Episode 7: Myth – Good leadership is masculine leadership

Overview: What makes a good leader? When you hear this question, do you think about traits like assertiveness, ambition, and determination?

A lot of people may be surprised to realize that as a society, we often associate good leadership with stereotypically masculine traits. In fact, a range of different traits—including both stereotypically masculine and feminine traits—make effective leaders. This episode delves into the myth that good leadership is masculine leadership and explores how we can facilitate more diverse and representative leaders across our workplaces and our societies.

Featured Guests:

Dr. Felix Danbold, Assistant Professor, University College London School of Management

Dr. Joyce He, Assistant Professor of Management and Organizations, University of California Los Angeles

Research Mentioned:

1. Gaucher, D., Frisen, J., and Kay, A.C. (2011). Evidence that gendered wording in job advertisements exists and sustains gender inequality. *Journal of Personal Social Psychology* 101(1), 109-28.
2. Cheryan, S. and Markus, H.R. (2020). Masculine Defaults: Identifying and Mitigating Hidden Cultural Biases. *Psychological Review* 127(6), 1022-1052.
3. He, J.C. and Kang, S.K. (2021). Covering in Cover Letters: Gender and Self-Presentation in Job Applications. *Academy of Management Journal* 64(4).
4. Danbold, F. and Bendersky, C. (2019). Balancing Professional Prototypes Increases the Valuation of Women in Male-Dominated Professions. *Organization Science* 31(1).
5. He, J.C., Kang, S.K. and Lacetera, N. (2021). Opt-out choice framing attenuates gender differences in the decision to compete in the laboratory and in the field. *PNAS* 118(42).
6. Danbold, F. and Huo, Y.J. (2017). Men's defense of their prototypicality undermines the success of women in STEM initiatives. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 72, 57-66.

Transcript:

Felix Danbold: If a company's procedures for determining who can be a good leader rely on whether or not an employee possesses stereotypically masculine traits, this is going to systematically disadvantage women's advancement in that workplace. People are naturally attuned to what gets rewarded and what doesn't, so this association between masculinity and success will spread through the broader culture and send the signal this is "a man's job."

Sonia Kang: That was Dr. Felix Danbold, talking about what happens when we implicitly associate leadership with masculinity. Welcome to Busted, a podcast by the Institute for Gender and the Economy, otherwise known as GATE. In this podcast, we bust prominent myths about gender and the economy that are all around us. We're gonna team up with leading experts to chat about what the research says and give you the tools you need to bust each myth yourself. I'm Dr. Sonia Kang, Canada Research Chair in Identity, Diversity, and Inclusion at the University of Toronto, and my pronouns are she and her.

Carmina Ravanera: And I'm Carmina Ravanera, Senior Research Associate at GATE, and my pronouns are she and her.

Sonia: So for this episode, we're going to be talking about leadership. The big question here is, what makes a good leader?

Carmina: It's an important question! I think many of us have biases related to leadership that we might not even be aware of. When asked that question – what makes a good leader - a lot of people might come up with traits like confidence, or authority, and decisiveness. Basically, leadership is often associated with traits that are stereotypically associated with masculinity – even if we don't realize it.

Sonia: Right. So today we're going to bust the myth that masculine leadership makes good leadership. This means we're going to question those assumptions that people *have* about what makes an effective leader. First off, tons of research shows that masculinity is valued super highly in the workplace, even in white-collar, professional workplaces that present themselves as inclusive and bias-free.

Carmina: Yeah. And that goes back to, what *is* masculinity exactly? It's not just like, being physically strong or liking sports. We've talked about this in our previous episodes: masculinity refers to the qualities and attributes that society associates with boys and men. And if you're a man and you meet those expectations, society will probably reward you for it. I talked to Dr. Felix Danbold, Assistant Professor at University College London School of Management, about how those norms show up at work and in leadership.

