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Gender issues in management development: implications and research agenda

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Women in management overview
Women have been entering the ranks of management in increasing numbers for the past 20 years. However, in contrast with their male peers, they have not been rising to top organizational levels. Proportionally, 42 per cent of management, administrative and executive positions are held by women; but women hold only 5 per cent of the top organizational posts[1]. Presuming males and females enter organizations with like educational preparation and similar skills, what influencing factors yield such sharp differences in advancement? One factor is opportunity for management development[2-4].

A key element in the professional developmental process is training. Research regarding gender biases in training is limited; however, the potential parallels to higher education classrooms are striking. This article will explore the research on gender in the classroom and how it relates to management development training and opportunities. The issues will be discussed by exploring participant selection and the training process.

Most research conducted on women's career development in organizations has taken a "macro" perspective, examining mentoring opportunities for women[5,6], how women plan careers[7], women's developmental experiences for management[3,8], and obstacles in women's career development[2]. Little has been done regarding gender bias in the way management training is designed and implemented.

There is, however, a growing body of research on gender bias in the college classroom[9-11] and on how women learn[12,13]. This literature provides useful information to apply to management training and development in organizations. A brief review of the literature on gender bias in the classroom and women's learning is helpful for understanding the implications and recommendations that follow.

The assumption has been made that some of the same gender biases that occur in the college classroom will also occur in management training classrooms. The white male model is firmly entrenched in academia, and evidence exists that the same is true in corporations across the country[14].

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While we believe this assumption is valid, we recognize a need to conduct more empirical research to determine the extent of this bias. Therefore, an agenda for future research is also included.

**Literature review**

Evidence indicates that the college classroom is a “chilly” learning environment for many women. These inequalities often begin in primary school and continue through the college experience[15]. Many scholars believe this bias is a result of a male-dominated culture. Gallos writes:

> They [men] have designed and conducted the research, served as research subjects, developed the theories, written the histories, defined the procedures for science, controlled access to the ivory towers and academies, and set the public values and policies that guide both men and women[11, p. 19].

Tisdell[16] found that, even when faculty challenge the existing structure, the college curriculum “still favors the white male experience” (p. 223). Leong et al.[14] emphasize this male-dominated model in discussing the traditional business core curriculum present on most college campuses. They write:

> ...most traditional business courses are built on a white male model of organizations that stresses efficiency, effectiveness, and output ... The problem with this approach is that it essentially tells women that, if they conform to the male model (be sex-typed “male”), they will be successful. If they do not conform, they will not (and perhaps should not) succeed. It also tells men that the male model is the “right” one and that anyone (male or female) who does not adhere to this model is in some sense “wrong”[14, p. 205].

Not only are gender inequities found in the curriculum, but also how information is taught in classrooms points to potential bias. Women, more than men, are likely to be sexually harassed by professors via numerous methods, including the use of sexist comments and jokes in the classroom, unwanted touching, or suggestions of sex in return for a good grade[9,15].

Sex bias is often present in teacher-student interactions in that males are more likely to be called on than females, males typically talk longer than females, and females are more likely to be interrupted than males[9,17]. The feedback male students receive is different from that given to female students. For example, women are less likely to have their responses and questions elaborated on, their opinions sought, and to receive confirming non-verbal behaviours from professors[18]. Sadker and Sadker[9, p. 172] write: “Professors usually respond to student answers with neutral silence or a vague okay. But when praise is awarded, when criticism is levelled, or when help is given, the male student is more likely to be on the receiving end.”

Even when efforts are made to incorporate issues of concern for women into the curricula and to avoid gender bias in teaching, subtle discrimination may occur because “…strategies of teaching and methods of evaluation rarely are examined by faculty to see if they are compatible with women’s preferred styles of learning”[12]. Research indicates that women tend to be “connected knowers”, learning through relationships and empathy[12]. Collaborative discussions rather than argumentative debates are preferred ways to
understand ideas[19]. Because classroom environments frequently rely on the use of lectures (“separate learning”) and argumentative debates, women often express feelings of self-doubt and alienation when discussing their educational experiences. In a study done on Harvard students, Light[20] discovered women to be significantly more critical of their academic performance and efforts than men. Maher[10] describes how collaboration is important to women in discovering their “personal voice” and in eliminating thoughts of self-doubt and alienation:

The discovery of a personal voice, the multiplistic stage, is not only forged through a competitive struggle of different opinions (which can be very alienating to some female students) – it is also developed through a cooperative mode in which personal experiences are shared and validated. Each viewpoint builds on the others, rather than competing with them. A competitive classroom where ideas battle and are constantly “under attack” forces many young women into inauthentic learning postures. They may learn how to defend and compare viewpoints intellectually, but feel their own sense of the world, their need for sharing ideas and building connections, invalidated [10, p. 55].

