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**SPOTLIGHT ON WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP**

# Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers

**Persistent gender bias too often disrupts the learning process at the heart of becoming a leader. Here's how to correct the problem.**  
*by Herminia Ibarra, Robin Ely, and Deborah Kolb*

# Spotlight

**ARTWORK** Janet Echelman, *1.26 Sculpture Project at the Amsterdam Light Festival*  
December 7, 2012–January 20, 2013, Spectra Fiber, high-tenacity polyester fiber, and lighting, 230' x 63' x 30', Amstel River, Amsterdam, Netherlands



# Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers

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PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF JANUSVAN DEN EIJNDEN

Many CEOs who make gender diversity a priority—by setting aspirational goals for the proportion of women in leadership roles, insisting on diverse slates of candidates for senior positions, and developing mentoring and training programs—are frustrated. They and their companies spend time, money, and good intentions on efforts to build a more robust pipeline of upwardly mobile women, and then not much happens.

The problem with these leaders' approaches is that they don't address the often fragile process of coming to see oneself, and to be seen by others, as a leader. Becoming a leader involves much more than being put in a leadership role, acquiring new skills, and adapting one's style to the requirements of that role. It involves a fundamental identity shift. Organizations inadvertently undermine this process when they advise women to proactively seek leadership roles without also addressing policies and practices that communicate a mismatch between how women are seen and the qualities and experiences people tend to associate with leaders.

A significant body of research (see "Further Reading") shows that for women, the subtle gender bias that persists in organizations and in society disrupts the learning cycle at the heart of becoming a leader. This research also points to some steps that companies can take in order to rectify the situation. It's not enough to identify and instill the "right" skills and competencies as if in a social vacuum. The context must support a woman's motivation to lead and also increase the likelihood that others will recognize and encourage her efforts—even when she doesn't look or behave like the current generation of senior executives.

The solutions to the pipeline problem are very different from what companies currently employ. Traditional high-potential, mentoring, and leadership education programs are necessary but not sufficient. Our research, teaching, and consulting reveal three additional actions companies can take to improve the chances that women will gain a sense of themselves as leaders, be recognized as such, and ultimately succeed. (This article expands on our paper "Taking Gender into Account: Theory and Design for Women's Leadership Development Programs," *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, September 2011.)

### Becoming a Leader

People become leaders by *internalizing a leadership identity* and *developing a sense of purpose*. Internalizing a sense of oneself as a leader is an iterative process. A person asserts leadership by taking purposeful action—such as convening a meeting to revive a dormant project. Others affirm or resist the action, thus encouraging or discouraging subsequent assertions. These interactions inform the person's sense of self as a leader and communicate how others view his or her fitness for the role.

As a person's leadership capabilities grow and opportunities to demonstrate them expand, high-profile, challenging assignments and other organizational endorsements become more likely. Such affirmation gives the person the fortitude to step outside a comfort zone and experiment with unfamiliar behaviors and new ways of exercising leadership. An absence of affirmation, however, diminishes self-confidence and discourages him or her from seeking developmental opportunities or experimenting. Leadership identity, which begins as a tentative, peripheral aspect of the self, eventually withers away, along with opportunities to grow through new assignments and real achievements. Over time, an aspiring leader acquires a reputation as having—or not having—high potential.

The story of an investment banker we'll call Amanda is illustrative. Amanda's career stalled when she was in her thirties. Her problem, she was told, was that she lacked "presence" with clients (who were mostly older men) and was not sufficiently outspoken in meetings. Her career prospects looked bleak. But both her reputation and her confidence grew when she was assigned to work with two clients whose CFOs happened to be women. These women appreciated Amanda's smarts and the skillful way she handled their needs and concerns. Each in her own way started taking the initiative to raise

**Idea in Brief****THE BASELINE**

People become leaders iteratively: They shoulder increasingly challenging roles, learn from mentors, and experiment with new behaviors. Then, if their performance is affirmed, they repeat the process.

**WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS**

That process is often more difficult for women than for men because of subtle biases. For example, behavior considered assertive in a man is seen as aggressive in a woman and thus denigrated rather than rewarded.

**THE PATH FORWARD**

Just naming those biases can help men and women alike to understand what's going on. That frees women to focus more on leadership purpose and less on how they're perceived.

Amanda's profile. One demanded that she be present at all key meetings, and the other refused to speak to anyone but Amanda when she called—actions that enhanced Amanda's credibility within her firm. "In our industry," Amanda explains, "having the key client relationship is everything." Her peers and supervisors began to see her not just as a competent project manager but as a trusted client adviser—an important prerequisite for promotion. These relationships, both internal and external, gave Amanda the confidence boost she needed to generate ideas and express them forthrightly, whether to colleagues or to clients. Her supervisors happily concluded that Amanda had finally shed her "meek and mild-mannered" former self and "stepped up" to leadership.

