

# **Toward a New Narrative for the Leadership Gender Agenda**

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## Session Abstract

The media is abuzz about the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership. This session explores how popular notions like the female leadership advantage, confidence gaps, and leaning in, while well intended, may be misguided. Combining data and practice, we go beyond common stereotypes to reframe the problem and offer solutions.

## Session Summary

There is much current discussion about gender and leadership in the popular media. It is largely based on a glaring disparity: women make up over half of the U.S. labor force (59.2% in 2012 according to the U.S. Department of Labor [2012]), but a tiny minority of senior leadership roles. For instance, only 23 of the current Fortune 500 CEOs are women. A great deal has been invested in helping women to advance yet we've made little progress. According to the research firm Catalyst (2012), women comprised 11.2% of corporate officers in Fortune 500 companies in 1998; by 2012 that figure had barely budged to 14.6%.

As a society we have created a narrative on the gender agenda—a story we tell about why it is important to achieve gender parity and what prevents it from happening. This narrative involves three themes. The first is that there is a female leadership advantage because today's collaborative and connected workplace is better suited to the relational style that comes naturally for women (Smith, 2009). But, says the second theme, there is a glass ceiling formed by a barrier of invisible bias that gives preference to men and masculine qualities for senior leadership roles (Feminist Majority Foundation, 2014). The third theme explains how this puts female leaders in a double bind (Catalyst, 2007): As women they are penalized for not matching those preferred masculine qualities, but by displaying masculine behaviors they are penalized for violating social norms about how women are expected to behave. They are damned if they do and damned if they don't emulate the masculine ideal.

This narrative is popular, largely because it provides a tidy explanation by playing on common stereotypes about differences between women and men. But gender stereotypes do not apply very well to corporate managers. For instance, field studies show that there is little difference in how women and men are rated on gender-stereotypical leadership styles like task-oriented and people-oriented, structure and consideration; the biggest gender differences are on non-gender stereotyped behaviors (Eagly & Carli, 2003). We believe a new narrative is needed, one that better represents reality and leads to solutions that will help competent women reach the top. This session is a step in that direction.

To open, as Chair I will frame the issues by reviewing the lack of progress we've made in helping women reach the top. Then I will review recent examples in the popular media of the current narrative and related advice (e.g., *Lean In*, Sandberg, 2013; *The Confidence Gap*, Kay & Shipman, 2014).

Jackie VanBroekhoven-Sahm will present a comparison of the personalities of women and men from the Hogan data archive. Her analysis includes comparisons of women and men in general, in management, and in executive positions. Although she finds reliable differences between women and men in general that parallel popular stereotypes, this pattern is muted for executive women and men. Women executives are more agreeable than men executives, but they are much more ambitious than other women. Moreover, women executives are less open but more conscientious than men. This pattern doesn't neatly fit the stereotypes implied in the popular narrative, and raises additional considerations that are often overlooked.

Next, I will present a summary of trends across "gender audits" for six companies. These studies utilize a matched sample of women and men leaders and analyze 360 ratings that include gender-stereotypical and business-oriented behaviors. The analyses show no evidence of systematic bias against women leaders. However, there are substantive differences showing that women leaders are more often seen as overly controlling and better with the tactical details of execution but men are seen as more strategic and visionary. These themes echo the differences in VanBroekhoven's personality data.

Wanda Wallace will then show how these findings suggest a new narrative and explain how women leaders get themselves boxed in by being seen as "the tactical implementer, not the strategic visionary" and subsequently overlooked for senior leadership roles. Based on extensive experience consulting to organizations on these issues as well as research and writing on them (Wallace, 2008), She will present case studies, lessons learned, and suggestions for helping women avoid this trap and cultivate strategic leadership skills.

Discussant Peter Wright, Acorn Strategy Consulting, will offer reactions to the emerging view of the gender agenda from the perspective of a senior HR professional involved in trying to develop more women into senior leadership over the last three decades in such global companies as AIG, Estee Lauder, Merrill Lynch, BP, and Unilever.



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## Summary of Hogan's Contributions Beyond Stereotypes: Personality Differences between Women and Men Leaders

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The debate surrounding the challenges faced by women in leadership has reached a fever pitch. Successful female leaders have stepped into the spotlight of this issue, drawing attention to an already-hot topic. For example, COO of Facebook Sheryl Sandberg's (2010) *Why we have too few women leaders* is in the top-50 most-watched TED talks of all time. *Lean In*, Sandberg's (2013) bestselling book urging women to defeat gender biases by taking charge of their careers, has sold over 1.6 million copies. Kay and Shipman's (2014) article in *The Atlantic* struck a resounding chord as it traced science and anecdotes about differences in who gets ahead at work to men conveying greater confidence than women.

At the heart of these discussions are two assumptions: one, that women are at a disadvantage when it comes to getting promoted into senior management and two, personality differences between the sexes put women at a disadvantage.