Felix: So when I ask you what does it mean to be a leader, you'll probably automatically start listing some traits or adjectives that you associate with leadership. For example, you may say a leader is someone who is knowledgeable and dedicated and dynamic, but you may also say they're someone who's assertive, decisive, and at times domineering. And this set of traits that you associate with what it means to be a leader make up what social psychologists would call your leader prototype. And leader prototypes are important because they are how we judge people's fit with certain roles, like how good do I think this person can be in a leadership position? However, what can happen is that we start to associate the prototype with membership to other groups. So for example, if our definition of a leader really emphasizes traits that we think of as stereotypically masculine, like being assertive or domineering, that's going to lead to an association forming in our minds between being stereotypically masculine and being a good leader. The same thing can happen of course when we're thinking about specific jobs. If your prototype of a whitecollar professional contains stereotypically masculine traits like being willing and able to work all hours of the day, then you're also going to form a relationship between being a good white collar professional and being a man. If these beliefs are shared at a company level, which is what typically happens, then this masculine prototype is going to show up in things like the criteria used for hiring and promoting people. And this reinforces and rewards the idea that masculinity is a key part of succeeding in these roles.

Sonia: So basically, if we have a lot of overlap between what we think of as masculine traits and what we think of as "good leader" traits, that's going to create or contribute to the idea that men and leaders are like one and the same group.

Carmina: Yeah. And I also talked to Dr. Joyce He, Assistant Professor of Management and Organizations at University of California, Los Angeles. She's our former colleague at GATE.

Sonia: and my former PhD student – love Joyce.

Carmina: (laughs) Yes, so Joyce mentioned how the value of masculinity in workplaces can also be communicated more subtly.

Joyce He: There's also a lot of research showing that masculinity can present in much more subtle ways. And I think that's often the more pernicious ways that can affect inequality, gender inequality, as well. And so for instance there's a lot of research by others in the field looking at what we call ambient cues in the environment. So these are kind of like subtle environmental cues, this could even be things like you know, the washrooms, right? How many women's washrooms and how many men's washrooms, that could be a really subtle environmental cue that says hey maybe you don't belong here, right, because there are just

kind of more washrooms for men, for instance. Even posters or images, that kind of masculinity, or more of this kind of cultural aspects that appeal more to men and things like that, you know. It's very subtle but again can really affect women's belonging. And so there's actually research by Gaucher, Friesen, and Kay dating 2011, where they found that males on new jobs, for instance like engineering, they tend to have language that is more, in their job postings, that are more stereotypically masculine. So words that we stereotypically associate with men like assertive, dominant, competitive, ambitious, independent. Words like that. And they find that this kind of language, even though it's very subtle, can also send the signal of hey, maybe you don't belong. They don't belong here. And as a result, women actually find a job in less appealing, so they're less likely to apply. So that's kind of one way that masculinity can manifest even in the signals people send out about who is welcome to apply.

Sonia: Yeah, Joyce and I did this study about language in job postings and how it sends signals to applicants about who the organization sees as the ideal candidate. That language can basically suggest what kinds of identities companies prefer, who they're hoping will apply. We'll come back to that in a second. But overall, there's a lot of different ways that organizations show that they value masculinity. It's not only in the way they expect people to act; it's something that can appear all over the place.

Carmina: Right. And going off that point, I asked our experts what they think happens when that valuing of masculine traits permeates the workplace, even in subtle ways. Here's what they had to say.

Felix: If a company's procedures for determining who can be a good leader rely on whether or not an employee possesses stereotypically masculine traits, this is going to systematically disadvantage women's advancement in that workplace. People are naturally attuned to what gets rewarded and what doesn't, so this association between masculinity and success will spread through the broader culture and send a signal that this is "a man's job." Certainly, women can try to act more stereotypically masculine at work, but the research is abundantly clear that that backfires. Women who try to act more masculine typically get punished for acting counter stereotypically. Simply put, if your company is failing to promote women, rather than trying to fix the women, you should reexamine what it is about your expectations of what a leader should look like that is giving men an unfair advantage.

