# TALENT Quarterly

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**About *Talent Quarterly***

Our mission at ***Talent Quarterly*** is to make organizations more successful by providing their leaders with the science-based, insightful and practical information needed to make critical talent decisions.

We accomplish that mission by publishing serious, provocative and practical articles and interviews that raise the quality of dialogue about talent.

We believe the current dialogue on talent issues is bi-polar – either bloggy and sensational or academic and detached. We believe that serious dialogue requires more than 500-word stories. We believe that corporate executives and human resource leaders should take ownership for this dialogue.

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# Changing the Narrative

## on Why Women Aren't Reaching the Top

Everyone is talking about the challenges that women face in reaching the top of the corporate world. This is an important discussion because, despite considerable effort to increase their representation in upper management, we've made little progress. According to the research firm Catalyst, women comprised 11.2% of corporate officers in Fortune 500 companies in 1998; 15 years later that figure had nudged up to only 14.6%.

We have created a narrative on the gender agenda—a story we tell over and over about why it is important to achieve gender parity and what prevents it from happening. This narrative is popular, largely because it provides a tidy explanation for a messy problem by playing on common stereotypes about differences between women and men. But gender stereotypes do not apply very well to corporate managers. We need a new narrative, one that better represents reality and leads to solutions that will help competent women reach the top.

**Popular Narrative vs Research Evidence**

Let's begin with the current narrative. It features three familiar themes. The first is that there is a female leadership advantage, based on the idea that today's more collaborative and connected workplace is better suited to the relational, empathic, and team-oriented style that comes naturally for women. But, the second theme points out, there is a glass ceiling formed by a barrier of invisible bias that gives preference to masculine qualities like confidence, assertiveness, and competitiveness for senior leadership roles. The third theme explains how this puts female leaders in a double bind: 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.

There are some serious problems with this narrative. For one thing, although experimental research in laboratories with student samples often does find that women are more likely to display stereotypically feminine behaviors like listening, supporting, and warmth, field research with actual managers does not. Male and female managers have been compared on such stylistic differences as task focus versus relationship focus, results orientation versus interpersonal orientation, and autocratic decision-making versus democratic decision-making. Meta-analyses, which summarize dozens of studies with thousands of managers, find hardly any overall difference on these measures. The one exception is that female managers tend to be slightly more democratic than male managers, but this is a very small difference (albeit statistically significant because of large sample sizes). By far the stronger trend is that female and male managers tend to be more alike than different in their use of these behaviors.

**Rob Kaiser, M.S., (rob@kaiserleadership.com)**, is the President of Kaiser Leadership Solutions, which develops and distributes cutting-edge tools for leadership assessment and development. His latest books are *Fear Your Strengths* (Berrett-Koehler, 2013) and *The Perils of Accentuating the Positives* (Hogan Press, 2009).

**Wanda T. Wallace, PhD., (Wanda.Wallace@leadershipforuminc.com)**, is the President and CEO of Leadership Forum, Inc., which coaches leaders, builds teams, and consults with organizations on leadership capability and managing diversity. She is the author of *Reaching the Top: Factors that Impact the Careers and Retention of Senior Women Leaders* (Lulu.com, 2008).

At the same time, there are more pronounced differences between male and female managers on nongender stereotypical leadership behaviors. A meta-analysis of transformational versus transactional styles found that women were rated higher on the transformational qualities of "idealized influence" (walking the talk) and "individualized consideration" (responding to the unique needs of different people). The biggest gender differences were on transactional leadership, where women were rated higher on "contingent reward" (providing reinforcement for satisfactory performance) and men were rated higher on "management by exception" (reacting to problems rather than proactively addressing them). Interestingly, men were also rated higher on the non-leadership dimension "laissez faire" (an uninvolved, disengaged style). In fact, the largest differences are the higher scores for men on the passive behaviors.

Although these academic research findings contradict popular stereotypes, they do square with our findings in field work with large, global corporations. This work includes a range of data-based applications, from assessing thousands of executives for selection and development, to coaching dozens of executives and their teams, to designing and delivering leadership programs (including those designed for women leaders), to conducting gender audits to help CEOs and HR leaders better understand how their leadership cultures impact women. This work has provided both broad and deep exposure to gender dynamics and illustrates how the academic findings play out in the real world.

For instance, in practice we find that many men


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who may seem passive and laissez faire are actually quite savvy about which battles are worth fighting, whereas some active and engaged women overstep their bounds. One male executive recently confided in private that he agreed a junior male manager was too hard on his staff. He went on to explain, though, that he would not confront the junior manager because he was unwilling to step on the toes of that person's boss. In contrast, a female counterpart felt it was wrong to not address the issue and called out the junior manager, which created friction in her relationship with his boss.