Writers have provided several suggestions for eliminating gender inequities and the feelings of alienation present in many educational environments. Maher[10] suggests an “interactive pedagogy” which “integrates student experiences and contributions into the subject-matter” (p. 49). Massin’s[21] experience indicates that “co-operative learning exercises”, small group discussions and role-plays help create a supportive environment for her female students. Thorne[17] advises educators to look closely at their use of language (i.e. generic “he”), seating arrangements, classroom talk rules and their non-verbal communication behaviour to facilitate gender equity in the classroom. Other suggestions include using experiential learning, mutual problem solving, journals, praise and encouragement to facilitate learning for men and women[10-12].

Management development implications

The selection process

As men and women pursue management development opportunities in the workplace, they often discover that the gender inequities of the university classroom are perpetuated in the training process. Female college students are frequently underrepresented in historically male-dominated scientific and technical university programmes. Similarly, women in the workplace make up a smaller percentage of training programme enrolments[4]. This gender-skewed phenomenon may result from factors like those encountered by college students: biased career advice or lack of such advice, influence from family or friends, self-elimination from the participant pool, or pervasive societal assumptions and stereotypes about male leadership[9]. While multiple factors influence the developmental training process, the first step is selection of participants to attend training. Each of the factors cited will be addressed as it influences candidate preference.
Ragins and Sundstrom[22] found that opportunities to attend training are part of the preparation of males to assume more work responsibilities and to build their credentials for moving into upper management. Women, who may be isolated from the informal mentoring networks within traditional organizational hierarchies, often lack guidance in their strategic career planning. With few women in senior-level positions, patterns leading to a successful rise in organizations are difficult to discern. Consequently, women may not realize the importance of training programmes for their advancement. Even when the potential impact of attending such programmes is recognized, female staff members may not receive adequate information about training options, may be denied funds to attend programmes, or may lack sufficient career encouragement to pursue training that could better prepare them for upper management responsibilities[4].

Beyond lacking strategic career planning, women may not be their own best advocates in the bid for professional development. In self-report measures, women may rate their skills lower than similarly qualified male counterparts, reflecting low self-confidence, socialization influences, and lack of role models in the higher ranks for reinforcement[23]. Although interested in advancement, women are more likely to believe that reward and recognition will come from doing their best work, rather than by self-promotion[7]. Consequently, they may be overlooked as candidates for limited training programme openings. This phenomenon may be intensified by women’s value of relationships in the workplace. They will be less likely to press competitively for their own advancement if they fear disrupting support networks of colleagues, or if they perceive that others deserve the opportunity just as much. Additionally, some women select themselves out of training opportunities because of family or community obligations that take precedence over their own professional development.

In their study of managerial advancement, Tharenou et al.[4] found that “being a spouse and parent reduces a woman’s work experience and in turn her training and development” (p. 925). Men increasingly may experience the same pressure but, currently, women are more likely to respond to these conflicting role demands[23]. Women who are single parents with budgeted incomes have few options regarding home and work priorities. Travelling to distant training sites is not feasible for many single parents; nor is staying late to complete work left unfinished by training attendance. Further, as two-career families become increasingly common, women often keep more of the home duties[24]. Whether by choice, to fulfill societal expectations, or in response to their spouses’ greater earning power, the commitment to hours of work at home leaves little time to pursue additional professional development.

From an organizational perspective, the EEOC Uniform Guidelines prohibit discrimination in training selection[25]. However, procedures for recommending who should receive training frequently yield results detrimental to female managers. Minimal representation of women in upper management means that most decisions about high-potential candidates and training priorities for
promotion and succession are made by males well established in their respective organizations. Their choices of prospective trainees may be based on employee level in the organization, previous training, work experience, or company politics, all factors that typically favour male candidates[4]. Unless the selection process requires multiple methods – for example, manager recommendation, validated instruments to assess need, and self-report from potential participants – gender bias is likely to begin long before staff members enter the classroom.

When these selection-related phenomena are coupled with the greater abundance of males “in the pipeline” and more males being prepared for promotion through line positions[1], rosters for professional development training may be overwhelmingly male. This cycle is perpetuated by more males than females being trained for advancement; consequently, more males will receive promotions[4], and when they are called on to recommend participants for training and development, they will see more males to put into courses. Clearly, the first step to rectify this concern is to choose qualified women as well as men to enhance their professional growth through training.

