Women in Management: Does Manager Equal Male?

Susan A. Basow

The proportion of managers who are women increased from a distinct minority (15.6% in 1960) to one-third (33.3%) in 1985 to a little over one-half (51.5%) in 2010 (Catalyst, 2011a). This seeming parity is belied by other statistics that indicate that women are overrepresented in lower-level and middle-management positions, and underrepresented in the top positions. For example, in 2010 women were only 14.4% of the Executive Officers of Fortune 500 companies (Catalyst, 2011b). Women are most likely to rise to the top in service sector companies that are large and employ a large proportion of women (Huffman, Cohen, & Pearlman, 2010; Stainback & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2009). Furthermore, women managers are more likely than their male counterparts to be passed over for promotion, resulting in their greater likelihood of being overqualified for their position (Luksyte & Spitzmueller, 2011). Explanations for this “glass ceiling” phenomenon, which has been noted since the 1980s, abound (see Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009, for a fuller discussion). In this chapter, we will focus primarily on one barrier to women moving up to top management positions: the equating of manager with characteristics associated with men and masculinity. We will also examine the actual performance of female managers before closing with some concluding comments.

The Power of Gender Stereotypes

Considerable research documents the linkage of men and masculinity with agentic characteristics, such as dominance, assertiveness, confidence, and competence. In a complementary fashion, women and femininity are associated
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with such communal qualities as warmth, empathy, nurturance, and relational skills (Basow, 1992; Eagly & Karau, 2002). When people are asked to describe the qualities of a good manager, they are more likely to describe agentic rather than communal qualities, although both qualities are important for managerial success (Heilman, 2001; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ris-tikari, 2011; Powell, 2011; Prime, Carter, & Welbourne, 2009; Robertson, Brummel, & Salvaggio, 2011; Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996). Not surprisingly, then, people tend to think of men when they think of managers. People are more comfortable when their expectations are confirmed rather than disconfirmed. With reference to gender stereotypes, then, people are more comfortable with male managers than female managers because the former coupling fits people’s expectations and the latter does not. Thus perceived lack-of-fit or role incongruity may seriously impair perceptions and evaluations of women in management, especially in the higher status positions that tend to be perceived as involving even more agentic qualities than do lower-level ones (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Sczesny, 2009; Heilman, 2001).

A recent meta-analysis of 70 studies by Koenig et al. (2011) documents both the strength of the “think managers, think male” association as well as some moderating variables. A typical study of this type would ask participants to rate “women in general,” “men in general,” or “a leader” on a large number of both agentic and communal qualities. The degree of relationship between the ratings for “a leader” and the ratings of “men in general” are then calculated; a similar correlation is computed between ratings for “a leader” and “women in general.” Across all the studies, Koenig and colleagues found that the stereotypic qualities of leaders and those of men were significantly correlated with an $r = .62$, a relatively large effect size, while the correlation between stereotypic qualities of leaders and those of women were correlated with an $r = .25$, a relatively small effect. That is, the qualities most linked with leaders were agentic rather than communal qualities. As we have seen, agentic qualities are most linked with men and masculinity while communal qualities are most linked with women and femininity. Thus, the “think managers, think male” association is also a “think managers, think masculinity” and a “think managers, think agentic qualities” association. In all three pairings, women are less likely to be seen as a manager than are men.

There are several factors that appear to moderate this “think managers, think male” association: the status of the management position, the gender of the rater, the explicitness of the rating, and the date a study was done.
The Koenig et al. (2011) meta-analysis of the “think managers, think male” association also revealed some factors that moderated the strength of the pairing. One important factor was the status of the leadership position: the “think managers, think male” association was stronger for higher-status relative to moderate-status leader roles. This pattern is clearly reflected in the actual gender demographics of management positions, with fewer women as one moves up the organizational pyramid. This “glass ceiling” has not changed much in the last 30 years (Barreto et al., 2009; Huffman et al., 2010).

**Rater Gender**

Another important factor that moderates the strength of the “think managers, think male” association is the gender of the person doing the ratings (Duehr & Bono, 2006; Koenig et al., 2011). The “think managers, think male” association was much stronger for male research participants than it was for female participants. This is consistent with other findings that indicate that men tend to hold more sexist attitudes than do women.