There is a strong connection between stereotypical conceptions of masculinity and femininity and personality. Masculinity is often defined in agentic terms like confidence, assertiveness, and competitiveness that concern social dominance while femininity is often defined in communal terms like compassion, nurturance, and empathy that concern social relatedness (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Interpersonal theorists have long considered these the two primary dimensions of interpersonal behavior, and they correspond to the first two factors of the Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality, Surgency/Extraversion and Agreeableness (Wiggins, 1991).

There is a large literature on sex differences in personality (e.g., Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001; Hyde, 2005). As Costa and colleagues concluded, "gender differences are small... (but) broadly consistent with gender stereotypes" (p. 322). Women typically score higher on Agreeableness, whereas men typically score higher on the Assertiveness facet of Surgency/Extraversion. However, this research is based on men and women in general, in the population at large. As Hyde (2005) argued, since gender differences in personality are, on average, small, they are likely to be context-dependent and vary across particular subgroups, especially relatively homogenous subgroups such as corporate leaders.

There is surprisingly little published data comparing the personalities of corporate leaders and the population at large. One recent exception was a study of New Zealand CEOs (Winsborough & Vathany, 2013), which found that they tend to be more ambitious, better adjusted, more outgoing, and eager learners. However, this sample was almost entirely comprised of men, precluding a comparison of differences between men and women CEOs.

In this presentation, I will report the results of a study to address a gap in the empirical literature concerning similarities and differences in the personalities of men and women corporate leaders. Do the gender differences in personality observed in the broader population also apply to managers and executives? Are the gender stereotypes and personality characteristics defined in the “glass ceiling” and double-bind narrative hooks valid within executive ranks?

To conduct the analyses, I created a gender-balanced sample of 6,000 working adults representing primarily Western cultures—the U.S. and Western Europe. The data were collected in the last ten years and are part of the data archive at Hogan Assessment Systems. The sample represents men and women from three definable populations: non-managers, a general leadership group (primarily comprised of managers and supervisors), and upper-level executives. The sample also represents a broad range of organizations and industries, although most organizations are large corporations.

Personality was measured with the Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI; Hogan & Hogan, 2007). The HPI contains seven scales that represent the FFM: Sociability and Ambition represent two facets of Surgency/Extraversion, Interpersonal Sensitivity represents Agreeableness, Adjustment represents (reverse-scored) Neuroticism, Prudence represents Conscientiousness, and Inquisitive and Learning Approach represent Openness (Inquisitive reflects broadmindedness and creativity while Learning Approach reflects interest in formal, structured knowledge). Scale scores are computed as percentile ranks against a global norm.

In the non-manager sample I expected to replicate prior findings that men would score higher on the agentic scale, Ambition, and women would score higher on the communal scale, Interpersonal Sensitivity. It was an open question whether this pattern would also be evident for managers and executives. Also, I wanted to determine the extent to which differences on other, non-gender-stereotyped characteristics found in prior research (e.g., women higher on Neuroticism/lower on HPI Adjustment) generalized to the managerial populations.

The primary analysis included a series of univariate one-way ANOVAs using the seven HPI scales as the dependent variable. The results are shown in Table 1 in terms of mean differences, which are also visually presented in Figure 1.

Three trends are noteworthy. First, moving from non-managers to managers to executives, the populations do indeed get more homogenous: the SDs are largest for non-managers (Mean SD=30.0) and smallest for the executives (Mean SD=26.2), indicating less variability.

Second, concerning the gender-stereotypical characteristics, men did score higher on Ambition and women higher on Interpersonal Sensitivity. However, this difference was muted for executives compared to the general population: all executives scored lower on Interpersonal Sensitivity, but a sizable gender difference remained. The biggest difference for executives was on Ambition, on which they scored the highest, but the increase from non-manager mean scores to executive mean scores was greater for women. Women executives are distinguished from women in general by their higher Ambition. As leaders, this may show up in women executives being more assertive and driven than women in general.

Third, there are also noteworthy differences on the non-gender-stereotypical scales. Women are generally less Adjusted than men, but executive women score nearly as high as executive men. Perhaps the biggest differences here are that Women executives score lower on Inquisitive but higher on Prudence and Learning Orientation. This pattern suggests that women may be better with organization, managing details, and structured problem-solving, whereas men may seem more visionary, strategic, and flexible (Kaiser & Hogan, 2010).

Taken together, these results suggest that stereotypes based on men and women in general may not be broadly applicable to understanding why women are not as represented in senior leadership. However, they do suggest that differences in non-gender-stereotyped characteristics may apply.

