Gender differences in leadership – believing is seeing: implications for managing diversity

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Abstract

Purpose – Are there "really" gender differences in leadership? Do beliefs regarding gender differences in leadership differ across cultures? And how do these beliefs influence diversity management? This article aims to demonstrate how different beliefs regarding gender differences and leadership can influence company diversity policies and initiatives.

Design/methodology/approach – First, the authors review the research evidence on the relationship between gender and leadership. Then they explore the effects of gender stereotyping. Furthermore, they consider the role of culture on these beliefs. This review serves as the foundation for the discussion of three different perspectives regarding gender and leadership: gender-blind; gender-conscious; and perception-creates-reality (or believing is seeing).

Findings – Adhering to these different paradigms can influence actions taken to managing diversity and human resource policies. Revealing these different paradigms can help companies and managers reassess their diversity practices.

Originality/value – The paper discusses issues that are of interest to all levels of managers.

Keywords Gender, Leadership, Human resource management, Cross-cultural management

Paper type General review

Introduction

Due to globalization and changes in economic and social conditions the role and self-perception of women in industrialized countries is dramatically changing (Stedham and Yamamura, 2004). The appearance of women in formerly all-male occupations contributes to this "dramatic cultural change" (Inglehart and Baker, 2000). Given these trends there are increasing similarities in the management styles of men and women (Diekman and Eagly, 2000). Nevertheless, despite economic and social changes in the role of women, certain beliefs regarding women in leadership roles seem to persist and these beliefs apparently continue to flourish across cultures (Fullager *et al.*, 2003; Prime *et al.*, 2008).

Indeed, there remain important barriers for women in navigating their careers. The "glass ceiling" is a metaphor for the barriers women encounter when trying to attain positions of leadership. Subsequent metaphors such as "glass elevators" and "glass cliffs" refer to the greater scrutiny and criticism that women may receive when in leadership roles (Ryan and Haslam, 2005). However, Eagly and Carli (2007) have suggested the metaphor of the "labyrinth," may be more appropriate as it conveys the complexity and number of obstacles women face throughout their careers. While these metaphors may provide insight into the barriers that women confront and thus help to develop more appropriate policies and interventions, the debate continues regarding the reasons for, or beliefs underlying, these barriers. Are women leaders "really" different from men or not? Or are the differences merely "perceived?" If so, should women be treated differently or not? It seems that even equal treatment does not

necessarily promote equality in the upper layers of corporations. In fact, (diversity) managers may need to clarify their underlying beliefs and eventually consider new perspectives on the relationship of gender and leadership, while taking cultural aspects into consideration.

In this article, we first present the empirical evidence regarding differences in leadership styles between men and women (i.e. "real"). We then explore the role of stereotyping on the beliefs regarding the relationship of gender and leadership. In addition, we explore the influence of culture on these perceptions. We then describe these different perspectives/paradigms and how they might influence diversity initiatives and human resource (HR) practices. The reflections and experiences of diversity managers in two multinational organizations are presented, as examples, to demonstrate the impact of these paradigms on diversity policies and HR practices.

Gender[1] and leadership

Research in leadership has a long and inconclusive history. For centuries, scholars have sought to establish the traits and behaviors (see Bass, 1990) that determine effective leadership. More recently the focus has been on leadership that is transformational vs transactional, and leadership that is "authentic" (e.g. Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Davis-Blake and Pfeffer, 1989; Hooijberg et al., 2007). Popular interest is evident in a Google search, which shows more than 100 million hits. What leadership is depends on the ontological and epistemological stance and assumptions (Hunt, 2004). We take here a generic (perhaps naïve) stance whereby leadership in organizations is about setting direction for the collective and leaders define and communicate a direction for their subordinate units (Zaccaro and Banks, 2001). Organizations are often defined publically by its leaders at the very top level and CEO effects are frequently investigated (e.g. Waldman and Yammarino, 1999), but leadership is important throughout management levels (Bass, 1990) and prevalent in much of the management literature.

Although the idea that men and women are from different planets (Gray, 1992, 2008) and that their ways of leading differ innately (e.g. Senge, 2008) is rife in popular culture, empirical evidence does not indicate significant gender differences in leadership. In fact, the results of the role of gender and leadership research over the last 20 years remain largely inconsistent (for an overview, see Butterfield and Grinnell, 1999; Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2007; Vecchio, 2003). Some research supports the notion of gender differences, for example that women tend to be slightly more "transformational"[2] (Bass and Avolio, 1994; Eagly et al., 2003; Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2003), and democratic, participative and inclusive (Eagly and Johnson, 1990). Research on gender-related comparisons of leadership styles according to masculine and feminine traits is extensive (e.g. Carless, 1998; Eagly, 1987). This approach often associates male leadership styles with instrumental, agentic or "transactional" qualities and female leadership styles with more communal, nurturing and people-oriented qualities (Gibson, 1995), which are either considered to be incongruent with idealized leadership attributes ("Think manager think male," Schein, 2001) or represent the so-called "feminine advantage" (Rosener, 1990).

Other research findings, however, do not support the notion of many distinct differences between men and women leaders (e.g. Eagly and Johnson, 1990; Powell, 1990). A meta-analysis of 45 studies measuring different kinds of leadership behaviors found only small (yet statistically significant) differences between the leadership styles of women and men leaders (Eagly et al., 2003). Due to the high degree of similarity in the behaviors of women and men leaders, this study concluded that knowing that an

individual is female or male is not a reliable indicator of that person's leadership style (Eagly *et al.*, 2003). Yammarino *et al.* (1997) also consider these effect sizes too small to matter in practice. So while research has not demonstrated significant ("real") differences between men and women with regard to leadership styles, what matters more is the beliefs or sex-role stereotypes, rather than gender *per se* (Butterfield and Powell (1981).

