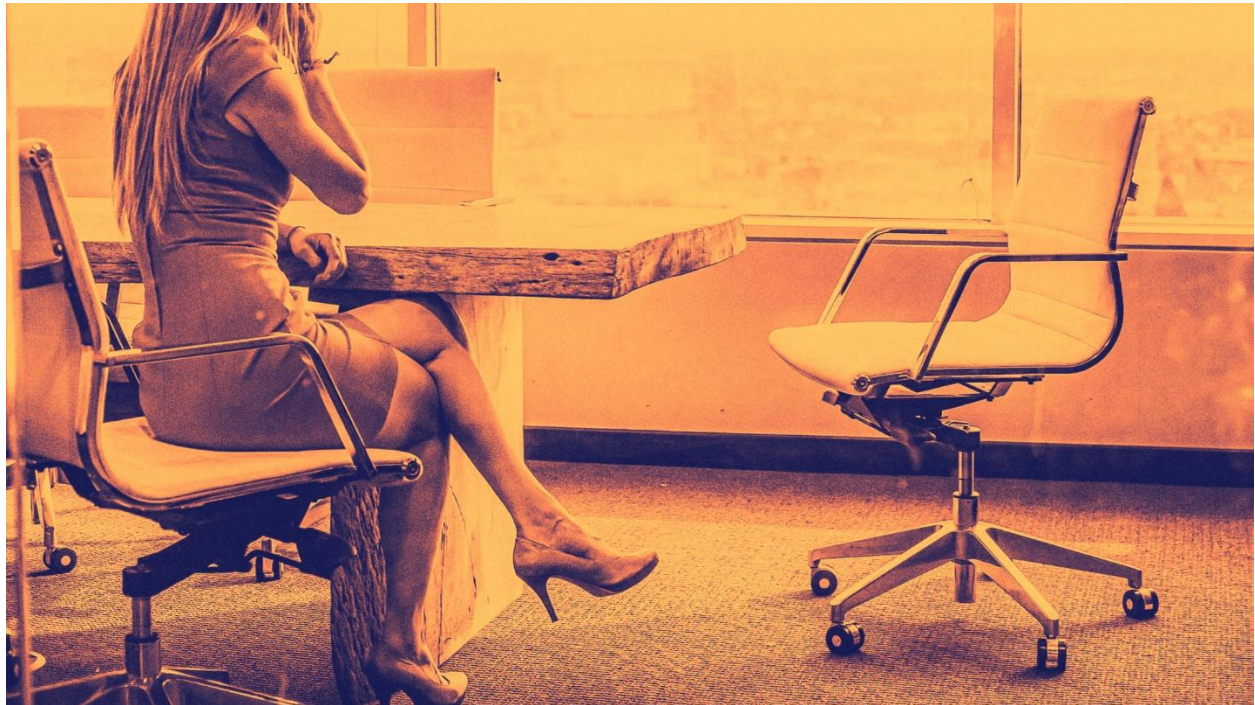


Why We Urgently Need to Dismantle the Leadership Double Standard

Fast Company | Wema Hoover | January 9, 2025

Companies must commit to actionable steps that ensure every leader, regardless of background, has the opportunity to excel and contribute.



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Leadership should be about competence, vision, and results. Yet, for women—especially women of color—leadership is often about navigating a minefield of biases and double standards. Despite making up nearly half of the workforce, women hold only 10% of executive leadership roles in Fortune 500 companies. This goes beyond a simple glass ceiling; it's a complex maze of systemic inequities that consistently obstruct progress.

Why does this gap persist in an era that champions equality and innovation?

The gravitas gap

One of the most insidious biases women in leadership face is the concept of gravitas. This unwritten norm—defined as a person with dignity, presence, and influence—is often tied to traits like executive presence, and authority, and tends to favor men.

Women are often measured against this elusive standard, which pressures them to excel in their roles while conforming to male-oriented views of leadership and pressure to look, and act, all while exuding a traditional feminine style and approach.

