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**Eight powerful ways managers can support equality**

Closing the gender leadership gap is an imperative for organisations that want to perform at the highest levels. Leveraging the full talents of the population provides a competitive advantage; companies with more women in leadership roles perform better, and employees on diverse and inclusive teams put in more effort, stay longer, and demonstrate more commitment. To change the numbers, gender bias and stereotypes must be understood and counteracted.

## **1. Challenge the “Likeability Penalty”**

Success and likeability are positively correlated for men and negatively correlated for women.

When a man is successful, his peers often like him more; when a woman is successful, both men and women often like her less. This trade-off between success and likeability creates a double-bind for women. If a woman is competent, she does not seem nice enough, but if a woman seems really nice, she is considered less competent. This can have a big impact on a woman's career. Ask yourself: Who are you more likely to support and promote, the man with high marks across the board or the woman who has equally high marks but is just not as well liked?

This bias often surfaces in the way women are described, both in passing and in performance reviews. When a woman asserts herself—for example, by speaking in a direct style or promoting her ideas—she is often called “aggressive,” “ambitious,” or “out for herself.” When a man does the same, he is seen as “confident” and “strong.”

**Listen for the language of the likeability penalty, particularly when making hiring decisions and evaluating performance.**

When you hear biased language—such as “bossy,” “pushy,” and “shrill”—request a specific example of what the woman did and then ask, “would you have the same reaction if a man did the same thing?” In many cases, the answer will be no. Remember that you can fall into the same bias traps, so think carefully about your own response to female coworkers.

## **2. Evaluate performance fairly**

Male performance is often overestimated compared to female performance, starting with mothers overestimating boys’ crawling ability and underestimating girls’.

This bias is even more pronounced when review criteria are unclear, making individuals more likely to rely on gut feelings and personal inferences. Over time, even small deviations in performance evaluation have a significant impact on women’s careers. This difference in the perceived performance of men and women also helps explain why women are hired and promoted based on what they have already accomplished, while men are hired and promoted based on their potential.

**Look for opportunities for gender-blind evaluations in hiring.**

When evaluating performance, make sure managers are aware of gender bias. Be specific about what constitutes excellent performance, and make sure goals are set in advance, understood, and measurable. Ask managers to explain the reasons for their evaluations—and do the same yourself. When people are accountable for their decisions, they are more motivated to think through them carefully.

**3. Give women credit**

Women and men ascribe their success to different things. Men typically attribute success to innate qualities and skills, while women often attribute success to external factors such as “working hard,” “getting lucky,” or “help from others.”

Women and men also differ when it comes to explaining their failures. When a man fails, he attributes it to situational factors like “didn’t practice enough” or “not interested in the subject.” When a woman fails, she is more likely to attribute it to lack of ability.

Moreover, women are often undervalued by others. When women and men work together on tasks, women are given less credit for successful outcomes and blamed more for failure.

Because women receive less credit—and give themselves less credit—their confidence often erodes. As a result, they are less likely to put themselves forward for promotions and stretch assignments.

**Make sure women get the credit they deserve and look for opportunities to publicly acknowledge their accomplishments.**

Push back when women say that they’re “not ready” or “not qualified” for an opportunity—or when others say that about a woman—and encourage women to take stretch assignments. Make sure success and blame are attributed fairly.

### **Did you know?**

Men will apply for jobs when they meet 60 percent of the hiring criteria, while women wait until they meet 100 percent.

## **4. Get the most out of meetings**

Compared to women, men tend to talk more and make more suggestions in meetings, while women are interrupted more, given less credit for their ideas, and have less overall influence.

This starts in school, where girls get less airtime and are interrupted more, even by the most well-intentioned teachers. If you watch men and women at the same level, you will notice that more of the men sit in the front and center seats, while women tend to gravitate toward the end of the table and edge of the room—away from positions that convey status.

Without full participation in meetings, you cannot tap everyone’s skills and expertise, and this undermines team outcomes.

**Encourage women to sit front and center at meetings.**

If a female colleague is interrupted, interject and say you’d like to hear her finish. Openly ask women to contribute to the conversation. Be aware of “stolen ideas” and look for opportunities to acknowledge the women who first proposed them.

### Did you know?

In an eight-member team, three members will make 67 percent of comments. In a five-member team, two members will make 70 percent of comments.

