

Female leaders are still stereotyped

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Women's leadership programs are charged with imagining a new type of woman leader for whom leadership is an attainable aspiration. But effective leadership education for women is still a haven for bad practices that send mixed messages to aspiring leaders. There are two types of practices that work to stereotype women in leadership:

First, programs rely on bringing out the superwoman as a model of leadership. On the final day of our leadership program, a woman was invited to present her tips for getting ahead to a group of aspirational young female leaders. She was in her mid-forties, a professor and dean of a business faculty, and had just given birth to twins through IVF. She was immaculately put together, on stilettos all day. Can we do all that? Why do so many women's leadership programs send out this unrealistic and exhausting message? There is a lack of women leaders as role models, but sustaining stereotypes of the superwoman is no solution. For role models to be effective, they need to be both inspirational and motivational. Consider the context of aspiring women leaders, who dismiss the idea that work is your entire life and a woman needs to go it alone and to have it all. The superwoman is not affirming of choices and balance. She continues to perpetuate the traditional notion that doing leadership about getting control, dominance, and power, at all costs. Instead, leadership programs need to increase the repertoire of role models so leadership is feasible, flexible, and appealing at all stages of a career. Such role models could be better fostered from our networks and our exemplary peers, rather than from exaggerated tokens of women's leadership.

Second, programs focus on the common narratives about the woes of women in leadership. Glass ceilings, the double binds of family and work, and discriminatory nature of organizations reinforce ideas that women are vulnerable and need fixing. Women need a better way to use the language of self-promotion and accountability. We know that language creates the reality of how individuals see themselves. So, while leadership language for women still focuses on barriers and struggles, this practice maintains the backlash avoidance model of success, which suggests that women fear negative repercussions from self promotion and standing out. It is no wonder that women can often negotiate a better deal for others than they can for themselves. Compare this language context to that of male leadership programs which are littered with the narratives of success. Males learn to take charge, tackle challenges, develop talent, driving innovation and guide change. Disrupting the stereotypical use of language should be a focus of women's leadership programs.

Women's leadership programs are necessary to accelerate women's leadership aspirations. But just having a women's leadership program isn't enough. If it's not done right, women can't move forward. Effective programs for tomorrow's leaders should disrupt stereotyping.

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