Traits that typically earn men respect—assertiveness, directness, and confidence—can be perceived differently when exhibited by women. Women are frequently labeled as “too aggressive,” “not likable enough,” or “lacking in executive presence.” This gravitas gap places a double burden on women, who must balance demonstrating authority with remaining approachable. As a result, women in leadership are constantly forced to navigate conflicting expectations, while men are often assessed solely on their achievements and potential.

Why a double standard persists

The gravitas gap is a facet of a larger double standard that remains deeply ingrained in workplace culture. Consider this: Studies show that 66% of women receive critical feedback on their personality in performance reviews, compared to just 1% of men.

This bias is not only evident in evaluations but is reinforced by cultural norms and media portrayals that frame leadership through a predominantly male lens. From boardrooms to Hollywood, the prevailing archetype of a leader—assertive and commanding—often does not align with societal expectations for women, creating a tightrope for them to walk: assertive yet likable, competent yet approachable, and professional yet attractive.

My encounter with the double standard

Early in my career, a senior female executive advised me to wear skirts or dresses to important meetings—advice she had received from a male colleague. It was clear that excelling wasn’t enough; I also had to fit into the mold of what was deemed “appropriate” for a woman in leadership. I followed the advice, believing it was a necessary step to be taken seriously.

But why must women jump through these extra hoops to be seen as legitimate leaders? Why are appearance and likability given such weight when evaluating leadership potential?

The cost of bias

The double standard carries significant consequences, affecting both fairness and organizational success. McKinsey & Company’s 2023 Why Diversity Matters Even More report found that companies with diverse leadership teams are 25% more likely to outperform their peers. Ignoring the leadership potential of half the population is a strategic misstep businesses can no longer afford.

Women of color face an even steeper climb, facing compounded challenges, often seen as “overly ambitious” or “too outspoken.” This compounded bias makes it harder for them to rise through the ranks, widening the leadership gap even further.

How to tackle the double standard

If we want to change this narrative, organizations need to take deliberate steps:

- Leadership criteria must evolve. Move beyond traditional notions of gravitas and executive presence, that are often subjective and skewed. Focus on competence, skills, and the ability to inspire and lead teams effectively.
- Support systems are crucial. Provide women, especially those from underrepresented groups, with mentors who can guide them through organizational dynamics and sponsors who can advocate for their advancement.
- Bias in evaluations needs to be tackled head-on. Ensure that performance evaluations are consistent and based on clear, objective criteria. Address unconscious biases by training managers to focus on results rather than personal traits while providing feedback regularly.
- Structural change is necessary for long-term progress. Implement policies to address systemic inequities in organizational processes, such as succession, key talent planning, and entry into leadership development programs. These efforts should be targeted to identify and nurture the potential of the full workforce across every demographic within the talent pool.

Why now

Younger generations are already pushing back against these outdated norms, demanding workplaces that reflect their values. This shift requires an integrated approach that aligns with an organization's mission, vision, and purpose. It is driven through a culture of allyship to promote an inclusive workplace that allows each person to reach their full potential. It involves speaking out against biases, supporting underrepresented voices, and creating environments where all talent thrives.

The stakes are high. Organizations face unprecedented challenges, from stark political changes to economic instability, social unrest, and rapid technological change. To navigate this complexity, leaders who bring empathy, and innovation, and are able to leverage a wide range of perspectives and experiences are necessary. Overlooking half the population for leadership roles is not just a loss of opportunity but a strategic failure to tap into the full spectrum of talent and abilities.

Leadership in the 21st century calls for a redefinition—moving beyond outdated stereotypes to foster a culture where everyone's potential is recognized, utilized, and celebrated.

Now is the time for organizations to reshape leadership by fostering inclusion and addressing systemic biases. This requires clear strategies that prioritize optimizing all workforce talent by creating supportive environments for each person to thrive and succeed. Companies must commit to actionable steps that ensure every leader, regardless of background, has the opportunity to excel and contribute.

Building a future where leadership reflects the full range of talent and potential is essential for long-term growth.