perception that men fit as leaders while women do not (Eagly & Karau, 2002) or that women can participate but are not fit to lead (Lau & Hennessee, 2013). As such, when women do rise to leadership roles in these contexts, the burdens of external gender bias are that much greater. Much like the film and architecture industries mentioned previously, various other industries are characterized by this gender disparity between rank-and-file employees and leaders. In the fashion industry, women comprise 80% of academic graduates (Friedman, 2018) at some top schools but run about 16% of brands. In the financial sector, women occupy a majority of employee positions but just 8.1% of non-CEO executive roles (Desilver, 2018; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). In the leisure and hospitality sector, the workforce is majority female, but men outnumber women in hotel leadership by over 7-to-1 (Castell Project, 2020). In healthcare, women comprise 78.1% of the workforce but just 12.6% of non-CEO executive positions. A final example is the education industry, where women comprise almost 70% of the workforce but rarely occupy top leadership positions (Alcalde & Subramaniam, 2020).

The purpose of our discussion here is not to point fingers at those industries. Instead, our goal is to identify potential hot spots of external gender bias that firms can circumvent. Additionally, we expect that another factor further amplifies gender bias: When entire industries are characterized by the success of a small handful of highly visible men, there is a heightened hazard for women leaders in the field.

3.1.2. Bias hot spot 2: Industries with male exemplars as celebrity leaders

If, as is often said, “history is written by victors,” then certain industries are likely to designate key celebrity figures that exemplify success. Think classical music, think Beethoven. Think tech, think Steve Jobs. In industries where many of the celebrity CEOs or other prominent leaders are male—electric cars (Elon Musk), social media (Mark Zuckerberg, Jack Dorsey), computers and software (Steve Jobs, Tim Cook, Bill Gates), banking (Brian Moynihan, Jamie Dimon), and restaurants (Bobby Flay, Gordon Ramsay), among others—these male figures loom large in stakeholders’ memories in terms of what a prototypical leader in this industry should look like. The ease of recalling male exemplars—which overlooks the number of men that could not achieve such status—creates an even larger hurdle for women leaders navigating these conventional, male-dominated spaces. For instance, Elizabeth Holmes—infamous founder of the now-defunct Theranos—was highly sensationalized as being the first “female Steve Jobs” (Weisul, 2020), and many attribute this prototypical celebrity comparison as heightening her fear of falling short of such lofty expectations, potentially contributing to her decision-making. Generally, women may come to believe that they must establish themselves in these conventional spaces by replicating the efforts of these male prototypes in order to prove their merit and gain a similar celebrity designation. Yet the more they try, the more they may inadvertently highlight differences that may induce biased comparisons from the public. This stands in sharp contrast to industries with highly prominent women celebrity exemplars as leaders, such as child health products (Jessica Alba’s The Honest Company), athleisure (Kate Hudson’s Fabletics), and undergarments and shapewear (Kim Kardashian’s Skims). Under these conditions, whereby these biasing hot spots are less prevalent, women leaders are less likely to face the same degree of external bias.

3.2. Moving from threat identification to threat mitigation

Addressing and mitigating any threat—including subtle external gender bias against women leaders—begins with recognition that these hot spots are prevalent in certain industries. When men dominate the industry and there are easily recognizable male prototypes, this should

alert both executives and women leaders that external gender bias is more likely to exist. This bias, in turn, has implications for how executives evaluate the woman leader's performance, because performance evaluations may fail to correct for the disadvantage that women face in these bias-prone hot spots. This not only affects the woman's career prospects but also the firm's effective assessment and (re)allocation of its human capital.

This is particularly challenging given that external gender bias is often subconscious. Interestingly, one study found that 59% of Americans believe there are too few women in both high political office and top executive business positions (Desilver, 2018), and the rate at which they blamed gender discrimination for the scarcity of women in those roles was 49% and 54%, respectively. However, even if the public can articulate that gender discrimination unfairly affects women leaders, people may still make subconscious choices that perpetuate that bias, especially within conventional, mainstream contexts.

Fortunately, there are ways for both executives and women leaders to cope with these obstacles. To determine how one might mitigate these threats, we invert the two hot spot criteria—that is, (1) when men do *not* dominate the industry and (2) when there are *few* easily recognizable male prototypes, women leaders will find themselves in a better position to be judged on their own merits.

