

Women's Perceived Leadership Weaknesses Actually Strengths

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A perception of sensitivity and competence causes women to be evaluated as better leaders than men in comparable positions, says a recent study.

The prevailing stereotypes that women in business are too sensitive or just not as competent as men form the frame of the glass ceiling. But once a woman has shattered that barrier to advancement, these same biases may work in her favor, according to a Duke University researcher.

A perception of sensitivity and competence causes women to be evaluated as better leaders than men in comparable positions, according to a recent study in the [Journal of Applied Psychology](#).

The research, led by assistant professor Ashleigh Shelby Rosette of Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, showed that top women executives credited with responsibility for their own success can be viewed simultaneously as more competent and more relationship-oriented than men, leading them to be perceived as more effective leaders than their male counterparts.

"In business environments, even if women are thought to be sufficiently competent, they are frequently thought to be not very nice," said Rosette. "But on the tiptop rungs of the corporate ladder, competence and niceness may have a certain level of compatibility for women top leaders."

With the assistance of graduate student and co-author Leigh Plunkett Tost, Rosette conducted two separate experiments to assess if women could be simultaneously evaluated as competent and relational, and if that combination is what sets top successful women executives apart.

In the first study, 323 graduate and undergraduate students reviewed fictitious newspaper clippings and then evaluated the male or female CEOs mentioned in the stories on their competence and relational characteristics. Rosette and Tost found that when the newspaper articles portrayed women CEOs as successful and gave them credit for that success, the students evaluated them more favorably -- as both more competent and more relational -- than comparable male CEOs.

In a second study, Rosette and Tost sought to determine why this advantage exists and whether it occurs at other levels of the corporate organization or just at the top.

More than 100 graduate and undergraduate students reviewed fictitious job descriptions and performance summaries and then evaluated the male or female employees as before. Although both top executives and middle managers were described as successful, students only evaluated females more favorably than males when they were in top-level positions. They rated these women as more competent for having faced double standards and triumphing over exceptional hurdles.

Participants in the second study also rated women as more relationship-oriented because they expected top women to engage in a more traditionally 'feminized' type of leadership, an employee-focused leadership style that is increasingly viewed as effective.

Both the double standard and feminization of management perceptions help explain why women top leaders were rated as more effective leaders overall than men.

“Let’s face it, women are often viewed as having to work twice as hard to get half as far and successful women executives may benefit from this perception, leading to a female leader advantage,” Rosette explained. “Additionally, the business mantra to ‘think leader, think male’ may begin to fade as employees and other stakeholders gradually begin to value those leadership skills that focus on relationships and not just traditional leader traits that are more in line with masculinity.”

Rosette and Tost say that their study’s findings are consistent with a trend toward more communal management styles and demonstrate that women can succeed and be viewed as both competent and nice when sitting on top of the organization.

However, they cautioned that female leaders should realize that their behaviors may be viewed differently at different levels of the organization because “successful women may face changing stereotypes as they move up the corporate ladder,” explained Rosette.

“As women increasingly gain access to more powerful positions in organizations, we hope that this type of research can help women leaders develop strategies for managing the dynamic effects that both their power and their gender can have on how they are perceived and evaluated by others,” Tost said.

“The irony here is that the double standard and a feminine approach to leadership have both traditionally been obstacles for women in the workplace,” Rosette said. “Our research suggests that these two views can lead to a female leader advantage for those [women](#) who successfully break through the glass ceiling.”

Provided by Duke University

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