Believing is seeing

The debate among management scholars goes on regarding ontology (the nature of reality) and epistemology (how we know it). Is reality "objective" and exists without observers, can it be measured and quantified (positivism) or is it based on subjective interpretations (socially constructed)? With regards to the relationship of gender and leadership, are the differences "real" (based on empirical findings) or socially constructed?

Stereotyping

Stereotypes are perceptions about the qualities that distinguish groups or categories of people (for a definition overview, see Schneider 2004, pp. 16-17). They are typically thought of as over-generalizations, sometimes with negative connotations such as "thinking ill of others without warrant" (Allport, 1954). Stereotypes can apply to any category that a society considers important, from gender to caste to religious affiliation, and have been acknowledged in the literature since the start of the twentieth century. Lippmann's (1922) original work on public opinion applied the word "stereotype" to the "pictures in our heads" that shape our beliefs and "stereotype" was also used in the seminal Princeton studies first carried out in the late 1920s (Katz and Braley, 1933). People use stereotypes as cognitive short-cuts in anticipating the motives, abilities and behaviors of others. Rather than having to "figure out" each person they meet, people routinely use stereotypes for the sake of expediency (Macrae *et al.*, 1994; Schneider, 2004, p. 363) and as energy-saving devices (Allport, 1954). This convenience factor increases under time pressure and contributes to the enduring human phenomenon of stereotypes (Fiske, 1998).

Stereotypes are further reinforced by various social mechanisms, such as the "spillover effect," which suggests societal gender roles may contaminate organizational roles and result in different expectations for female and male managers. In short, our gender belief systems include stereotypes and gender-role attitudes (Deaux and Lafrance, 1998, p. 789). Gender is considered "a major organizing principle in our perception of the world and everything in it" (Cockburn, 1985, p. 251). For women in leadership roles, the matter is complicated as the reference frames for potentially evaluating women are limited (Lee and James, 2007) and stereotyping is seen as "the best bet we have." When we use stereotyping because it makes our life easier, we stereotype based on familiar women's roles (mothers, wives, nurses, etc.) and the characteristics they embody, which are currently inconsistent with those that traditionally define a good business leader.

Stereotypic views specifically on gender and leadership have been studied for the last 50 years. Studies in the 1960s and 1970s confirmed the notion that women were thought to be unfit for management positions (for overview, see Nieva and Gutek, 1981) and the attitude, "Think manager – Think male" (Schein, 1973) prevailed. While researchers considered the actual leadership behavior of men and women to be similar in practice, it was perceived to be widely different by both genders (Day and Stogdill, 1972). Later, it seems as if women have changed their perceptions to some extent, but men less so (for an overview, see Brenner *et al.*, 1989; Duehr and Bono, 2006; Lueptow *et al.*, 2001; Schein, 2007).

The impact of stereotyping

Women have identified stereotypes as an important barrier to the most senior positions in business (e.g. Catalyst, 2002), and scholars have echoed this view consistently for years (e.g. Antal and Izraeli, 1993; Heilman, 2001; Schein, 2001). This is consistent with the commonly-held notion that perceptions of "appropriate" leadership are influenced by gender (Campbell *et al.*, 1993). Stereotyping also may result in a self-fulfilling prophecy. When a negative (or positive) stereotype exists about a certain group, members of the group perform in a way that confirms this stereotype. This phenomenon is called the "stereotype threat" (Steele, 1997). For women in management, this may result in the internalization of the idea that women are less capable of assuming leadership roles. As such, they do not identify themselves with potential leadership positions, considered male territory, thus undermining their motivation and potentially leading to lower performance. Stereotype threat has been proven to impact women negatively in academic fields (such as lower performance on math tests), and, importantly, in women's professional aspirations (Davies *et al.*, 2002; Roberson and Kulik, 2007).

Women who do assume leadership roles are often judged negatively by both men and women alike. If they adhere to traditional "female" characteristics (e.g. nurturing/communal) they are considered too nice and therefore not capable/competent. If they assume more "male characteristics" (agentic) they are considered to be too harsh. Thus women who attain leadership positions have to make a tradeoff between being liked vs respected, or "Damned if you do, doomed if you don't" (Catalyst, 2007). Also, as is often said, women have to work harder than men in order to prove themselves (e.g. Bielby and Bielby, 1988). The concern regarding the evaluation of their performance rather than focusing on opportunities for learning can result in, for example, not taking on challenging assignments which are necessary for career progression (Ely and Rhode, 2010).

Apparently the views of what constitutes effective leadership and the perceived characteristics of men and women as leaders are consistent across cultures, even the ones that are considered to promote gender egalitarianism. Thus the problem is fundamentally the same insofar that most managers, regardless of cultural background, consider stereotypical male behaviors as closer to "good leadership" than stereotypical female behavior (Prime *et al.*, 2008; Schein, 2001; Williams and Best, 1990). Nevertheless, beliefs regarding gender and leadership do vary among cultures and approaches to managing these beliefs or stereotypes may vary from country to country and from organization to organization.

The impact of culture

Leadership concepts are claimed to have been culturally endorsed (Brodbeck *et al.*, 2000). That is, leadership and related behavioral values must be understood within a given cultural context, or as Clifford Geertz (1973, p. 49) stated, "There is no such thing as human nature independent of culture." Leadership research shows that cultures often have very different notions and perceptions about what behaviors contribute to outstanding leadership (e.g. Ardichvili and Kuchinke, 2002; Dorfman *et al.*, 2004), different leadership prototypes (Bass and Stogdill, 1990; Paris *et al.*, 2009), and differences in leadership style as perceived by male and female subordinates (Stoeberl *et al.*, 1998). Other studies, such as GLOBE, find universal characteristics of leaders (House *et al.*, 2004). As such, differences in leadership styles have even been reported to be based more on national culture than on gender (Stoeberl *et al.*, 1998).

