

KELLY WATSON AND JODI ECKER DETJEN

THE NEXT
SMART
STEP

HOW TO OVERCOME GENDER
STEREOTYPES AND BUILD A
STRONGER ORGANIZATION



Making gender equity the norm is
THE NEXT SMART STEP in organizational success.

“A candid, readable, and useful book about how we can get past talking about gender bias and actually start doing something about it.”

ADAM GRANT, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Originals* and *Give and Take*, and host of the TED podcast *WorkLife*

“Drawing from a deep well of research and experience, Kelly Watson and Jodi Ecker Detjen offer a necessary and practical step-by-step guide to reimagining gender equity, recognizing bias, reframing untrue and harmful gendered assumptions, and giving teams and organizations the tools to make progress toward real gender equity possible. As they write, together, we can do more. And when we do, we all benefit.”

BRIGID SCHULTE, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Overwhelmed: Work, Love & Play When No One Has the Time*, and director of The Better Life Lab at New America

“A brilliant and needed book, *The Next Smart Step* shows how gender bias is more than meets the eye, and how to actually do something about it. Even the most forward-thinking and well-versed leaders will be surprised. Ignore this book at your own risk!”

SHANE SNOW, author of *Dream Teams*

“Every organization wants to know: how can we succeed in an increasingly competitive environment? *The Next Smart Step* has a compelling answer, and will help you leverage the power of thoughtful diversity to become stronger, better, and more resilient.”

DORIE CLARK, executive education faculty, Duke University Fuqua School of Business, and author of *Reinventing You* and *Stand Out*

“Kelly and Jodi have captured the essence of what stands in the way of women in the workplace. Every one of us can all help women rise by recognizing (and reframing) the stereotyped assumptions that are so clearly identified in this book. Essential and highly recommended.”

SALLY HELGESEN, author of *How Women Rise*, *The Female Vision*, and *The Web of Inclusion*

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AND BUILD A STRONGER ORGANIZATION

KELLY WATSON AND JODI ECKER DETJEN



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INTRODUCTION

TERRY WAS A BRIGHT, CURIOUS CHILD who loved hearing stories about astronauts and outer space while growing up. Other kids built buildings or cars with Legos, and Terry built spaceships, watched every space movie, and dreamed about visiting another planet or the moon.

Terry got a telescope at five years old and used it to make a map of the stars. When friends wanted to learn about planets or constellations or stellar distances, Terry was there. Favorite field trip? The planetarium. Favorite subjects in high school? Advanced placement science and math—and Terry aced it all, learning how to code sophomore year and winning a rover-building contest.

Terry's future unfolded from these interests and strengths: top of the class in college, internship with an aerospace company, and eventually a seat on the Mars exploration team. Smart, confident, hard-working, and dedicated, Terry is now living the dream, paving the way for a new era in space exploration.

Terry, in all likelihood, is a man.

Somewhere else there is another Terry—a woman—who also aced her science and math classes. She is equally smart, confident, hard-working, and dedicated. But her college counselors told her she wouldn't have good work-life balance with an aerospace career and she should think about the social sciences instead (advice many women receive). Her friends told her she was weird because she liked math. ("That's not normal for girls!")

But Terry persisted and landed her dream job in aerospace. Or so she thought. There was no seat on the Mars team. From the beginning, some

of her work colleagues eyed her suspiciously, assuming she got the job because of affirmative action. They openly challenged her technical abilities, talked over her in meetings, and dismissed her ideas. She was paid less than her male colleagues because she hadn't asked for raises as often as they had, and the organization went along with her reticence. When Terry had a baby, other women told her good mothers raise their own children, and she should prioritize her family. Her boss steered her to an operational role with less travel and critical responsibility. And when she invented a breakthrough technology, management told her she was just lucky, and if she did it again, *then* they would give her a bonus.¹

THE DESIRE FOR EQUITY

You get the picture. We like to believe that everyone has the opportunity to realize their career dreams. And the first Terry—the male Terry—got that opportunity. What's more, he might even have expected to have the career he envisioned and probably didn't question that he would be paid what the work is worth. And why not? It is normal for a man like him to have a meaningful career.

The second Terry wants what the first Terry has—a great career. She is willing to work just as hard for it. But even today the odds are stacked against her being as successful as her namesake. Especially if she is a woman of color. Women get blocked so often, they leave organizations and even careers. Or they box themselves in to lower-level jobs or limited contributions. The few who make it through often find there aren't women in sufficient numbers to make change; rather it is they who ultimately get changed by the organization.

The Next Smart Step is driven by a desire to turn a wish—that all people have the opportunity to realize their career dreams—into reality. That women like Terry should have the same expectations and achievements as Terry the man. That gender equity—fair treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs—moves from aspiration to actuality. That seems reasonable, right? Maybe you picked up this book because you are a woman who wants a career without barriers. Or maybe you're a man who wants to know how to help change organizations to support women. Maybe you're a leader who has already tried to make change and you want to do more. Or perhaps you've made some honest mistakes and want to learn how not to do *that* again. That's great, and we are glad you want to learn.

But gender equity isn't only about fairness: it's also about effectiveness for individuals *and* organizations. Because an organization that does

not have equity and that primarily hires and promotes white men at the expense of not just women but people of color and other groups that traditionally lack opportunity—such an organization is narrowed to one perspective, one type of background, one model of success. And while two men may be somewhat different, they are not nearly as different as a man and a woman would be. So gender equity helps everyone. And *The Next Smart Step* will show how organizations reap the benefits when employees have many different types of backgrounds, skills, and perspectives—cognitive diversity—and put that to work for better, more innovative results.

Organizations need women’s voices to be part of the conversation. Women make up 50 percent of the population and now nearly 50 percent of the workforce, yet less than 20 percent of top decision-makers.² When women aren’t involved in the conversation, policies get made that don’t benefit them.³ Products get developed that don’t fit them.⁴ Drugs get developed that don’t work for them.⁵ And workplaces get designed that don’t suit them.⁶ There is now significant research that suggests women make a disproportionately positive impact on the economy through their workforce participation.^{7,8} Further, women’s leadership contributions have been shown to have a significant positive influence on company earnings.⁹ So everyone needs to get better at including women and leveraging the advantage they bring.

Gender equity is also about leadership. Leading diverse teams and fostering inclusion are key twenty-first-century leadership skills. Our world is increasingly connected, which means organizations have access to a wider range of talent, background experience, cultural context, and unique points of view than ever before. Tapping into that potential and leveraging it effectively is critical for leadership success. It can also provide organizations with a unique point of differentiation (translation: competitive advantage) because so few organizations are truly maximizing the potential that diversity has to offer. For individuals, being among the first to excel at leading diversity will mean better opportunities for personal

**MEDIAN WEEKLY EARNINGS
BY DEMOGRAPHIC GROUP, 2019***

	Men	Women
Asian	\$1,380	\$1,138
White	\$1,025	\$843
Black	\$768	\$683
Hispanic	\$757	\$661

* Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Usual Weekly Earnings of Wage and Salary Workers Third Quarter 2019,” U.S. Department of Labor (October 16, 2019).

leadership impact. So it is also the aim of *The Next Smart Step* to teach these skills and maximize this advantage. We want to help you do that so you can influence others and drive change in your organization.

We believe that what women and men do as individuals to address their biases about themselves and others is foundational to organizational change. Organizations are merely groups of individuals, and the unconscious bias of individuals is compounded when people form groups. Based on our combined decades of research and working with organizations large and small across the US, the methods outlined in this book provide leadership tools to help male and female leaders improve their understanding of diversity and inclusion and their ability to apply this understanding in the workplace to build more inclusive teams. *The Next Smart Step* also outlines a consulting process for organizations to help you learn how to assess your own organization or team and address any gaps. There are concrete solutions to common organizational problems you can apply immediately. These three areas of focus—individuals, leaders, and organizations—are our three pillars of gender change. If all Terrys are to succeed equally, everyone needs to change, even Terry.

VISIONING: GOING BEYOND THE WISH

We all may wish things were different for Terry, but while asserting that is great, it is not enough. Many leaders make the mistake of thinking that simply by being aware of a wish, it will happen. “We are going to improve diversity,” or, “Diversity is a big priority for our organization.” The problem is that leaders often miss the next step—envisioning what the wish means for people and organizations. Or they think about the good stuff that could happen for individuals, but not necessarily how it will look and feel when the job gets done. And they forget to consider how it might impact everyone else. While leaders may get support for the broad desire for “diversity,” they don’t usually get buy-in for the changes that diversity actually brings. What we need is for leaders to envision a truly diverse organization, and think about how that differs from today, so they can get the engagement they need to enact lasting organizational change.

The wish for gender equity requires a different way of thinking and a different way of working. Radically different. It’s not just about inviting more women into organizations; it’s about truly engaging them to make organizations better. It’s not about recruiting diverse people and then molding them to “fit in” with the homogeneous culture already there. And it’s not about keeping women at the bottom of the organization or in “pink-

collar roles” with no influence on leadership or decision-making. Instead, it’s about a workplace that actually engages *all* the Terrys. What does that look like?

Before you get scared, when we say radical we mean looking at gender equity from a different viewpoint altogether. A difference that is achievable. We have worked with dozens of organizations to help them remove barriers for women. We’ve worked with hundreds of men and thousands of women. We began our journey by studying women’s careers and uncovering the ugly impact of organizational barriers and unconscious bias on the dreams and aspirations of many career-focused women. And although we started with the premise that work-life balance was the main problem hindering women, we discovered that this assumption was flawed. In fact, we learned that women themselves often make decisions based upon many flawed assumptions. Through our workshops and women’s leadership-development programming, we have helped individuals uncover their assumptions to challenge and change them. Our work has empowered many women to “lean in” to their careers in whole new ways as they navigate male-dominated workplaces.

