

Cracking the Code to the Glass Ceiling

A WHITE PAPER

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During my thirty years in leadership, the glass ceiling has been a nearly impenetrable blockade, limiting the vast majority of aspiring women leaders hoping to reach the top. I am delighted to report that we have, at last, cracked the code.

Before elaborating on the research and data that helped crack the code, it is important to understand the truths and falsehoods of where things stand today.

Clearly, no significant progress in shattering the glass ceiling has been made during the course of my career, commencing just as the Pregnancy Act of 1979 went into effect:

- Only 21 Women are CEOs of Fortune 500 Companies and 21 are CEOs of Fortune 501 to 1000 respectively – a mere 4.2% of the positions. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_CEOs_of_the_Fortune_500
- In 2012, women held 14.3% of Executive Officer positions at Fortune 500 companies and 8.1% of Executive Officer top earner positions. Source: <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/2012-catalyst-census-fortune-500-women-executive-officers-and-top-earner>

Next, studies compiled by the American Psychological Association experts repeatedly show that “one’s sex has little or no bearing on personality, cognition and leadership.” (APA, 2005) When reviewing performance, many may find these data astonishing: women leaders are frequently rated higher on 360 feedback than their male counterparts. In fact, Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman reported in their 2011 survey of 7,280 leaders that

“at all levels, women are rated higher fully in 12 of the 16 leader competencies measured.” Sources: [Zenger Folkman Inc. and HBR Blog Network, March 16, 2012](#)

In addition, a study in the *International Journal of Business Governance and Ethics* was released on March 25, 2013 stating,

"We've known for some time that companies that have more women on their boards have better results," explains professor Chris Bart. "Our findings show that having women on the board is no longer just the right thing but also the smart thing to do. Companies with few female directors may actually be shortchanging their investors."

While the glass ceiling is real and consequences for women severe, its root cause has been elusive. As a result, incorrect explanations and nonproductive advice is frequently given to aspiring women leaders.

Jack Welch, the former General Electric Chairman and Chief CEO, annoyed a group of women executives at a forum last year sponsored by the Wall Street Journal by stating that the only thing that could help their advancement to senior executive positions is to “Over deliver... Performance is it!” The female members of the audience balked, accusing him of understanding nothing about cultural biases and how they shape the perception of performance. *Source: John Bussey’s article on May, 2012 in the Wall Street Journal.*

Results and performance seldom tell the whole picture of successful females. While it is a no brainer that exceptional performance is essential – there are still too many barriers preventing women from aspiring to the C-Suite. Most would agree that Jack Welch has earned the stripes as a leader to pontificate and to speak anecdotally; however, we have empirical data that proves he is wrong on this matter. Our data show that women actually do dig in and work hard, and when the pressure is on, many hunker down and push themselves beyond the pale compared to their male counterparts, yet these same women are bypassed for the best and most coveted positions time and time again.

Yet, others suggest that aspiring women leaders need to:

- Find a worthy mentor
- Get help
- Build a network
- Assert themselves – learn to negotiate
- Get an MBA (*Source: Matt Symonds, 10 Traits of Women Business Leaders: They’re Not What You Think, Forbes, Aug 8, 2012*)
- And on and on...

These are all worthwhile and practical developmental endeavors. Unfortunately, none of these are the code to getting through the glass ceiling.

Some more radical feminists would have aspiring women believe that the existence of the glass ceiling is predominately due to various forms of overt discrimination such as: job segregation (keep those women out!), good old-boy network barriers, sex discrimination, sexual harassment; and, the lack of enforcement of anti-discrimination laws. (*Feminist Majority Foundation, 2013*)

While there are pockets of discrimination that need to be addressed in timely and effective ways, discrimination is not the root cause of the glass ceiling. Furthermore, copping the “victim” mentality is not productive and sets ambitious women up to be defensive and cynical, both counterproductive to the positive inroads they need to make.

First Step in Cracking the Code...

There is, however, a real cultural bias developed and engrained since early in the history of humankind. Normal human biases do not equate to overt or intentional, malevolent discrimination. However, leadership gender perceptions are out of whack and are taking a huge toll. This is where training, education, group facilitation, diversity workshops and more, can help. While this is not rocket science and business people and academics alike understand this – the crux of the matter is that many leaders and professionals still buy into the biases. Many, if not most, take part by accepting or endorsing gender misperceptions without consciously realizing they are doing so or with no grasp of the damage being done.