In a similar vein, Robertson et al. (2011) found that women and men employees labeled the necessary competencies of good managers differently. Both men and women indicated that agentic competencies were important for a good manager to have, and both men and women viewed these qualities as masculine. In addition, both men and women thought interpersonal skills were important for a good manager to have, but women rated those skills as feminine, while men rated them as gender neutral. Thus, men didn’t think of women, even when interpersonal skills were involved. The consequence of these differential ratings was that men raters were more likely than women raters to recommend a hypothetical male applicant for promotion rather than an identically described female applicant.

**Explicitness of the Rating**

Other research suggests that biased perceptions may operate more on an unconscious implicit level than on a conscious explicit level. For example, Latu et al. (2011) conducted two studies with college students using a version of the Implicit Association Test that examined the association between gender and successful managers. This test requires the participant to quickly decide (by tapping a computer key) whether a certain trait or quality is more associated with men or women, or successful or unsuccessful managers. The speed of the
reaction time reveals one’s implicit associations; for example, if we think successful managers are more like men, our reaction time to those pairings would be shorter than our reaction time to women and successful managers. This type of test is widely used to assess implicit attitudes and has been found to reveal biases that escape detection in more explicit questionnaire-type assessments (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). In Latu et al.’s study, male participants showed a strong association between traits of successful managers and men, and between traits of unsuccessful managers and women. As previous research also demonstrated, women were less likely than men to hold such biases. In fact, women showed a positive association between traits of successful managers and traits of women, as did participants, both women and men, who had a strong internal motivation to be nonsexist. These findings occurred even though the same participants did not respond in a sexist way to explicit measures of workplace gender stereotypes.

Implicit views matter, even when they contradict explicit views. In Latu et al.’s study (2011), those who made the “think (successful) manager, think male” association as well as those who made the “think (unsuccessful) manager, think female” association also recommended higher salary increases for a hypothetical male employee than did participants who didn’t have such associations. Thus in an actual workplace setting, evaluators, especially if they are male, may be unconsciously privileging men employees in ways even they wouldn’t be able to acknowledge. The fact that this effect was not found for participants who were aware of sexism and committed to reducing it suggests that educational efforts may make a difference if these efforts not only alert employees to how sexism works but also engage them to work for change.

Changes over Time

One sign of hope is the finding that the strength of “think manager, think male” association has decreased over time. Koenig et al.’s (2011) meta-analysis of studies dating from 1973 to 2010 showed that expectations of leader have become somewhat more androgynous (i.e., inclusive of both agentic and communal qualities) over time. This change may be due to several factors: increasing numbers of women in management positions who may in fact have different leadership styles than men (see below), or to the changing nature of leadership in the 21st century, which may require both traditional agentic qualities as well as the more communal qualities related to interpersonal skills, such as fostering teamwork (Duehr & Bono, 2006; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Powell, 2011; Prime et al., 2009).
An example of the change in conceptions of leadership, as well as its limitations is the findings of Prime et al. (2009). Senior managers were asked to rate women and men with respect to 10 pivotal leadership behaviors. In general, women were perceived as more effective than men with respect to leadership behaviors requiring caretaking, while men were perceived as more effective than women with respect to leadership behaviors requiring taking action. This perception may be due to actual differences in the leadership styles of women and men (see below) and/or to the influence of gender stereotypes which label women as more communal and men as more agentic. Of note is Prime et al.’s finding that male managers were particularly likely to view men as superior to women in problem-solving behaviors, which were viewed as critical for an effective manager. This association of men with effective problem solving may contribute to the greater proportion of men as one moves up the organizational hierarchy.

Not only may stereotypes of effective leaders change over time, but gender stereotypes of workers too may change. Duehr and Bono (2006) examined these stereotypes among managers and found that male managers, in particular, have changed their views of women workers over the past 30 years. Current views of women workers include such agentic qualities as confidence and ambition, thus leading to greater overlap between stereotypes of women and stereotypes of leaders than once was the case. Nonetheless, the rater’s gender still affected these ratings: male managers perceived less overlap than did female managers. Thus, the “think manager, think male” association continues, albeit less strongly than in the past, especially for men. Since most high-level managers are men, their views are most likely to affect employment-related decisions.

**Effects of “Think Manager, Think Male”**

A consequence of this “think manager, think male” association is the under-representation of women in management positions, especially high-level ones, as the statistics that began this chapter indicate (Eagly & Sczesny, 2009). Because men are viewed as more similar to the stereotypes and expectations people have of managers, they are more likely to be hired and promoted into those positions than are women (Koenig et al., 2011). This is particularly true for higher status positions and for decisions made by men.