The Next Smart Step builds on our foundation of training and consulting work and the research behind it, with the goal of helping women and men improve their leadership skills and organizational approaches. We recognize the reality that the important efforts women have made to remove their own biases and barriers are not enough—because organizational biases and barriers remain. Men need to include the women on their teams. Leaders must change their approach to managing women and use measurable leadership competencies to manage inclusive workplaces. (Later in this book you’ll find a gender scorecard, developed to help organizations objectively and systematically remove bias from their processes.) Most importantly, this book will give you an approach that has led to improvements in the numbers of women retained and promoted in the real-world organizations we’ve worked with.

CHANGE MEANS CHANGE

“You think change comes without change? You think you can open the door and then keep the rooms on the other side exactly the same? Come in, come in, sure—but don’t touch, don’t sit on the furniture. Watch where you’re stepping. That’s not change, man—that’s a dinner party. All the guests come and then all the guests go home.”

from *The Guest Book*, by Sarah Blake *

* Sarah Blake, *The Guest Book* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2019), 436.

Organizations need more than a desire to improve gender equity; they need a vision of what that looks like. Leaders need to ask themselves: What would gender equity look like for our organization? What would increased diversity look like? (Think race, age, and ability level too.) What faces would we see when we walk in the door? How would people be dressed? What would people eat? How would they move around? How would decisions be made? Who would make them?

These questions are important because sometimes people get stuck. “We hired a woman executive once, but she didn’t want to join us for our weekly cigar-smoking sessions where we strategized about the business. She was fully welcome to join us; we were being inclusive,” said one COO. (Yes, this is a true story.) “We have been meeting weekly like this for fifteen years and all of a sudden she comes along and wants to change the venue. Why should we? She wasn’t willing to fit in.”

Take a moment to think about your own organization. Using your senses as a starting point, what do you see? Hear? Smell? A more diverse workplace might mean different noise, different colors, and different smells. It might mean a workplace that resembles a bustling city rather than a stifling office. You might hear different languages, smell different foods, and see different ways of bringing people together.

It could also mean that work happens differently, in different places, and at different times of day. It might mean there are breast-pumping rooms, prayer/meditation areas, and massage stations, not just cigar rooms. Today’s pool tables, video games, scooters, and beer kegs might be supplemented by volleyball courts and spa water. And there might be daytime breaks for parents to pick up school-age kids or coach soccer. Or there could be people using walkers or wheelchairs to get around.

What will executives be doing? It’s likely they won’t frequent the same country club with their wives anymore. And certainly not strip clubs like in the past. Social situations at work, such as cultural celebrations and birthdays, may be more robust. And there could be subtler changes, such as more collaboration, less competition, and more creativity.

Most certainly there will be more conflict: the good, healthy kind that comes when people with different perspectives speak up and banter ideas around. It might get raucous! There will also likely be a wealth of skills, experiences, and different ways of thinking that will result in radical ideas, innovation, and the production of something extraordinary. It may be uncomfortable too, especially for those who come from more traditional or homogeneous organizations. Or for people who don’t like to debate.

But discomfort often precedes growth and development, and the prize will be worth it. It could also change the decision-making time frame. Slow things down. Including a wider variety of perspectives and debating their impact will probably take longer. This might feel less agile. But maybe fewer mistakes will be made.

Think again about your own organization. How will having more women at the top change things? Will it change the social fabric—what executives do together when you aren't working? Will it change the decision-making structure—who decides, how they decide, and who has to buy in? And will it change what formal and informal networks look like? Hierarchy might give way to flatter organizational structures that include more relevant perspectives or a new organizational structure altogether. Processes like hiring and promotion will likely change, as would definitions of success. Will these be small changes for your organization? Or does this seem like a different planet?

Visioning in this way—asking and answering critical questions—helps us move beyond only wishing for change. It helps us see that true gender equity requires a change in leadership skills. It demands more facilitation, conflict resolution (or not letting positive conflict go too far), maintaining the diversity of teams, and finding ways of fighting bias and groupthink. And it forces us to consider: How will existing employees upgrade their skills to this level?

In Appendix A you will find a mind-map tool to guide a visioning exercise and help you think about what your organization could look like with gender equity and/or diversity at all levels. Part of that exercise is recognizing that not everybody will embrace this vision. Anticipating resistance is critical so it doesn't come as a surprise. Let's face it: unconsciously, many people like organizational culture just the way it is, especially if they have been successful there. Homogeneity, especially if you are in the majority group, can feel very comfortable.

In the old command-and-control structure of most organizations, difference was considered threatening, so people unconsciously worked to identify and exclude it from their teams and organizations. Difference often meant dissent, and dissent was highly discouraged. But the workplace has evolved to more egalitarian organizational structures. Now it is more commonly recognized that dissenting opinion is good—it keeps teams away from groupthink and the echo chamber. Difference yields innovation and creative outcomes. And as hard as it seems, this ability—to manage and cultivate difference successfully—is what the future holds for leadership.

THE NEXT SMART STEP

Over the past forty to fifty years, American corporations led predominantly by white men have embraced marked, significant change. They've moved from a top-down, authoritarian leadership approach to more dispersed and empowered leadership. This globally accepted model is taught as standard at universities throughout the world. This innovative shift in leadership is partly why Western companies continue to lead the world in performance. It's a framework that enables strong talent and ideas to rise and be heard. The foundational history of openness and acceptance of difference in places like the United States are actually advantages: they produce more ingenuity. Homogeneous and hierarchical societies, on the other hand, make it harder for individuals within organizations to manage difference because people are generally so unused to it.

Making organizational leadership more diverse is the next step in this egalitarian trend. It is about embracing a distinct global business advantage, the culture of diversity, and putting it to work for your organization. Many business schools offer core courses about working in diverse teams. Some universities have installed "managing diversity" as a core developmental skill across all disciplines.¹⁰ The challenge for businesses is that while diversity is touted as critical to success (69 percent of senior leaders say it's important¹¹), leaders don't know how to leverage it. Most of them weren't trained in bias awareness or fostering inclusion, and they are still much more comfortable with homogeneous teams. So, it's time to catch them up—fast!

Fostering diverse teams doesn't come easily or intuitively to most people. We all learn to key in on people who are similar to us, to look for commonality, and to alter our behavior—copying gestures, language, and ideas—to fit into the broader group. It's comfortable to be the same as everyone else. Remember how awkward it felt in middle school to be different or how nice it felt in high school to finally find your clique? We bet most of that transition meant finding your people, and maybe to some extent, modifying your own behavior or appearance in some way to manufacture sameness. Some people took bigger risks and joined more diverse groups while others did not. Some were accepting of difference, and some—think about the bullies—were not. Already the seeds of inclusive leadership skills were sprouting in a few, though most of us were nudged toward sameness and conformity, not diversity.

In fact, despite research that shows diverse teams outperform non-diverse teams, people keep hiring sameness.¹² Why? Some say it's because similar people seem easier to manage, quicker to integrate, and harbor less

team conflict. That may be true, but we think it is something bigger. We believe a stronger force is at play, rooted in a more emotional personal place for those who lead: it's more fun to hang out at work with people you like. And why are those people easier, quicker, and less dissonant to manage? Because the intrinsic emotional motivation—the fun—keeps leaders incentivized to make it work.

Think about the last time you enthusiastically advocated for a colleague who you don't particularly like as a person but who brings a unique or helpful skill set to the organization. Hard, right? Have you ever defended the mistakes of someone you like at work? Or advocated for them to get a second chance? Were they really deserving? Would you be able to devote similar passion for a perceived outsider? We all struggle with this. It is an invisible tide that seeps into hiring, promotion, and firing decisions.

And then there is the classic tech startup story—a fast-growing company is started by two college buddies who hire friends and family to build their empire. In these stories, the founders don't seek the best possible candidates when hiring, they seek the best candidates they like. It especially helps if they already know them. And we get it—people spend a lot of time together at work, so it is human nature to want that time to be fun. But it squashes diversity and merit right out of the candidate pool when you unconsciously solve for a different variable entirely!

Here's the real kicker: it's harder to like people who are different from you. Think about your preferences in music and how influenced they are by the music business. The first time you hear a song, you might not like it, but once you hear it hundreds of times, you find yourself humming along when it comes on the radio. There's a reality that all music producers understand: you don't know what you like; you like what you know and what is familiar to you. So the music business works hard to expose you to their clients' music as often as possible until you like it.

People do the same thing: seek out similarities and commonality—things you know—to determine if you like someone. Of course, shared values play a big role in our relationships, but again, not as much as having a similar background. If Sally is a person who values honesty, and her colleague Jonus is honest, then they share an important value. They can appreciate and respect each other. If what they are being honest about is also something they agree on, they will probably get along and even like each other. For example, if Jonus expresses his concerns to a client about the viability of a project he and Sally are working on, and she shares those concerns as well as the desire to be open and honest with the client, then they will get along.

But what if their honesty centers on a different point of view or perspective? What if Jonus is a staunch socialist with a background in labor organization, and he expresses his honest concerns to the client that the part-time workers on the project are the company's attempt to exploit people by avoiding paying them benefits? Whereas Sally's background in consulting makes her think that having part-time workers on the project offers a compelling opportunity to bring people incremental paid work they otherwise wouldn't have? Not only do they disagree, but their shared values about honesty are suddenly less important than their different perspectives. Well, then it is a heck of a lot harder to like each other. And it takes two very big people to leave that client meeting and go grab a beer together. To create and lead diverse teams requires new skills: it takes training and disciplined practice to become proficient at managing people who aren't like you, especially if the difference makes them unlikeable to you.

It's a cop out to say, "Some guys just shouldn't manage women." Think about it. If a man isn't very good at presenting, he would be coached. He certainly wouldn't be promoted or allowed to avoid presenting. But organizations let people off the hook when it's about gender. They don't get feedback; they are given a pass to run all-male teams.

Working with difference is a skill that can be cultivated by anyone. Women too. In fact, not all women are proficient at including other women at work. Some actually work against other women out of fear or intimidation. Everyone starts in a different place on their own personal journey. The key is to identify where the gaps are in skill sets and provide support and training as well as sufficient practice and feedback to develop those skills. Chapter 9 of this book shows how anyone can learn this. We will even give you the opportunity to assess your own skills or those of your team members as well.