Effective leaders develop a sense of purpose by pursuing goals that align with their personal values and advance the collective good. This allows them to look beyond the status quo to what is *possible* and gives them a compelling reason to take action despite personal fears and insecurities. Such leaders are seen as authentic and trustworthy because they are willing to take risks in the service of shared goals. By connecting others to a larger purpose, they inspire commitment, boost resolve, and help colleagues find deeper meaning in their work.

Integrating leadership into one's core identity is particularly challenging for women, who must establish credibility in a culture that is deeply conflicted about whether, when, and how they should exercise authority. Practices that equate leadership with behaviors considered more common in men suggest that women are simply not cut out to be leaders. Furthermore, the human tendency to gravitate to people like oneself leads powerful men to sponsor and advocate for other men when leadership opportunities arise. As Amanda's story illustrates, women's leadership potential sometimes shows in less conventional ways—being responsive

to clients' needs, for example, rather than boldly asserting a point of view—and sometimes it takes powerful women to recognize that potential. But powerful women are scarce.

Despite a lack of discriminatory intent, subtle, "second-generation" forms of workplace gender bias can obstruct the leadership identity development of a company's entire population of women. (See the sidebar "What Is Second-Generation Gender Bias?") The resulting underrepresentation of women in top positions reinforces entrenched beliefs, prompts and supports men's bids for leadership, and thus maintains the status quo.

The three actions we suggest to support women's access to leadership positions are (1) educate women and men about second-generation gender bias, (2) create safe "identity workspaces" to support transitions to bigger roles, and (3) anchor women's development efforts in a sense of leadership purpose rather than in how women are perceived. These actions will give women insight into themselves and their organizations, enabling them to more effectively chart a course to leadership.

### **Educate Everyone About Second-Generation Gender Bias**

**For women.** More than 25 years ago the social psychologist Faye Crosby stumbled on a surprising phenomenon: Most women are unaware of having personally been victims of gender discrimination and deny it *even when it is objectively true and they see that women in general experience it*.

Many women have worked hard to take gender out of the equation—to simply be recognized for their skills and talents. Moreover, the existence of gender bias in organizational policies and practices may suggest that they have no power to determine their own success. When asked what might be holding women back in their organizations, they say:

## WHAT IS SECOND-GENERATION GENDER BIAS?

**Research has moved away from a focus on the deliberate exclusion of women and toward investigating “second-generation” forms of gender bias as the primary cause of women’s persistent underrepresentation in leadership roles. This bias erects powerful but subtle and often invisible barriers for women that arise from cultural assumptions and organizational structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently benefit men while putting women at a disadvantage. Among them are:**

**A PAUCITY OF ROLE MODELS FOR WOMEN.** Aspiring leaders need role models whose styles and behaviors they can experiment with and evaluate according to their own standards and others’ reactions. Fewer female leaders means fewer role models and can suggest to young would-be leaders that being a woman is

a liability—thus discouraging them from viewing senior women as credible sources of advice and support.

**GENDERED CAREER PATHS AND GENDERED WORK.** Many entrenched organizational structures and work practices were designed to fit men’s lives and situations at a time when women made up

only a very small portion of the workforce. For one example, formal rotations in sales or operations have traditionally been a key step on the path to senior leadership, and men are more likely than women to have held such jobs. Yet requirements like these may be outdated when it comes to the kinds of experience that best prepare a person to lead. For another, career-enhancing international posts often assume a “trailing spouse” who has no career and can easily move—a family situation much more common for men than for women. How work is valued may similarly give men an advantage: Research indicates that organizations tend to ignore or undervalue behind-the-scenes work (building a team, avoiding a crisis), which

“It’s nothing overt. I just feel less of a connection, either positive or negative, with the guys I work with. So sometimes I seem to have difficulty getting traction for my ideas.”

“I look around and see that my male colleagues have P&L responsibility and most of us are in staff roles. I was advised to make the move to a staff role after the birth of my second child. It would be easier, I was told. But now I recognize that there is no path back to the line.”

“My firm has the very best intentions when it comes to women. But it seems every time a leadership role opens up, women are not on the slate. The claim is made that they just can’t find women with the right skill set and experience.”

These statements belie the notion that gender bias is absent from these women’s work lives. Second-generation bias does not require an intent to exclude; nor does it necessarily produce direct, immediate harm to any individual. Rather, it creates a context—akin to “something in the water”—in which women fail to thrive or reach their full potential. Feeling less connected to one’s male colleagues, being advised to take a staff role to accommodate family, finding oneself excluded from consideration for key positions—all these situations reflect work structures and practices that put women at a disadvantage.