**The Double Bind**

Stereotypes have real behavioral consequences because they affect our perceptions and evaluations. Because we expect women to be nurturant and communal
and men to be assertive and agentic, we experience the same behavior differently depending upon whether it is displayed by a woman or a man. For example, being assertive is generally viewed as a positive-management quality. But a woman who is assertive often is viewed negatively, as she is behaving in a role incongruent way (Catalyst, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Phelan, Moss-Racusin, & Rudman, 2008; Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). This negative reaction is especially likely if she doesn’t also display other markers of femininity in personal style and behavior, such as warmth and nurturance. The frequent result is that an agentic woman may be rated highly in terms of competence, but less proficient interpersonally than her less agentic counterpart (and than similar-behaving men). In other words, unless women walk the fine line of conveying qualities linked to both leadership and femininity, they are likely to encounter negative social reactions. These negative reactions lead to more negative recommendations with respect to hiring and promotion decisions.

The difficulty of walking that narrow line was illustrated in the reaction to a recent report in the Harvard Business Review (Flynn, Heath, & Holt, 2011). The report suggested that women stunt their careers because they are less confident and assertive than their male counterparts and thus need to change their behaviors in the workplace. Within 48 hours, the Comments section on the website was flooded with poignant personal stories from women regarding how they were treated when they engaged in assertive and confident behaviors in the workplace, especially by male supervisors. For example, women reported being ignored, reprimanded for “having ideas above your station,” criticized for being a “bitch,” and/or punished by being denied promotions or even demoted or fired.

Similar findings appeared in Catalyst’s (2007) more systematic summary of research on executives’ perception of women leaders. In fact, the non-profit organization working to build inclusive workplaces named their report “The Double-Bind Dilemma for Women in Leadership: Damned If You Do, Doomed If You Don’t.” The double bind to which they refer is the need for women in leadership to demonstrate managerial qualities, which we have seen are associated with men and masculinity, while also demonstrating feminine qualities, which might not signify leadership ability. Thus, a woman needs to act assertively to be seen as a leader, but when she does, she risks being seen as bossy and abrasive. But if she acts too cooperatively, as expected of a woman, she is likely to be viewed as not having what it takes to be a leader.

Supporting Catalyst’s (2007) conclusions are the results of an experimental study by Phelan et al. (2008). These researchers found that women who displayed agentic qualities were likely to be viewed as socially unskilled;
they also were less likely to be hired for a management position than their identically described male counterparts because social skills were viewed as especially important for women applicants. But when a woman applicant was presented with strong communal skills, she was also unlikely to be hired because she was viewed as less competent than her agentic sister. A double bind, indeed!

This double bind for women managers is especially visible when women are in a traditionally male job or position. Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, and Tamkins (2004), in a series of experimental studies, found that women who were successful at tasks viewed as masculine, compared to similarly successful men, were described more negatively, liked less, and reacted to with greater hostility. These negative views translated into lower performance evaluations and lower reward allocations. Thus, even when women demonstrate their competence, they may be viewed negatively. Indeed, it appears that they are viewed negatively specifically because they demonstrate their competence at a male-typed task (such as financial planning), since such negative ratings were not given when women were portrayed as successful at a more feminine task (such as employee assistance). Thus, the “think manager, think male” paradigm has significant negative effects on women who aspire to management positions, especially if those positions are in a traditionally masculine domain.

Catalyst (2007) also found that compared to male managers, women in management often must work harder to be perceived as equally competent. That is, when men and women have the same accomplishments, men generally receive more positive treatment in the workplace. It is only when women outperform men that they are viewed as equally competent, a clear double standard. Furthermore, even when women are perceived as equally competent, they tend to receive fewer rewards (e.g., pay, promotion) than similarly rated men. For example, women managers are more likely to be overqualified for their position than are their male counterparts because women tend to be overlooked for promotion (Luksyte & Spitzmueller, 2011). As if these disadvantages weren’t enough, Catalyst also found that women in management must continually prove themselves. Men appear to be given the benefit of the doubt if they make a questionable decision; women are held to a stricter standard. Because their very competence is viewed as role incongruent, successful women managers often feel that people are waiting for them to make a mistake and thereby confirm the gender stereotypes. Thus, even when women are doing well in an organization, they may feel vulnerable and experience a great deal of stress, which may produce its own negative effects.
Other Effects