SOME RADICAL THOUGHTS

In our research and workshops, we have developed three key insights that are the foundation of our vision of turning the wish for gender equity into reality. The feedback we have received from our clients is that these insights are perspective-changing. At first blush, they may seem innocuous. Read on. We promise they will dramatically change your viewpoints. And it's from this perspective shift that change can start.

KEY INSIGHT #1: THE MERITOCRACY DOESN'T EXIST.

What? Really? Merit is fundamental to most people's core thinking about the workforce. "We only hire the best and brightest regardless of gender, race, creed, color, background, sexual orientation, etc." and "We are an equal opportunity employer." But numbers don't lie. Would it surprise you if I told you that a disproportionate number of CEOs are tall, white, heterosexual men named John? ¹³ How does that make you feel if you are short? Latino? Named Luis? Gay? Female? Does it make you feel like you are less good at your job? Less deserving of a high position? Less qualified for leadership? So what does this data imply? In a fully functioning meritocracy, the only logical explanation is that people who don't fit these characteristics are less good. Let that sink in.

Many men and women justify this disproportion with unconvincing excuses. John *is* the most popular boy's name. Women entered the workforce en masse in the latter half of the last century and haven't had time to rise (it takes time!). Many women take time off to have babies, which naturally slows career progress. But the fact is, even once all these factors are considered, the data say the same thing: the representation is disproportionate. In Western countries, being tall has been associated with an increase in salary between 9 and 15 percent.¹⁴ Are you 15 percent better at your job than your shorter peers? Are you 15 percent worse than your taller ones? What if, when deciding salary increases, management took your whole team and lined them up against the wall and ranked the increase in terms of height. Would that roughly represent your value? Would that be fair?

In a true meritocracy, given that women are as good as men, they would be represented fairly at all levels. But they are not. Believing that the meritocracy works means believing that women are actually less good than men at leadership. We know (and the data shows¹⁵) that isn't true, but there is a large segment of the workforce, including many women, who unconsciously believes that it *is* true. If people believe that, then how can they effectively lead inclusive, gender-balanced teams? The first step is to acknowledge the facts about the meritocracy's flawed reasoning and their own internal biases against women.

Later in this book we will explore the pervasiveness of bias. Remember this height example because it illustrates something important: privilege is invisible to those who have it. If you are tall, you probably aren't aware

that your height gives you an unfair advantage at work. You may even have an emotional reaction to this news and want to reject it. What does it say about your abilities? That you are a fraud? You have this reaction because this data contradicts your meritocratic ideals. Shorter people, on the other hand, probably already sensed this reality as they were overlooked, dismissed, or even marginalized for their height at some point. We've all heard of the "Napoleon Complex," a phrase used to attribute negative personality characteristics to short men. Are those stereotypes legitimate? Of course not! But do people with height privilege unconsciously perpetuate them as a means of protecting the meritocracy and their own legitimacy? Sometimes. These are all important things to think about as you consider your own privilege and how it impacts your unique perspective about the meritocracy.

We all wish there was a true, working meritocracy, especially those who don't benefit from privilege. But wishing and having are two different things. When everyone assumes that a meritocracy works, they become closed to thinking that it needs to be fixed. If they question it, then it puts their own abilities in doubt. And it is tempting to think that because there has been some progress for women that the struggle is over and the meritocracy works for women. It doesn't.

KEY INSIGHT #2: WOMEN ARE NOT MORE BIOLOGICALLY PREDISPOSED TO CERTAIN ROLES LIKE PARENTING AND NURTURING OTHERS.

Many people still assume that women are so biologically different from men that they naturally should prioritize home and family. Girls play with dolls, boys beat each other with sticks. It's nature. Okay, we know: said out loud, this seems like blasphemy. Feminists everywhere are burning this book. But we said it because deep down it's true. The unspoken pressure to conform to long-held gender roles and to limit career aspirations for parenting (or give up family to have a career) is extremely strong. Women everywhere are counseled as early as middle school to pick careers that offer work-life balance over income potential. And roles that are nurturing like Human Resources (HR) and Nursing. Because of strongly held stereotypes about gender roles, women, especially white women with college degrees, may start out with a meaningful career that dominates their attention until they get married and have children. Then they face pressure to pull back and invest in their husband's career or focus on raising children until the kids leave the nest. Or they struggle to fit in work while feeling guilty for not being perfect at home. Or they give up having children, thinking that is

the only way to achieve true career success. Women may want to put their careers first or at least treat them equally to family, but everyone else acts like that's too selfish and cold. And many women unconsciously think that having babies means we are the ones who should raise them.

It's sad, because all this is based on made-up, culturally ingrained gender roles. Worse, many people unconsciously behave as if every woman is working only to pass time until they become a mother. This assumption is made even about women who have no intention of having kids, or who don't subscribe to traditional gender roles. Workplace behaviors are modeled around it. You find that hard to believe? Notice when you ask people what they do to help move women into leadership roles, their first answer is usually about helping women balance motherhood with work. On-site daycare. Flextime. Maternity parking. Those offerings are based on some pretty big assumptions, right? Interestingly, even women who start out with the intent to buck stereotypes often end up falling into them when workplace and social pressures nudge them hard in that direction.

Our research shows that almost everyone makes assumptions about gender roles, including women, and those assumptions are limiting. Men are expected to go to work, have a career, provide for their family, and take out the trash. Women are supposed to take care of the family and make a nice home (and women living at lower socioeconomic levels are expected to keep working plus do all this). Society says that bucking these rules emasculates men and makes women less likable. These assumptions are especially dangerous because they tend to be unspoken and invisible. In fact, we tell our sons and daughters they can be anything they want, but then we question whether our sons can earn enough as a nurse, and we caution our daughters that surgeons don't enjoy good work-life balance. All because of unspoken gender rules underneath. In Chapters 6, 7, and 8, we encourage you to question foundational assumptions and reframe them to open up new possibilities for yourself and others. We will show you how to recognize when unspoken gender rules are influencing your decisions and what to do about it.

KEY INSIGHT #3: GENDER EQUITY AND INCLUSION ARE A BUSINESS PROBLEM, NOT AN HR PROBLEM.

Yes, we know. This insight is also controversial and may make those of you in Human Resources want to raise your pitchforks in protest. But let's face it, treating gender equity like it is some kind of benevolent social

good initiative or accommodation instead of just plain smart business has contributed to holding women back. There is a lot of research on the positive impact of women's work on business, but let's boil it down to a simple fact—when leaders exclude half of the talent pool from their search, they end up with less talent. Their workforce is less talented, so their output is less good. Period.

So why do so many gender initiatives start in HR and focus on fixing or training women to fit in better? We get that nothing really matters to a business (and yes, nonprofit organizations) unless it makes money. Social good, award-winning products, environmental stewardship—these are all nice things to have after the company is profitable; rarely are they considered integral to corporate strategy. As soon as profitability is threatened, HR initiatives such as bringing more women into the organization are seen as “nice to haves” and are shed. In fact, they often need to be justified financially—and incrementally—to be implemented in the first place. Think about the diversity conversations you have heard in your organization. Do they start with having to prove why adding women will help the company financially? Have men ever had to prove as a whole gender that they benefit companies?

Most diversity initiatives start in HR and, as such, come from outside the business. They lack compelling bottom-line impact and are seen mostly as overhead—discretionary costs that can be dropped in tough financial times. These initiatives usually ask the business to compromise something in favor of a nobler goal. The entire foundational premise is that diversity is abnormal or unnatural for business, and it's something that requires investment to get done. And the return usually isn't measured, only the costs are. What is needed is a shift in thinking—one that starts in the business itself.

The Next Smart Step is grounded in our operational business experience, an understanding of the business drivers that impact the bottom line. We get it: any business-improvement initiative must be driven by positive return on investment or it isn't going to be a priority for the long term. We understand that change happens when the math gets done, and we encourage organizations to do the math: counting, reporting, and calculating return is all a part of our solution.

This operational approach is unusual in a world where most companies are merely checking the boxes for women, offering a benefits-based approach with on-site daycare or sending high-performers to expensive conferences without understanding what really holds them back or how solutions can achieve any type of strategic goal for the organization. Or teaching people how to be politically correct, saying the right words while

stifling the real conversations. Companies like that spend a lot of money trying to look good without any sort of real progress for women or any measurable financial return. Instead, our approach represents the next generation of gender progress.

This book is not about throwing out the baby with the bath water, however. Let's first acknowledge the good stuff. There has been progress towards gender equity in the last hundred years, particularly in the United States. Women are now 55.4 percent of university students,¹⁶ including 49 percent of business majors.¹⁷ And 36.8 percent of those who earn an MBA are now women.¹⁸ More women than ever before are starting businesses, spending longer in careers before having children, and rising through leadership ranks. Women are making headway around the world: in Saudi Arabia, women are getting driver's licenses for the first time, and in America women are leading Fortune 500 companies. This is great!

But while these statistics are encouraging, they also lead many to assume there is no work left to do. To assume that generational attrition will do the rest, that women will naturally rise through organizations when given enough time or when older men retire is flawed. Because that's not happening. The World Economic Forum estimates that it will be 170 years before gender equity is achieved.¹⁹ That's long past when generational attrition should have worked (it should have already!). Workforce participation for women has stalled since the turn of the twenty-first century,²⁰ and there are fewer women engineers in Silicon Valley now than there were in the mid-1990s.²¹ There may be a lot that is going well for women's advancement, but powerful counterforces are stalling progress. It's time to fix the system.

FIXING THE SYSTEM

The Next Smart Step offers a unique, three-part approach to solving the gender equity problem, a roadmap for how to change individuals, leaders, and organizations as a whole.

In Part 1, we examine some of the assumptions underlying how most of us think about gender. We show how many of these assumptions are flawed and, in fact, completely made up! We then explain unconscious bias, both the external stuff we get from others and the internal stuff we buy into ourselves. And we'll show you how much of this has been unconsciously embedded into our organizations. Once current behaviors are better understood, and once we can see why we behave this way, the path to fixing it becomes more clear.

