IN THE LEAD

By Carol Hymowitz

Too Many Women Fall for Stereotypes Of Selves, Study Says

THREE DECADES after droves of women started business careers, and at a time when 50.3% of all managers and professionals are female, women still comprise fewer than 2% of Fortune 1000 CEOs and just 7.9% of Fortune 500 top earners.

A familiar litany of reasons attempts to explain why this is: Women hit their prime childbearing years at the same time they are most pressured to prove themselves at work; they are reluctant to put in the 80-hour workweeks and globe-trotting required for a shot at the corner office; they are too concentrated in staff jobs like human resources or marketing, where they never learn crucial profit-and-loss responsibility; they don’t have informal mentoring and networking opportunities, like golfing with the guys.

These theories belie the basic truth proved by countless surveys over the past decades: There is little difference between the leadership styles of successful male and female bosses.

The big problem is both sexes believe their own biased perceptions more than they believe this fact. The problem was pointed out in a new study by Catalyst, the New York research group, which found that women internalize many of the stereotypes men have about them as less-effective leaders.

CATALYST FIRST analyzed more than 40 studies of men and women leaders, and found no real difference in styles. The group then asked 296 executives of both genders, 85% of whom were CEOs or within two reporting ranks of that post, to rate, by percentage, the effectiveness of female and male leaders on 10 different leadership behaviors. It avoided direct “who is better at” comparisons.

To their credit, men said both men and women were roughly equal when it came to team building, mentoring, consulting and networking. They gave women higher marks on two qualities: supporting and rewarding.

But in a disturbing find, men said they were superior to women at problem solving, inspiring, delegating and “influencing upward,” or being able to have an impact on the people above you—four critical leadership skills. And because men are typically the ones in charge at businesses, these opinions help explain why women are so thinly represented at the top.

When women do stand up to men who say women aren’t equipped to be leaders, they can wield a lot of power. Last week, Neil French, world-wide creative director of WPP Group, resigned his job amid an uproar over remarks he was reported to have said about female ad executives. Earlier this month, Mr. French reportedly said at an industry dinner that there weren’t many high-ranking female creative-advertising directors because “they’re crap” and “don’t deserve to make it to the top” because of the time they spend caring for children. Mr. French last week said his remarks were taken out of context, but that he had nevertheless decided to resign.

Yet Catalyst’s study found that women are giving up important ground. Women said they are better at supporting and rewarding employees, and at the important tasks of problem solving, team building, mentoring; consulting and inspiring. But they also said men are better at networking, influencing upward and delegating.

“Women as well as men perceive women leaders as better at caretaker behaviors and men as better at take-charge behaviors,” says Ilene Lang, president of Catalyst. “These are perceptions, not the reality.”

BUT PERCEPTIONS, we all know, strongly influence reality.

After Ms. Lang reported the study’s results to Catalyst’s advisory board, one member described how the big consulting company at which she is a partner discovered how sex-role stereotypes influence employee performance ratings. After analyzing past reviews of managers, the company found that women who aren’t considered “supportive” mentors get negative ratings, while nonsupportive men weren’t at all badly judged. “Men aren’t expected to be supportive, so they’re not criticized when they aren’t,” says Ms. Lang.

It’s not surprising that women are rated as more effective leaders when they work in so-called feminine occupations, such as cosmetics or fashion companies, than when they are employed in a traditionally masculine industry such as steel. Respondents in Catalyst’s study who had a female boss in a feminine occupation were likely to judge women as better problem solvers than men; but those with a female boss in a masculine occupation expressed profoundly negative views of women leaders. So, simply hiring more women into management positions isn’t likely to eliminate stereotyping.

Catalyst advises companies to combat stereotyping by making sure men and women are judged equally on performance reviews, and educating managers about the often latent influence of stereotyping.

But women also have to push themselves and one another to stop believing they don’t have what it takes to be great leaders, and to stand up to men who believe they don’t.

As the women who stood up to Mr. French showed, speaking out is a powerful tool.

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