4. Step two: Mitigating the external gender bias threat

Women—and the organizations who employ them—can take heart that appointing women to lead initiatives will not necessarily worsen how stakeholders perceive those initiatives (Dezsö & Ross, 2012; Parker et al., 2020). Adopting a strategic positioning perspective and encouraging women to lead in less conventional areas, which are less prone to bias-inducing comparisons (Parker et al., 2020), might improve both the performance of the firm's overall portfolio and boost the careers of these women leaders. We detail three levels of remedies that executives and women leaders might consider as they take stock of their organizations' unique circumstances and provide illustrations of how this might play out.

4.1. Recognize and adjust for external gender bias

The first and least invasive option is for executives to account for the effects of probable external bias in women leaders' evaluations, especially in conventional spaces. If the performance evaluations of project or division leaders in a firm are based on external performance measures that are susceptible to bias, then the firm may unknowingly undervalue and underutilize the talent of their women leaders (Kray & Kennedy, 2017). If women are objectively qualified but subjectively disadvantaged by external stakeholders' perceptions, they may receive worse performance evaluations from firms that focus only on sheer performance—and not on the bias baked into the perceptions underlying that performance. This has implications for training and retention, the latter two pillars of the attraction-training-retention tripod of effective human resource management (Ulrich, 1996). If women leaders are evaluated inaccurately, they (1) might be subject to needless and costly training that is both redundant and demoralizing, or (2) might be ignored or undervalued vis-à-vis incentive programs designed to retain top talent, and (3) could even be lost to rivals who would utilize them more effectively. But these internal evaluation penalties are correctable.

Practical examples of how such a remedy may be borne out include (1) incorporating safeguards when appraising performance using external evaluations, or (2) challenging the narrative by celebrating the historical accomplishments of “conventional” women in the industry. In this instance, it is important for executives to recognize the lack of control women leaders may have in adjusting for this bias. For example, women may try to lead with stereotypically masculine characteristics, or they may intentionally choose to focus on leading in conventional spaces as a way of proving their merit, but this often backfires and only further highlights the perceptual disparities they often must endure (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These women face a double bind: Without fitting the mold for traditional leadership, they find themselves at a disadvantage; yet the more they try to fit the conventional mold, the more they seem not to fit, aggravating the bias further.

In the film industry study by Parker et al. (2020), the authors examined three separate types of external stakeholders relevant to that industry: moviegoers, movie critics, and awards committees. While film

studio executives may find it difficult to explicitly change the minds of moviegoers, they can still acknowledge potential gatekeeping imbalances among critics and awards committees and work to change them. In 2019, male film critics outnumbered female critics two to one, and they acknowledged the prior work and accomplishments of female directors less frequently than did female critics (Donnelly, 2019). Similarly, selection processes among awards committees also tend to be heavily male-dominated and consistently overlook women directors (Dockterman, 2020). We suspect this underrepresentation among certain gatekeeping groups is not unique to the film industry and that executives in other industries will face comparable challenges.

If executives are aware of and account for this bias—that certain stakeholders or gatekeepers may rate women leaders more negatively, irrespective of objective outcomes, and that women leaders may lack options to avoid this bias—then executives can avoid passing over these women and their unappreciated talents and better leverage the firm's human resource potential.

For instance, film industry executives might explicitly acknowledge that the efforts of female film directors may not adequately be represented in the perceptions of audiences—whether they be moviegoers, critics, or peers serving on awards committees. This affirmation of the bias women leaders face may encourage these women to press on until their objective achievements are subjectively appreciated. Further, by recognizing and adjusting for this bias in their evaluations and communications of women leaders' achievements—both internally and externally—executives may help spotlight the imbalances in gatekeeping groups, or at least underscore that external audiences need not have the last word on the woman leader's capabilities.

Similarly, another way forward is for gatekeepers and executives to celebrate the historical accomplishments of conventional women in the industry, as this provides current female leaders, their executives, and external gatekeepers with women-based prototypes to use as unbiased comparisons. For instance, there has been renewed interest in celebrating historic female scientists and other “rebel women” and their accomplishments (Flood, 2016) in order to set a precedent for young girls wanting to enter fields traditionally dominated by men. In this vein, many industries are beginning to highlight prominent women who have played an integral role in shaping their industries. By doing

so, both executives and gatekeepers can start new conversations that challenge the notion that only men are capable of serving as prototypical references.