We do know from cross-cultural research that a number of cultural dimensions – including values and practices relating to gender equality – differ from country

to country. One approach uses labels such as masculine and feminine societies. Hofstede (1980, 2001) argued, for example, that masculine societies expect men to be assertive and tough and women to be modest and tender. Thus cultures seem to vary in the degree to which they associate feminine and masculine stereotypic traits with women and men, respectively. This means that, in some cultures, people are more likely to describe women with feminine stereotypic traits and men with masculine stereotypic traits than in other cultures. Several studies have shown how acceptance of certain leadership "behaviors" (such as being "assertive" or "affective") varies between cultures (e.g. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998). For example, collective cultures tend to stress traditional authority (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995), which would predict perceived typical male leadership attributes as more appropriate than perceived typical female leadership styles. The Globe study (House *et al.*, 2004), overall, found effective leadership to be universal (to endorse leaders as team players, charismatic/value based, participative, humane) and to reject leaders who are autonomous (individualistic, independent) and self-protective (competitive, status conscious, self-centered). The former are considered to be more likely female traits ("female advantage") and the latter more likely to be male. Research by Paris *et al.* (2009) found neither men nor women endorsed leadership that was humane, and both men and women rejected leaders that were autonomous. Nevertheless, men and women did have different prototypes of leadership as a function of culture (gender egalitarianism), for example, while there was no gender difference found with regard to endorsing participation, gender egalitarianism moderated the degree to which men and women's prototypes of leadership as participative differed.

One line of thought supporting the importance of culture follows Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt's (2001) perspective of social role theory in which gender differences in leadership behavior appear and disappear with shifts in social context. According to social role theory, leadership styles and what is appropriate behavior for men and women may be influenced by different cultures. Findings show that stereotypes concerning the communion and agency of women and men are products of the social roles that women and men have been observed to occupy. In their earlier work, Eagly and Steffen (1986) demonstrated that people in domestic positions are regarded as more communal and less agentic than people in paid occupations. Because women are still primarily perceived as homemakers and men as employees, each are assigned the characteristics corresponding to these traditional roles, even when they have assumed new and different occupations in society. This is also culturally relevant because the proportion of domestic work completed by men or women varies greatly between nations. Recently Gratton *et al.* (2007) have demonstrated how team leaders often experience spillover between work and home and how this is different for men and women as women team leaders are six times more likely to carry the domestic burden than male team leaders. This domestic burden of women contributes to maintaining gender inequalities in organizations (Acker, 2006).

Still, the impact of the cultural context on gender stereotyping and how it relates to what is considered to be effective management behaviors has remained relatively unexplored (Prime *et al.* (2008) is a noticeable exception). Stoeberl *et al.* (1998) reported that no comprehensive empirical study was available (at that time) to assess the degree and directional relationship between culture and gender and the style of leadership. As most cultures have gender-role stereotypes (Matusak, 2001), the lack of research in this field is surprising.

Indeed, many reported gender differences in leadership reflect socialized perceptions that are embedded in our respective cultures (Nieva and Gutek, 1981). Gibson (1995) proposes that the interaction of culture and gender significantly affects the degree of emphasis placed on certain leadership behaviors and styles. This is in line with Alvesson and Billing (1997) who claim that the relatively small number of female leaders in upper management can most likely be attributed to an interplay of cultural traditions and perceptions, and the life and socialization experiences that are unique to being male or female.

While mindful of the wide range of factors affecting women's careers and career choices (for an overview, see Nieva and Gutek, 1981), the effects of social influences and the obstacles caused by various gender-related dilemmas provide compelling evidence of gender differences in power (Carli, 1999). Women who aspire to management positions contend with common stereotypes of their being unfit for the role in most societies (Powell, 1999, p. 335), especially at the higher levels of management where the presence of women in leadership positions most violates the notion of male superiority. Wright *et al.* (1995) has reported no specific research in the area of leadership and power, when combining the effects of culture and gender. Furthermore, a recent meta-analysis of the contextual influences of diversity on team performance (Joshi and Roh, 2009) demonstrates that in industries and occupations that are male dominated, the presence of women is detrimental as gender stereotypes are more likely to emerge. The complexity of the different cultures in which managers operate is increasing and all organizations are claimed to have "inequality regimes" defined as "loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that results in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities" (Acker, 2006, p. 443).

Yet despite similarities in gender-related beliefs due to national, occupational or industry cultures[3], there remains significant room for differences in organizational cultures (see Gerhart (2009) for a recent overview), which means that organizations *can* establish more or less gender-equal climates across their global operations.

So what is the problem?
Labor markets and work organizations are clearly divided according to gender (Alvesson and Billing, 1997). Despite the evidence that there is no overall difference in the leadership styles and effectiveness of women and men who actually hold leadership positions (Eagly *et al.*, 1992), differences do exist when it comes to the beliefs regarding gender and leadership behaviors (e.g. Kolb, 1999), with some cultural variation (Prime *et al.*, 2008). These beliefs influence women's opportunities for career advancement (Ellemers *et al.*, 2004; Schein, 2007), including managerial selection, promotion, placement and training decisions (Schein, 2007). And women tend to receive less favorable or prejudicial evaluations (Powell, 1999; Nieva and Gutek, 1981).

Agars (2004) argues, in line with other scholars (e.g. Wellington *et al.*, 2003; Ellemars, 2004), that gender differences, or perceptions of such differences, play a powerful role in maintaining the "glass ceiling." Agars' study illustrates that gender stereotypes have been underestimated as a causal factor in the slow advancement of women especially in high-level management positions. Observed effect sizes of gender stereotypes have been undervalued (or not appropriately used) by scholars who found them small and insignificant. Through a demonstration in a hypothetical organization, the author shows the cumulative effect of gender stereotypes on the selection and promotion of women in management with the end result of substantially fewer women in upper management.