Alison Quirk of State Street Corp., also at the Forum with Jack Welch, was quoted saying “... we can do more to help people understand their unconscious biases.” At CDR Assessment Group, Inc. we have studied this very point, the biases versus personality. What we found is that there is a real chasm between the performance tendencies or the personality traits of women versus the related perceptions of those behaviors. It is the perceptions, biases and stereotypes that hold droves of women back while perceptions and biases catapult men forward. Cracking this part of the code is not revolutionary, however, what is compelling is that the data are more starkly damaging than most realize.

CDR Assessment Group measures the personality and motivational traits of leaders and executives. Interestingly, the overall leadership characteristics as measured by our CDR Leadership Character Assessment between male and women leaders are remarkably similar which means that both sexes are quite capable of leader posts at the highest levels. This supports the APA studies previously mentioned in their publication “Men and Women: No Big Difference.”

Cracking the Code, the Break-Through Finding...

The next key part of cracking the code to the glass ceiling is a break-through (pun intended) finding. Where, the glass ceiling can be broken – and the code is cracked – is with the results of the CDR Leadership Risk Assessment. This instrument measures inherent personality risk factors or ineffective coping strategies that undermine performance and can derail success. These “risks” tend to show under stress, conflict and pressure. Think of how often high stress and adversity is present in organizations or in leadership jobs today.

Ironically, women do what Jack Welch suggested – they dig in, work harder, out perform, analyze, research, often become sleep deprived, and work harder again. Under stress, the gender study shows that women tend to be more predominately “Worriers.” Meanwhile, their male leader counterparts tend to show a statistically significant difference in the Risks Factor data. Men leaders tend to be “Egotists, Rule Breakers, and Upstagers” under adversity and conflict.

Hence, the missing part of cracking the code up to this point has been the unrecognized reality that women leaders go in to Worrier or “fear of failure and fear of making a mistake” mode.

They study, analyze and re-study under conflict or adversity. Their fearful, cautious, and moving away from conflict approach results in women being judged as lacking courage and confidence. There are unwritten expectations that leaders do not, and should not, run away or back down from the tough issues or conflict.

Meanwhile, the men, in greater numbers, are moving against, fighting for resources, fighting for airtime, and aggressively winning the day, albeit with over-the-top pushy, in-your-face, and “brave” tendencies. Men win the perception battle as they stay in the game with stamina to fight to the end. While, women run away, study, and analyze some more. Under pressure, more women tend to be cautious decision makers and slow up the process. Men push forward hard and fast. Clearly, the over-confident and aggressive behaviors exhibited more by men leaders are viewed as “leader-like” by the promotional power brokers. The glass ceiling is evidence that it has not been going well for the women.

Bottom line, under pressure, many women default to self-defeating, diminishing behaviors that take them out of the leadership limelight and pipeline. Women, by their own ineffective coping strategies, often pull themselves out of the running, promotionally speaking.

We need to help women STOP resorting to these natural self-defeating and self-doubting tendencies and to learn ways to manage, neutralize and prevent the Worrier behaviors from derailing their visibility, upward mobility, and success. One way to facilitate development is with individual assessment and coaching to help women (and men) understand and manage their risks more productively, particularly the “Worrier” tendency. Our firm hosts a webinar titled “Don’t Worry – Be Decisive!” and all attendees thus far have been women leaders.

With great timing to share our research, Sheryl Sandberg just released the much talked about book “LEAN IN - Women, Work, and the Will to Lead”. She is a successful executive from Facebook who shares how she has learned to conquer, or at least, quell her fears and self-doubt:

“I know that in order to continue to grow and challenge myself, I have to believe in my own abilities. I still face situations that I fear are beyond my qualifications. And I still sometimes find myself spoken over and discounted while men sitting next to me are not. But now I know how to take a deep breath and keep my hand up. I have learned to sit at the table.”

Ms. Sandberg is keenly self-aware and has developed ways to manage and neutralize her worrying and fearful tendencies. Aspiring women leaders who have this “Worrier” trait can do the same. While training and development or wishing cannot erase this Risk Factor, these actions can go a long way in managing and neutralizing these ineffective coping strategies so that they do not take women away from the table.

In addition, other leaders need to understand how many women tend to cope – and to be partners in helping them learn more productive ways to deal with conflict and stress. Executives need to refrain from being overly jaded about a women’s tendency to worry, because this frequently results in a fatalistic or stalled career trajectory.

Women have amazing talent, knowledge and skills as leaders and in all career vocations – so it is time we begin to appreciate their capability – while understanding that all leaders and people have risk factors.

Illustration 1 shows the averaged results of a random selection of men and women leaders across 26 organizations. In examining the data, note women averaging higher Worrier scores and men higher in Egotist, Rule Breaker and Upstager. Illustration 1.

