The Edge: Different pressures face women in leadership positions

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With so much discussion on the need for diversity in top level positions, taking a look at women who currently serve in leadership positions and how they are fairing, is a good way to gain a better understanding of workplace culture.

A recent study from the Journal of Health and Social Behavior examines the role job authority, the extent to which one has control over others’ work, has on happiness. Job authority is associated with benefits such as higher earnings, a flexible schedule, and the ability to have ownership over one’s work. These qualities are typically associated with higher-status occupations and generally result in positive psychological outcomes. Stated simply, the more ownership we have over our time and work the happier we are at work.

The study revealed some stark differences amongst men and women in how they experience job satisfaction when in positions of authority. For example, women who have the ability to hire and fire employees, influence over pay, and ownership over their work expressed more depressive symptoms than men with jobs of the same characteristics.

So what might explain this? Women in positions of power are more likely to face discrimination and harassment in the workplace than men in power positions. Women who reach top-level positions defy traditional gendered expectations. Men in positions of power are normalized, their
power is legitimated because this is the cultural script we are used to seeing. Women, on the other hand, have to evaluate their actions and question if their tone and practices are going to fulfill the gendered expectations people have of them.

Women in positions of power face impossible dichotomies. If they are too feminine they may not be taken seriously by their coworkers; if they don’t fit the feminine script enough, they may be judged negatively by their peers. If they come off as too strict, they are likely to be seen as fulfilling the “typical” female boss stereotype and viewed as cold. If they are too nice, their colleagues may not respect them.

Men do not have to worry about people thinking they are in a position of authority because they are fulfilling a company quota; they don’t have to worry about their peers thinking they earned their way to the top simply because they are male. Females in position of power not only have to take all of these notions into consideration, but they have to combat them.

Women currently represent 5.4% of CEO positions of Fortune 1000 companies. For women in positions of power, they are most likely there alone. The lack of representation of women in higher-powered positions is key, because the more we see women in these positions, the more normalized it becomes, and even more important, the more influence they have over workplace culture and practices.

Broadly, changing the way women are portrayed in media, and expanding our definition of what it means to be a leader, will help to improve workplace cultures that still cater to and perpetuate the dominant ideology of a male-dominated business culture. However, we also have to look to male leaders in the workplace and evaluate the tone they set for workplace culture. We need to educate leaders in their companies on the impact micro-level aggressions can have on the way an individual feels and performs at work.

For business leaders in the community, spending the time and resources needed to understand the often unconscious ways we act on and verbalize the stereotypes of women, is a good place to start. From there, evaluating the structure of your organization, how individuals are promoted, the type of mentoring and networking events your organization supports, and creating an environment where there are processes in place that allow individuals to confidently express their experiences in your organization is key to developing a workplace culture that is welcoming to all.

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