Research also suggests that when women and men are exposed to gender
stereotypes, they also become more accepting of existing gender inequalities (Jost and
Kay, 2005). The status quo threat is also supported by other research streams such as
social role theory (explained earlier) and expectations states theory, both of which
result in biases against women (Weyer, 2007). Expectation states theory argues that
gender becomes salient in settings where it either differentiates the players or is
culturally linked to the task at hand (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin, 1999) and that actors
use cultural beliefs about the status implications of their distinguishing characteristics
to organize their interactions in goal-oriented settings (Berger *et al.*, 1977). As gender is
a characteristic that determines status in many countries, this also helps to explain
why gender inequalities are not likely to change rapidly. This is perhaps not
surprising, as men are likely to be satisfied with the status quo when it comes to
inequality in power distribution (Stedham and Yamamura, 2004) and will strive to
maintain it (Niebuhr, 1932). In fact, societies that are strongly hierarchical, with high
power distance, tend to more readily accept inequality, including gender inequality
(Stedham and Yamamura, 2004).

Finally, as Grant (1988) points out, organizations may have been successful in
creating the "she-male" as a livable compromise with which both men and women can
coexist and thrive at least to some extent and where some of the more overt forms
of inequality have been removed (Liff and Cameron, 1997). But this "progress" may also
repress some characteristics that could be considered female advantages for leading
teams and people, such as sense of community and nurturance. And, it does not solve
the more subtle forms of discrimination embedded in the larger systems of power and
patterns of socialization processes. In fact, "false gender-neutrality" has been said to
prevent women's broader equality in the workplace (Liff and Wajcman, 1996).

Managerial consequences
This review provides an understanding of:

- the differences between reality and perception regarding male and female
  leadership;
- the difficulty of assessing what the real behavioral gender differences are;
- the prevalence and importance of beliefs and stereotypes; and
- the potential influence of cultural context.

Yet very few managerial guidelines address the relationship of gender, leadership and
culture, i.e. how organizations should deal with gender diversity when it comes to
structures, policies and processes, let alone with the complexity of a particular cultural
or societal context. For example, while there has been some focus on legal compliance,
there has been little effort to organize work differently (Liff and Cameron, 1997) and
to look at the larger picture that includes the importance of home and work spillover
effects (Gratton, 2007; Liff and Wajcman, 1996). And, unfortunately, too little research
has been done concerning what organizations can do to impact the work-life balance
by using practices and policies, and the potential effects of such initiatives on women's
careers (Straub, 2007).

As stated more than a decade ago by Liff and Wajcman (1996), we are still looking at
two fundamental problems: The first problem is to find out in what situations men and
women should be treated differently (if any. . .). The second problem is to determine
what structures, initiatives and policies will lead to a long-term, fundamental equality

between men and women in organizations. We are indeed faced with a complex nexus of forces, processes and ambiguous research results. In light of this, managers often act according to what they believe to be true. If the world is round, but nobody believes it, a manager has the choice of leading according to the fact that the world is round, the common belief that it is flat, or may try and change the belief that the world is flat. The same principle applies to gender management in organizations. Managers choose to lead either according to what they believe to be the differences between men and women, if any, or according to what other people believe are the differences, both prototypes as well as stereotypes. This has implications for HR practices. For example, if one holds the assumption that women leaders are more nurturing but less task oriented than their male counterparts, a reward and promotion system that is merely built on short-term results (i.e. sales numbers) might indeed favor men, as opposed to a reward and promotion system that has built in measures for team satisfaction or mentoring efforts. In essence, performance evaluations should reflect a variety of what is valued (see Chen and DiTomaso, 1996).

In the following section we will explore three paradigms. This way of thinking, in relation to this particular subject, was suggested by Powell (1990) almost two decades ago and has, we believe, inspired numerous influential scholars in our field (see Kolb *et al.*, 1998; Liff and Wajcman, 1996; Thomas and Ely, 1996). Each of the paradigms we articulate are based upon our reflections on the research and literature reviewed previously and as they concur with our extensive experiences working with organizations on the issue of diversity. We are not advocating any of these in particular, but we acknowledge that their assumptions and, therefore, their implications are quite different. The three paradigms are:

(1) *The gender-blind view*: Women and men leaders are not significantly different and should therefore be treated the same.

(2) *The gender-conscious view[4]*: Women and men leaders are significantly different and should be treated accordingly.

(3) *Perception creates reality*: Women and men leaders are not significantly different. But people believe they are different (stereotyping) and these stereotypes create barriers to women's advancement.

We have outlined some of the gender-research-related background and some paradigms that may enable structured discussions in organizations and hopefully also contribute to the future research agenda, insofar as we need to monitor and measure potential consequences of gender diversity beliefs at all levels of organizations and always with a high degree of cultural sensitivity. Because large transnational corporations often act as role models for firms in many countries (Adler, 1994), and are considered critical sites for research (Ely and Rhode, 2010), we specifically asked two global organizations (both with operations in more than 100 countries) for their reflections on the paradigms and examples of implications. We provided the directors responsible for diversity with our literature review and the three paradigms (see Appendix for the instructions).

Example 1: "Fuel" (a multinational oil company)

In our work on (gender) diversity, we are mindful of all three paradigms and we realize that the importance of each often varies with culture. For example, it is not equally accepted in all cultures that men and women be treated in the same manner, nor is it

equally accepted in all cultures that they be treated differently. And we need to be sensitive to our environment, while driving in the direction of Fuel's own values. One paradigm that comes close to Fuel's thinking and approach to diversity and inclusion (D&I), is that of stereotyping and perceptions. Thus, we have focused our efforts particularly on reducing stereotyping and changing gender perceptions because this is seen as a necessary step in our journey towards gender equality.

In principle, Fuel's aim is to ensure that diversity and inclusion considerations are embedded into its main HR systems and processes as we strive to create a gender neutral organization, allowing all employees with high competence to progress to their potential, regardless of age, gender, ability, sexual orientation and ethnic background. We recognize that both genders can offer the same potential, but that hidden barriers may indeed limit the growth of one gender over another.