In Part 2, we offer a model for change. Based in cognitive behavioral therapy, our approach seeks to challenge biased thinking and reframe flawed assumptions to create new decision options for people and organizations. There is specific work to be done by women, men, leaders, and organizations, which we identify. We also show you how to manage resistance when it inevitably arises.

In Part 3, we provide practical tools for designing more diverse organizations. We offer a comprehensive way to identify and measure inclusive leadership competencies in leaders so we can up our talent game. We also share our consulting process for assessing barriers to gender equity throughout the organization so that policies and processes can be changed for the better.

Please note that throughout this book we talk about the specific problem of gender inequity. Our expertise is with gender. But that in no way minimizes the inequity that exists for other underrepresented groups. And we know that intersectionality—the interconnected nature of membership in more than one underrepresented group—compounds the effects of bias and inequity. Our recommended approach, while focused on women’s examples, can also work well for these other groups. And the benefits of gender diversity can be magnified by including all types of diversity in a company.

We also apologize in advance if we refer to any group or gender using an outdated term or reference. We recognize that gender is a social construct, and it’s not always binary. Our intention is to showcase examples and vantage points from our experience, and we are always learning new perspectives. We hope you are too.

No one person or organization has ever gotten gender equity completely right. There are many good deeds, partial role models, and works-in-progress. That’s okay. We all need space to learn. So we share examples and anecdotes of things that work and things that don’t. Maybe some of it describes people familiar to you or pockets of your organization. Getting it right on your team is a nice place to start. Because eventually, those pockets will join and change larger pockets until the majority of the organization has changed. It will never be perfect—people are human after all. But our goal is to make diversity and gender equity the norm, not the exception.

You’ve taken the first step. You’re reading this book. Thank you. Now join us for the journey. You will be glad you did.

PART 1

THE CHALLENGE: BARRIERS AND BIAS

1

It's All Made Up

IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT THAT seventy-five years ago, World War II ended differently, and the fascist powers did not surrender until nuclear bombardment had irradiated many parts of Europe and Asia, and a global food crisis emerged because of the lack of suitable land for planting. Imagine that women in the United States, who had been running factories and many companies while men were at war, decided that food production was so important that they sent the returning men, blessed as they are with innate physical strength, out to farms to grow food to feed the world.

What if, using their innate empathy and connection skills, women managed business and government so the men could be free to focus on the important physical work of farming. Let's say that as women consolidated power and wealth, they passed legislation to stipulate that only one family member could work in business so that the other could farm. And since it was obvious who was better physically equipped for farming, the men stayed home on the farm. Of course, the entire culture would elevate farming as glorious and beautiful, and so important for society, so revered, and so honorable. But of course farming would be unpaid, because after all, shouldn't men simply do their duty, knowing they are doing what nature intended?

The world today might look completely different, like this: Folk songs connect the long history of farming to the present. Young boys are given toy farms to play with. Special holidays are set aside to honor farm service, days on which the women fumblingly hold the tiller so men can have breakfast in bed. Teenage boys are steered towards farming school. The most physically fit men become objectified, with Mr. America contests

and an industry of magazines focused on the male body. There would be no point in hearing what farmers had to say, as their intelligence is irrelevant and, before long, probably considered absent. And if anyone tries to innovate farming to make it less labor-intensive, then an organic movement might arise to show how family farming by hand is the only socially correct way for farming to happen.

Can you imagine how frustrated a man who wasn't interested in, or particularly physically suited for farming, might feel in this scenario? Or how limited his life options might be? Even if he was particularly gifted in another field, he would be socially ostracized at work and constantly made to feel as if there were something wrong with him for wanting to pursue a passion other than farming. His male identity would be constantly under attack for daring to want something else. If he were able to work outside the farm, there would always be the expectation that his career was his second priority, after number one—the farm. Any time he took off from work would be assumed to be about the farm and that would make him appear less committed to the job. If he hired anyone to help on the farm while he worked, he'd be letting the household down by not truly farming or leaving it in less capable hands, especially if something went wrong. Because only by personally farming was a man really farming. The more wealthy and successful his wife became, the more it would be encouraged that he give up his work and make his farm the most beautiful and plentiful so his wife's status would be elevated.

You get where we are going with this. We indulge in this exercise in alternative history to show how a perfectly plausible social construct can be rationalized by flawed gender-science assumptions. It makes it easy to see how today's gender-based social constructs about women and their social roles is equally false. Because these kind of assumptions about biological traits or innate differences due to gender are, in reality, *all made up*.

Imagine the farm scenario being believed by most men and women and reinforced as an accepted set of gender rules. Well, much of what women have been historically allowed to do for a career has been culturally defined and socialized into us. Then it has been back-end justified based purely on a binary, presumably nature-based, definition.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Let's take a step back before we move forward. How did we get here? How did we end up with a workplace dominated by white men where women struggle for fair representation? And in the United States, women

have had the right to vote for a hundred years, right? Why is this still a problem? Why do barriers still exist?

In our consultation work, people often immediately jump to a nature argument: men are naturally better workers, better leaders, and better built for work outside of the home. In fact, many people who hear the word *leader* still imagine a white man.²² After all, people assume, “cavemen” hunted for the food and “cavewomen” cooked it. But research suggests that prior to agriculture there was actually much more gender equality.²³ Early human women didn’t stay home and clean the cave; they were out gathering food-stuffs. Yes, there was some gender specialization, but if we want to go back to early days, that story suggests better gender equality than we have today.

Even after human societies became agrarian, gender power differences and role differentiation were not clearly defined. Yes, there were societies which relied on men’s brute strength to plow, but there were other societies that relied on hoeing, which was done by both men and women.

But as society moved toward increased specialization and trade, where the struggle for food lessened and a wider variety of commercial roles emerged, the worth of women’s work roles diminished. In the 1100s, “English common law, a combination of Anglo-Saxon and Norman traditions, led to the creation of coverture, which is the belief that married men and women are one financial entity. As such, married women [could not] own property, run taverns or stores or sue in court. Those financial rights could be enjoyed, however, by widows and spinsters. Over time, coverture was corrupted into the view that women are property of their husbands.”²⁴

Women lost significant rights as individuals. Whether to protect tradition, wealth, and power, or in fear of political instability, governments legislated and institutionalized gender roles.²⁵ It became illegal for women to work outside of the home, own property, or have a bank account. And even though democracy spread in the West, women had no legal right to vote, and policies were entrenched in the political system.

The system started to tell a story that physical strength was worth more, so men were more valuable. Yet even jobs that didn’t require strength came to be seen as male jobs, as long as they were able to generate wealth. Women were relegated to unpaid or less-valued work. They had neither the political power to make change nor the physical power to resist. How can such a condition be said to be natural? Historians concur, noting that, “there is nothing ‘natural’ about this system.”²⁶

But women and men *are* different and have different innate strengths, right? Doesn’t biology tell us that? “My son behaves so much differently

than my daughter,” or “He’s all boy.” Well, it turns out not so much. The differences between men and women make it seem easy to place everyone into one of two categories, male and female. But the science behind these differences tells us that gender difference is not really that clear-cut. It’s much more nuanced. There is actually more variation among members of the same gender than there is between the conventional binary genders. And many people don’t subscribe to either gender.

These differences appear big when we think in terms of stereotypical ideals—men or women as representations of the ultimate example of their gender. Such a construct creates a set of characteristics intentionally set in opposition to each other. But researchers note that the science doesn’t support the large gender assumptions.²⁷ Much more of the differentiation is due to socialization rather than physical difference.²⁸ Jodi has two sons, one with brown hair and one with blond hair. Each has a very different personality from the other and their approaches to life are often described as polar opposite. Yet we don’t stereotype those differences with a binary categorization and say that all brown-haired people behave a certain way. That would be ridiculous. If we did, an entirely different socialization and resulting role allocation could occur!

These so-called ideal gender definitions exist at the extreme oppositional ends of a scale, and very few of us fit either mold perfectly. The majority of us exist somewhere in the middle. And of course the ideals themselves change over time. Different generations see these definitions very differently. Not that long ago, women were thought incapable of running marathons; now there are more women marathoners than men. If the reason was based on nature or biology, how could it change so drastically? Of course, it couldn’t change; it wasn’t true to begin with. *It’s all made up*. Before women had the right to vote, it was generally believed that women were too emotional to make such decisions. Now it is broadly considered a basic human right. Appendix B provides more eye-opening examples of how attitudes about what women can and cannot do has changed over the past century.

A CHANGING WORKFORCE—BIT BY BIT

A closer look at the history of gender and the workplace illustrates the arbitrariness of these supposed ideals. The place of women in the workforce has steadily changed, as well as the perception of specific industries as masculine or feminine. World War II is an interesting starting point because of significant changes in the workforce made necessary by so many men being away at war. Of course, women worked prior to that.

Women have always worked, especially at lower socioeconomic levels, and during the Victorian Age women worked extensively in textiles, service, retail, workhouses, and on the farm. And enslaved women worked extraordinarily hard physical jobs. But World War II marked a more formal definition of “women’s work.”