Without an understanding of second-generation bias, people are left with stereotypes to explain why women as a group have failed to achieve parity with men: If they can’t reach the top, it is because they “don’t ask,” are “too nice,” or simply “opt out.” These

messages tell women who have managed to succeed that they are exceptions and women who have experienced setbacks that it is their own fault for failing to be sufficiently aggressive or committed to the job.

We find that when women recognize the subtle and pervasive effects of second-generation bias, they feel empowered, not victimized, because they can take action to counter those effects. They can put themselves forward for leadership roles when they are qualified but have been overlooked. They can seek out sponsors and others to support and develop them in those roles. They can negotiate for work arrangements that fit both their lives and their organizations’ performance requirements. Such understanding makes it easier for women to “lean in.”

**For women and men.** Second-generation bias is embedded in stereotypes and organizational practices that can be hard to detect, but when people are made aware of it, they see possibilities for change. In our work with leadership development programs, we focus on a “small wins” approach to change. In one manufacturing company, a task force learned that leaders tended to hire and promote people, mainly men, whose backgrounds and careers resembled their own. They had good reasons for this behavior: Experienced engineers were hard to find, and time constraints pressured leaders to fill roles quickly. But after recognizing some of the hidden costs of this practice—high turnover, difficulty attracting women to the company, and a lack of diversity to match that of customers—the company began to experiment with small wins. For example, some executives made a commitment to review the

women are more likely to do, while rewarding heroic work, which is most often done by men. These practices were not designed to be discriminatory, but their cumulative effect disadvantages women. A vicious cycle ensues: Men appear to be best suited to leadership roles, and this perception propels more of them to seek and attain such positions, thus reinforcing the notion that they are simply better leaders.

**WOMEN'S LACK OF ACCESS TO NETWORKS AND SPONSORS.** Informal networks are a precious resource for would-be leaders, yet differences in men's and women's organizational roles and career prospects, along with their proclivity to interact with others of the

same gender, result in weaker networks for women. They cite as a major barrier to advancement their lack of access to influential colleagues. Moreover, the connections women do have tend to be less efficacious: Men's networks provide more informal help than women's do, and men are more likely to have mentors who help them get promoted. Meanwhile, men in positions of power tend to direct developmental opportunities to junior men, whom they view as more likely than women to succeed.

**DOUBLE BINDS.** In most cultures masculinity and leadership are closely linked: The ideal leader, like the ideal man, is decisive, assertive, and independent. In contrast, women are expected to be nice,

caretaking, and unselfish. The mismatch between conventionally feminine qualities and the qualities thought necessary for leadership puts female leaders in a double bind. Numerous studies have shown that women who excel in traditionally male domains are viewed as competent but less likable than their male counterparts. Behaviors that suggest self-confidence or assertiveness in men often appear arrogant or abrasive in women. Meanwhile, women in positions of authority who enact a conventionally feminine style may be liked but are not respected. They are deemed too emotional to make tough decisions and too soft to be strong leaders.

job criteria for leadership roles. One male leader said, "We write the job descriptions—the list of capabilities—for our ideal candidates. We know that the men will nominate themselves even if they don't meet all the requirements; the women would hold back. Now we look for the capabilities that are needed in the role, not some unrealistic ideal. We have hired more women in these roles, and our quality has not suffered in the least."

In another case, participants in a leadership development program noticed that men seemed to be given more strategic roles, whereas women were assigned more operational ones, signaling that they had lower potential. The participants proposed that the company provide clear criteria for developmental assignments, be transparent about how high potential was evaluated, and give direction as to what experiences best increased a person's potential. Those actions put more women in leadership roles.

### Create Safe "Identity Workspaces"

In the upper tiers of organizations, women become increasingly scarce, which heightens the visibility and scrutiny of those near the top, who may become risk-averse and overly focused on details and lose their sense of purpose. (In general, people are less apt to try out unfamiliar behaviors or roles if they feel threatened.) Thus a safe space for learning, experimentation, and community is critical in leadership development programs for women.

Consider performance feedback, which is necessary for growth and advancement but full of trip wires for women. In many organizations 360-degree

feedback is a basic tool for deepening self-knowledge and increasing awareness of one's impact on others—skills that are part and parcel of leadership development. But gender stereotypes may color evaluators' perceptions, subjecting women to double binds and double standards. Research has amply demonstrated that accomplished, high-potential women who are evaluated as competent managers often fail the likability test, whereas competence and likability tend to go hand in hand for similarly accomplished men. We see this phenomenon in our own research and practice. Supervisors routinely give high-performing women some version of the message "You need to trim your sharp elbows." Likewise, we find that participants in women's leadership development programs often receive high ratings on task-related dimensions, such as "exceeds goals," "acts decisively in the face of uncertainty," and "is not afraid to make decisions that may be unpopular," but low ratings on relational ones, such as "takes others' viewpoints into account" and "uses feedback to learn from her mistakes." We also frequently encounter women whose performance feedback seems contradictory: Some are told they need to "be tougher and hold people accountable" but also to "not set expectations so high," to "say no more often" but also to "be more visible," to "be more decisive" but also to "be more collaborative."