4.2. Reassign women leaders to less conventional leadership posts

Building on our first remedy, which focuses on the acknowledgment of and adjustment for external gender bias, a more invasive and potentially controversial course of action is to reassign women leaders—should they be interested—to posts less susceptible to external gender bias. The threat of external bias undermines the women leaders' performance—when they are already at a disadvantage for promotion and advancement (Coury et al., 2020)—and also squanders talent that could benefit the firm if reallocated elsewhere.

For organizations seeking to implement this remedy, there are two important caveats. First, firms should avoid the heuristic of reassigning women to roles or contexts considered less masculine or more feminine in nature. Across industries, specific kinds of leadership roles are already skewed in terms of their gender distribution. While women less often occupy leadership roles in operations, research and development, or strategy, they are well represented in human resource leadership roles (International Labor Organization, 2019), especially in the United States, where women comprised 74.8% of HR management in 2019 (Catalyst, 2020b). Paradoxically, assigning women to roles where there is already a precedent for women leaders, however well intended, may be a short-term solution that is more harmful in the long run. The reason for this potential long-term hazard is that assigning women to feminine roles and contexts can perpetuate the notion that women can lead only within certain lanes. Thus, instead of assigning women to feminine roles, a better option is to assign women to fields with fewer examples of strong male-prototypes.

Second, it is important to underscore that should executives pursue this remedy of reassignment, it must be with the consent and agreement of the leader herself. Such tactics are not intended to stunt the career prospects of the woman leader, relegate her to a fringe industry or role, or cast her as a liability due to external gender bias outside of her control; it is to provide her an avenue to grow and progress without enduring the hazards of certain bias-prone contexts.

For instance, if top executives at a management consulting firm notice that their female project leads are experiencing lackluster reception, executives might first consider the standards against which these women are compared. If the firm's clients operate in an industry defined by masculine norms (i.e., the industry is male-dominated or male-led), then—consistent with our first remedy—executives can acknowledge the presence of external bias and realize that these women may experience higher hurdles in industries that are more conventional in nature. This recognition could influence how the management consulting firm evaluates the performance of these women, since women project leads might see less revenue, less repeat business, or lower client satisfaction ratings from their clients because of external bias. This recognition may also highlight the need to address imbalances among external gatekeepers that could account for these lower ratings, as well as promote stories or examples of women who have navigated similar experiences.

To take things further, a more aggressive approach consistent with our second remedy would be to discuss with these women the prospect of reassignment to initiatives in fields that are more novel or unconventional, as these contexts may be less susceptible to such biased evaluations. By transferring women leaders to contexts less prone to gender bias and with the above caveats in mind, these women's true capabilities may shine through in ways not evident before. In line with our previous example, if a female consulting project lead is operating in a bias hot spot, her supervisor could start conversations that transparently highlight the current hurdles, suggest areas of reassignment (i.e., industries that are not predominantly male-led, or male-dominated, with fewer male celebrity leader figures), and defend their reasoning in a manner that is not meant to be demeaning but—from a strategic positioning perspective—highlights the value of empowering her to differentiate herself.

4.3. Create flexible paths for advancement in unconventional positions

The third remedy is to create pathways whereby women can advance into unconventional leadership contexts. This is a nuanced hybrid of the first two remedies and has more to do with shifting mindsets—that is, recognizing that women leaders need not mimic male prototypes as a

way of establishing legitimacy in a field, and that their executives should recognize and help them carve out other paths for success. Women leaders can consider the value of pioneering in new, unexplored spaces, and executives can similarly help women leaders by encouraging them to explore contexts that are unconventional relative to male-prototypical roles.

Finding unconventional contexts in which women leaders might thrive can be as straightforward as identifying less-traveled paths, or as nuanced as allowing the woman leader to chart her own course. For example, a banking firm might encourage a woman leader to consider avenues like technology oversight, a relatively unconventional position within the banking industry, whereas a female orchestra director might avoid direct comparison to the great male maestros by conducting less canonical music and instead contribute to a new canon drawn from more recent composers. Marin Alsop, the only female conductor of a major U.S. orchestra to date, is widely recognized as a champion of American music (Rauch, 2019); likewise, Alondra de la Parra is known for her interpretation of contemporary Mexican composers (Guzman, 2015). These genres of music are not considered feminine *per se*, but unlike the previously established European music of the classical or romantic era, they do lack the presence of dominant male predecessors. Top decision makers at an orchestra can empower their women directors to pursue atypical paths that allow their individual capabilities to shine—while avoiding the glare of a male-prototypical spotlight. In doing so, the orchestra might reap greater rewards from those women leaders than if they simply chose to ignore the potential effects of gender bias from donors, critics, and audiences.