As the timeline on page 24 illustrates, over the last ninety years or so, there have been several shifts in attitude and practice around the role of women in the workplace. Sometimes the shifts are progressive; often they are not. The trend towards women gradually growing their numbers

WE CAN DO IT

A famous World War II advertisement aimed at getting women to work said, “‘What Job is mine on the Victory Line?’ If you’ve sewed on buttons, or made buttonholes on a machine, you can learn to do spot welding on airplane parts. If you’ve used an electric mixer in your kitchen, you can learn to run a drill press. If you’ve followed recipes exactly in making cakes, you can learn to load shell.”*

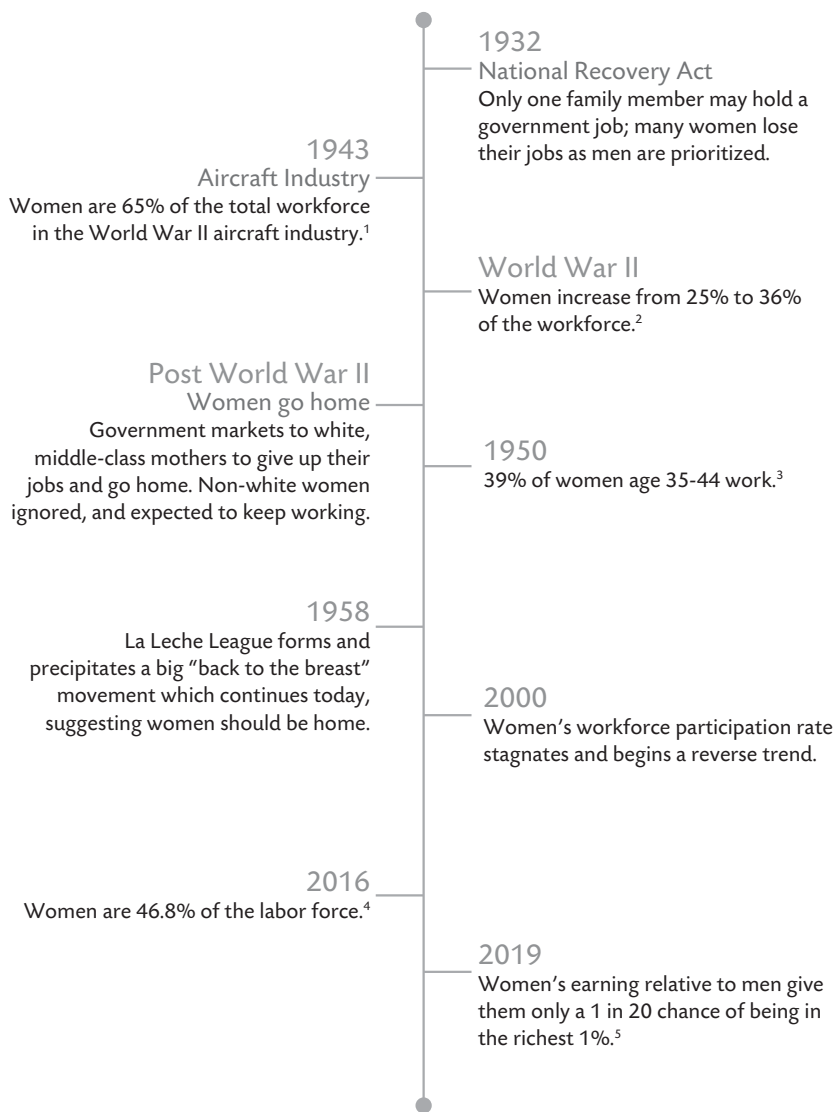
in the workplace and in positions of leadership is improving, albeit very slowly. But each time women move forward, the goalposts that mark success change. It’s no longer good enough to simply care for their children; for example, now mothers are expected to entertain them and enrich their education with carefully curated after-school activities and developmental interventions.

And note that acceptable careers for women shift, too—from teachers, nurses, and secretaries to women engineers. (And why do we need to name a gender in front?) You see, to

label a job feminine or masculine is also *all made up*. Have you ever noticed how once an industry becomes too “female,” men stop entering it and wages go down?²⁹ The veterinary industry was once dominated by men but is now mostly populated by women (except in industry leadership roles), and this feminization is expected to decrease veterinarian salaries over time.³⁰

These shifts can also be the result of automation. When the complexity of a job is reduced, it is often deemed more feminine.³¹ For example, in 1910, slicing and wrapping margarine was considered men’s work. “Despite the shortage of boys, and the problems with discipline, it took some time before . . . management decided to hire girls on a large scale. The innovation that triggered this change was the introduction, in 1915, of a machine that looked like a large egg slicer, which cut slabs of

* Karen Westerberg, “What Job is Mine on the Victory Line?” *Cobblestone* (2007).



Women in the Workplace: Shifts in Attitude*†

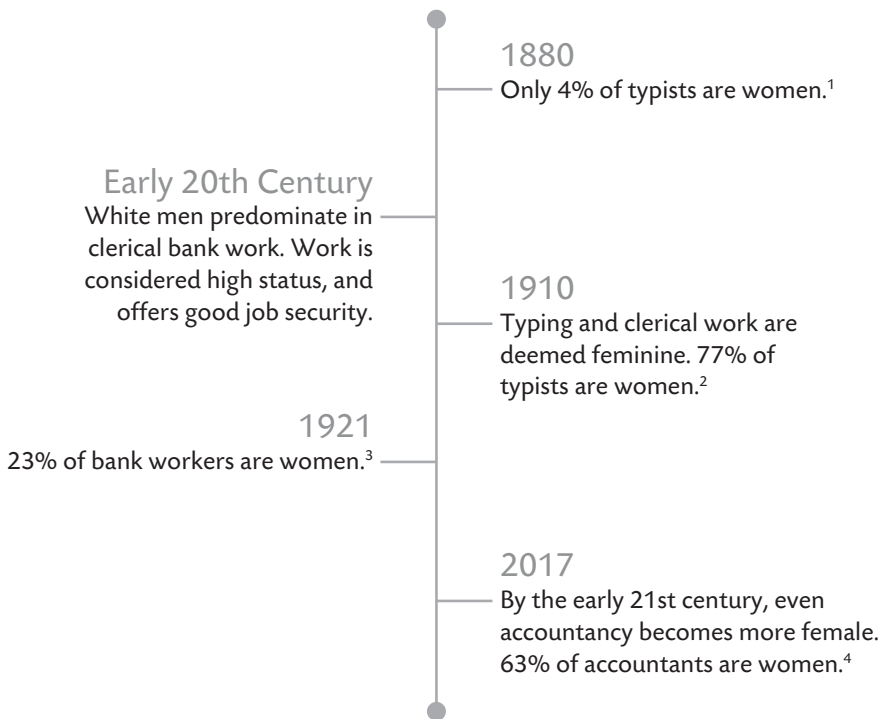
* Paula England, Paul Allison, and Yuxiao Wu, “Does Bad Pay Cause Occupations to Feminize, Does Feminization Reduce Pay, and How Can We Tell with Longitudinal Data?,” *Social Science Research* 36, no. 3 (2007): 1237-1256.

† All timeline citation information begins on page 240.

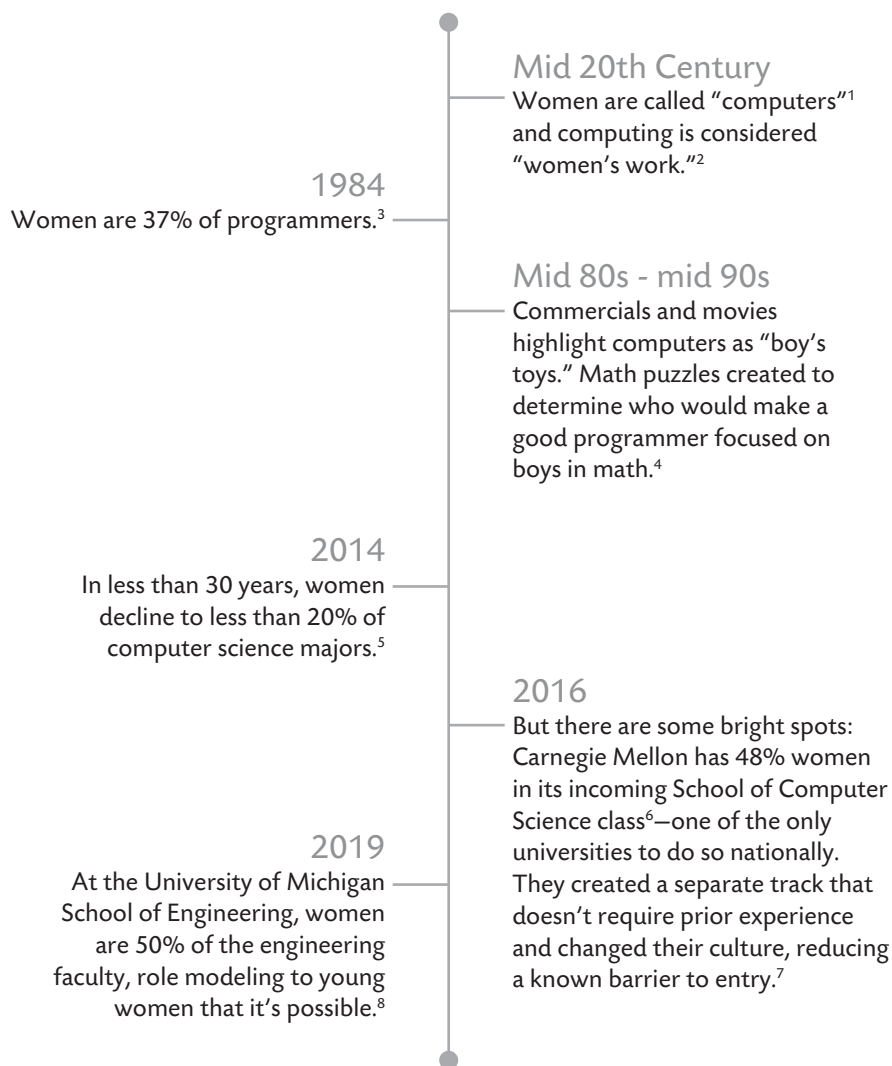
margarine into pieces of more or less the same size.”³² The job became a woman’s job and the pay dropped.

The opposite also happens. Once an industry becomes more visible or lucrative, it becomes more masculine. In the 1950s, most computer programmers were women. But in the 1990s, as the personal computer took off, men entered the computing business en masse and squeezed women out. One woman we worked with commented, “Silicon Valley didn’t used to be like the old boys’ club. When the Internet was first invented, 40 percent of tech was women.” But she noticed that as the industry got more mature and became more lucrative, the men sharpened their elbows and moved women out. It became so competitive that women decided because of family and life obligations and their dislike of the “bro” culture, that they didn’t want to compete.³³ The result? Computer programming is now considered men’s work. It’s all completely *made up*.

This phenomenon is not recent. Consider the history of the three different industries below.

