

Hiring Women into Senior Leadership Positions

“Women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions. This underrepresentation is at least partly driven by gender stereotypes that associate men, but not women, with achievement-oriented, agentic traits (e.g., assertive and decisive). These stereotypes are expressed and perpetuated in language, with women being described in less agentic terms than men.” (Lawon et al., 2022).

In the cited paper, the authors “show that hiring women into leadership positions—as CEOs or members of executive boards—can provide pathways to systemically and positively changing gender stereotypes encoded in language. They suggest two processes by which increased female representation could induce systemic and positive language change: 1) unconscious, incidental shifts in attitudes toward the appointed women and/or, 2) conscious, strategic intention to signal the agentic qualities of organizations’ female leaders.” (Lawon et al., 2022).

Quick facts

Barriers addressed



Institutional Norms and Practices

Lack of women in policy or financial institution leadership

Segment focus

1 2 3 4

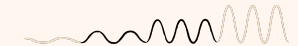
Geography

Global

Sources

[Lawson et al., 2022.](#)

Customer Journey Relevance



Key stakeholders involved

S&P 500 companies

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Key activities

“Study 1 aimed to test whether hiring a female CEO is related to an increase in the association of women with agency between the periods before and after hire. To capture organizations’ outward-facing language, the authors extracted 1) DEF 14A filings (definitive proxy statements), 2) 10-K filings (annual reports), and 3) transcripts of investor calls for all S&P (Standard and Poor’s) 500 organizations in a 10 year window between 2009 and 2018. They identified the subset of these organizations that had 1) a female CEO in the sample period, 2) text data available for at least three pre-hiring and post-hiring, and 3) a male CEO predecessor prior to the female hire.” They “measure the change in the gendering of organizations’ language before and after hiring a female CEO using an unsupervised natural language processing algorithm that estimates the semantic meaning of references to gender and references to agency.”

Study 2 aimed to measure how “female representation on executive boards is associated with changes in the gendering of language.” The team used “word embeddings to convert organizational documents into measures of gender stereotypes (women’s

association with agency and communality)” to study “the relationship between the proportion of women on companies’ executive boards and the female-agency association longitudinally across 345 former and current S&P 500 companies.”

Outcomes/results

- “Hiring female CEOs and board members is associated with changes in organizations’ use of language, such that the semantic meaning of being a woman becomes more similar to the semantic meaning of agency. In other words, hiring women into leadership positions helps to associate women with characteristics that are critical for leadership success.”
- The findings suggest that “changing organizational language through increasing female representation might provide a path for women to break out of the double bind; when female leaders are appointed into positions of power, women are more strongly associated with the positive aspects of agency (e.g., independent and confident) in language, but not at the cost of a reduced association with communality (e.g., kind and caring).”

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- 72.7% of the target organizations “saw an increase in the association between the semantic meaning of female and agency words, while only 27.3% of control organizations did in the same time period.”
- “The findings suggest that when organizations are incentivized to portray their female leaders in positive ways, stereotypes can change in a way that is both systemic, removing the burden of stereotype change from the individual, and positive, in that it does not reflect a trade-off between appearing competent and likeable.”

Challenges encountered during the program

The authors indicate several limitations / remaining questions from their research:

1. “To what extent is the observed effect causal?”
2. “To what extent do the effects generalize beyond the appointed female leaders and impact perceptions of women more broadly?”
3. “At what level of seniority do the benefits of female representation cease to be present?”
4. “To what extent do the results generalize to other organizations?”

Recommendations from the research

The authors recommend using this research as evidence that “hiring female leaders might not only combat discrimination by making the top seem possible for other women but might also indirectly do so by changing our understanding of what it means to be a female leader.”