

## Synopsis

# Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership

Alice Eagly and Linda Carli

*“‘Labyrinth’ as a contemporary symbol, conveys the idea of a complex journey toward a goal worth striving for. Passage through a labyrinth is not simple or direct, but requires persistence and resilience, awareness of one’s progress, and careful analysis of the puzzles that lie ahead.”*

### *“Labyrinth”*: an apt metaphor

“Glass Ceiling” implies an absolute barrier at a specific height in an organization, and implies that women and men have equal access to entry- and midlevel positions. They do not.

Women do not turn away after almost reaching the top. They turn away at many stages along the journey. The “glass ceiling” implies a single solution and there is none. Multiple solutions are needed to address the myriad of obstacles that women face at every stage.

### *Vestiges of Prejudice*

Men continue to enjoy a higher paycheck and faster promotions. In 2005, women earned 81% of the male paycheck. Studies conducted by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) correct for factors such as time in work force and experience, and still find significant wage discrepancies.

White men are promoted more quickly than white women, black men, and black women. The Goldberg paradigm is the verified tendency for essays or resumes with men’s names attached to be evaluated more favorably than those with women’s names attached. (Paradigm is named after Philip Goldberg, a researcher who devised a method to test this theory in 1968.) (From “Blink”: Goldberg paradigm plays out in musical auditioning as well. Women musicians fare much better when auditioned behind a screen to conceal gender.)

Importantly, research indicates that women’s promotions do not become less likely than men’s at higher levels within organizations. Instead, a general bias against women appears to operate with approximately equal strength at all levels. (However, Virginia Valian introduces the concept that men accumulate advantage, while women accumulate disadvantage: small slights here and there add up!)

### *Resistance to Women’s Leadership*

Bias is rooted in implicit associations, or gender schemas, that people hold unconsciously. (It is important to note that both women and men hold unconscious schemas. Women are also likely to judge men more favorably than other women.)

Women are associated with being communal: empathetic, warm, caring, helpful, etc. Men are associated with being agentic: ambitious, aggressive, dominant, self-confident, self-reliant. Agentic traits are associated in people’s minds with effective leadership—hence the resistance to women in these roles.

### *Double Binds*

Women encounter many double binds as they attempt to lead. Negotiating these binds is the essence to traversing the labyrinth.

*“Study after study has affirmed that people associate women and men with different traits and link men with more of the traits that connote leadership.*”

*“[I]f there is not a critical mass of other women to affirm the legitimacy of a participative style, female leaders usually conform to whatever style is typical of the men—and that is sometimes autocratic.”*

---

#### REFERENCE

Eagly, Alice H., and Linda L. Carli. 2007. *Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership*. *Harvard Business Review* September 2007: 2-11.

Reprint R0709C can be purchased from [www.hbrreprints.org](http://www.hbrreprints.org).

**Creating Influential Leaders & Sustainable Organizations**

**Communal/Agentic:** Women are expected to be communal. If they show the same level of agency as a man, they may be labeled “iron lady,” “cold,” “unfeeling,” and much worse. Furthermore, men get credit when they are communal in the work place. They accumulate attention & advantage for being nice to staff. Women don’t because it is expected of them.

**Self-promoting/self-effacing:** Self-promotion is dangerous territory for women. Modesty is expected even of highly accomplished women. Yet, history is full of women who did not get the Nobel Prize or other recognition deserved because they stayed in the background—either out of choice or circumstance.

#### *Issues of Leadership Style*

Women must cultivate an appropriate and effective leadership style—one that reconciles the communal qualities people prefer in women with the agentic qualities expected of a leader. Female leaders have somewhat a more transformational style than male leaders, especially when it came to giving support to subordinates. Females also engaged in more rewarding of desired behaviors that are one aspect of transactional leadership. Men, on the other hand, exceed women on aspects of transactional leadership involving corrective or disciplinary actions. Men are also more likely to be laissez-faire leaders, who take little responsibility for managing despite their positional power.

These studies suggest that the gauntlet that women endure and navigate either serves to make them more effective leaders, or that only the very best women make it into leadership roles (whereas average men can assume leadership.)

#### *Organizational Interventions that Work*

- ☎ Increase people’s awareness of the psychological drivers of prejudice toward female leaders, and work to dispel those perceptions.
- ☎ Change the long-hours work norm.
- ☎ Reduce the subjectivity of performance evaluation.
- ☎ Use open-ended recruitment tools, rather than informal networks and referrals.
- ☎ Ensure a critical mass of women in executive positions—to avoid problems that come with tokenism.
- ☎ Avoid having a sole female member of any team.
- ☎ Help women shore up their social capital. (LMG: And don’t insist that networking to take the same form as that preferred by men.)
- ☎ Prepare women for promotion by giving them challenging work.
- ☎ Establish family-friendly HR practices; encourage male participation in these benefits.
- ☎ Allow employees who have significant parental responsibility more time to prove themselves worthy of promotion.
- ☎ Welcome women back who have stepped out of the workforce for a few years.

**coactive**  
CONSULTANTS

[www.CoactiveConsultants.com](http://www.CoactiveConsultants.com)