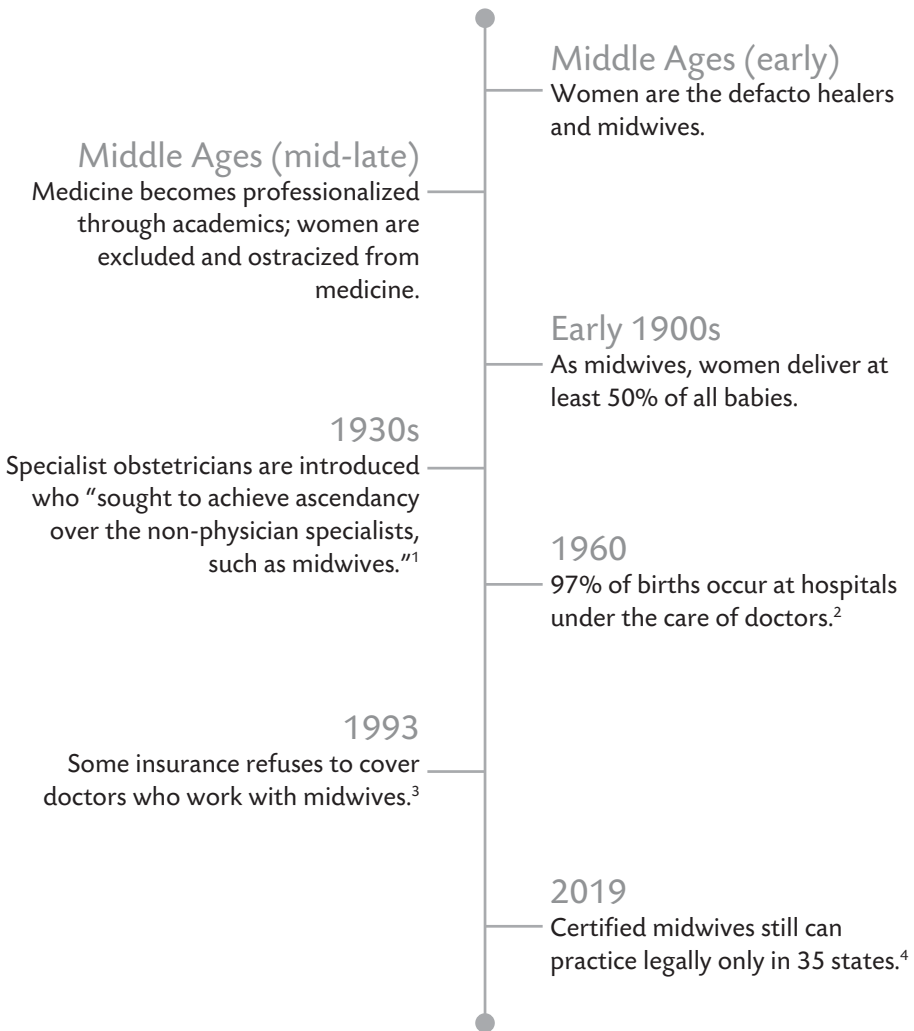


The Feminization of Jobs: Clerical Work



The Masculinization of Jobs: Computer Programming

“It really amazed me that these *men* were programmers, because I thought it was women’s work!” —*Elsie Shutt*, hired by *Raytheon* in 1953³⁴



The Masculinization of Jobs: The Business of Birthing Babies

Each of these examples shows how a job, once considered the domain of only men or women, transitioned to the domain of the other gender. The essence of the story is that these assignments are all made up based on bifurcation of roles and on a single criterion: gender. It's this history that we need to recognize honestly so we can change the future. The good news is: *because we as a society have made it so, we can unmake it, too.*

Why should you care? Because we all want to have an impact that aligns with who we are, to pursue our passions and *métier*. It's that simple.

These arbitrary gender barriers stop that from happening. Why should gender have any role in determining which career we end up in?

Two young women we've worked with wanted to be surgeons. The father of the first woman told her, "You can't have a family and be a surgeon!" So she changed her goal and is now a nutritionist. The second woman interned at a surgery, saw the lifestyle role modeled by the mostly male surgeons, and concluded, "I can't have a family and be a surgeon!" She's now a surgical nurse practitioner. Simply because of gender norms, there are two fewer, potentially brilliant surgeons in the world. Isn't it way past time to change these restrictive, made-up gender definitions?

Here's something we hear a lot: "But what about birthing and breast-feeding babies—men can't do that, right?" This line is used to justify all kinds of things. Yes, many women birth babies at some point in their life. Those who do are pregnant for nine months. They have the baby, which takes a day or two. Some breastfeed, sometimes for six to twelve months. Some women birth more than one child. Taken all together, on average, this would mean a one-to-three-year interruption in a woman's career, assuming that is all they did. One to three years. In a career of thirty to forty years, that is a very small percentage of the total. Of course, not all women do this and not all mothers take time off for pregnancy or to breastfeed. And it's now increasingly common for men to take parental leave.³⁵ So we are talking about designing an entire system around something that happens for *some* people for a very small amount of time. It's absurd, really.

Appendix C includes a short history of women's rights. And yes, there have been changes for the better. But progress has been slow and barriers remain—and will remain as long as this made-up narrative and the biases that come with it are not addressed.

2

Unconscious Bias

WHY ARE THESE MADE-UP SITUATIONS still accepted? A key driver is unconscious bias, a tendency deeply embedded in human thinking. This is such an important and pervasive barrier that we dedicate this chapter to documenting biases that exist. We know it's a negative place, but don't let learning about unconscious bias crush you into believing it can't be fixed. It can. We just need to define the problem before we explain how to turn bias on its head.

Ohio State University defines unconscious or implicit bias this way:

Also known as implicit social cognition, implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. These biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness or intentional control. Residing deep in the subconscious, these biases are different from known biases that individuals may choose to conceal for the purposes of social and/or political correctness. Rather, implicit biases are not accessible through introspection.³⁶

Let's break down this definition:

1. The brain often makes quick decisions that are often invisible to us.
2. The narrative on which these decisions are made was built over a lifetime of our own personal experiences.

That is, there is no cognition or intent behind the decision-making process; it's simply an automated response based on a person's individual socialization. It's not our fault. But we can do something about it. We need to know and accept that this is happening to all of us.

Understanding unconscious bias is important because, unmitigated, it can work against any group that holds a minority position in a given situation (including white men) or that doesn't fit the dominant group's stereotype. So, in leadership positions, it works against women because the majority group has traditionally been white men. Boys, especially Asian boys, are stereotypically said to be better at math and science, a bias that works against girls, Hispanics, and African Americans.³⁷ Bias shows up in job roles too, protecting the incumbent group. For example, it can be difficult for men to become nurses or daycare workers, and it can be challenging for African Americans and women to gain tech roles.

Bias doesn't negatively impact only hiring, it also shows up in promotions and whether or not people ultimately stay in a particular job or career field. It impacts whether a person feels psychologically safe or included in their work or school environment. It also affects whether or not someone's perspective is integrated into decision-making. In this way, unconscious bias reinforces stereotypes because out-groups remain out-groups and are thus unable to influence or erode stereotypes.

BIAS 101 – A REFERENCE GUIDE

Putting a name to each different type of bias helps us recognize it when it occurs.

LEADERSHIP BIAS

In our work, we've seen significant bias in the workplace around leadership. This is a deeply rooted bias because, for most of us, history shapes how we feel. And historically, people conflate leadership with masculinity.³⁸ Furthermore, the traits that male leaders from the past have displayed are assumed to be the characteristics of good leaders. People feel that good leaders are strong, assertive, decisive, calm, and tough. And when men behave this way, people naturally feel good—it confirms our expectations. When women exhibit these characteristics, people feel awkward, as if it is unusual or out of character for women. So we struggle to explain it. We either decide she is not a normal woman, or we change the words used to describe those characteristics; instead of “strong” she is “brash,” instead of “assertive” she is “aggressive,” and instead of “tough” she is “bitchy.”³⁹

Compare these definitions of top leadership skills:

- *Entrepreneur Magazine*: Focus, confidence, transparency, integrity, inspiration, passion, innovation, patience, stoicism, wonkiness, authenticity, open-mindedness, decisiveness, personableness, empowerment, positivity, generosity, persistence, insightfulness, communication, accountability, and restlessness⁴⁰
- *Harvard Business Review*: Strong ethics and moral standards, provides goals with loose guidelines/direction, clearly communicates expectations, flexible, is committed to ongoing training, communicates openly and often, is open to new ideas, creates a feeling of failing or succeeding together, nurtures growth of others, and provides a safe environment for trial and error⁴¹

Does your definition of leadership also include these skills? Notice that many of these traits are gender-neutral and some are even stereotypically female traits. Yet organizations often credit men with being better leaders than women, with male examples of leadership exemplified as the natural model. Clearly the leadership skill itself is not as important in the definition of a good leader as one would expect. At the end of the day, people mostly think of leadership as male merely because leaders in the past were men.

Here are some examples of leadership bias we've heard in our workshops:

- A female ad-agency executive told us that “women did not fit into the senior management circle” because they tend to overcommunicate, take too long to say things, and use too many words. She said she was successful because she was succinct but could understand why she was the only woman in leadership because other women don't seem to innately possess this skill.
- A senior leader in an entertainment company was given similar feedback when she was turned down for a promotion that should have been a sure thing. During the debrief, she was given a list of reasons why, even though she had met all the criteria formally spelled out for her for the role, it was given to a male colleague who hadn't met all of the requirements. Her tendency to “overcommunicate” was cited, although without specific example. She was also told that she needed to “push back on senior executives more” but was confused because the winning candidate was commonly described by peers as a “butt-kissing yes-man.”
- Men in an organization with almost all men from the mid-level up said that the number-one way to get promoted—what the company

valued most—was working hard. But the women felt they were doing the majority of the actual work, and very few women were promoted. They said that “being friends with executives, golfing, and going to lunch” seemed to be valued more highly than working hard because that is who they saw being promoted.

These are just a few examples of what we have encountered professionally. Now ask yourself: Who springs to mind when you think of great leadership? Is it a man? You wouldn’t be alone.