### Data-Based Gender Audits

We have plenty of anecdotes like this, but the gender audits we have conducted are even more telling because they rely on objective data and large samples. This work helps individual companies get a better handle on why so few women reach the top by systematically comparing their female executives and high-potentials to their male counterparts.

Key to our approach is using matched samples: We pair each woman in the database with a man at the same organizational level with a similar age and amount of managerial experience. The features of the measure of leadership are important too. We use the Leadership Versatility Index, a 360 that utilizes a unique "Goldilocks" scale ranging from "too little" to "the right amount" to "too much." The behaviors that are assessed include a pair of gender-stereotypical dimensions—Forceful (using personal and position power) versus Enabling (creating conditions for others to contribute)—and a pair of nongender stereotypical, business-oriented dimensions—Strategic (positioning the company for the future) versus Operational (focusing on short-term results).

We analyze the 360 data first for evidence of gender bias and then for differences in behavior. For instance, evidence of bias is indicated if men rate female managers more harshly than women rate them, or if male bosses rate women more harshly than their male subordinates do, and so on. Across the six companies we have studied—representing the financial services, high-tech, and consumer-products industries, and involving corporations headquartered in the United States, Europe, and Australia—we have found very little evidence for systematic gender bias.

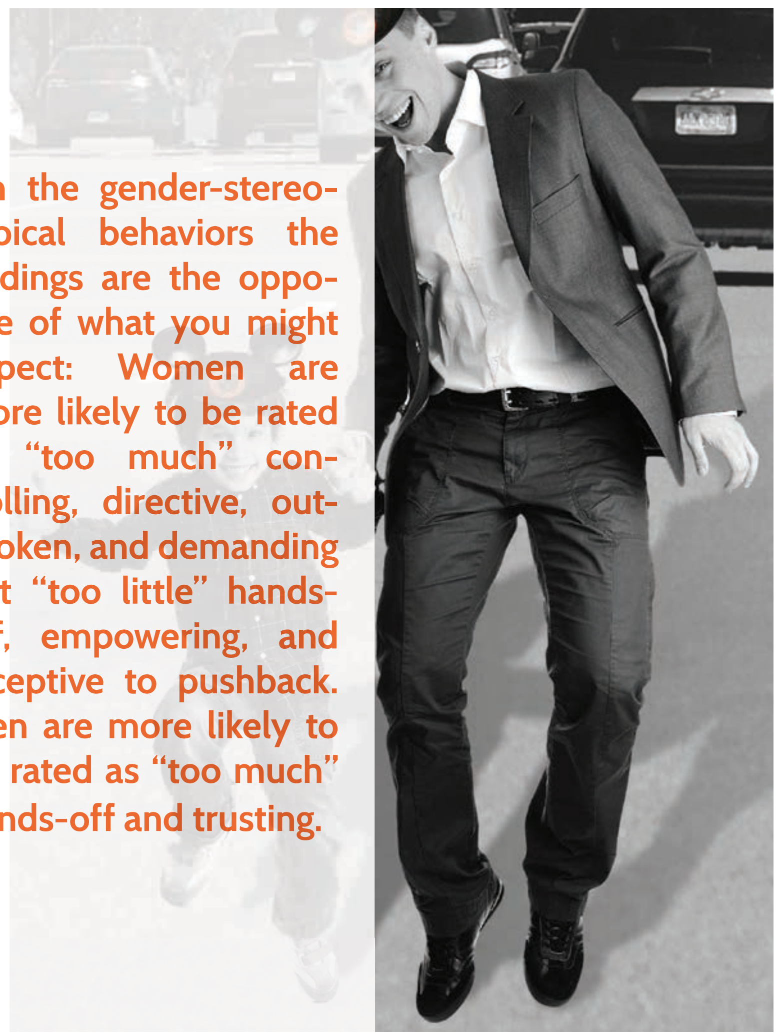
The dominant trend is that men and women are rated similarly by male and female bosses, peers, and subordinates. For instance, our analysis tests a total of 1,024 effects involving gender. We have found as few as 21 (2.1%) in one company and as many as 35 (3.4%) in another to be statistically significant. The proportion of significant effects is fewer than the 5% to be expected on the basis of chance with a 95% level of confidence.