Burke and Richardsen (2009) summarize research on the health and well-being of women managers and note the high levels of stress they experience. These stressors stem partly from the factors we’ve been reviewing: being viewed as less competent, needing to continually prove themselves, dealing with sexism and outright hostility, and experiencing obstacles to advancement. The very fact that as one moves up the organizational hierarchy, one encounters fewer and fewer women means that in many work environments, women’s presence appears as a form of tokenism. As Kanter (1977) and others (e.g., Yoder, 2002) have demonstrated, being a token typically involves psychological, behavioral, and organizational correlates. For example, women managers who are tokens tend to experience their organizations as inequitable for women and consequently have negative attitudes toward their jobs, which may impair their actual job performance (King, Hebl, George, & Matusik, 2010). Furthermore, because of the paucity of women in senior management positions, women managers have few role models and mentors. In particular, women managers tend to have very limited access to strategic informal networks that can lead to increased organizational knowledge and ultimately, power (Durbin, 2011).

Women in management, like other employed women, may also experience stress in balancing their work and personal lives, especially since their job may require long hours and after-hours work-related activities (Burke & Richardsen, 2009). In addition to the actual stress of work-family conflicts is the stress related to parental stereotypes conflicting with those related to managers. We’ve been examining the “think manager, think male” association, but such an association is even more pronounced when parental status is included. When men become fathers, their parental status is not only viewed as consistent with that of manager but may even be enhanced. Fathers may be seen as particularly committed to their work and to job advancement, since they now have “more mouths to feed” (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). In contrast, women who become mothers tend to be viewed as less committed to their jobs than before and are often judged by particularly harsh standards.

In several studies, Correll and others have documented this “motherhood penalty” (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). When raters are presented with hypothetical male and female managers and given information regarding the manager’s parental status (either a parent or not) and their qualifications (equal), raters devalue the mother compared to the non-mother. Specifically, the woman depicted as a mother was rated lower in terms of competence and likelihood of advancement than the same woman not depicted as a mother. In contrast, parental status did
not affect ratings of male managers. These differential perceptions and ratings also affect decisions about salaries. Not only do women typically earn less than men in similar positions (the gender wage gap) but mothers also typically earn less than non-mothers even in similar positions. In fact, the motherhood wage gap is typically larger than the gender wage gap (Avellar & Smock, 2003; Crittenden, 2001). Not surprisingly, then, women managers are less likely to be married and/or to have children than are their male counterparts (Lyness & Thompson, 1997). Even when they are married or are mothers, women executives often take pains to keep their personal and professional identities separate. They still may have to withstand their colleagues’ often skeptical attitudes about their commitment to the job.

Performance of Women Managers

As we have seen, stereotypes of managers overlap considerably with stereotypes of men and very little with stereotypes of women. This traditional pattern is changing somewhat, especially for lower-level management positions and when ratings are done by women (Koenig et al., 2011). Indeed, women now hold half of all management positions in the United States. Since the “think manager, think male” pattern is based on gender stereotypes as well as stereotypes of good managers, we need to examine the actual behavior of managers as a function of gender. Do women managers manage differently than men managers? Regardless of the management style, are women managers as effective as men managers? Considerable research has addressed both questions.

Management Styles

Using meta-analyses, Eagly and colleagues have examined the relationship between gender and leadership style (Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003). Generally, leadership styles can be classified into three categories: transactional, in which the manager rewards satisfactory performance on the part of subordinates, or punishes unsatisfactory performance; transformational, in which a manager projects a positive attitude and motivates positive behavior on the part of subordinates, and/or who fosters the development of subordinates and new ways of addressing tasks; and laissez-faire, in which the manager typically maintains a hands-off attitude with respect to subordinates and task completion.

When the management styles of women and men are rated by subordinates, peers, superiors, and self, some gender differences emerge, although the size of the differences tends to be small (Eagly et al., 2003). Men are more likely
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than women to use the laissez-faire style and the transactional style, especially with respect to focusing on work problems. Women are more likely than men to use a transformational leadership style, especially with respect to helping subordinates develop their potential. Thus, some of the gender stereotypes discussed above do connect to behavioral differences: women managers do seem to take a greater personal interest in their subordinates than do men, and they are more likely than men to reward satisfactory performance.

