



An exploration of stereotypical beliefs about leadership styles: Is transformational leadership a route to women's promotion?

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ABSTRACT

Two experimental studies examined whether gender stereotypes about the transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles constitute an advantage or an impediment for women's access to leadership positions in organizations. The first study investigated the accuracy of *descriptive* gender stereotypes about leadership styles, showing that participants accurately believe that women display more transformational and contingent reward behaviors, and fewer management-by-exception and laissez-faire behaviors than men. The second study investigated *prescriptive* stereotypes about the importance of leadership styles for the promotion of women and men to different levels in organizations. Inspirational motivation was perceived as more important for men than women and especially important for promotion to CEO. In contrast, individualized consideration was perceived as more important for women than men and especially important for promotion to senior management. Consistent with these stereotypical beliefs about leadership, women interested in promotion may be well advised to blend individualized consideration and inspirational motivation behaviors.

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Despite the increasing numbers of female managers in industrialized nations, few women occupy top management positions in large corporations. This situation prevails in most countries, including the United States and the Netherlands, the two nations in which we conducted our research (Catalyst, 2008a, b; European Commission, 2008). This phenomenon of few women in top corporate positions is often ascribed to a discriminatory glass ceiling that prevents women from rising to high positions (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). This article moves beyond this metaphor by examining whether people's stereotypical beliefs about the leadership styles of women and men constitute one of the impediments that lessen women's chances of achieving high positions. Our studies therefore assessed gender stereotypes about leadership styles, which likely influence who is hired and promoted (Agars, 2004).

1. Stereotypical beliefs about male and female leadership styles

Insight concerning the role of gender stereotypes in promotion decisions follows from distinguishing between *descriptive* beliefs, which pertain to the typical attributes of women and men, and *prescriptive* beliefs, which pertain to their ideal or desirable attributes (Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). Descriptive gender stereotypes thus refer to beliefs regarding how women and men *do* behave, whereas prescriptive gender stereotypes refer to beliefs regarding how they *should*

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Table 1
Definitions of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles in the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ).

MLQ scales and subscales	Description of leadership style
Transformational	
Inspirational motivation	Exhibits optimism and excitement about goals and future states
Idealized influence (attribute)	Demonstrates attributes that motivate respect and pride by association with him or her
Idealized influence (behavior)	Communicates values, purpose, and importance of mission
Intellectual stimulation	Examines new perspectives on problem solving and task completion
Individualized consideration	Focuses on development and mentoring of followers and attends to individual needs
Transactional	
Contingent reward	Exchanges rewards for satisfactory performance by followers
Active management-by-exception	Attends to followers' mistakes and failures to meet standards
Passive management-by-exception	Waits until problems become severe before attending and intervening
Laissez-faire	Exhibits widespread absence and lack of involvement during critical junctures

Note. Table reproduced from Eagly, A. H., Johannesen-Schmidt, M. C., & van Engen, M. L. (2003). Transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles: A meta-analysis comparing women and men. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129, 569–591. Published by American Psychological Association and reprinted with permission.

behave. If those who make selection and promotion decisions believe that women's leadership styles are different from men's (descriptive beliefs) or that women should not manifest certain particularly effective leadership styles (prescriptive beliefs), the path to leadership may become more difficult for women than men.

In investigating stereotypical beliefs about leadership styles, we focused on the *full range of leadership* paradigm (Avolio & Bass, 1991), which distinguishes between the transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles. This focus is appropriate because meta-analyses have established the relations of these styles to leaders' effectiveness (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996) as well as sex differences and similarities in these styles (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003).

In the full range of leadership model, transformational leaders inspire employees to go beyond the call of duty, foster creative solutions to problems, serve as mentors, create vision, and articulate plans for achieving this vision. As shown in Table 1, measurement of transformational leadership encompasses several subscales, typically inspirational motivation, two aspects of idealized influence (attributes and behavior), intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. In contrast, transactional leadership entails establishing exchange relationships by rewarding subordinates for a job well done and punishing them for mistakes and omissions. The transactional subscales, as also displayed in Table 1, include contingent reward and management by exception (active and passive). A final leadership style, labeled "laissez-faire," is marked by a general failure to take responsibility for managing.

As established meta-analytically, transformational leadership is generally effective, as is the contingent reward component of transactional leadership, whereas the other aspects of transactional leadership and the laissez-faire style are less effective (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). The effectiveness of these styles appears to be similar across different functional, organizational, and national contexts (Bass, 1997; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Given these clear-cut patterns, it is important to understand what people believe about the prevalence and importance of these styles for women's and men's promotion in organizational hierarchies.

As shown by the meta-analysis that compared female and male managers (Eagly et al., 2003), women exceed men on overall transformational leadership and the contingent reward aspect of transactional leadership, especially on the individualized consideration subscale, which entails mentoring behavior that is supportive of other people. In contrast, men exceed women in management by exception (active and passive) and laissez-faire leadership. In short, although these sex differences are small, women, compared with men, more often lead with effective styles and less often with ineffective styles.

These findings pose an intriguing paradox. If women, even slightly more than men, lead with effective styles, why do women fail to advance at the same rate as their male counterparts (e.g., Maume, 2004; Smith, 2002)? Although there are many possible answers to the question, we investigate gender stereotypes about leadership styles, which might result in women seeming unsuited for leadership (e.g., Agars, 2004; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman & Haynes, 2008). In a first study, we examine the accuracy of *descriptive* gender stereotypes about transformational and transactional leadership. In a second study, we address *prescriptive* stereotypes by investigating the perceived importance of these leadership styles for the promotion of male and female managers to higher ranks.

The opportunity to collect data in the United States and the Netherlands allows an exploration of national differences and similarities in these stereotypes about leadership style. This comparison is facilitated by the validation of the full range of leadership model in the Netherlands (Den Hartog, Van Muijen, & Koopman, 1997) as well as the United States. The Dutch-American comparison of prescriptive beliefs about these leadership styles is especially interesting, given differences in these nations' social values related to achievement, a theme that we develop in introducing Study 2.

2. Study 1: accuracy of descriptive stereotypes about female and male leadership styles

In this study, the accuracy of gender stereotypes about the leadership styles was evaluated in relation to data on the styles of male and female managers. Accuracy is important because, if decision makers should accord advantages in transformational and transactional leadership to men rather than women, these beliefs could hinder women's promotion.

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