

# Psychological Research Shows How Biased We Are When It Comes To Female Leadership

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Whether we like to confront it or not, our culture has shared unconscious biases of what each gender looks like in terms of qualities and abilities and how each gender should or should not behave. Because of this, our work is perceived differently – for better or worse – and our career paths, happiness and fulfillment are affected.

One woman who is at the helm of sex bias research in the workplace is Madeline Heilman, a social and organizational psychologist who is Professor of Psychology at NYU. Madeline has been researching this topic for her entire career, and what she has seen in her research has not shifted a lot even with the incredible strides women have made in the workplace. What does this mean? It means, we have to talk about it.

Professor Heilman describes two very important aspects of gender stereotyping in the workplace – one leading to descriptive bias, and the other to prescriptive bias. Descriptive bias as she defines it is a result of culturally shared beliefs about women and men and how they are different. For instance, she says, women are thought to be people-people, who take an interest in other people and relationships. They are kind and caring. And men are thought to have qualities that are “agentic” like taking charge, getting things done, confronting conflict, and not letting emotions get in the way of their thinking. While these characterizations may be true for some, it definitely isn’t true for all. There are women who are not people-oriented and men who are kind and heavily invested in people.

So, why is this a problem? Because gender beliefs about women do not fit with what we think is required to succeed at traditionally agentic roles – positions that often are the most prestigious and high status in the workplace. So women are expected to not be very good at them. And these expectations affect us more than we know — If women are expected to not be good at traditionally agentic roles, then women will be passed up for them and, if they are put into these roles, people are going to undervalue them. Professor Heilman says that these expectations are widely held and we tend to “make them come true”. So, when women are in traditionally agentic roles, we don’t notice their successes as much as men’s, don’t remember them as accurately, and explain them away as due to something other than their ability, (maybe someone helped them, or the task was easier than it appeared?). In these situations we (both men and women, alike) also interpret women’s behavior differently than men’s: If, for instance, a woman in a role such as sales or finance asks questions about the business pipeline, her colleagues may describe her as “worrying” or being “emotional” whereas they would describe a man behaving exactly the same way as “prudent” or “proactive.” All of these beliefs allow the different expectations we have for women and men to persist, and even be strengthened.