Joyce: You know I think, typically we think about masculinity, is a gender inequality problem because it really keeps women out of these male-dominated jobs. But I think it does actually have more far-reaching effects that just women. And so we know from the gender identification literature that both women and men—first of all there's, gender exists beyond those categories. But even within those categories, just because you identify as a woman or you identify as a man, doesn't mean that you automatically kind of identify strongly, right, with that category. And so we know that from the gender identification literature that individuals kind of differ in the extent to which they see their gender category as very central to them, right? And so to what extent is being a woman a large part of my identity? Or it's kind of a smaller part, that is a very small fraction of my identity, that's not really what I identify strongly as. Taking into account that there is variation even in gender identification, that has implications for the extent to which these kind of cues, right, affect us. So that's what we kind of looked at in this research on masculine language. And as I mentioned we found that job postings with more masculine language tend to actually attract more==we see that more men apply, but specifically we find that it's actually more men who identify strongly with their kind of male category. We actually did one study where we presented this language and asked a bunch of women and men to just describe, how does this language makes you feel? Would you want to apply for a job that has this kind of language? And perhaps unsurprisingly we found that women kind of say that this language makes me think that they are looking for a man, so I'm not going to apply. Or that I don't really identify with those traits. But we also found that a surprising number of men, so actually 1/3 of our male respondents, also said, "I don't really identify this kind of language. I don't really feel like I present in a very stereotypically masculine way." So not kind of male enough for the kind of applicant that they're looking for with this language. So I think, you know, that really signals that masculinity and this kind of masculine default, which is what you know call it, that has a more detrimental effect on all individuals who don't fit with that kind of stereotypical, prototypical male identity. Which includes both women and men, and any kind of other individuals who doesn't present as super masculine. I think it is kind of worth thinking about, the more exclusionary signals you're sending to a broader set of individuals.

Sonia: So, these ideas about who *fits* into a certain role, or who makes a good leader, are part of a larger system that's built around gender norms. And if we uphold those norms – both at work and in society – not only are *women* excluded but also *anyone* who doesn't fit in with those masculine norms. That might be men who don't feel like the prototypical masculine man, or maybe non-binary people who don't align with gendered expectations. Really anyone who doesn't identify themselves as capital M *masculine*. It's a way that organizations subtly contribute to gender segregation in different jobs or industries.

Carmina: And if workplaces are excluding this huge group of people who don't fit this traditionally masculine mould, they could be missing out on some great leaders. We know from research that there are so many qualities that can make people good leaders, not just things like ambition, or being competitive and assertive.

Sonia: Absolutely. I also want to go back to something Felix said in that last clip -- that if women try and fit themselves into these roles, try and show that they *do* have masculine traits, it can actually backfire. Joyce and I studied this exact thing. We looked at how women use "covering" in cover letters when applying to male-dominated jobs. They'll leave out stereotypically feminine traits, like being cooperative, helpful, and understanding, to try and help them get the job. As if those are bad things to be!

Carmina: Yeah, that's such a great study, and the results are kind of depressing, right? Here's how Joyce talked about the outcomes when women try to make themselves look less feminine.

Joyce: We actually find that women who use less feminine language, right, when they downplay femininity, that actually, ironically, they're less likely to get the job even when it's for a male-dominated job. And this is kind of surprising, but I think it makes sense we think about the different stereotypes that we hold right. So there are descriptive stereotypes, like women tend to be more understanding and empathetic. But there's also prescriptive stereotypes, which dictate the ways that we expect women and men to self-present, right. So it might be that, you know, we expect that woman should be humble and empathetic and understanding. And so when women are kind of downplaying their feminine identity, or using less feminine language to describe themselves, they're in a way kind of violating those gendered rules for how they're expected to self-present. And that's how we see that kind of penalty. So I think it's a paper that shows that even when women are trying to kind of overcome some of these barriers by anticipating discrimination by downplaying their identity, they actually run into this other barrier of the prescriptive norms that we have about gender and gendered behaviour.

Sonia: Basically, it's a sticky situation to figure out. When women do try and align themselves with those masculine gender norms to get a job, it doesn't tend to work out for them. So, the question is, what *can* we do about it?

Carmina: Well, the first thing we should emphasize here is that it's the organization's job to fix this stuff. We shouldn't place the burden on women and other marginalized groups to navigate these complex structures and figure out how to solve the problem of inequality. These norms and their consequences are so deeply entrenched. In the end, even *if* women and other minorities manage to fight the bias and make it into a leadership role they want, the system will *still* continue to make things hard or even impossible for them. Here's what Joyce had to say about this.

