



SENIOR LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION: DEBUNKING THE 10 GENDER MYTHS

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All of the high-quality research into the effects of increasing gender and ethnic diversity at Senior Leadership level indicates that it leads to significantly higher performing organisations. There are a myriad of reasons for this: diversity of thought means that opportunities and threats are more quickly identified, there is less tendency towards 'group think', diverse organisations tend to be more creative, innovative and happy. They are more responsive to change and provide higher-quality products and services.

And yet, according to UK Government data, only 36%

of senior school headteachers are female, despite the fact that women account for 62% of all teachers.

Governing bodies are 81% male and in higher-education, only 21% of vice-chancellors are female.

Aside from the organisational benefits, pressure groups such as #WomensED argue that it is especially vital for education institutions to have high-status female role-models for young boys as well as girls to help avoid future gender stereotyping.

So how did we get into this position as a profession? What is happening now, and what are the lessons for Leadership Teams and Governing Bodies?

Are talented female teachers simply not applying for leadership roles? Or is inherent sexism at play?

Wendy Baxter, now a headteacher at Meadstead Primary Academy, has been forthright about her experiences.

"Governors overtly believed that a man would be a better because he would be tougher and more respected by students. I once found myself the only woman in a shortlist of nine, and believe I was there only because I was already doing the role as interim head. There were over 50 applicants, so I don't think the male-dominated shortlist was down to chance."

I have also recently spoken to a female Headteacher in the UK Independent Sector about an instance where she

compared her interview feedback with a fellow male interviewee who she knew well. On one question, they had given virtually identical responses. Her male counterpart was praised from his knowledgeable and authoritative answer. She was marked down as being over-confident and unnecessarily strident. She's neither.

Dominique Gobbi, Executive Principal and Havelock Academy also offers anecdotal evidence that all is not as it should be when it comes to assessing suitability for Senior Leadership.

"Female school leaders may encounter difficulty in becoming a head because of things that should be immaterial. Age and appearance can become a focal point. I have been dispirited that colleagues who encourage and support young people also openly judge female leaders on a superficial level."

Aside from such anecdotal evidence, an enormous amount of research has been undertaken by organisations such as the 30% club, KPMG, McKinsey, Oxford Brookes University, PwC and the Centre for Diversity Research on the reasons for gender imbalance at the top of organisations, and what leadership teams can do to tackle it effectively.

I have reviewed the research and compiled a list of 10 common 'myths' that the research debunks, along with implications for schools and leadership teams:

Myth 3:

RAISING A FAMILY STOPS WOMEN GETTING TO THE TOP

RESEARCH REALITY

Having a family can delay career progression, but it is not significant in preventing women from reaching the top. There is no statistically significant difference in the number of promotions between women with and without children. There is also strong evidence that raising a family enhances organisational skills, empathy and ambition.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY SCHOOL?

Schools need to take a long view about the career paths for their talented females. Sensible career management is of immense value to women throughout the early stages of their career. Challenging women in the middle stages of their career to revisit their short and medium term aspirations in light of personal growth as a result of having a family could add some fresh perspectives on who should be in the talent pool.

Myth 1: WOMEN DON'T ASPIRE TO SENIOR LEADERSHIP ROLES.

RESEARCH REALITY

Women's career aspirations do not differ from those of men, and they define what matters most to their success in exactly the same way: having positive working relationships and doing something that is interesting. Their ambition grows as their professional experience does. Women's ambition therefore has a slow fuse and their decision making takes account of more factors: This is sometimes interpreted as a caveated commitment to career progression.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY SCHOOL?

If you ask men and women at the outset of their careers whether they aspire to become a Headteacher, you are likely to receive very different answers. If you ask the same question of men and women already in leadership roles, their responses are likely to be much more aligned. Career discussions with men and women are also likely to feel rather different because women's careers have a different flight-path to men's. Schools need to apply an open mind and a gender intelligent lens on the role of ambition when screening for potential in their talent pools.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ME AS A LEADER?

Do not assume that everyone will succeed in the same way or at the same time. Listen for and challenge assumptions about what women are really seeking in their careers. Encourage a discussion within your leadership team on how to identify and encourage criteria for women's ambition.

Myth 2: WOMEN LACK THE RESILIENCE TO MAKE IT AND STAY AT THE VERY TOP.