Research from 2005 on the retention and progression of women in Fuel demonstrated that various barriers for women existed, which influenced the ability of women to advance in the organization. While several women already held key roles, the number was small and some women opted to leave the company. This research resulted in more than ten tangible and key actions, ranging from more mentoring by and for women, to reevaluating our assessment processes and our current estimated potential processes, as well as the development of women with potential. These actions are now embedded into the HR systems and processes and immediate results are noticeable, as the number of women in senior leadership positions has progressed significantly.

At the same time, Fuel realizes that women and men do not have the same privileges in a working world largely created by and for men and as a result, Fuel entertains supportive action initiatives. One example consists of making sure that in 70 percent of supervisor-level positions and above, at least one female candidate is on the short list. While businesses are not required to hire a woman, it has been noted that the conversion rate, or the rate at which women are selected, is high. This confirms the good quality of candidates that this action brings forward, instead of merely provoking a selection of "token" women.

Our investment in training people and increasing D&I awareness at a personal, inter-personal, and organizational level emphasizes our belief that awareness of differences (including perceptions) must be understood before they can be addressed and tackled. Differences, such as gender and culture, do not need to be erased, as long as they are appreciated and the value of both men and women is perceived by both genders.

Recent research from Catalyst (2007), called "the double bind," demonstrates that senior women still suffer from stereotype barriers today and was recognized by senior women in Fuel, reminding us that there is still some distance to go before women and men are judged and treated equally. Nevertheless, Fuel's D&I's journey has already covered much ground, and we anticipate that Fuel will continue to push the envelope in a male-oriented, engineering industry, in order to allow greater gender diversity and develop better ways of benefiting from it. It is often said that "Making a company better for women makes it better for everyone," and Fuel subscribes to this viewpoint.

Many of the positive action initiatives and the hiring guidelines that were implemented to increase the nomination of women into senior leadership roles have been extended to include ethnic origins (POC in the USA, Asians in Asia, etc). Results of the last years show that these steps helped in changing the profile of Fuel into one that better reflects the global world that it operates in. While much remains to be done, we are confident that our activities are supporting the company's overall business strategies, as well as reaping the benefits of the diversity that we currently host. To

address the above, Fuel has implemented and uses a holistic framework to drive progress in D&I. This approach is global and has been rolled out in all countries, driven by each business. This framework covers:

Vision. D&I is about obtaining the best people in leadership positions and, in turn, supporting growth in the market and stronger relationships with our joint venture partners. It is about talent, growth, and competitiveness.

Communication/education. Recognizing that gender differences need to be understood, "Gender Awareness" courses were made mandatory for supervisors and above. More than 5,000 managers in all regions have taken these four hour-long courses. In addition, a three-day "Diversity and inclusion awareness" course was required for HR professionals; this course contains input on gender differences, as well as other aspects of diversity such as culture, generation, and sexual orientation. Again, this was delivered in all regions in a consistent manner. Lastly, Fuel hosts more than 25 "Women Career Development" courses each year, which catered to talented, upcoming women and address issues such as assertiveness, being yourself, and how to learn from women managers and each other. The women who attend this course have a higher promotion rate than those who do not. The strength of these courses is that they are global and rolled out consistently in all countries. Global teams design them and take into consideration the Fuel culture and values. And since local cultures are equally important, regional experts play an important role early on in the design phase.

Attraction/attrition. Special attention is given to recruitment in all regions and the company aims to hire a 50/50 gender split in all commercial roles and achieve a 28 percent technical female target. These targets are based on market availability and Fuel has been able to exceed its technical female targets repeatedly.

Mentoring/networking. All country HR directors and country chairs are responsible for support and champion women networks. As a result, more than 25 women networks are currently active across the globe, from Nigeria to Norway and the USA to Malaysia. Many of the women networks have created mentoring circles, which can be headed either by men or by women. These circles have positively impacted the development of all participants. Special attention is given to encouraging senior leaders to mentor people from under-represented groups. The more senior women are specifically asked to play a strong role in supporting upcoming women in the company and to act as role models.

Environment/inclusion. A focus on embedding D&I considerations has created a unique environment. Two concrete examples are an e-learning course where managers are trained in new evaluations systems and the exit interview process. The e-learning course included a gender stereotype session which offered suggestions on how to recognize and address stereotyping when it occurs. "Exit interviews" incorporate D&I considerations when people discuss reasons for leaving the company. Special "Stay in touch" programs allow senior women to return to Fuel after they pursued other career choices. One such situation recently occurred in the Middle East, where Fuel was able to re-hire a senior female after she had left for another company.

Measures. Fuel, like most corporations, measures progress, and the mantra "what gets measured gets done" applies to this 100-year-old company as well. Fuel measures and publicizes its three targets in its CSR and Annual Report:

(1) 20 percent women in leadership positions;

(2) a majority of local nationals in local leadership positions; and

(3) inclusion index based on a yearly survey.

While the company recognizes and honors cultural differences, all regions are expected to participate in the above group targets and drive these with their own requirements. In South Africa, for example, the global D&I targets are in addition to local leadership profile requirements (black economic empowerment or BEE), and the businesses operating there are requested to drive all of these activities with equally high attention.

Example 2: "Excel" (a multinational accounting firm)

Excel is a large and decentralized international organization, where one can expect there will be different approaches to gender diversity. Excel experiences "gender-blind," "gender-conscious", and the "perspective creates reality" attitudes. It is only by leveraging these different attitudes that over time the firm has become one of the professional services firms that has received numerous recognitions for being the "best place to work for women."

Gender blind? In the first instance, because we recruit a large number of people every year, gifted with the same education and interests, but perhaps from different backgrounds, all our young professionals are operating with identical objectives, leveraging a set of competencies that vary only by level and line of service. We do not believe that men and women work differently, hence we use a single set of competencies to measure everyone for results and areas of progress, regardless of their gender. Everyone discusses their objectives at the beginning of the year with a set of standard expectations and at the end of the year, these will be measured against achievements. This approach continues throughout individual careers, and in this sense, we are "gender blind."