SYSTEM 1 AND SYSTEM 2 THINKING

Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman pioneered a new way of understanding how the brain makes decisions and the pitfalls of trusting them. He highlights the trade-offs between what he calls System 1 thinking, where the brain operates automatically and unconsciously, and System 2 thinking, which is more deliberate, conscious, and logical. He points out the cognitive bias inherent in System 1 thinking and what happens when we over rely on it.⁴² It’s easy to find examples in our work and in popular culture of how System 1 thinking negatively impacts women.

- *“One hundred percent of the resumes we get are from white men. Therefore, there are no women candidates available for this job.”* Using System 1 thinking, people are influenced by irrelevant numbers, such as the size of the candidate pool for a single job posting. Called **anchoring bias**, this refrain ignores the actual number of women candidates in the market. It also ignores how unconscious bias can affect a company’s marketing process for candidates: how job descriptions are worded, where job ads are posted, how many women’s faces show up in the company’s marketing materials, what is reflected in the press about the company, even what products the company sells—all of which have been found to influence the size of a single job’s application pool.⁴³
- *“We are hiring plenty of women at lower levels in the organization, so naturally this problem will solve itself in time. We have only men at the top because there were only men at the bottom when they were hired.”* With System 1 thinking, the answer that comes most easily to mind seems right, an example of **availability bias**. The belief that this problem will solve itself over time is a common trap that leads people to dismiss the need for gender equity intervention. But it isn’t true. The management consulting

company McKinsey & Company predicts it will be more than a hundred years before gender parity is achieved in organizations.⁴⁴ Cornell University researchers predict gender equity in computer science won't be achieved until 2100 or beyond!⁴⁵ That's not your grandkids, that's your grandkids' grandkids. Further, women have graduated with bachelor's degrees in larger numbers than men since 1981.⁴⁶ If the quote above were correct, then shouldn't there be *more* women than men in leadership? Yet less than 13 percent of corporate leaders are women.⁴⁷

- *“I feel bad for men these days with all of the sexual harassment allegations. How do they know that some innocuous thing they do won't end up getting them in trouble?”* It's common to substitute easier questions for the harder question at hand, another feature of System 1 thinking known as **substitution bias**. This bias allows a quick response to a question or comment by using a ready and obvious answer to a different question. In the above example, when harassed and assaulted women come forward to address their perpetrators after years of victimization, the response to the problem often relates to a completely different question: whether or not men will be frivolously and falsely accused going forward. The leap to a substitute issue further demeans the women who are victims and blocks the development of solutions to the complex problem of sexual harassment.
- *“Susan Fowler took her harassment complaints to Uber's HR department, only to have her concerns dismissed because her harasser was a star-performer.”*¹² **Optimism/loss-aversion bias** is when System 1 thinking overestimates the good and underestimates the bad. This example at Uber shows that the good—someone is a star-performer—so far outweighs the bad—harassed women—that the behavior was allowed to continue unchecked.⁴⁸
- *“If we have quotas for women, we will end up recruiting and promoting people who are less effective.”* Using System 1 thinking, brains are fooled by context, and people fall into what is called **framing bias**. People think quotas, for example, will interrupt the meritocracy by rewarding group status over merit. But as we often point out, this assumes a working meritocracy, and we know the system isn't a working meritocracy to begin with. Historically women were blocked, both legally and socially, from working. White men benefited because they were unencumbered by legal barriers, which is how they came to dominate. Statistically, at

least some of those candidates weren't as well qualified as some people in the blocked groups. Moreover, those in leadership built cultural and systemic barriers to outsiders. Research shows these cultural and systemic barriers will not entirely disappear until a minority group reaches at least 25 percent of the total group.⁴⁹ Until then, a minority group is dominated and shifted by the majority. This is why tokenism hasn't worked. A single underrepresented group member can't sufficiently sway or impact the group dynamic.

- *“The guys on our floor have been giving Sally ‘the business’ for years, whistling when she arrives at work and offering to take her to lunch. She has always been really good-natured about it. But recently, Tim gave her a playful smack on the butt when she walked by. Everyone thinks she should report Tim to HR but Sally just blushed and hid at her desk.”* As Kahneman's research has found, for some reason we often consider prior decisions relevant in current decision-making, a tendency called **sunk-cost bias**. In economics, it's throwing away good money hoping to turn around the bad, like the surge of hopeful marketing spending almost every company makes right before filing for bankruptcy. People's brains remember how much money, time, and effort has been invested and consider that in the next decision, even though it has no relevance. Often when a woman experiences sexual harassment, she fails to report it because she considers all the times she has tolerated low-level unwanted sexual innuendo in the past. There is often a belief that, because she tolerated it before, it would be inconsistent or unreasonable to discourage it now. As much as hindsight has revealed to her that she likely should have spoken up sooner, she may refuse to let go of the previous flawed decision-making. And so perpetrators of sexual harassment continue get away with their behavior in the workplace and victims continue to feel guilty and shameful.
- *“Let's promote Bob instead of Ellen. Just last week he was telling me about this excellent deal he closed. And while Ellen's numbers look as good as his on paper, she has been out on maternity leave for the past six weeks, and I can't remember her closing such an impressive deal before that.”* Kahneman's research with colleague Barbara Fredrickson showed that the human brain also doesn't tend to remember perceptions of duration, a phenomenon called **duration-neglect bias**. Memories of prior events are based on

remembering peak and end experiences. People like an event if it ended well or had a moment of great enjoyment and have an unfavorable memory if something tragic happened or if an experience ended on a low note. Annual review meetings can be particularly challenging for women, especially those who don't self-promote or speak proudly about their accomplishments, and for those who may have taken some time off during the year; they may find it harder to get a positive appraisal for the same quality work.^{50, 51}

ORGANIZATIONAL BIAS

Kahneman's ground-breaking work has been reinforced by other thought leaders, including Howard Ross, who studied the impact of bias and applied his research to the corporate context. He describes three ways in which unconscious bias manifests itself when we make decisions about ourselves and others:⁵²

- *“He’s just like I was at that age. He’ll make a big impact on our organization [just like I have].”* When people favor employees or candidates who remind them of themselves, they fall victim to **affinity bias**. Think about how often someone gets hired because of this bias. In fact, it has often been seen as a good thing. However, this bias is often based on physical traits and similar background experiences, not on merit or capability. And it corresponds to the dangers of unconsciously building homogeneity on our teams.
- *“Maybe I’m just not cut out for a career in finance.”* **Unconscious self-perception bias** or Claude Steele’s highly researched **stereotype threat**⁵³ is when people buy in to negative stereotypes about themselves and as a result perform less well. When women struggle in a male-dominated environment, it may have more to do with expecting to struggle than any actual skill deficiency.
- *“I always knew she was too emotional.”* When someone performs in a way that agrees with a stereotype, people believe it; but if they act against a stereotype, it’s rejected as coincidental. **Confirmation bias** is why women are commonly seen as having “feminine” leadership traits such as empathy, compassion, and the ability to nurture, and are less often described as strong, decisive, or strategic. It is also why when a woman does display strength, for example, it is dismissed as pushiness or some other negative characteristic. It is very difficult for our unchecked minds to accept counter-stereotypical information.

Joan Williams and Rachel Dempsey have documented four types of implicit bias that negatively impact women in the workplace.⁵⁴ In their research about women in the legal profession, as well as other high-stakes workplaces, they noticed some common trends that hold women, especially women of color, back from achieving their true potential.

- “*Your performance was pretty good, and you are almost there. Let’s review this again at next year’s promotional cycle.*” Groups stereotyped as less competent often have to prove themselves over and over, because of what is called **prove-it-again bias**. Williams and Dempsey found that women’s accomplishments are often seen as one-offs or lucky, particularly if they violate a stereotype, such as a requirement for highly technical skills or strong decision-making. Men’s accomplishments are seen in aggregate. Further, a woman’s accomplishments are often considered less significant compared to the same work done by a man. As Iris Bohnet notes, “When performance is observable, successful women are rated as less likable than men.”⁵⁵ This is where intangibles are often drafted into the evaluation process: language like *fit* and *executive presence*. On the other hand, “When performance is ambiguous, successful women are rated as less competent than men.”⁵⁶ For women to prove performance, there always seems to be one more opportunity needed or an extra step in the process that isn’t required of most men.
- “*I think she is too much of a bitch to be the leader we need.*” Williams and Dempsey write that a narrower range of workplace behavior is often expected from women, which they call **tightrope bias**. Women are expected to balance the stereotypical masculine traits of a leader with likability and femininity, an often contradictory challenge. If she comes across as too assertive, she can be labeled as bitchy. Unlike men’s, women’s performance reviews often contain assessments of subjective qualities and personality traits, rather than a focus on results or measurable skills.⁵⁷ If a woman spends too much time adjusting her behavior to walk this tightrope, she can be seen as inauthentic. And note, this tightrope is enforced by both men and women leaders, not only men.
- “*Whenever I walk by her desk, she is always away at some appointment with her kids.*” Mothers, Williams and Dempsey found, are stereotyped as less competent or committed, whereas fathers

are seen as breadwinners who shouldn't take time off. This bias is called the **parental wall**. Whenever a mother is away from the office, it is often assumed she is home with her kids, and she gets penalized. She is not seen as someone who can be good at work and good at being a parent.

- *“I wonder how she got that role. I heard she slept with the boss.”* **Tug-of-war bias** says that underrepresented groups tend to fight and are suspicious of each other's success. They tend to be harder on each other with a real implication for career progress. This bias can be the root of much woman-versus-woman conflict and can lead to women accusing each other of tokenism or “sleeping their way up.” There is also the assumption that if one woman earned a leadership role, there is no space for another. So it forces women to compete rather than work together.

Finally, there is a phenomenon that occurs when bias happens throughout multiple stages of a process: **cascading bias**. For example, when a company uses traditional hiring practices, such as hiring candidates from similar companies in the same industry or graduates from a select number of “brand name” schools, it is at risk for compounding the selection biases of all of those companies or schools. It is well documented that Ivy League schools skew to wealthy, white students regardless of ability or talent.⁵⁸ But when companies assume that candidates from these schools are better qualified than candidates from urban colleges, for example, they perpetuate a biased candidate pool.