RESEARCH REALITY

At senior levels there is no strong evidence that women give up on their careers any more than men. Lack of promotion rather than attrition is why females do not make it to Headship and beyond.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY SCHOOL?

Schools need to get much closer to the actual experience of their potential female leaders, who appear to be missing out on promotion opportunities relative to their male peers.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ME AS A LEADER?

Prioritise spending time with your potential female leaders in an informal setting in order to really understand any mismatch between their aspirations and their experience. Encourage your leadership team to discuss the career progression – both past and future – of their direct reports.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ME AS A LEADER?

If you are a senior woman leader, make time to talk to talented young women and encourage them to lean in and look beyond the immediate challenges of combining parenthood with a career.

If you are a senior male leader, explore and compare any generational differences in the attitudes and expectations of your talented young men and young women with your own assumptions.

Gender & Leadership

Myth 4: WOMEN DON'T GET TO THE TOP BECAUSE THEY LACK SELF-CONFIDENCE

RESEARCH REALITY

Risk-alertness keeps women grounded in reality. Women are more honest about their skills and abilities when putting themselves forward for unfamiliar challenges. A forensic approach to assessing personal risk and return is a more accurate explanation than lack of confidence for women's career choices.

As a leadership strength, men and women are told that they demonstrate confidence in equal measures. Yet, expectations about women's behaviour means their margin for error in projecting the right degree of confidence is very narrow. Female leaders are twice as likely to be given feedback on how they need to develop their confidence than their male counterparts.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY SCHOOL?

Confidence is implicit in the concept of leadership. But schools need to be careful in their interpretation of behaviours that imply confidence. Both men and women are seeking greater transparency around criteria for promotion and clear career pathways to help them progress with confidence. The quality of the conversations that women have about their readiness for a move will require careful interpretation, especially in the early stages of a woman's career, if she is not to be branded as lacking confidence.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ME AS A LEADER?

Women leaders need to be precise when talking about their sources of professional credibility and personal comfort, rather than talking about confidence in general terms. This will help to eliminate unhelpful explanations about a range of behavioural differences between men and women. All leaders need to be mindful of an 'over-confidence effect' – shown to be more prevalent in men than women – whereby confidence in one's own judgement is greater than the objective accuracy of the same judgement.

Myth 5: WOMEN LACK THE LEADERSHIP QUALITIES NEEDED AT THE TOP

RESEARCH REALITY

Men and Women's leadership is experienced as broadly similar. The differences between men and women leaders are subtle and complementary. However, men's marginal leadership strengths are rewarded disproportionately.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY SCHOOL?

Quantifying and qualifying the impact of leadership behaviour is difficult. Nevertheless, organisations need to look beyond easily quantifiable metrics in order to ensure that women's leadership contribution is not being underestimated.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ME AS A LEADER?

'Inattentional blindness' is a well researched phenomenon that arises when individuals are so tightly focused on achievement of goals that they do not spot other things happening around them. What happens when you consider the leadership impact of men and women on your team? How do you weigh up their contributions to 'what' and 'how' things get done around here? How can you improve your own and others' peripheral vision for cultural leadership?

Myth 6: WOMEN DON'T HAVE THE NETWORKS THAT OPEN DOORS TO THE TOP

RESEARCH REALITY

Women understand the link between professional networking and career success. At work, they choose formal channels to build their profile and access support for their professional development. Men use informal contacts more readily to sustain their progress.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY SCHOOL?

Diversity networks are welcomed as opportunities to share experience but are not seen by women as being valuable in progressing their careers until they are relatively senior. Evidence from cross-organisational mentoring schemes shows how much value both parties derive from regular contact with individuals outside their normal day to day activity. Building diversity of experience into sponsoring and mentoring relationships, e.g. across the organisation or between organisations, appears to be where women derive most value.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ME AS A LEADER?

Senior Leadership teams and Governing Bodies should look to open up their own network of contacts to help female leaders to find relevant opportunities – even outside their existing school – that prepares them for a Senior Leadership role. It is also worth considering creating opportunities that are within school hours.

Myth 7: SENIOR WOMEN LEADERS PULL UP THE CAREER LADDER BEHIND THEM

RESEARCH REALITY

Senior women attract and work hard to recruit other women through a range of approaches. Men are as important as women at inspiring women further down the leadership ladder.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY SCHOOL?

