



Conder & Company



"All it takes is acting more like the woman you are capable of becoming than like the girl you were taught to be."

Helena Morrissey



Article

Ambition, Authenticity and Achievement – women in leadership

Inspiring senior women leaders to be successful and happy

Many women are unaware of some different ways of thinking and behaving that could be inadvertently holding them back and in certain corporate cultures creating hidden hurdles.

Policies and procedures are being put in place to enable more equality and remove bias and more people have been trained in unconscious bias. The proportion of men and women in the workplace is equal however women are consistently underrepresented at senior levels. Many businesses could do more to educate women on the behaviours that could inadvertently be holding them back.

At Conder and Co we have reviewed a high volume of research in this area and collated stories from hundreds of men and women executives from middle management to board members, identifying what has held them back and what has enabled them to be successful.

Our AAA programme is a masterclass aimed at women in their mid-thirties to executive level although in some cases it may be helpful to consider the possible barriers before they get so far up the corporate ladder but finding themselves in a cul-de-sac. Some of these barriers stem from societal messages that have been internalised. Many women are unaware of some different ways of thinking and behaving that in certain corporate cultures can be creating hidden barriers.

Ambition, Authenticity and Achievement – women in leadership

“The impact of gender stereotyping and girls’ self-perception starts early and is powerful and long-lasting.” Cordelia Fine

According to academic psychologist Cordelia Fine in her work “Delusions of Gender: The Real Science Behind Sex Differences”, people start to think of themselves in terms of gender from a very early age – “the social context influences who you are, how you think and what you do. It’s intimate, it’s messy.”

Messages received in childhood can snowball into something much bigger, creating unknown and unwanted differences in girls’ perceptions of ‘what they can and can’t do, should and shouldn’t do.’ When we think and do something time after time, it will become automatic and we learn habitual ways of responding and behaving. Mindsets and behaviours are habits and eventually they can become the default without us having to think; for some, they become outdated stories that are unhelpful and limiting.

Society and cultures portray strong messages about the differences between men and women and set expectations about how each should behave.

These messages are often strong in our corporate cultures and influence how men and women view talent and performance. Countless studies such as those by Lise Eliot, Professor of Neuroscience at the Chicago Medical School and author of Pink Brain Blue Brain, found that anyone who goes searching for innate differences between the sexes won’t find them.

A meta-analysis of hundreds of studies has shown there is no male or female brain but of course there are hormonal differences including testosterone which can increase tendencies for competitive instincts in men or oxytocin in women which encourages bonding and connection. Most research concludes that biological and hormonal differences are insufficient to explain the challenges women have had in being successful in business.

As we become more senior, some of these unhelpful scripts can get in the way. As Marshall Rosenberg says, *‘what got you here won’t get you there.’*

It’s helpful for women to identify trigger situations and use the plasticity in their brains to change the habitual response that will be more valuable to them – they should also be aware of the stories they’re telling themselves that might be getting in the way. Importantly, it’s a choice as to whether they will change their repertoire of thinking and behaving, not to become more like men but to be aware that some of the messages they have received may not be serving them well. Girls are often taught to consider others’ needs first: this can cause them not to put themselves forward for positions in the workplace which can

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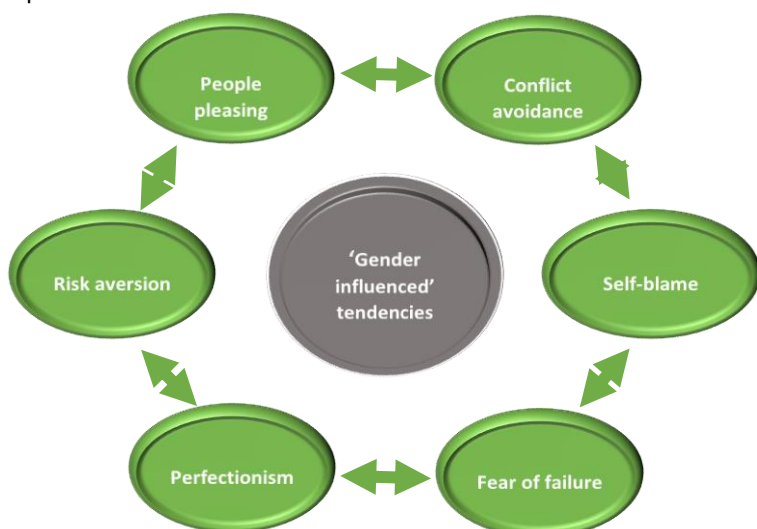
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result in men being appointed for a role even when a woman is more suited.