In three of the companies, however, we did find that male coworkers were more likely than female coworkers to rate women as too defensive and too conservative. This is the only evidence suggesting gender bias on the part of men. Surprisingly, the strongest evidence for bias comes from ratings from female raters, who rate women more harshly than do male raters. And their self-ratings are the harshest of all: Women leaders are particularly self-critical.

We analyze differences in behavior by averaging the ratings across coworkers, and do not include self-ratings. Again, overall there is more similarity than difference in the behavior of male and female managers. A few noteworthy differences, however, do show up across the various organizations.

The findings are the opposite of what you might expect on the gender-stereotypical behaviors: Women are more likely to be rated as "too much" on such Forceful behaviors as controlling, directive, outspoken, and demanding but "too little" on the Enabling behaviors, hands-off, empowering, and receptive to pushback. Men are more likely to be rated as "too much" hands-off.

The differences are even more pronounced on the nongender-stereotypical behaviors on the business side, Strategic and Operational. Women are rated better ("the right amount") on results-orientation, tactical, attention to detail, and follow-through compared to men who are more often rated "too little" on these operational behaviors. However, men are rated better on strategic behaviors, whereas women



**On the gender-stereotypical behaviors the findings are the opposite of what you might expect: Women are more likely to be rated as "too much" controlling, directive, outspoken, and demanding but "too little" hands-off, empowering, and receptive to pushback. Men are more likely to be rated as "too much" hands-off and trusting.**

tend to be rated "too little" on big picture perspective, growth orientation, and risk-taking.

**How Women Become Boxed In**

The findings from our gender audits are not unique; they converge with other field studies. For instance, in the 2009 *Harvard Business Review* article, "Women and the Vision Thing," Herminia Ibarra and Otilia Obodaru reported results from their analysis of executive-education participants at INSEAD. They concluded that today's women leaders "owe their success to a strong command of the technical elements of their jobs and a nose-to-the-grindstone focus on accomplishing quantifiable objectives." They went on to explain how this leads to the perception that women leaders are better at hands-on execution than strategic thinking.

In our coaching practices, we see this pattern time and again. High-potential women are rewarded early in their careers for minding the details and getting results. As a boss, such a go-getter is the ideal person to have reporting to you: She will get things done—even mission impossible. Furthermore, many high-potential corporate women are perfectionists. So not only will she get it done, but it probably will be done better than you expected.

The task may be difficult and she may have to push people pretty hard (since she doesn't have the formal authority). If it gets too bad, you can step in and smooth things over. Otherwise, she handles the heavy lifting. And, she gets rewarded for this; everyone sees her as your right-hand person. All is well (except perhaps for her stress level), until you leave for a new role. As a top-performing number two, she expects to get your job. But no one else sees it that way. To them, she is the implementer who gets it done, not the ideas person.

She has ideas, of course, but she rarely brings them up—and when she does it's often in a practical language that sounds tactical and not particularly visionary. And yes, she has rubbed a few people the wrong way. But, as her manager, you never gave her candid feedback on her "pushiness" because it's awkward and because, frankly, you benefited from her doing the dirty work. To make matters worse, the organization assumes she is not ambitious for the top job and that she prefers the role she has because it lets her balance her life.

**Toward a More Realistic Narrative**

The popular narrative—involving a female leadership advantage, the glass ceiling, and a double bind—is an oversimplification that does not jibe with the data. Common gender stereotypes may apply to many women in the population at large but they do not apply to most driven, career-oriented women trying to succeed in a corporate hierarchy.

We believe that the main reason women are not making it to the top is not because they are too feminine or because they are not sufficiently masculine. It is because they come on a bit too strong and get themselves boxed in carving out a niche by executing someone else's agenda. They get stuck in the technical expert, implementer role and are seen as not strategic enough to lead the enterprise. Further, they are so reliable in this role that they are often considered too valuable to put in other roles, roles that could broaden their perspective, expose them to working across boundaries, and connect their focus on execution to a bigger picture. There is a silent conspiracy among men and women themselves—everyone is complicit.

If we must have a narrative that plays on stereotypes to keep the popular conversation going, we suggest a new direction. It is kind of like dad proposes a family vacation to Disney World, and mom does all the research and planning: Which resort to stay in, when to go to what park, which meal reservations to make, which rides to go on in what order and when to get the fast passes, what clothes to pack from shorts and swimsuits to sweatshirts and parkas, and all the little things it takes to make the vacation a success. In getting it all arranged, mom got a little stressed out and short-tempered—she may have even hollered at the kids. But everyone had a blast. And they all agreed: dad had a great idea to go to Disney. TQ