Trusting competitors' hiring practices can result in the same cascade. When a company recruits candidates who hold comparable positions at other companies, it compounds whatever biases those companies hold. Also, when companies use hiring committees to vet candidates or discuss an employee's readiness for promotion, the unconscious biases of each of the committee members are triggered, as well as the tendency for groups to be subject to politics and groupthink. Unconscious biases are not mitigated by simply adding more voices to the conversation—they are actually further exaggerated.

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS—THE HIDDEN IMPACTS

Unconscious bias is, of course, *unconscious*. Without careful self-scrutiny, its principle dangers are hidden to us. In addition to the external impacts of bias, such as reinforcing stereotypes and keeping women underrepresented in powerful roles, there are also internal impacts.

Social psychologist Claude Steele, who has spent a lifetime studying stereotypes, has documented the very real physical damage that can occur when people work under the effects of stereotypes. He contends that being aware of negative stereotypes for a group you belong to, even subliminally, causes performance-limiting anxiety, including both physical and mental effects. The constant subliminal awareness that your positive actions will be dismissed and your negative actions reinforced by the stereotype, or that you feel you need to represent all women when you lead, raises the heart rate, takes blood away from cognitive function, and lowers performance. It is actually enough stress on the body to reduce a person's lifespan.⁵⁹

And it can be completely unconscious. The performance impact is stunning.⁶⁰ A famous Harvard study had two groups of similarly-skilled Asian women take a math test.

THE TRICKS BIAS PLAYS

Knowing there is bias doesn't make it go away—Howard Ross offers a training session where he walks participants through a series of examples of the tricks bias plays on the brain, everything from showing lines that appear to converge (but don't) and images laced with stereotypical props intended to nudge thinking. The audience buys in. They agree there is bias and they actively want to eliminate it from their decision-making. Then he breaks them into groups and each is given a resume to evaluate. They evaluate as individuals first, then as a group, rating the resume on a scale of one to one hundred. He records the results on the board and gets a range of between forty and about ninety. Then he reveals that the resumes are all identical except for the name and photo. Even after an entire workshop predicated on knowing that people have unconscious bias, nobody can help how brains work, even if they are willing and try!*

One group was reminded through demographic pre-test questions that they are Asian (and thus a member of a positive math performance stereotype group), and the other group was reminded of their gender (and thus a member of a negative math performance stereotype group—Barbie thinks “math is hard”⁶¹). The group with the gender stereotype threat performed significantly less well on the test.⁶² Similar tests show the same documented effect—stereotype threat—negatively impacts performance.

The impact is not short term, either. Long-term physical effects of stereotype threat, such as increased anxiety, heart rate, and blood pressure, are cumulative and life-shortening.⁶³ Also, the poor performance that can result reinforces or confirms the group

* Howard Ross, “Everyday Bias: Identifying and Navigating Unconscious Judgments” | Talks at Google,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v01SxXui9XQ>.

stereotype on an individual level, further increasing performance anxiety, reinforcing the performance impact, and so on in a vicious cycle. It's as if women at work are carrying a backpack of emotional baggage all day, every day, for their working lives. Think of the physical and mental toll this takes. These internal impacts alone should compel anyone who wants to optimize human capital to address the problems of unconscious bias.

The math-test study above illustrates the impact of priming on a person's level of stereotype threat. If a person is primed—or reminded in advance—that she is capable, she performs better than if primed negatively. Again: this process is completely unconscious.

Microaggressions can reinforce impact. Small reminders of stereotypes, delivered as insults or slights on a regular basis, microaggressions can be couched humorously or dismissively. “Don't drive with Inga—she's Asian” or “You don't sound like us. What country are you from?” or “You should smile more.” Although the receiving party can feel like these are intentional, many perpetrators are quite ignorant of the negative impact. They tend to deliver microaggressions as a way to maintain their own in-group status without overt malice toward the recipient. But the effect is the same: remind someone of a negative stereotype and their performance will suffer. It's a form of priming.

Unconscious bias is dangerous because its impacts are felt whether or not malice is intended. Understanding what it is and how it occurs is critical to recognizing the impact on human behavior and decision-making.

In our consulting engagements, we have found that most corporate recruitment efforts target graduates from a short list of name-brand schools, woo only candidates who hold the same role at another firm in the same industry, or tap into a network of people who have similar backgrounds. When we question organizational leaders about these tactics, we hear a common response: “It's easier and avoids risk.” Well yes, it does make recruitment and training easier. Going outside the box takes more time and makes comparative judgment harder. Also, when you hire stereotypical leaders—tall, male, white, Ivy League—nobody faults you if they fail. “Who knew the Harvard guy wouldn't work out?” But when you hire a nontraditional candidate (yes, there is even a name for this) and they don't work out, your decision-making is questioned. You get blamed for *not* succumbing to bias.

There is as much variability in the workplace performance of graduates of the top schools as there is from other educational experiences. So our underlying assumption that these selection processes yield the best candidates is inherently flawed. And these selection errors are

compounded when the processes of other organizations are weighed more highly than our own discernment.

There is a hidden cost to unconscious bias and the way it cascades—a smaller supply of qualified labor means a higher price for that labor. As the leadership pipeline constricts, this effect compounds, and the price of labor at the top keeps rising. One reason executive salaries have become exponentially higher than entry-level salaries is reduced supply.⁶⁴ Bias plays a big role by artificially narrowing the candidate pool. This is a self-perpetuating problem.

If this bias information is new to you, don't despair. We didn't know most of it when we started doing this work. And growing up in a biased world, we didn't see it, even when it was directly affecting us. Just because women are victims of bias doesn't mean they don't unwittingly impose bias on others. The tendency is deep and hidden. It's invisible.

The problem with bias invisibility is twofold. On the one hand, not knowing it is there causes people to falsely attribute 100 percent of success or failure to merit.⁶⁵ While nobody admits to believing that women are less capable or qualified for leadership, that is nonetheless the subtle implication of a merit-based system where women aren't as successful. It also provides a perceived rational explanation for gender inequity, one that in many cases puts the responsibility for the lack of representation and progress on the women themselves. While women do share in the responsibility to drive their careers, work hard, promote themselves, and remain focused on goals such as senior leadership, it is also imperative that men and women understand and mitigate the impact of unconscious and unintended biases along the development pipeline.

Secondly, denial of the problem eliminates the possibility of understanding, empathizing, and ultimately, solving it. Studies show that organizations that believe they are meritocracies are often much more biased than those that understand that bias happens.⁶⁶ So the leaders who recruit, evaluate, and promote based on merit are deficient in critical skills and further perpetuate bias. Qualified candidates and employees are overlooked, held back, or slowed. They can become frustrated and leave, costing money in turnover, or they stay but are underutilized. Low bias awareness in an organization usually signals stronger likelihood of many underlying systemic problems.

"I always hire the best person for the job, regardless of gender, race, or any other factor." We hear this claim a lot. Managers tell us there is no bias in their processes. They believe strongly that they only hire the best people for the job, that they employ rational decision-making, and cultivate a meritocracy. If women are not represented, they say it is a problem of

numbers—there are not enough women in the pipeline, and the situation will change once there are. Or women choose to exclude themselves from the pipeline because of the type of work. This is commonly cited in legal, consulting, or Big Four CPA firms because of the need for “billable hours.” People think that women choose not to enter these fields because they don’t want to do the work, particularly when they become mothers. For tech jobs, such as coding or engineering, people commonly think women exclude themselves because they aren’t interested in science.

But as Kahneman’s research shows, the majority of our decision-making is based on flawed System 1 thinking. In our consulting projects, we often document this feedback and then explore the data. Most often we find the real story. For example, a software firm may say their population of new hires represents the demographics of the software market, but we do the research and show the client the number of graduates and compare it to their on-campus recruiting pools. Generally, the clients are shocked when they see how their perception compares to reality because they truly believe their system and process is above bias.

Part of the problem is that believing in bias often carries stigma. Who wants to admit to negative behavior, even if it is unconscious? Nobody likes thinking that they are biased. Or that their processes are flawed. And the big question it raises is, “I thought I got here solely because of my talent and hard work—didn’t I?” There is even a fear, and not an unfounded one, that if the environment were truly biased in their favor, changing it could make them less able to compete. This fear can restrict the impetus to change when those in charge of ridding the system of bias feel they are themselves vulnerable to being displaced.

Awareness of unconscious bias and moving from System 1 to System 2 thinking provide the best foundational opportunity for mitigating its effects. Once you know bias is there and begin to see examples around you, you can work out how to slow down and make better decisions.

Finally, it’s important to note that women often have internal unconscious biases. That may seem strange—how can women be unconsciously biased against themselves—but our own research over many years has shown that women often buy in to some of the common external biases against women, unquestioningly, in a way that dictates their own behaviors and responses.

These behaviors don’t always help careers progress. In fact, the extent to which women buy into the stereotypes is often directly correlated to performance. For example, a woman who feels a lot of conflict between her role as a parent and her career tends to be less successful at work

and more encumbered with guilt than a woman who sees the roles as compatible and complementary.

The larger the role conflict, we found, the larger the performance gap. Some women see career and family as a binary choice. Even women who are not parents can experience conflict between their roles as friends or extended family members and their career goals—with a negative impact on performance.

Women haven't only been victimized by unconscious and conscious bias; they have also perpetuated it. Women throughout the ages have helped enforce some of society's rules by policing other women and raising children in their image. For some, this is a conscious act, done perhaps to protect traditional roles or models of femininity. For others, it is an unconscious implementation of what they've seen and been taught by external social cues. The solution to diminishing bias is not only a challenge for men and organizational leadership—it is also critical to acknowledge the work women need to do to change our own behavior.

And don't worry—we'll get to solutions later on. In the meantime, have a look at Appendix E for a self-assessment tool to help show where you are on this journey of discovery. Recognizing unconscious bias and learning to think differently is a twenty-first-century leadership skill. But before we get there, let's consider some of the bad habits and flawed assumptions that bias and complacency can lead to, for both men and women.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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