## **5. Share office housework**

Women take on more “office housework”—service and support work such as taking notes, organizing events, and training new hires. These tasks steal valuable time away from core responsibilities and can keep a team member from participating fully; the person taking diligent notes in the meeting almost never makes the killer point. In keeping with deeply held gender stereotypes, people expect help from women but not from men, so when women do favors at work, they earn no points for doing so—but when they say no, they are penalized. Men, on the other hand, gain points for saying yes and face minimal consequences for saying no.

Moreover, many women—including two-thirds of executive women in Fortune 200 companies—are in support roles, but line roles with profit-and-loss responsibility more often lead to senior leadership positions. Together, these dynamics can have a serious impact on women’s career trajectories.

**Audit who’s doing service work and make sure it’s distributed evenly between women and men—and that women are not doing additional work without additional reward.**

Encourage rising stars to pursue line roles and celebrate the women who do to set an example for more junior women.

### Did you know?

In a performance evaluation study, men who stayed late to help prepare for a meeting were rated 14 percent more favorably than women who did the exact same thing. When both men and women failed to help, the women were penalized with a 12 percent lower rating than the men.

## **6. Make work work for parents**

Motherhood triggers assumptions that a woman is less competent and less committed to her career. Many studies show that the pushback—or “maternal wall”—women experience when they have children is the strongest gender bias. As a result, she is held to higher standards and presented with fewer opportunities.

This also impacts women who aren’t mothers—and men, too. Women often face pushback as soon as they’re engaged to be married, and fathers who leave work early or take time off for family pay a higher price than mothers. Studies show that fathers receive lower performance ratings and experience steeper reductions in future earnings after taking time away from work for family reasons.

Women also often “leave before they leave,” compromising their careers in anticipation of family responsibilities they do not yet have. They turn down projects, don’t apply for promotions, or choose more flexible paths to accommodate families they plan to have someday, closing doors to opportunities and limiting their options even before they become parents.

**Don’t make assumptions about mothers’ willingness to take on challenging assignments or travel.**

Avoid messages like “I don’t know how you do it,” which signal that good mothers should be at home. Let the women—and men—in your organisation know you support their decisions to start families and take maternal or paternal leave. Establish an open-door policy for discussing pregnancy and adopt family-friendly policies, which increase productivity and employee retention. If you’re a parent, be vocal about the time you spend away from work with your children; this gives other parents in your organisation permission to do the same.

### Did you know?

A recent study found that a job applicant with “PTA coordinator” on her resume was 79% less likely to be recommended for hire compared to an equally qualified woman without children.

## **7. Make negotiating a norm**

Women negotiate as often as men — but they face pushback when they do.

We expect men to be assertive and advocate on their own behalf, so there’s little downside when they negotiate. In contrast, we expect women to be communal and collaborative, so when they negotiate or advocate for themselves, we often react unfavorably.

**Make sure the women in your organization are encouraged to negotiate and applauded, not penalized, when they do.**

Review compensation regularly to ensure that you are paying women and men fairly.

### Did you know?

Women who negotiate are more likely than men who do to receive feedback that they are “intimidating,” “too aggressive,” or “bossy.”

## **8. Support mentorship and sponsorship**

Mentorship and sponsorship are key drivers of success, yet women can have a harder time finding mentors and sponsors, especially ones with influence.

Mentoring relationships often form between individuals with common interests, and junior women and senior men often avoid mentoring relationships out of concern that time spent together will look inappropriate. In fact, according to a recent report, almost two-thirds of male senior leaders are hesitant to have one-on-one meetings with a more junior woman. As a result, men end up mentoring other men, and women miss out.

**We need more male managers to mentor and sponsor women, and we should reward them when they do.**

Establish formal mentorship and sponsorship programs and encourage informal interactions between the women and men in your organisation; it’s these personal connections that lead to relationships that can propel careers. [Start Lean In Circles at work](http://leanincircles.org/) to tap into the power of peer mentorship. LeanIn.Org provides the materials and technology to run a successful Circles program, and 75 percent of Circle members attribute a positive change in their life to their Circle.

### Did you know?

Sponsorship makes women more likely to aim high. Women with sponsors are 8 percent more likely to ask for both a stretch assignment and a pay increase than women without sponsors.

Source: Lean In. org