Creating a safe setting—a coaching relationship, a women's leadership program, a support group of peers—in which women can interpret these messages is critical to their leadership identity development. Companies should encourage them to build



## FURTHER READING

**“Who Will Lead and Who Will Follow? A Social Process of Leadership Identity Construction in Organizations,”** by D. Scott DeRue and Susan J. Ashford (*Academy of Management Review*, October 2010)

**“Women and Leadership: Defining the Challenges,”** by Robin J. Ely and Deborah L. Rhode (*Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice*, Harvard Business Press, 2010)

**“Impossible Selves: Image Strategies and Identity Threat in Professional Women’s Career Transitions,”** by Herminia Ibarra and Jenifer Petriglieri (Insead working paper, 2007)

**“Negotiating in the Shadows of Organizations: Gender, Negotiation, and Change,”** by Deborah M. Kolb (*Ohio State Journal on Dispute Resolution*, 2013)

**“Taking Gender into Account: Theory and Design for Women’s Leadership Development Programs,”** by Robin J. Ely, Herminia Ibarra, and Deborah Kolb (*Academy of Management Learning & Education*, September 2011)

communities in which similarly positioned women can discuss their feedback, compare notes, and emotionally support one another’s learning. Identifying common experiences increases women’s willingness to talk openly, take risks, and be vulnerable without fearing that others will misunderstand or judge them. These connections are especially important when women are discussing sensitive topics such as gender bias or reflecting on their personal leadership challenges, which can easily threaten identity and prompt them to resist any critical feedback they may receive. When they are grounded in candid assessments of the cultural, organizational, and individual factors shaping them, women can construct coherent narratives about who they are and who they want to become.

### The Importance of Leadership Purpose

In a recent interview with members of Hillary Clinton’s press corps, a veteran reporter noted, “The story is never what she says, as much as we want it to be. The story is always how she looked when she said it.” Clinton says she doesn’t fight it anymore; she just focuses on getting the job done.

How women are perceived—how they dress, how they talk, their “executive presence,” their capacity to “fill a room,” and their leadership style—has been the focus of many efforts to get more of them to the top. Voice coaches, image consultants, public-speaking instructors, and branding experts find the demand for their services growing. The premise is that women have not been socialized to compete successfully in the world of men, so they must be taught the skills and styles their male counterparts acquire as a matter of course.

To manage the competence-likability trade-off—the seeming choice between being respected and being liked—women are taught to downplay femininity, or to soften a hard-charging style, or to try to strike a perfect balance between the two. But the time and energy spent on managing these perceptions can ultimately be self-defeating. Overinvestment in one’s image diminishes the emotional and motivational resources available for larger purposes. People who focus on how others perceive them are less clear about their goals, less open to learning from failure, and less capable of self-regulation.

Anchoring in purpose enables women to redirect their attention toward shared goals and to consider who they need to be and what they need to learn in order to achieve those goals. Instead of

defining themselves in relation to gender stereotypes—whether rejecting stereotypically masculine approaches because they feel inauthentic or rejecting stereotypically feminine ones for fear that they convey incompetence—female leaders can focus on behaving in ways that advance the purposes for which they stand.

Focusing on purpose can also lead women to take up activities that are critical to their success, such as networking. Connections rarely come to them as a matter of course, so they have to be proactive in developing ties; but we also find that many women avoid networking because they see it as inauthentic—as developing relationships that are merely transactional and feel too instrumental—or because it brings to mind activities (the proverbial golf game, for example) in which they have no interest or for which they have no time, given their responsibilities beyond work. Yet when they see it as a means to a larger purpose, such as developing new business to advance their vision for the company, they are more comfortable engaging in it.

**LEARNING HOW** to be an effective leader is like learning any complex skill: It rarely comes naturally and usually takes a lot of practice. Successful transitions into senior management roles involve shedding previously effective professional identities and developing new, more fitting ones. Yet people often feel ambivalent about leaving the comfort of roles in which they have excelled, because doing so means moving toward an uncertain outcome.

Second-generation gender bias can make these transitions more challenging for women, and focusing exclusively on acquiring new skills isn’t sufficient; the learning must be accompanied by a growing sense of identity as a leader. That’s why greater understanding of second-generation bias, safe spaces for leadership identity development, and encouraging women to anchor in their leadership purpose will get better results than the paths most organizations currently pursue. ♥

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