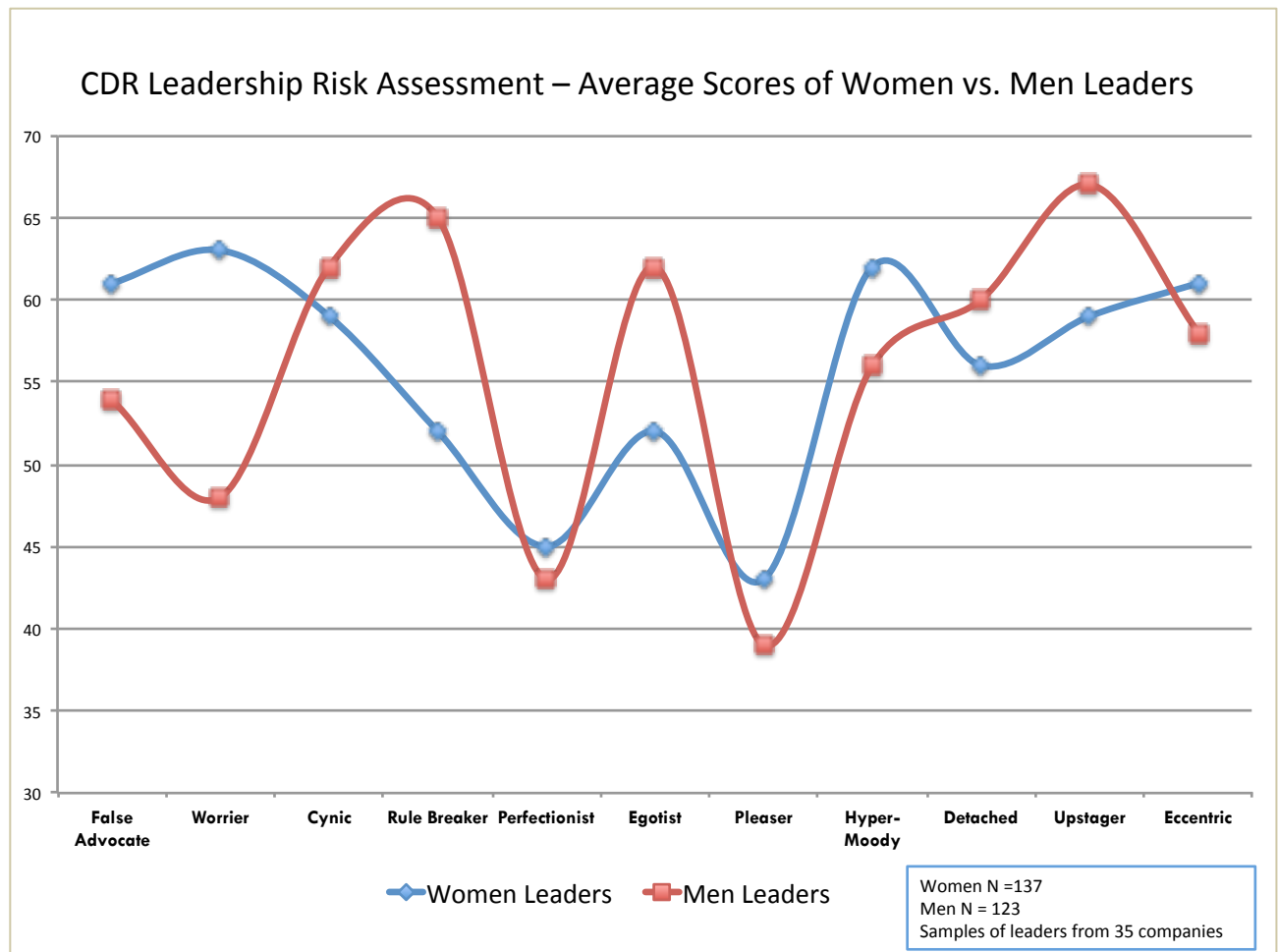


Illustration 2 below supports Ms. Quirk’s contention that the unconscious bias is holding women back far more than demonstrated performance or capability. Below is a chart from our presentation given at an American Society for Training & Development (ASTD) and Women’s Business Council – Southwest (WBCS) sessions titled: **“Risk Factors that Impact Women in Leadership”** that shows the damaging, yet different perceptions that often stem from the same leadership risk behavior.

Illustration 2.