Joyce: I've been talking to people about it, and one question I often get, especially from the media, as well, you know, what strategies do you advise women to do, right? What should women do, should they use a lot more feminine language or should they not? And I always have a lot of trouble answering that question because I feel like it is often in some ways the wrong kind of question we're asking. Because I think you know, my research and other research as well, shows that it's very complicated to kind of have to navigate the system of all these different stereotypes and rules. I think it's kind of unfair and kind of ineffective, right, to put the onus on minorities and women to have to navigate these biases. And at the end of the day, I think it's really up to the organizations to think about, what are ways that we as organizations can root out bias, right, which harms everyone, from our selection processes or personnel

selection processes? To kind of look at the root of the problem, which is the fact that these biases exist in the labour market.

Sonia: Right. And obviously it's not something that one organization can change on its own: this is a huge, systemic, societal issue. But organizations can play a big role.

Carmina: Yeah. I asked Felix about how organizations can think about leadership differently, in ways that aren't just defined by masculinity.

Felix: So the ideal answer is to just do away with gender stereotypes. Unfortunately, though, gender stereotypes are deeply embedded in our culture. That's not to say that things can't change. People do stereotype women as more competent than they did 60-70 years ago. But this change took decades. And even with this change in stereotypes around competence, people still see women as inherently more warm and compassionate and men as inherently more competitive and ambitious. So if we can't change people's gender stereotypes, what can we do? Well, we can think about redefining, for example, what it means to be a leader. Targeting these prototypes. Some may argue, though, that stereotypically masculine traits like being assertive or ambitious are actually valuable to leadership. That may be true. So rather than denying the importance of these traits, perhaps we can give equal value to traits that are more stereotypically feminine, which the research shows are often associated with more effective leadership. So for example, traits like perspective-taking and being present and attentive with subordinates are all things that women leaders tend to do more than men. And these are all things that are associated positively with leadership effectiveness. If companies ensure that stereotypically masculine and stereotypically feminine traits are recognized as equally important, a strategy that my co-author Corinne Bendersky and I called "prototype balancing," this should not only reduce bias against women in leadership but also make for more effective leaders overall.

Sonia: So, I think the takeaway from Felix there is, we have to rethink how we're defining "good" leaders – or really how we're defining success in any other gender prototypical role. We need to shine a light on tired stereotypes and assumptions and force organizations to move beyond them. And I think one way to do that is to redesign systems in our organizations (and society) so that biases and stereotypes play less of a role in determining people's outcomes.

Carmina: Yup. Joyce gave a good example from her dissertation research on how organizations can use a systemic solution to level the playing field for people of different genders when it comes to competition and promotion.

Joyce: Other work that I've been doing is my dissertation work, looking at what can organizations do to kind of debias, right or remove it by redesign of their promotion processes. One major gap, gender gap, that we see at organizations exists at the promotion level, where women are less likely than men to get promoted to these senior management positions. And so it turns out that when we think about most promotions they typically require people to self-nominate or to apply, right. And so within the behavioral insights, nudge literature, we know that that's one form of choice architecture, which is an opt-in frame, right. So by default, if you don't do anything you're kind of not considered in the pool. You have to really opt in or put yourself into the pool in order to be in the running, right. But we also know from this choice architecture literature that another way of framing that choice is opt-out. And so opt-out involves automatic enrollment into some desired behavior, unless you actively opt out, or kind of say that you don't want to be considered. And so what this is means is that, perhaps a way to reframe these promotions is that everyone who passes some kind of qualification threshold is automatically considered for the promotion, unless they actively opt out, right. So that's a…you still have the same choice of whether to apply or not. You can still opt out you don't want to, right, be considered. But that changes the default of the choice. And so in my dissertation I was interested in understanding, what if we apply that insight to promotions? Can we close the gender gap there? And so I ran a series of studies, and in one representative study I looked at choices to compete in the lab. That's where you're typically, where we see that, you know, these competitions are very similar to promotions right, because promotions require competition. And we have multiple candidates competing against each other for some winner-takes-all-prize. And so in the lab I looked at this, where we had participants do this math task and what we found is

that even know men and women perform equally as well on the math task, women are much less likely than men to compete in the opt-in provision, right. So they're less likely to kind of put their names forward for the competition. We see that men are competing at around 72% and the women at 47%. but then when you change the default of that choice so that everyone is competing automatically with the choice to opt out of that competition, the gender gap closes almost completely. As soon as we see that men compete at 76% and women are choosing to compete, or to stay in competition, at 75%.

