



Combating Stereotypes That Come With Being A Woman Leader

Gender stereotypes in the workplace involve both conscious and unconscious biases. Female CEOs and leaders on the rise have found these biases to be a hindrance to both a successful career and to future opportunities.

For women leaders, combating long-held biases head-on and systemically within an organization can be the most productive way to effect lasting change. By creating a company-wide system of support and accountability, they can make inroads toward breaking down bias and building a company culture that thrives on talent over identity.

Impostor syndrome

Impostor syndrome reinforces many negative stereotypes in the workplace for female leaders. Often due to the difference in work — both volume and quality — that women in the C-suite must do in order to achieve top-rung status, they can feel that they still don't deserve to sit at the top.¹

Women are questioned or doubted more often for their management, vision, or path for implementation. Because of this, it's important to remember the steps that were taken to achieve personal success — the hours and years spent working hard, as well as the successes and failures that molded perspectives and expertise. All of these moments should be remembered to assure women that their efforts have earned them their position.

Key takeaways



Creating a company-wide system of support and accountability can help break down harmful gender stereotypes.



An implicit bias quiz can help companies take the first step toward gender parity.



Inclusivity training can help unite rather than divide by highlighting how everyone has biases.



Impostor syndrome can be reinforced at every level of the ladder. During meetings where female voices are silenced or talked over, refuse to accept it. Instead, empower those women to speak and educate the interrupters. The most unattractive business behavior is refusing to collaborate. Shutting down interruptions can help build a culture where female voices are respected, empowered, and valued.

Aggressive or unprepared?

When you're questioned for your methods or demeanor, consider who's doing the questioning. A report about female leaders from *The New York Times*[®] mentions that doubt about female leaders doesn't overtly come down to being labeled as aggressive. Rather, doubters focus on a leader's preparedness for the position.²

Don't be afraid to stand your ground on your qualifications, accomplishments, and experience. Bias-driven perceptions about women as executives — that for all of the work they've done, they're simply not ready when compared to their male colleagues — are only as strong as your willingness to perpetuate them.

Consider creating a network within your company that supports the work of female team members and specifically analyzes their numbers, performance, and contributions to the company's success. As you combat inevitable instances of impostor syndrome, you can build a company culture that provides the answers to the questions female leaders are continuously asked about preparedness. A company culture that supports female team member metrics can combat gender-based biases surrounding the perceived lack of preparedness through a simple show of data. When the numbers don't lie,

you can get to the heart of why a colleague might feel a female leader — perhaps even yourself — isn't ready for the task at hand.

Owning your own biases

A powerful step for combating negative stereotypes of female leadership can be to embrace unconscious bias training as part of your company culture. We all have biases. Your commitment to not only own biases and explore your own but invite the company along to do the same can start tough conversations that lead to a lasting, high-impact change in culture.^{3,4}

A simple way to begin is to invite colleagues to take an implicit bias quiz.⁵ While the "quiz" title makes light of the topics covered in the questionnaire, it's a less daunting phrase that can encourage higher rates of participation. Results of the quiz can be a powerful way for both you and your fellow team members to uncover and then begin to explore ways to tear down your biases and begin building a more inclusive workplace.

You can also hire an outside firm or consultant that specializes in unconscious bias and inclusivity training. Trainings can be powerful because they highlight how everyone has biases instead of singling out a few bad apples. Unlike training that addresses a singular experience (sexual harassment, etc.), unconscious bias training can potentially unite more than divide.⁶

As you look for tools to help combat stereotypes, the best tool might be to eschew combat. Rather, to address them, bring them out into the open and examine them for what they are — problems to be solved for the good of the company and its employees. Those actions transcend all labels, save those attributed to successful leaders.

Steps to consider

- Work with your organization's leadership to ensure that open communication is encouraged and expected. Build a plan to continue candid conversation at all levels.
- Bring in an outside consultant to provide training focusing on unconscious bias and inclusivity.
- Get involved with your organization's women's group. If one does not exist, create one by calling on your colleagues and women at all levels to get involved and share experiences as well as ideas.

The support you need

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Would you like to weigh in on future topics? Please take our [survey](#).



¹Key4Women, "How to Overcome Impostor Syndrome," August 2018, KeyBank, <https://www.key.com/businesses-institutions/business-expertise/articles/overcome-impostor-syndrome.jsp>

²Susan Chira, "Why Women Aren't CEOs, According to Women Who Almost Were," July 21, 2017, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/21/sunday-review/women-ceos-glass-ceiling.html>

³Key4Women, "Create Real Change by Confronting Unconscious Bias," August 2018, KeyBank, <https://www.key.com/businesses-institutions/business-expertise/articles/unconscious-bias.jsp>

⁴Neal Goodman, PhD, "Unconscious Bias," *Training*, <https://trainingmag.com/trgmag-article/unconscious-bias>

⁵"Unconscious Bias Quiz: Do You Know the Facts?" EveryWoman, <https://www.everywoman.com/my-development/learning-areas/articles/unconscious-bias-quiz-do-you-know-facts>

⁶Calvin K Lai, "What's 'unconscious bias training,' and does it work?" April 19, 2018, CBS News, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/whats-unconscious-bias-training-and-does-it-work/>.

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