Gender conscious? Taking into account past experience and the fact that more men tend to become partners than women, Excel has engaged in different programs to identify women with potential for growth and help them develop at a pace that is comparable to their male peers. While one can acknowledge that the opportunities for personal development, client exposure, and mobility are there for both men and women, facts show that more men around the globe choose to become partners. Hence, a special effort has been made to grow women leaders. Programs, such as an initiative for the retention and advancement of women launched in the 1990s in the USA, have proven to be effective and have led to significant progress in the management and leadership positions of the US firm. By being "gender conscious," Excel made great strides in moving women ahead. In 2007 21 percent of partners were women, up from 6.5 percent in 1993 and 12.9 percent in 1999.

Perception creates reality? One good opportunity for anyone in a professional firm to advance their career is to accept an international assignment. In general, it means moving household and family, spending 18 months away from home, and going through the inevitable hurdles and complexities of adjusting to and living in an unfamiliar world. Obviously, complexity increases when families are involved. Hence, when it comes to selecting expatriates, many of our partners assume that married women will not be in a position to accept a job aboard, since their spouse is working and will not relocate. This is a typical case of "perception creating reality," and the proportion of married women on international assignment over the years has remained proportionally low. In reality, women with spouses have proven on a number of occasions that their marriage does not block their ability to work abroad, to hold a demanding job or to work longer hours – yet in some countries, a number of opportunities are still not offered to our female staff because the perception is that they will not be in a position to accept them. The shift from this stereotyping requires that

the management take a "gender conscious" approach to ensure that equal opportunities are given to women and that targets are set to change the culture over time.

Conscious of the complexity of the matter, and of the need to change, Excel launched a global program for retention of women, and set the proportion of women elected to partner and director level as a benchmark for improvement. This program, a combination of practices that both raise gender consciousness and combat stereotypes, has several components:

Tools: A whole set of tools has been developed and shared to help countries analyze their situation in light of the proportion of women in the firm at all levels; review their management tools and styles; prepare and launch initiatives to improve the advancement of women and ensure their fair representation at all levels.

Learning: Several learning opportunities to help both men and women understand the business case of women in management and develop sets of expertise to improve the advancement and management of women.

Communication: Internal and external communication around our objectives, achievements, and expectations that foster a different attitude towards careers and opportunities for women.

Benchmark: On the assumption that: "What gets measured, gets done!" a set of items have been identified along with the above-mentioned global benchmark and are being tracked to ensure that women are represented in fair proportions at all levels and are given the same opportunities.

These components, while prepared at the global level, are implemented at the local level to take into account that different cultures and environments lead to different management styles and objectives.

Culture matters. We cannot consider that countries where women have not been economically present in the past decades will be advancing at the same level as countries where women share the professional activities of men. Culturally, the role of women and legal landscape vary across countries in the Middle East, which affects policies and programs. Excel serves as a catalyst for change in the region by having appointed a woman into a significant leadership role for all of the Middle East. Also family structures and childcare management have significant impact on opportunities for women to develop their own careers. However, the legal context differs between countries; part time is organized by law in some countries but not in others. While the different Excel offices can have a common approach to facilitate careers in all countries, local practices have to take into account legal requirements, social organization, and attitudes towards the advancement of women in order to build projects that are successful and that support the development of a larger proportion of women leaders. Once fair representation of women at all levels has been reached, the need to conduct gender awareness programs will no longer be as acute, but one can only acknowledge that this will take time and effort.

Discussions and implications

Holders of each of the three paradigms that we have described in this article, may all believe it is important to increase the number of women in senior management, but they have different strategies for achieving this and sometimes vehemently disagree with the methods of others. We have seen two examples of multinational companies that are addressing these paradigms in different ways, and having to deal with all three of them in one way or another. Since we intended to represent the "view of the natives" in this text, without "contaminating" the data (Moustakas, 1994), we did not engage in

either editing (other than grammar and typos) or deep-level interpretation processes. Nor did we attempt to develop or ground theory in these examples, or to assess their efficacy. In fact, Özbilgin (2008) points to the "pick and mix fashion" whereby organizations select a variety of aspects and initiatives that are ambiguous to monitor, and thereby also difficult to compare.

Based on the case studies, the literature reviewed, and our own experiences in the field, we outline here generic consequences of the three paradigms and how they may impact gender-equality. Specifically, we provide examples of HR initiatives that are consistent with each paradigm, identify potential benefits to women and to the organization if the initiatives are implemented effectively, and describe potential drawbacks (for gender equality and for organizations) within each paradigm.

Paradigm 1: The gender-blind view: Women and men leaders are not significantly different and should therefore be treated the same.

Believers in this paradigm are likely to implement HR initiatives that increase opportunities for women to access to the organizational system. They see the lack of senior women in management as a "pipeline" issue: Since women and men lead in the same way, the fact that there are fewer women in management roles can be attributed to women's historical role as mothers and homemakers, that women can choose to stay at home, and also perhaps admitting to past discrimination. Women are simply lagging behind men in terms of management positions. Advocates of this paradigm would like to see more women in the workforce because women represent half the labor force, and if they are under-represented in management then presumably the company is missing out on some good managers.

Specific HR initiatives might include mandating that job candidate pools include a certain proportion of women, targeting awareness campaigns to women without changing the content of the campaign, (i.e. encouraging female high school students to go into engineering) and ensuring that there is a certain proportion of women in high potential pools within the organization. The HR system gives women opportunities and encourages them to try to take advantage of them, but does not change anything in their performance assessment or in the nature of the opportunities themselves. If such initiatives are successfully implemented, women will be more aware about avenues for advancement or professional development and will change the way they think about themselves in relation to these opportunities. Organizations will have more women in the pipeline who are poised for promotion.