Sonia: This is such a great finding because it suggests that if organizations make small changes – like changing a promotion opportunity from opt-in to opt-out – it could have a big effect in reducing gender inequality in leadership or other roles that tend to be dominated by men. And there's quite a bit of other research that shows how systemic changes can help women advance—we'll put some links in the show notes. But one thing I wanna ask is – what happens when people (like men) feel like they're being pushed out of leadership because of initiatives like these? I've read some of Felix's research which shows that these kinds of initiatives can lead to anxiety for the prototypical or dominant group and they push back. What can companies do to stop that from happening?

Carmina: I'm glad you asked, because backlash towards equity and equality is something organizations have to deal with All. The. Time. Here's what Felix had to say.

Felix: Well, just because there may be some backlash that doesn't mean that organizations should shy away from doing what's right. Some men may leave a company because they can't handle women in leadership positions. Losing those individuals may ultimately be a good thing. However, as discussed, moving on from a stereotypically masculine leader prototype doesn't mean just replacing it with a stereotypically feminine one. Often a balance of stereotypically masculine and stereotypically feminine traits is what's needed in many roles. This is something that men can still see themselves reflected in. Expecting both of all employees can help minimize backlash and bring out what's best in everyone.

Sonia: I think it's important to remember here that breaking down that link between leadership and masculinity will make things more inclusive for a huge range of people, not just women, but anyone who doesn't fit those stereotypical roles. So a lot of men could benefit as well, particularly men from historically marginalized groups.

Carmina: Definitely.

Sonia: So if I was to hear someone say that good leaders have to have these masculine traits, what could I say to bust that myth?

Carmina: Joyce and Felix gave me some good tips!

Felix: The data just doesn't support this. On the whole, gender differences in leadership effectiveness are small, and when there are differences, there is growing evidence that women are more effective leaders than men. This is especially true when it comes to protecting the safety of employees and the environment, which should be top priorities for companies given the multiple crises we face today.

Joyce: I mean first of all I think part of the reason why we think masculinity is valued for leadership is that there's a perception that other people might think that as well, right. So it's more this kind of you know, I think that there's this norm that masculinity is valued in leadership, and as a result I'm also going to subscribe to that norm because that's what is accepted in society. But I think there's a lot of research that's been coming out over the years showing that there are these stereotypes of leadership, ideas we have about leadership are changing, they're shifting to be less stereotypically masculine, right. And so, norms are dynamic, they've been changing over time; we see that even gender stereotypes are changing over time. And so just doing making people aware of the fact that there is all this evidence coming out that not everyone thinks this way, that actually the norms are changing. That's one way to kind of break that cycle of, "well everyone thinks this way so I'm going to think that way." And so perhaps that's one way to say that, well, evidence shows that we are shifting away from this very traditional notion of masculine leadership.

Carmina: Overall, I think you could ask: what evidence do you have that good leaders have to be stereotypically masculine? Mention that research shows that these ideas about effective leadership have been shaped by rigid gender norms that disadvantage anyone who doesn't fit in with them. You could also talk about how gender norms don't have to be this way – we could open the doors to many great leaders in our organizations and our society if we rethink what traits make someone a good leader. So let's get the final verdict on this myth. Felix, what do you say, is good leadership masculine leadership?

Felix: I think the science is pretty clear that this myth is busted.

Sonia: With that, make sure to subscribe so you don't miss our next episode of Busted! We'll be busting the myth that women don't negotiate. Make sure to join us then.

Carmina: Until next time, happy mythbusting!