Of course, determining what is unconventional depends on the organization's industry context, and as with all new and unexplored territories, there may be new kinds of threats and risks. However, by consciously partnering with women leaders to craft unconventional paths for their advancement, executives can hedge against the external threat of gender bias while promoting creative diversity among their human capital. By encouraging women leaders to pioneer in areas that potentially broaden the firm's opportunity base, executives may help the firm achieve a better overall person-task fit than was possible via a conventional approach that neglects these nuances.

5. Moving forward: Creating a new norm

5.1. For executives: Encourage women to be pioneers

Including women in leadership can spark innovation (Bourke & Dillon, 2018), lessen the gender pay gap (Tate & Yang, 2015), and generate a more favorable bottom line (Charlton, 2018). Yet executives committed to such inclusion face an ongoing battle in determining best practices that can address bias, promote talented personnel, and make the most of the resources—human and otherwise—at their disposal. Organizations can strive to combat bias through equitable internal policies and yet still experience performance disadvantages and negative evaluations as a result of external gender bias. By recognizing the conditions under which women leaders are more (or less) likely to face such biased external evaluations, executives can facilitate fairer evaluations of women leaders and better leverage their talents by distancing them from the hazards of mental shortcuts prone to gender bias.

Furthermore, it is important for executives to note that the issue of gender-biased evaluations is entangled with issues of gender disparity and underrepresentation in leadership positions, and it is difficult for executives to attempt to address one without also addressing the other. Indeed, there has been some progress toward mitigating overall gender disparity, as the issue of underrepresentation is slowly improving in many industries, which could potentially contribute to the lessening of role-congruity stereotypes. For instance, both the apparel and government/nonprofit industries had high rates of women replacing departing CEOs in 2019 (53.8% and 43.3%, respectively; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). At face value, simply increasing the number of women leaders may seem a viable path toward establishing female-based prototypes in conventional spaces. But the approach of appointing a token woman leader can be problematic because it attracts disproportionate scrutiny for those filling the token role (Chang et al., 2019; Fitzsimmons, 2012) and may create backlash in how their capabilities are perceived (Lee & James, 2007). Executives must also recognize that token appointments of women leaders into these conventional spaces may not be the answer; instead, encouraging women leaders to blaze unconventional trails may be the better alternative, with better short- and long-term returns (Lang, 2020; Zillman, 2019).

Executives have unique opportunities to pursue remedies that can either adjust for bias that women are likely to face in conventional spaces or encourage women leaders to explore the benefits of unconventional spaces. For example, executives can start new conversations that (1) challenge the notion that only men are capable of serving as prototypical reference points, and (2) appropriately acknowledge both the prior and future accomplishments of women leaders. This could redefine success in a more gender-balanced world of leaders. As this process unfolds, even skeptical decision makers and gatekeepers can be mollified by the evidence that the subtle biases that affect the viability of women-led initiatives can be overcome—as long as the organization is creative in terms of the strategic space to which their female leaders are deployed.

5.2. For woman leaders: Forge a new path

As much as this article highlights remedies for executives to implement, women leaders should also note how these decisions may affect their career trajectories. Women leaders may still have to work harder to convince the public of their leadership capabilities for the foreseeable future. Yet regardless of whether the bias stems from gendered comparisons to prototypical male referents or from pursuing less familiar spaces, there are ways to be strategic—that is, to leverage strategic positioning to circumvent some of these biases and potentially to exceed implicit expectations (Dezsö & Ross, 2012; Parker et al., 2020).

The women who currently work in unconventional spaces, or who have the chance to do so, face a unique opportunity to drive meaningful and needed change. Their leadership, vision, and voices can contribute to the erosion of stereotypes about what men and women do. Eventually, women leaders will measure themselves against new prototypes rooted in merit, rather than in convention or maleness. In any context, women leaders must weigh the benefits of either adhering to convention or pursuing a path less traveled, and there are benefits and costs to both. At a minimum, it is potentially costly for women leaders to operate in conventional spaces that are likely to be hotbeds of entrenched gender and role-congruity biases. By contrast, unconventional spaces present a promising avenue for women leaders to thrive despite the persistence of gender bias in society.

Does this mean that women should be content with staying in their own lanes or leading around the edges in unconventional spaces for the foreseeable future? No, but it does point to a viable path for women to build incremental wins and to become pioneers in their own right, staking their claims in new, uncharted territory. After all, you cannot be a pioneer if you only adhere to convention.

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