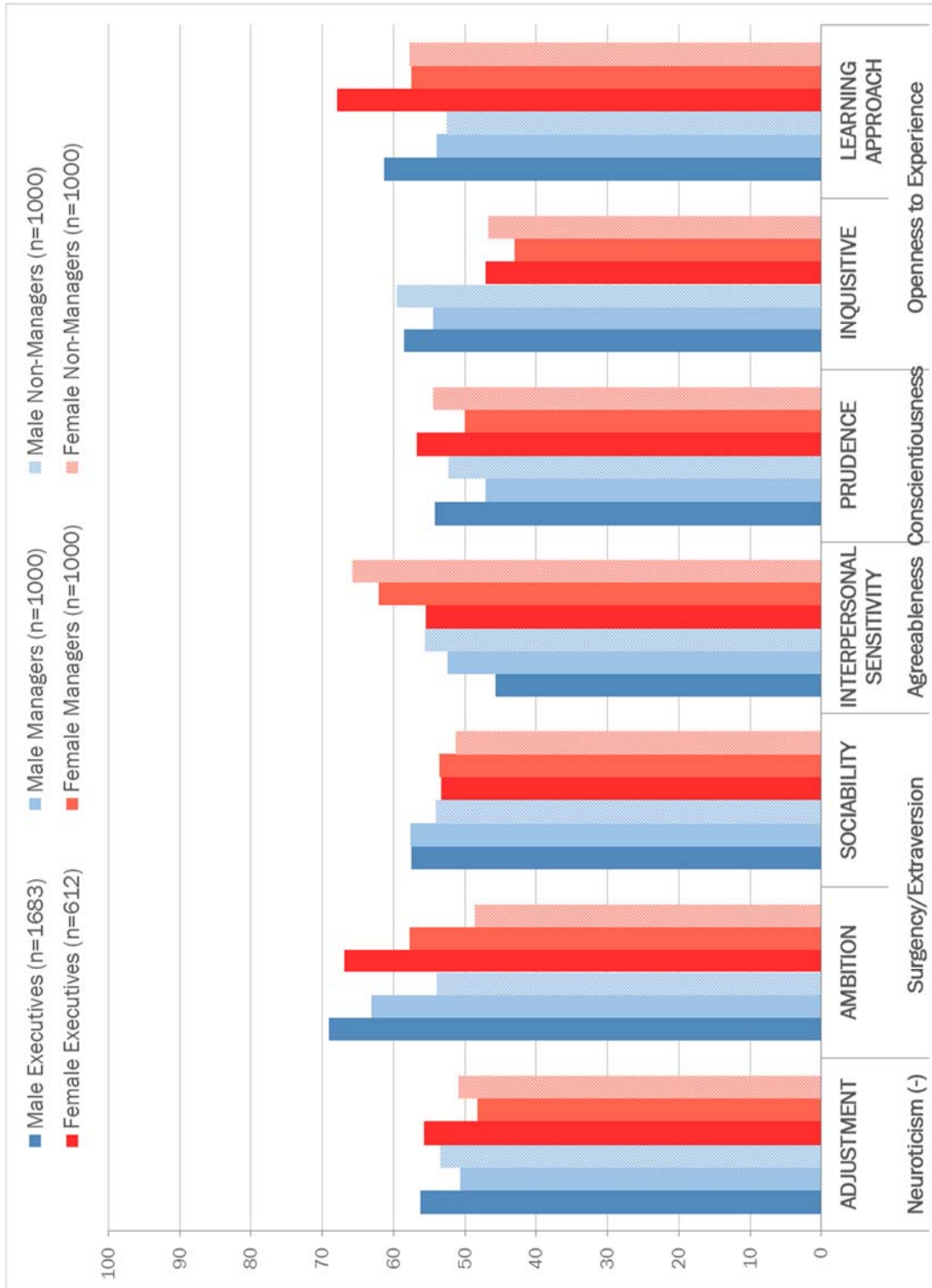


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Figure 1. Mean HPI scores for three populations of women and men: non-managers, managers, and executives.



**Table 1. HPI Scale Ms and SDs for three populations of men and women**

Big-Five Factor:	Neuroticism (reverse)		Surgency/Extraversion				Agreeableness		Conscientiousness		Openness to Experience			
HPI scale:	ADJUSTMENT		AMBITION		SOCIALITY		INTERPERSONAL SENSITIVITY		PRUDENCE		INQUISITIVE		LEARNING APPROACH	
Group	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<b>Men</b>														
Executives	56.3	26.4	69.0	22.7	57.5	26.0	45.7	29.7	54.2	26.6	58.6	25.4	61.3	26.1
Managers	50.7	29.4	63.1	28.5	57.7	27.4	52.4	31.2	47.1	28.2	54.5	26.8	53.9	28.7
Non-managers	53.5	30.3	53.9	30.7	54.0	30.2	55.6	31.8	52.3	30.4	59.5	28.3	52.5	30.7
<b>Women</b>														
Executives	55.8	25.8	66.8	24.1	53.3	27.6	55.5	31.0	56.7	26.1	47.1	25.3	67.9	24.3
Managers	48.3	28.4	57.8	30.4	53.5	28.4	62.1	32.0	50.0	27.5	43.0	29.1	57.5	28.2
Non-managers	50.9	30.6	48.5	31.1	51.2	29.1	65.8	31.3	54.4	28.3	46.7	28.7	57.7	28.7

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