



Breaking the Mold Letting Women Bring Authenticity into the Workplace

Women are told how they must think, act and dress in order to be noticed for leadership positions. They are molded to fit the perspective of men on gender roles, and there is not room for authenticity. It is time to break the mold!

For many women, all the talk about allowing people to bring their authentic selves to work seems inauthentic. Women who want to succeed in business and move into leadership positions are sponsored and mentored, but the advice usually seems to revolve around helping high potential women think and act like a man, especially when decision-making. Instead of reimagining leadership to embrace authentic qualities of women, women are asked to mold themselves into the likeness of male leaders. They are given a figurative rules handbook that covers everything - how to dress, when to speak up, the ideal career path, remaining likeable, ignoring gender bias and even sexual harassment (do not be a troublemaker!), proving the demands of family will not derail career plans (meaning: work 6-7 days a week and put in long hours), and on the list goes.

Women in business are stereotyped, and the stereotype does not fit the likeness of people in power – mostly males. The current strategy for success is that women must change in order to succeed, and ironically it is changing to the stereotype of the powerful male decisionmaker. As diverse people continually discuss, the inability to be authentic is exhausting and drives away highly competent talent. It is time to break the mold.

Obstacles Not of Their Own Making

Women in business striving to reach management level have obstacles to overcome, and many are not of their own making. A woman can be educated, skilled, have the right experience and still find she has trouble getting the first-step manager position or even being heard at meetings. It seems even more difficult when women are in virtual meetings, per one survey. Forty-five percent of women surveyed said it is difficult for women to speak up in virtual meetings, and one out of five said they felt overlooked or ignored during video calls. This extends the challenge women have had to overcome for years – being heard at in-person meetings. Per numerous studies, women are more likely to be interrupted and their ideas taken less seriously. This behavior makes it more difficult to advance a career because they are not heard.

Women are expected to be likeable while taking on the persona of a male. When they do talk, act or make decisions like a man, they are not considered likeable. As newscaster and author Alicia Menendez explained it, women face a double bind between likeability and success and the “paradoxical expectation calls for gender-correcting performance and authenticity.” Strong women are criticized as being too much like a man, while warm women are viewed as pushovers. Women must be likeable to even get credit for their work. Women are expected to reimagine themselves rather than reimagining leadership in which unique talents and styles are encouraged.



The rules that women must maneuver are complicated, and they have been in place for decades. They include avoiding expressions of emotion, not be seen with other women, look professional which includes hair on the short side, avoid being seen as demanding, put in excessive hours, and networking with senior men. If men take credit for their work, women are supposed to be quiet about it.

In the science world, the Matilda Effect has held women back from advancing and stubborn ingrained bias in the industry continues to keep or drive women out, and suppresses their innovativeness. The Matilda Effect, a term dubbed by Cornell University historian of science Margaret Rossiter, refers to the denial of recognition of women scientists. The drive to get more women interested in taking leadership roles in STEM is certainly stymied by persistent biases like the Matilda Effect.

Breaking the Mold

The mold can be broken so that women can be authentic. It is not easy though. If it was easy, stereotypes and biases would already be eliminated in the workplace. One of the critical strategies is having regular dialogue between men and women. It is similar to men joining women's Employee Resource Groups. However, it is critical that men be active listeners and learn from what women have to say. Exploring biases is difficult because it forces people to examine their perspectives, beliefs and behaviors.

Refining the concept of leadership means throwing out certain ideas. For example, the idea that real business leaders do not express "soft emotions" like empathy and compassion needs to be tossed. Numerous studies have demonstrated that women and men approach leadership differently, and both styles are valuable. For example, women lead through relationship building, while men give orders.

During in-person or virtual meetings, the group leader should not allow women to be talked over or interrupted. The organization should ensure everyone enjoys work-life balance and not treat this need as a weakness in women, especially those who have children. The organization must address structural barriers that exclude women, like selecting only men for promotions by using nebulous tactics for excluding women. Leadership bias training is essential because nothing will change unless there is recognition that bias exists. Sponsorship and mentorship programs are good, but they cannot focus on turning women leaders into men-like leaders.

Women must do their part too. Ave Rio wrote, "Certain behaviors typically observed more in women are also said to undermine their career chances, such as disinclination to self-promote, limiting volubility (i.e., the time spent talking) and invisibility (i.e., 'states of exclusion' or difference because of a lack of women in leadership roles)." To attract and develop women in leadership roles, the rules must be rewritten, and it needs to be driven from the top.

Women should be given opportunities to do challenging work with the knowledge they get credit for success. Policies, like family leave, should be put in place and applied to men and women equally. The "broken rung" or first step up to manager needs fixing. A McKinsey and Lean In survey found



that hiring and promoting women to the first-level manager positions at the same rate as men will lead to a million women being added to management over a 5-year period.

Intentional Effort

The rules for women need changing, but therein lies the real difficulty. The rules are based in biases, and biases must be recognized as existing before change occurs. There must be an intentional effort to remove the structural barriers that keep women out of leadership positions, leadership bias training to change perspectives of desirable leadership qualities, and a willingness to let women bring their authentic selves to work.