Using data from the British 1998 Workplace Employee Relations Survey, Melero (2011) also found that workplaces with a high proportion of women in leadership positions were more likely to encourage feedback and employee development than workplaces with fewer women. Thus, women do seem to manage differently than men, at least on average. Does this make them more or less effective?

**Effectiveness**

Although the effectiveness of a particular leadership style is dependent on many factors, including the nature of the task involved, the gender of the workers, the organizational structure, etc., it does appear that the transformational leadership style more typical of women is very effective (Eagly, 2007; Eagly et al., 2003). This is true for both women and men managers, but is even more pronounced in women managers (Ayman, Korabik, & Morris, 2009). Male managers may still be effective when they are stern and all business, but a similar behaving woman may be punished for not displaying the more expected feminine caring qualities, as discussed previously. The greater effectiveness of the transformational leadership style for women may be due to the fact that this style combines both agentic and communal qualities.

Overall, women and men manage in similar ways, although women are more likely than men to use a transformational leadership style. This style appears to be a very effective one (see also Paludi & Coates, 2011). Thus, there is no basis for believing that the best managers are men.

**Moderating the “Think Manager, Think Male” Connection**

We have seen that the “think manager, think male” association is still the dominant one, although women managers can, in fact, be as (or more) effective as men managers. We have also seen evidence that the strength of the “think manager, think male” association has lessened in more recent years, perhaps due to changing views of managers (ones that include more communal interpersonal skills) and/or to changing views of women workers (ones that include more
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agentic qualities). We have also seen that the “think manager, think male” association is used less by women raters and when the workplace is more “feminine” than “masculine,” for example, human resources rather than financial planning, lower- or mid-level rather than senior management. Several other factors affect the traditional association as well: clarity of behavioral information and the level of performance of the workplace.

Clear Behavioral Information

Since stereotypes are most likely to operate in the absence of individuating information (Basow, 1992), it makes sense that stereotypic decisions would most likely be made when there is little else to go on except the person’s gender. In a recent study by Bosak and Sczesny (2011), German undergraduates were presented with a fictitious job applicant (male or female) and asked to decide whether to short-list or hire that person for a managerial position. When the job applicant was described as a leader, the male and female job applicants were equally likely to be short-listed and hired for a managerial position requiring leadership skills. However, when no mention was made regarding leadership skills, either on the part of the applicant or as required for the managerial position, male applicants were more likely to be hired, at least by the male participants. Thus, focusing on specific behaviors required in the job and particular behaviors demonstrated by the job applicant may help reduce the gender biases that might otherwise take place.

The Glass Cliff Effect

Recent research suggests that the general equation of “think manager, think male” has an interesting exception. When a company is experiencing a crisis, such as poor performance, people appear more likely to put women in management positions (Ryan & Haslam, 2007, 2009). In a series of three studies, Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, and Bongiorno (2011) systematically demonstrated that people think of men when they think of managers of a successful company but think of women when the company is unsuccessful. These results parallel those of Latu et al. (2011), described above, that men are likely to hold implicit attitudes that link successful managers with men, and unsuccessful managers with women, even when their explicit attitudes are nonsexist. Women may be viewed as ideal managers of unsuccessful companies not only because they are viewed as particularly effective managers of people, and therefore potentially able to turn the tide of poor performance, but also because they are more easily blamed for an organization’s failures. This effect has been termed the
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glass cliff effect because putting women managers in charge of underperforming companies also sets them up for failure—a walk off an invisible cliff. If failure occurs, not only would the specific woman manager be blamed, but also the association between women and unsuccessful managers would be strengthened.

Toward the Future

For the sake of fairness as well as for maximum workplace effectiveness, the “think manager, think male” connection needs to be eliminated. Such a decoupling already has begun, as evidenced by the trend to find fewer effects in studies done more recently compared to 20 years ago. We have also seen a decoupling when ratings are done by women and those who are trying to be nonexistent. To the extent that such people are moving into leadership positions, the personnel decisions they make should also be based less on gender stereotypes than on qualifications. Indeed, an examination of 30 years of longitudinal data from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission revealed that when women were in managerial positions, gender integration in their workplace increased (Huffman et al., 2010). Decoupling also occurs in work situations that are more associated with women, such as the expanding service sector, and when the workplace is characterized by poor performance, as currently is the case. Thus, there is reason to be cautiously optimistic that at least this one barrier to women in management is likely to decrease. As women managers demonstrate their effectiveness, the “think manager, think male” connection should weaken even further.

References


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