

# Are Women Rising?

Second generation bias, the unseen barrier to women leaders.

**In Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers**, a HBR article by Herminia Ibarra of London Business School, Robin J. Ely from Harvard Business School, and Deborah M. Kolb at Simmons University, the authors discuss the frustration of organisations who seek to develop their pipelines of women leaders. Despite high commitment, their succession management programmes are not delivering on their talent objectives.

The article suggests that such firms are inadvertently undermining the process of becoming a leader. They advise women to proactively seek out leadership roles but fail to address internal policies and practices that communicate a mismatch, between how women are seen, and the qualities and behaviours people often associate with leadership. This subtle gender bias exists as an unintended component in many organisation cultures. The authors term this “second generation bias” and say it disrupts the development cycle at the heart of becoming a leader. Their research illustrates that the solutions to this pipeline challenge are quite different to the traditional succession management activities firms often deploy.



Becoming a leader commences with the internalisation of a leadership identity and creation of leadership purpose. This is an iterative process. It includes growth in personal confidence, and the external presentation of the leader’s identity and purpose. Beyond this, the developing leader grows capability by addressing new challenges and learning to be more comfortable in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty. Affirmation from the organisation on the leaders progress is an essential element to this process, the absence of which diminishes confidence and can ultimately reverse the leader’s development.

In a recent show of hands at a business school in one of Ireland’s top universities, a second year student group were asked by gender, how many of them felt they would become successful millionaires during their careers. Of the females, about 15% put their hands up. 100% of the males put their hands up. Men and women carry this variance throughout their careers. However, the authors suggest women’s leadership potential sometimes shows in less conventional ways, rather than as males often do, boldly asserting a point of view. Given a greater proportion of men than women lead in our organisations today, male leaders can be inclined to see the more brash male assertiveness as a sign of leadership potential, while regarding a women’s reflectiveness as being a reluctance to lead. In doing this, are they simply repeating the cycle of gender imbalance?

Ibarra, Ely and Kolb, in their article, identify three actions for organisations to take that enable women’s access to leadership roles, which can be read in a full version of their article:

1. Educate women and men on the risk of second generation gender bias.
2. Create safe settings that support learning and experimentation in a like minded community.
3. Anchor women’s development efforts in a sense of leadership purpose rather than in how women are perceived. The

authors in discussing this action, share a situation that we are all too familiar with. A veteran Washington reporter noted, of a high profile female US politician, that “The story is never what she says, as much as we want it to be. The story is always how she looked when she said it.”

Even organisations fully committed to gender balancing, can suffer from second generation bias. Many firms still approach equality by centring on how to make women fit better in to male dominated structures. Instead, they should consider redesigning those structures to optimise the development experience for women. The reward for those firms that do adapt is higher organisation performance and a bigger leadership talent pool from which to source successors.

Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> March 2023 is International Women’s Day and it seems an appropriate juncture to ask are we making any advances in addressing the leadership pipeline blockers for women in our workplaces? Well the article written by Ibarra, Ely and Kolb was produced ten years ago, so you decide, has anything changed?

**Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers**, appeared in the print edition of the *Harvard Business Review* in September 2013. The authors are Herminia Ibarra; the Charles Handy Professor of *Organizational Behavior* at London Business School, Robin J. Ely; an American economist and the Diane Doerge Wilson Professor of *Business Administration* at Harvard Business School, and Deborah M. Kolb; Deloitte Ellen Gabriel Professor for *Women and Leadership (Emerita)* at Simmons University.