However, there are drawbacks to this view and some scholars have labeled it naïve and problematic, as gender equality may not be achieved through such initiatives (e.g. Prasad *et al.*, 2006). Gender blindness, like color blindness, tends to overlook the cultural and economic legacy that centuries of discrimination have left for historically disadvantaged groups (Goh *et al.*, 2008). It may also reflect an (American) ideology that has disregarded identity for certain groups and appealed particularly to non-minority groups (see Stevens *et al.*, 2008). Therefore it has been suggested to work with alternative models of inclusion based on identity safety (see Markus *et al.* (2000) to offset the disadvantages of the colorblind approach. Although the gender-blind perspective is essentially built on a principle fair equality of opportunity, this is indeed difficult to achieve because people's initial place in our social systems are unequal (e.g. Rawls, 1971). Furthermore, if the organization and its work have been structured according to norms that favor men, or stereotypical male characteristics, some women may have to change their behavior in order to act like men (confirming, incidentally,

that men and women lead the same way). These women may feel disempowered and not contribute their best, and the actual number of women in senior positions may not increase as quickly as anticipated. What if there are indeed differences in how men and women prefer to lead? It also overlooks the possibility that different leadership preferences may be complementary. These leads us the second paradigm.

Paradigm 2: The gender-conscious view: Women and men leaders are significantly different and should be treated accordingly.

Believers in this paradigm are likely to implement HR initiatives that address the particular needs and characteristics of women. They believe that women's contributions have been under-valued, and their interest in increasing the number of women is related to generating innovation and high performance by increasing the scope of perspectives. They may begin with special programs such as flexi-time, part-time, and re-entry after maternity. They may also re-write performance criteria and reward systems to include behaviors that women supposedly excel such as transformational, supporting others, and community-building. They are likely to build special mentoring programs for women with different content than mentoring programs for men. These HR systems focus on customizing the work experience for women, valuing their unique characteristics and ultimately empowering them. They may also dispute the assumed separation of work and home environment, as rooted in a "male model" (Omar and Davidson, 2001).

If these kinds of initiatives are successfully implemented, many women would feel valued for their different views and feel comfortable to "speak in a different voice" (as advocated by Grant, 1988), become more committed to the organization, and better able to manage different roles in constructive ways. The organization itself benefits from a skill set, such as long-term commitment and community building, which can lead to innovation. Such approach may also be better suited for some cultures, for example where religion is an important regulator of everyday life[5], and that support development that values gender differences (Metcalfe, 2008).

But there are also drawbacks to this paradigm. Initiatives may reinforce stereotypes, disempowering women and men who do not conform to the stereotype. For example, a woman who decides to put her career ahead of having a family may resent being grouped with other women in initiatives such as flexi-time for work-family balance. Furthermore, there is a danger that this paradigm could result in women achieving lower status if "women's so-called strengths" are thought of as important, but not relating to the core and essential part of business performance. This is one interpretation of the case of Scandinavia, particularly Sweden and Denmark, where "women's feminine perspectives and contributions" to society are valued in general, but often not in business. In these countries there are high proportions of women in senior positions in government and social organizations like hospitals and education systems, but the number of women in senior positions in business is only slightly higher than the rest of Europe. Thus it may lead to increased gender segregation, women in HR, PR, staff support functions, and not line positions.

Paradigm 3: Perception creates reality: Women and men leaders are not significantly different, but people believe they are different (stereotyping) and these stereotypes create barriers.

Believers in this paradigm are likely to implement HR initiatives that contradict gender stereotypes. They believe there are fewer women in senior positions because of a

perceptual bias that is reinforced by social behavior through society, and they see stereotypes as limiting people's potential for individual performance. The most important objective of HR initiatives is to overcome gender stereotypes for both men and women. They may showcase role models of women in non-traditional occupations, behaving in ways that counter stereotypes of women. For example, they may ensure that senior women as engineers and as line managers have highly visible roles. There may be training sessions on how to behave assertively or communicate forcefully. The company is likely to deliver workshops examining stereotypes and their consequences, encouraging people to look beyond stereotypes to actual individuals. Another initiative is to provide men with more experiences working with women so they can question or reexamine stereotypes (see Maznevski and Jonsen, 2006).

If these initiatives are implemented successfully, women in the organization will be freer to act authentically (differently, perhaps) without carrying the weight of others' expectations or biased evaluations. This benefit will extend to men as well and the workforce will be more empowered. The organization will likely see a decrease in stereotyping, not just of gender, but also of other categories such as race or profession and could have more of the "right people in the right jobs."

However, this paradigm also has drawbacks. If there are some real differences between men's and women's preferred styles of leadership, most organization's norms are built around the styles most likely to be preferred by men. Women may need to behave like men ("she-men"), and this could be disempowering, at least to some women. The women who stay and excel may be those who are atypical (do not fit the stereotype), and the organization will not benefit from alternative perspectives if real gender differences exist. Furthermore, there is some evidence that focusing on differences and stereotyping, for example in training, can actually enhance existing stereotypes rather than dispel them (Kossek and Zonia, 1993), and more recently it has been documented that training programs focused on stereotyping are not followed by increased diversity (Kalev *et al.*, 2006).

A world of three paradigms

As Kuhn (1962) taught us, paradigms of thought provide us with a structure to engage in action and build knowledge and results in a systematic way. On the other hand, believers in paradigms are unlikely to question the assumptions of the paradigm and sometimes truth comes from questioning and combining paradigms. In terms of increasing the number of women in senior management positions, the ideal might be to accept all three scenarios simultaneously[6]. What would this look like?

In some respects, women and men are the same as leaders. For example, there seem to be no real gender differences in terms of motivation to advance and influence others in the organization as well as the motivation and ability to achieve results as is already embedded in most performance management systems. In other respects, women and men may be different as leaders. For example, women may tend to build community in order to get results; men may tend to focus more directly on results directly in a more linear way. Good leaders do both, but the order is not always important. Our HR systems can recognize the ability to choose different paths to long-term results. To make things more complex, stereotypes of men and women as leaders can result in differential evaluations of men's and women's work (men's work is more valuable). Our culture does not allow for individuals to be considered as different from the stereotypes. We try to remove these negative aspects of the stereotypes through education and the behaviors of our senior managers: We value different approaches, no

matter whom they come from and we do not assume that any man or woman will behave like a "typical" man or woman.

