How Women Leaders Can Navigate the Labyrinth to Success
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The publication of Sheryl Sandberg’s “Lean In” has triggered a new wave of public debate regarding women’s desire and ability to lead. Is the onus on women themselves to grab hold of leadership and development opportunities? Are we ignoring real structural barriers that prevent women from pursuing and excelling in leadership roles? Given conflicting opinions and perspectives regarding how women leaders should achieve success and the barriers they face, we draw upon the large research literature on gender and leadership to examine how women leaders might successfully navigate the labyrinth-like road to the top of organizations – and how organizations can best champion and support them in their journey.

Advice for Current or Aspiring Women Leaders

Be sensitive and strong. Despite widespread perception that men and women leaders are different, differences in leadership style and effectiveness range from small to almost nonexistent, supporting more similarities than differences between men and women leaders. However, despite relatively small differences in what men and women leaders do, there are large differences in what we expect from men and women leaders.

Our expectations of men and leaders are very similar – we expect them to be assertive, dominant, and take charge. In contrast, our expectations of women are that they should be warm and nurturing. Thus, a conundrum faced by women leaders is that people hold conflicting expectations regarding their behavior. To meet people’s dual expectations, women need to be authoritative and friendly, commanding and approachable, sensitive and strong, or suffer negative consequences. This is no easy feat, but is critical since women leaders who fail to meet expectations are often derogated and negatively evaluated.

An androgynous leadership style, such as transformational leadership, can be used by women leaders to meet this standard. Transformational leaders lead by sharing an inspiring vision, challenging followers to defy conventional ways of thinking, considering the unique needs of individual followers, and serving as a worthy role model. Furthermore, this style of leadership has been shown to predict superior performance for both the leader and their followers.

Reach for opportunities, but beware of sinking ships. Women are less likely than men to negotiate for what they need and want in the workplace. Therefore, in order for women leaders to gain
key developmental experiences, such as line management responsibilities and international assignments, and powerful sponsors in the upper echelons of organizations, women need to start asking for these opportunities rather than waiting to be recognized.

However, women tend not to ask for opportunities because self-promotion is typically seen as inappropriate and self-serving for women. One strategy to combat appearing self-centered is for women to focus on what they can do for the group or organization when asking for opportunities for promotion and development. Another strategy is for women to frame their interest in leadership roles as act of service when negotiating for these roles.

When pursuing opportunities for growth and advancement, women leaders need to be cautious about the opportunities and roles they take on. Women leaders are more likely to find themselves leading during times of crisis, managing units or organizations that have uncertain or precarious futures. This is because people believe that women leaders’ superior interpersonal skills and nurturing nature are needed to guide a group or organization through trying times. However, given that women already have to meet a higher burden of proof to demonstrate their competence as leaders than men, these risky assignments may be particularly hazardous to women leaders’ upward mobility.

**Proactively manage the work-family interface.** Conflict between work and family domains are associated with poorer on-the-job-performance, according to both employees themselves and their managers, and can result in stagnation in upward progress in organizations. Given that women take on more household and childcare responsibilities (even in dual career households), managers often assume that women experience more conflict between the two domains and may erroneously conclude that most women are a poor fit for managerial and leadership roles. Thus, women interested in leading should present unambiguous signals regarding their availability and interest in opportunities for leadership and advancement.

Although one way to manage conflict between work and family is to create strong boundaries between the two domains, rigid separation of work and family life limits not only negative spillover but also prevents positive spillover between work and family life. Thus, instead of trying to separate the two spheres, one way women leaders have successfully managed the work-family (or more broadly work-life) interface is to integrate both work and family life (e.g., taking children on business trips) and redefining what success is in work and family domains to be more compatible with each other (e.g., a good mother isn’t defined solely by how much time she spends with her children).

**Advice for Managers and Organizations**

**Develop clear and consistent standards for success.** Despite their best intentions, people are often susceptible to biases in decision-making. Hiring managers and executives are no exception. Organizations who want to help women achieve their full leadership potential must therefore first educate their managers and senior leaders about these biases, and then train them to avoid them. The best way to do so is to generate clear and consistent standards for hiring, promotion, and the allocation...
of other important opportunities and rewards (e.g., challenging work assignments, training and development opportunities, entry into high potential mentoring programs) and to hold decision-makers accountable for their decisions. Clear standards will help decision-makers avoid common errors in judgment as well as provide clear pathways to advancement for aspiring leaders, both men and women.

Furthermore, when developing these standards, organizational decision-makers should carefully consider whether the criteria they are setting forth are necessary for success in the role or whether they simply reflect historical pathways to the boardroom that may insidiously disadvantage women (e.g., holding mentoring events or development programs during evenings or weekends, when women may have difficulty obtaining childcare arrangements).

**Change the conversation from “or” to “and.”** Women professionals, including women leaders, often experience tension between their careers and their personal lives. Thus, for many women, the choice appears to be work or family. In order to make leadership aspirations and roles appear to be viable choices to women, organizations need to provide solutions that make it possible for women to integrate work and family (or personal lives more generally), changing the conversation to work and family. Organizations need to provide workers with access to work-life policies and practices that facilitate the integration of work and personal lives.

Given the diversity in people’s personal and family life arrangements, it may be best for organizations to offer a range of programs and choices, allowing workers the control to determine what they need to achieve balance. However, the mere presence of policies is not enough. Organizations must also create an atmosphere where workers feel like they are free to use these policies without negative career consequences.

**Create a climate of inclusion.** Conversations about diversity at work are often fraught with apprehension for both managers and workers in modern organizational life. Managers and workers are often unsure whether they should be blind to differences between people or whether they should seek to talk about, and perhaps even embrace, these differences. Research suggests that organizations should seek to create a culture that celebrates and appreciates diversity among its workers. Organizations should seek to achieve a climate of inclusion that is appreciative of differences between workers and that allows employees to be their authentic selves by promoting equitable hiring and promotion practices (as articulated above), encouraging an atmosphere where workers learn about and value each other’s unique qualities, and by upholding organizational decision-making processes that seek out and incorporate a wide range of perspectives. A strong climate for inclusion better ensures that all employees, not just women leaders, will have the opportunity to flourish.
REFERENCES