CDR LEADERSHIP RISK ASSESSMENT SCALE DESCRIPTION	WOMEN LEADERS DEMONSTRATING THIS RISK PERCEIVED OR FREQUENTLY LABELED AS:	MEN LEADERS DEMONSTRATING THIS RISK PERCEIVED OR FREQUENTLY LABELED AS:
FALSE ADVOCATE - passive aggressive tendencies; appears outwardly supportive while covertly resisting	Sneaky, spreads rumors	Quiet dissent
WORRIER - unwillingness to make decisions due to fear of failure or criticism; indecisive, over-analyzes; self doubting	Afraid, fearful, indecisive, lacking courage	Thoughtful decision maker
CYNIC - skeptical, mistrustful, pessimistic, always looking for problems, constantly questions decisions, resists innovation	Nasty, pessimistic, paranoid	Investigative mind
RULE BREAKER - ignores rules, tests the limits, does what feels good, risks company resources, does not think through consequences	Inconsistent	Change agent
PERFECTIONIST - micro-manages, clings to details, high need to control, compulsive tendencies, sets unreasonably high standards	Micro-manager nit-picker	Good eye for detail
EGOTIST - self-centered, sense of entitlement and superiority, takes credit for others' accomplishments, hard-nosed competitor	Self-absorbed Bitch	Over confident
PLEASER - depends on others for feedback and approval, eager to please the boss, avoids making decisions alone, won't challenge status quo, refuses to rock the boat	Ingratiating, subservient	Good soldier
HYPER-MOODY - unpredictable emotional swings, moodiness, volatility, potentially explosive outbursts, and vacillation of focus	Emotional or "it's that time"	Intense
DETACHED - withdraws, fades away, fails to communicate, avoids confrontation, aloofness, tunes others' out	Non-assertive	Reserved, thoughtful
UPSTAGER - excessively dramatic and histrionic, dominates meetings and airtime, constantly selling a personal vision and viewpoint, demonstrates inability to go with the tide	Too opinionated	Sells Point of View
ECCENTRIC - quite unusual in their thinking and behaving, perhaps whimsical, weird, out of social step or norms, peculiar in some ways	Not well grounded	Abstract Thinker

Definitions Source: CDR Leadership Risk Assessment, Copyrighted 1998, Tulsa, OK, all rights reserved. www.cdrassessmentgroup.com

In Examples 1 & 2 below, our data show people are not as harsh or punitive in their judgments toward male behaviors as they are with women even when the same trait or risk factor is shared. When comparing the Pew Survey results to our CDR Leadership Character and Risk Assessments, the differences are stunning.

It is clear that, as pointed out with the first part of cracking the code, false perceptions and erroneous stereotypes hurt women leaders far more than men. Below are two examples of what we found:

Example #1

Respondents say that women (85%), not men (5%), are the more EMOTIONAL sex (Pew Leadership Research Survey, Aug 25, 2008)

What the CDR Assessment profile data results says:		
CDR Scale Title	Women Leaders Averaged Score	Men Leaders Averaged Scores
Adjustment	50%	54%
Hyper-Moody	62%	56%

What does this mean?

- There are no significant differences between the “emotionality” of men and women.
- How “emotionality” is expressed varies.
- How “emotionality” is judged or perceived is frequently based on gender bias.
- For women, emotionality is often confused with Interpersonal Sensitivity or Nurturing/Caring and Relationship Building capability.
- Emotionality of male leaders is often associated with anger, impatience, etc. and is considered within accepted norms. Secondly, men are more likely to hide “emotionality” better.

Example #2

Respondents rate women as more MANIPULATIVE than men by 52% to 26%. (Pew Survey, 2008)

What the CDR Assessment profile data results says:		
CDR Scale Title	Women Leaders Averaged Score	Men Leaders Averaged Scores
False Advocate	61%	55%
Inquisitive	50%	59%
Rule Breaker	53%	64%

What does this mean?

- False Advocate is higher for women leaders so there will be more inclination to complain behind the scenes; can manifest as the “martyr” or victim syndrome.
- Men leaders may manipulate or “jockey for position” in bolder ways due to Rule Breaking and Inquisitive scores
- However, the drastic 52% to 26% different rating in the Pew Survey is not supported by the CDR data and is perhaps exaggerated by biased perceptions.

So, we have unraveled the mystery and cracked the code to the glass ceiling:

- 1) Perceptions and cultural biases are not only present, but are hugely off track and significantly damaging to women; and
- 2) Most illuminating and new is that women leaders are Worriers and their own risk factors are self-defeating. They lose visibility, hurt their credibility by not standing their ground, and tend to spend too much time overanalyzing and studying, versus engaging in the toughest leader discussions necessary for advancement.

In all, these findings are good news because the major reason that the glass ceiling hasn't been cracked is because we have not clearly understood the problem. Now that we have measured and can clearly pinpoint and articulate what is actually holding women back, we can begin implementing developmental strategies and solutions that work.