

# Understanding bias in leadership assessments of women

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A new study conducted before COVID-19 busted open the leaky pipeline for women in leadership underscores the bias that men are naturally presumed to have leadership potential and women are not and

highlights the increased efforts needed by organizations to address the incorrect stereotype post-pandemic.

The research published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* highlights the continuing bias in [leadership](#) assessments of women, explores the contradictions between the perception and the reality of women's leadership, and shows why the slow rate of career advancement for women will likely continue at a snail's pace.

"The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's career progression will likely be felt for years to come as many women stepped away from the workforce," said Dr. Margaret Hopkins, professor of management in The University of Toledo's John B. and Lillian E. Neff College of Business and Innovation and lead author of the study. "This can only exacerbate the slow progress of women moving more fully into [senior leadership roles](#)—something that organizations and society must be fully attentive to correcting."

The contemporary view of effective leadership places a strong emphasis on [social skills](#), flexibility and engaging others, behaviors typically associated with women.

But when women exhibit gender role behaviors such as teamwork and empathy, they also pay a price in their leadership performance assessments.

Based on data collected from a sample of 91 senior leaders in one U.S. financial services organization over three years, women were penalized in performance evaluations when they displayed those leadership characteristics.

On the other hand, women also were viewed negatively when exhibiting stereotypical masculine behaviors such as a competitive drive to achieve,

task orientation and directing others. Men were positively evaluated for their leadership potential when exhibiting those same behaviors.

"Entrenched archetypes that define leadership as a masculine enterprise remain in spite of data that relates more stereotypical feminine behaviors to effective leadership," said Hopkins, an expert on women in leadership, executive coaching and emotional intelligence. "Our study found no evidence of acknowledging this more contemporary view of leadership when organizations actually assess women's performance and potential for leadership."

The researchers discovered that whether women demonstrated people-oriented, relational skills or whether they exhibited achievement-oriented behaviors, there was a negative effect on their leadership performance assessments and leadership potential appraisals. However, this was not the case for the male leaders in the study.

In order to change the dynamic, Hopkins said there are best-practice strategies that both women and organizations can take.

"My co-authors and I do not support the notion that the onus is on the women to change," Hopkins said. "Rather, organizational structures and systems must change to provide leadership opportunities for both women and men in equal measure."

She said organizational decision-makers can investigate organizational policies and practices to determine how they might be contributing to impediments for women in leadership roles.

Not only should leadership assessment instruments be examined for possible bias, but also the methods by which individuals conduct assessments of women leaders should be reviewed for inherent bias.

"Hiring procedures, training and development opportunities, benefits packages, leave policies, and performance, salary and promotional evaluations can all play a part in contributing to gender stereotypes," Hopkins said. "Organizational systems that rely on a limited framework for essential leadership behaviors will restrict their ability to recruit and develop outstanding leaders."

To help mitigate these inaccurate perceptions and biases of their leadership performance and potential, Hopkins suggests that women find both female and male allies and sponsors, create strategic networks, seek high-profile assignments to highlight their skills and abilities, and develop and communicate their individual definitions of career success.

The financial services organization at the focus of this study is one of the Top 100 U.S. Best Banks named by Forbes magazine. The sample of senior leaders included 26 [women](#) and 65 men, representative of the gender composition of the senior leadership team.

The researchers said a comparison of males and females in one organization ensured that any observed gender differences were not due to factors such as differences in industries or management hierarchies across organizations.

Researchers from UToledo, Bowling Green State University, Case Western Reserve University and San Diego Gas and Electric collaborated on the study.

**More information:** Margaret M. Hopkins et al, Buried Treasure: Contradictions in the Perception and Reality of Women's Leadership, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.684705](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.684705)

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