An organization like this would engage in a portfolio of HR initiatives that are mutually reinforcing, as opposed to being contradictory. The companies we have worked with who have the most inclusive climate are the few who seem to have embraced all three paradigms at an organizational level, even if different individuals hold different paradigms themselves. If diversity does what you make of it (van Knippenberg, 2007), it is important that individual managers, also in the HR community, discuss their beliefs of gender and leadership, with acknowledgement of their different foundations and implications. In order to achieve this, the organization must strive for a culture of openness and debate (Thomas and Ely, 1996).

Concluding remarks

Research addressing the relationship of gender and leadership began primarily with the question of why there are fewer women than men in senior positions in organizations. In trying to answer this question, research has examined the gender stereotypes, searching for the "real" differences between their leadership styles and ways of working. Yet this research has not been conclusive and no clear picture emerges. This is frustrating for companies that would like to make a difference and need to know which actions will be most effective in triggering change. More research is needed, that can help managers make better informed decisions and apply policies and initiatives that lead to changes.

We suggest here that the research is not conclusive for two reasons. First, because the problem is due to a nonlinear combination and interaction of causes – including stereotypes, expectations, actual gender differences, individual differences, and cultural context – the dynamics which result in fewer women than men holding leadership positions (see also de Luis-Carnicer *et al.* (2008) for their work on competing recommendations and curvilinear relationships as regards the effects of gender diversity and firm performance). Second, there is not a "best way" to manage diversity, as we struggle with fundamental assumptions and perceptions, alongside what often can be described as pseudo-global applicability (Özbilgin, 2008). There exists a tension between cost-effective coordination and sensitivity to local cultures, which makes it difficult to transit from typical localized and universal approaches to more transversal approaches (see Özbilgin, 2008). The latter represent true negotiated processes with subsidiaries as equal partners. The two examples in this article show an array of different ways and even different assumptions, and yet both companies are considered best practice in diversity management and benchmark-worthy by their peers. We do not have insights into the stories from the perspective of the many female employees who work there – which could be a future area of investigation, i.e. how do *they* perceived the different gender initiatives.

Our findings and discussions are in principle applicable to all levels of managers, including supervisors. We identified three specific paradigms, or categories of perceptions that affect action and combine to create "reality." Our case studies show two companies which act according to multiple paradigms may shift the various sets of perception-action sequences such that the situation for women in senior positions itself changes. Future research, rather than trying to prove the relative truth of one paradigm over another, should focus on the social construction of paradigms and their combinations. For example, the distance between what we know and what we want to believe. . . And to which extent some approaches are more successful in multinational

corporations and under which conditions. We have good reason to believe that gender initiatives are contingent on culture but we cannot yet predict well which initiatives are best when and where.

The road to (gender) equality is long and bumpy, and the concept of equality itself is fundamentally ambiguous, even mysterious (see Dworkin, 1981), as it is based on assumptions we make and how we perceive "reality." The numbers, or percentages, we have reached for women in management, after so many years of hard work, are not very impressive. The optimization of women's talents can boost business performance, yet the action it takes to achieve this will require courage, understanding, and commitment from today's corporate leaders (Wittenberg-Cox and Maitland, 2008). The conditions for a successful journey towards gender-equality may include knowing and discussing existing beliefs and assumptions within a given organization or work unit, and future research should explore this. We hope that the three paradigms we have outlined in this paper can make a contribution to this research journey which is nowhere near its end.

Notes

1. According to the feminist and, partly, psychological literature, gender is constructed as a process of enactment and gendering is by definition perceptual (no individual has a gender). However, we are using the term in a wide sense, reflecting the usage by practitioners (managers) in particular. Thus we are not engaging in a distinction between usage of the terms "gender" and "sex."

2. Developing people (followers) to become leaders themselves by inspiring to higher needs and goals than those of the individual, being visionary and role modeling.

3. The cultural level applied in this paper corresponds primarily to the value systems of major population groups, i.e. to societal norms (Hofstede, 2001, p. 12), although we acknowledge the importance of occupational cultures and their interaction with national cultures (see for example Blackburn and Jarman, 2006; Gilbert, 2009; Le Feuvre, 2009).

4. The authors are using the terms "gender-blind" and "gender-conscious" essentially to represent if the view of *equality* is either constructed based on believed sameness or believed difference.

5. Differences and gender complementarity may even be prescribed by religion (see Roald (2001) for further discussions).

6. The authors are aware of the rather loose usage of the term "paradigm." In a strict Kuhn sense (scientific) paradigms cannot be commensurable and thus, they cannot really compete as such; terms such as "perspective," "mindset," "habit of reasoning," or "episteme," is each – in their own way – applicable in this context. However, with the risk of violating Kuhn's original usage of the term, we argue that although the three paradigms (perspectives) may not be competing in the philosophical sense (e.g. within an individual), they may well be competing for attention and resources in an organizational context.

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Appendix
Guidance: gender perspectives
Please read the text and in relation to this provide us with your thoughts and feedback from the point of a professional multinational organization. Examples and "best practices" are most welcome in order to enrich the article. Ideally your feedback should be in the form of two to three written pages (but it could be more with documentation), taking the questions below into consideration:

- Does your organization take a stand *vis-à-vis* the three paradigms mentioned at the end of the text? [prior to the discussion sections] If yes, explain further; if no, explain why not.

- Are there circumstances under which certain paradigms are more "true" and relevant?

- What are the two to three most important initiatives and/or policies your organization have in place (or are planned) to support one, two or all of the paradigms?

- To what extent does culture matter, e.g. does your approach differ in practice between countries and regions?

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