In our experience based on the research and stories successful women, once women become aware of, and understand these societal messages, they have a broader repertoire of how to think and behave, should they choose to do so. This leads to becoming aware of what could inadvertently be derailing them and understanding what really makes women successful. For many, success lies in having a sense of purpose and a clear vision of where they want to get to, being authentic, feeling more engaged and confident with a broad blend of leadership skills and behaviours and playing to their strengths.

There is progress now that we understand neuro plasticity. Having reviewed the research and from my experience of working with men and women in the corporate environment over the last 20 years, I have developed a model of gender influenced tendencies. (That's not to say that men don't have these, because many do and it's not to say that all women experience them but there is a tendency based on the average man and the average woman.)

The 'Web of Gender influenced tendencies'© includes: people pleasing and concern for what others think, avoidance of conflict in relationships, tendency to self-doubt, fear of failure, perfectionism and risk aversion. In the workplace, these can translate into a range of behaviours such as; fear of saying no and the need for validation and approval from others, avoiding conflict or taking conflict more personally, judging themselves more harshly or blaming themselves for problems, fear of self-promotion and fear of making mistakes, setting high standards, difficulty trusting others and procrastinating by putting off decisions and not taking risks to speak out against the majority opinion.



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Helena Morrissey –
'A good time to be a girl'

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The **Ambition, Authenticity and Achievement** programme also helps women to focus on their strengths. A shift to a more female style of leadership was described in the McKinsey Women Matter 2013 report, which found that 40% of women felt that their styles were not fit for the top. However, countless studies have shown that organisations have changed from simply the 'male' model of leadership - direct and authoritative - and moved towards traits like collaboration, resilience, empathy and compassion. Other research from Northwest University's Alice Eagly showed that women have more traits of transformational leadership; charisma, the ability to motivate employees and creativity in problem-solving.

A Korn Ferry study found that women tend to be better at empathy than men and are more emotionally intelligent. We must be aware though that the same leadership qualities can be seen differently in men and women, as Sheryl Sandberg points out; if a girl shows the characteristics of power and assertiveness, she may be considered arrogant and bossy.

Leaders should be clear on what their important talents are and the power they have when combined.

As we get more senior, leveraging our unique combination of strengths to differentiate ourselves becomes more vital. Successful leaders know their strengths, beliefs, motivations, and intentions. When we recognise the value of our strengths and focus on them, it unlocks something in us, and we tend to be more grounded and stronger. By strengths I do not mean skills or knowledge but how women operate, their recurring patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. It is critical that women feel confident to play to their strengths and that they shake off any unhelpful societal messages. When strengths are applied in combination, they become our powerful value proposition; they become how we contribute to the success of the business. For all men and women, it's important to know their unique combination of strengths: it's often about what they really care about, what inspires them, when they feel valued and how they can have the most fun.

According to a report by Access Commercial Finance in 2018, more women than men experience imposter syndrome – this is about waiting for someone to tap you on the shoulder and say 'Ah ha, we found you out.' This can be exacerbated by being in an unrepresented group or made worse in a high performing environment. There are, however, practical things that women can do to be more resilient to these unhelpful thoughts.



Are you clear on what you're really important talents are and the power they have when combined?



"We have to find a way to fake it till we make it, till we become it."

Amy Cuddy

More women than men experience imposter syndrome

(Access commercial finance 2018.)

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Research shows repeatedly that women are not as confident as men and this is in all cultures.

Interestingly, in the industrialised west the gap is more pronounced than in non-western countries. Psychologist Wiebke Bleidorn concluded that in western societies, women are more likely to compare themselves with men and in McKinsey's Women Matter report 2017, one striking difference between male and female respondents was the level of confidence they expressed in reaching top management positions. The female FTSE report concluded that a lot of women are only confident when they feel competent which can cause inaction. Other research by Ehrlinger shows that women underestimate their abilities whereas men can have a tendency to overestimate.