Men are equally responsible for setting the 'tone at the top' and creating an inclusive culture that attracts female talent. Schools that recognise the value of diversity can help to plug women into relationships that extend their experience beyond their immediate organisational context. Organisations should encourage women to become sponsors in order to build their own network of affiliates.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ME AS A LEADER?

If you are not formally or informally sponsoring a talented woman, why not start now? It is relatively easy for an Senior Leadership or Governing Body member to leverage their connections to help a woman in their school to gain leadership experience that will improve her chances of promotion.

Myth 8: WOMEN ARE ALREADY BENEFITTING FROM GENDER DIVERSITY PROGRAMMES

RESEARCH REALITY

High potential and other development programmes are indicative of a supportive culture that develops both men and women. Such programmes are not instrumental in creating more diversity in Senior Leadership Teams.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY SCHOOL?

Schools may need to revisit their approach to selection criteria for development programmes dependent on whether they are intended to maintain or increase levels of gender diversity. At the same time, schools may also need to redirect their investment into developing individuals rather than groups. In terms of enabling their career success, women value individualised types of developmental activity, such as personal feedback, line management, coaching, mentoring and sponsorship – significantly more than men.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ME AS A LEADER?

Are you as rigorous about the return on investment of a high potential programme in your school as you would be about any other investment? What longitudinal data would you need to track to establish a rounded measure of success? How can you tease out the causality behind what happens to participants after a development programme from pre-existing factors that led to them being nominated to participate in the first place?

Myth 9: FORMAL FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS EASE WOMEN'S ROUTE TO THE TOP

RESEARCH REALITY

Informal, individual arrangements that allow autonomy and agility are what women find helps them to most succeed. High quality line management is essential in creating the right conditions for women to feel trusted.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY SCHOOL?

Schools need to be more sophisticated in tracking the impact of both formal flexible working arrangements and informal, agile working on career progression. Organisations should not overlook the importance of investing in the development of effective people management and team leadership skills if they want to create the best possible context for men and women to succeed.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ME AS A LEADER?

The type of manager that women value most is one who provides a light touch on task management and a high touch on career management. Women also see the best women leaders being those who create a high support and a high challenge culture. Line managers and leaders need to check their own assumptions about women's commitment to their careers – particularly before and after they take parental leave.

Myth 10: THE BUSINESS CASE FOR GENDER DIVERSITY IS WORKING

RESEARCH REALITY

The personal case for gender diversity is a more powerful lever when advocating for change, especially when the case is made by men. The business case for gender diversity is too abstract and generic to act as a motivational lever for change. The business benefits are often not proven on a local level. Authentic storytelling that conveys individual leaders' personal values behind the need for change taps into others' motivations more directly.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY SCHOOL?

Schools could certainly become more adept at presenting their own case for gender diverse leadership at various organisational levels, creating the conditions for individuals to explore their own personal rationale for change on gender diversity. This can overcome some of the scepticism shown towards what can be perceived as organisational 'lip-service' to the issue.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ME AS A LEADER?

Tap into your story-telling skill-set and open up and talk freely about the relevance for you, your family, and your close friends of creating gender intelligent organisations, where men and women can succeed on their own terms. This is likely to resonate more powerfully for your audience and connect them directly with their own motivation to challenge the status quo.

This article has drawn heavily from a number of sources, particularly:

Tomorrow's Global Leaders: how to build a culture that ensures women reach the top, Tomorrow's Company, 2014

Winning Hearts and Minds: How CEOs Talk about Gender Parity, KPMG & King's College, London research paper, 2014

Forget about balance – you have to make choices, Boris Groysberg & Robin Abrahams, HBR, March 2014

Getting real: How high-achieving women can lead authentically, Marian N. Ruderman & Sharon Rogolsky, Centre for Creative Leadership White paper,

How women decide, Cathy Benko & Bill Pelster, HBR, September 2013

Simple Steps to Unlocking Potential, Women's Business Council: Government Equalities Office, 2013

Maximising women's contribution to future economic growth, Women's Business Council: Government Equalities Office, 2013

The SHL Talent Report 2013: Big data insight and analysis of the global workforce, Eugene Burke & Ray Glennon, SHL, 2013

Women and the vision thing, Herminia Ibarra & Otilia Obodaru, HBR, January 2009

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