



Female Behavior Is Often Unrecognized as Leader Behavior

Ask 10 people to describe an effective leader and you will likely get similar responses. Decades of research demonstrate that we have a shared concept of leadership commonly referred to as a leader prototype. Such shared expectations are common—we have prototypes for many different categories—and they are usually very adaptive. Our prototypes allow us to process information with ease and without much conscious thought. However, our leader prototype can sometimes lead us astray.

Categorizing human behavior is much more complicated than many of the other categories for which we have prototypes (e.g., objects, animals). In general, categorizing the behavior of others requires the processing of many different pieces of information, some of which may be conflicting. This very process may be at least partially responsible for the gender bias that currently exists in leadership. This is because the content of our leader prototype is largely “agentic,” or task-oriented, and consists of such traits as dedicated, determined, and competitive. Only a small portion of the prototype is communal or people-oriented; honesty and sensitivity would fit in this second category.

So, where’s the problem? Well, in addition to having pre-existing beliefs about leader behavior, we also have pre-existing beliefs about males and females. In general, we believe that males are dedicated, determined, and competitive, while females are caring, considerate, and sensitive. Our beliefs about females are largely incongruent with the leader prototype. Therefore, perceivers receive two different pieces of information when they encounter a female leader—this person is a female and leader. Because these two pieces of information are incongruent, this means that people may not recognize task-oriented leadership behaviors when they encounter a female leader. Our gender stereotypes are very strong.

In a series of studies recently published in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision*

Processes (2006), my co-author Doug Brown and I set out to determine the extent to which gender information might interfere with the way leader behavior is processed. Using a psychological task that indicates the ease with which people can match the behavior of others with their own leader prototype, we found that people had no difficulty matching communal behaviors—regardless of whether the leader was male or female. However, participants took significantly longer to recognize the task-oriented behaviors of female leaders, even though the behaviors of the males and females were identical. In other words, people found it more difficult to recognize the task-oriented behavior of a female—such as working late, or fighting for resources—as indicative of leadership. We also found that exposure to a male task-oriented leader led participants to describe themselves using similar leadership traits, but this was not the case for participants exposed to a female leader.

Interestingly, there were no differences between our male and female participants in this study: Males and females responded exactly the same way. Although this may seem surprising, one important point to note is that all of this research focused on automatic (unconscious) processing—participants did not have the opportunity to think about their responses. Additionally, everyone, males and females alike, knows the content of stereotypes, and when people are not given an opportunity to correct for their explicit beliefs, stereotyped responses are most likely. Thus, our studies indicate just how early in our information processing gender bias in leadership emerges, and how this bias might occur without conscious realization.

Leadership is truly in the eye of the beholder. Thus, the challenge for female leaders is really to be seen as leaders. Because these studies focus on perception, the results speak to the responsibility of the perceiver. That is, because this research is centered on the perceptions of others, the onus

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to change how we see female leaders is really on the perceiver. Perhaps this is easier said than done. Our beliefs about gender role behavior and our beliefs about leaders have formed over many, many years and are not likely to change overnight. That said, positive signs of change are out there. There exist prominent examples of female leaders in business, politics, and, most recently, academia, where a number of prominent universities currently have women presidents.

What does this mean for perceptions of female leaders? There truly is power in numbers:

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—Kristyn A. Scott
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Reference

Scott KA, Brown DJ. (2006). Female first, leader second? Gender bias in the encoding of leadership behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 101(2) 230–242.

LETTERS to the Editor

To The Editor:

I wanted to take the opportunity to thank Bruce Alberts for the President's Column in the April 2007 *ASCB Newsletter*. In general, I have been very pleased to see such an emphasis on science education in the *Newsletter*, but several things about the column struck me as particularly significant.

As someone who considers herself a scientist first and an educator second, I was so grateful to see that a pre-eminent scientist of our day thinks that "... seeding large numbers of highly skilled scientists throughout society..." is a good idea. As a graduate student at a large research institution, not only was there little access to information about "alternative" careers in science, we were actively discouraged from pursuing career avenues other than traditional postdoctoral opportunities. While my husband and I managed to successfully leave the Ivory Tower without assistance from our mentor(s), how many other skilled scientists are being pushed away from careers that are not only personally rewarding but immeasurably valuable to our society as a whole?

The stigma often attached by researchers to careers in teaching has baffled me for years. Researchers often complain about the quality of their graduate students, and yet don't acknowledge that the quality of their graduate students is a direct reflection of the quality of undergraduate science education. As a professor at a two-year community college, I can say that our Biology Department is actively pursuing ways to make our freshman and sophomore biology classes more inquiry based in an effort to provide the "...sound basis for understanding and respecting the nature of science" described by Dr. Alberts. It is refreshing to know that researchers and educators may have some common ground after all.

Thank you again for your column.

—Amy Rice Doetsch, College of Southern Idaho

To The Editor:

ASCB has perhaps done more to get the funding crisis message out than any other society. Bravo.

I would like to suggest another tactic. Use the ASCB Annual Meeting as a major weapon to get the message to reporters. Reporters attend these meetings, especially if advance news releases suggest that some important new discovery in the health area will be discussed.

I suggest that, as long as the funding crisis exists, major public forums/symposia on the damage done to health research and to the biomedical research workforce in the U.S. should be held each year at the Annual Meeting. The symposia should be given fanfare in advance publicity. Symposia titles might be: "The Beginning of the End of U.S. Prominence in Biomedical Research" or "Disease Research: A Major National Crisis."

—Steve Oppenheimer, California State University, Northridge

Email testimonials of how the funding crisis has impacted you or your work to kwilson@ascb.org. Such testimonials are very persuasive on the Hill. ASCB will see to it that your message gets to the right place.