Confidence is hugely improved when we feel we can be authentic; when we say what we mean and do what we say, when we are congruent with our thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

The AAA programme focuses not on playing the men's game but understanding some typical differences in behaviour and feeling confident about individual strengths and styles. In several important areas, the research is presented so that women can see and understand the differences. For example, Deborah Tannen's research from analysing hundreds of boardroom conversations verbally, linguistically and behaviourally, identified the distinction between 'report' speech, presenting data and facts (male) and 'rapport' speech, facilitating relationships (female).

In the words of, "you have a choice of which definition of authenticity to use: the old historical self or being true to an aspirational self, and you can act your way to becoming truly authentic."

Herminia Ibarra

Other research found that with respect to self-promotion, women are less likely to put themselves forward for a role (originating from an historic Hewlett-Packard study which was replicated in many studies such as the one by McKinsey.) Women feel they must have 100% of the qualifications and experience whereas men felt more like 60% was sufficient. This can unintentionally hold women back from senior roles. According to Powers and Zuroff, women on the other hand have been found to be better than men at advocating for others rather than themselves. Their examples are a few of the many pieces of research presented in the programme.



The derailers that inhibit and accelerators that enable success

From our review of research in this area and from working with hundreds of executives across many organisations, we have distilled the most common factors that can derail women and stop them reaching their potential and ambition and those that enable them to accelerate their success. The programme contains a range of approaches to turn derailers into accelerators.

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The seven most common issues from the research and workshops

<i>De-railers</i>	<i>Accelerators</i>
1. <i>Doing it all</i>	<i>Delegation</i>
2. <i>Undervaluing politics</i>	<i>Developing mutually beneficial partnerships</i>
3. <i>Avoidance of confrontation</i>	<i>Collaborative negotiation</i>
4. <i>Expecting work to speak for itself</i>	<i>Self-promotion</i>
5. <i>Lower status speech and behaviour</i>	<i>Influencing with gravitas and executive presence</i>
6. <i>Overvaluing expertise</i>	<i>Operating strategically</i>



About the author

Sue Conder is a former Deloitte Partner and business leader, with 25 years + in organisational change consulting and leadership development and as a business psychologist, supporting executives and their teams to embrace the people dimension of success in life and in business. She delivers webinars, masterclasses, workshops and coaching for executives and for leaders and their teams.

She is the founder of Conder & Company who believe in the power of 'company' and bring together a large network of accomplished professionals. What unites Sue and those with whom she works in partnership, is a shared philosophy on the importance of wellbeing and how individual success contributes to organisational success.

They come with years of practical business experience and with evidence-based frameworks and tools, which take into account both the complexities of business and importantly an understanding of working with people's mindsets, emotions, behaviours and motivations. This enables individuals to gain personal success and wellbeing so that they can also perform at the highest levels.

To find out more about their ethos and approach, get in touch with Sue Conder on letstalk@conder.co or visit www.conder.co

Benefits of the Women in Leadership programme

The AAA programme is aimed at helping women embrace their ambition by helping them understand some of the differences between the way the genders typically operate. This knowledge will typically help women to decide how to leverage their repertoire of ways of thinking and behaving which are core to their identity and change the 'inner voice' of those that have become habits from unhelpful societal messages. The programme has 1 tools and strategies that have been informed from research and from the stories of hundreds of women. They support and enable women to move authentically and successfully forward. *Experimentation is a key component of the sessions as is focusing on a clear sense of who you are and where you're heading, challenging your personal narratives and stories so that you can leverage your unique combination of strengths in order to have more fun and be happier as well as more successful.*

Benefits of the Women in Leadership programme

Questions

1. *Do you have enough women leaders in senior positions or in sufficient numbers in your talent pipeline?*
2. *Do your women leaders have the skills they need to operate successfully in a male dominated culture?*
3. *Are your women leaders confident enough to put themselves forward for very senior positions?*
4. *Are your women leaders feeling confident enough to play to their strengths and lead with authenticity?*