Selection issues cross over into content when men and women are channelled into development programmes on the basis of gender. Although this topic has been debated in the literature[26], and it appears that the number of specialized courses has decreased over time, some training suppliers continue to offer courses particularly for women. A common example is “Assertiveness skills for women”, a course, like others of this category, that does not have a similar version targeted towards men. A training programme so labelled assumes that women as a group lack sufficient assertiveness, and that men, as a group, have this skill. By assigning this topic gender dependence, organizations deny males the opportunity to enhance their assertiveness abilities, while discounting women who have expertise in this area. This type of course, while possibly credible in content, reinforces old stereotypes. When gender, rather than individual needs, is the primary rationale for training selection, gender bias is operating[1].

**The training process**
The programme content and teaching methods used also have the potential to put women in the “outsider” category. Each time a training session is built on research done solely by men on men; each time examples focus primarily on males’ experience base, many women are less involved and connected to the learning process. They are adapting to the majority culture of the classroom, frequently struggling to make sense of the material from the perspective of their life experiences, that may more typically include references to relationships and family.

Gender bias in textbooks continues to be a recurring theme in college classrooms[9]. While textbook authors and publishers have made some progress in eliminating this bias, women are still often relegated to a sidebar on a page. In the training environment, care must be taken regarding the selection
of manuals, videos and experiential activities. When a majority of case studies and experiential activities portray men in upper leadership roles and women in "helper" positions, the myth of women being less capable, skilled and integral to the organization is bolstered.

The course trainer has a key role in making the corporate classroom a positive learning experience for both genders. In addition to selecting course content, examples and activities, the instructor is responsible for being aware of his/her own biases, and for setting the tone for participants in the course. Obviously, sexist or harassing behaviour by trainer or students is unsuitable. Other concerns are more subtle, and consequently more challenging to identify and to change.

Women learn best in an atmosphere that fosters discussion over debate, both between instructor and student and among students[27]. When trainers hold tightly to their expert power, daring participants to make the approved responses, and when they foster competition in the classroom, urging students to win over their classmates, they create a situation that excludes class members unwilling to do battle[27]. A collaborative environment that makes room for expression of many points of view not only encourages women to offer their ideas, but also provides an opportunity for richer interaction because more information is available to all students. Unfortunately, however, much like college classrooms, many training sessions rely primarily on the lecture method to cover content, keeping the focus on the instructor rather than on the participants[28]. Alternative methods that invite students to take part in their own learning process can open up the classroom environment while contributing to increased application of new skills[25]. Use of small group activities and journal-writing projects permits students to communicate their ideas in formats that foster more introspection and depth while providing a less threatening forum for discussing and integrating key learning points.

Feedback on performance is widely considered a critical component of the training process, influencing trainee learning[25,29]. If the training situation is similar to the college classroom, the trainer may provide less feedback to females than males regarding performance on tasks – in the form of praise and critical evaluation of their performance. Trainers' non-verbal behaviours – such as establishing eye contact with men more often than females and leaning forward when interacting with men – will provide more confirming feedback to males as well. This lack of feedback can have two effects on female trainees. It can lead to less effort to correct deficiencies in performance or to expand one's cognitive thought processes. Hence, performance and learning suffer. Second, it may lead females to believe they are being overlooked, discounted, and are not full participants in the training process. These beliefs, in turn, may perpetuate feelings of self-doubt and hinder women's advancement opportunities.

Beyond the immediate classroom interaction, evaluation of training is becoming increasingly important. While organizations are pushing to justify all expenditures, time and money devoted to training are under close scrutiny.
Evaluation may take several forms, and each of them is subject to potential gender bias.

A typical evaluation method is a reaction sheet completed by participants at the end of a training session. The items may vary, but usually they concentrate on content, instructor skills and materials provided. Women students may leave the experience with a vague sense that the session was not what they expected, needed, or wanted; however, they will probably assume that the difficulty is their slowness to adapt to the corporate culture, rather than criticize the course content, model, or instructor.

If female participants felt discounted by the instructor or other class members; if they found the course format less conducive to their learning; if they found the materials to be sexist in orientation; and if they realized that they were not to blame for these shortcomings, the typical reaction sheet provides little encouragement to give that feedback to the instructor. If a few female participants persevere and add their critical comments, theirs may be considered an extreme minority view when compared with the majority of the class which, according to statistics for upper management, will probably be male[1].

Post-training evaluation is often the responsibility of the participants’ managers, who observe behavioural changes on the job. Management development skills are challenging to evaluate in a meaningful way. Unlike technical skills that are amenable to measurement, documenting improvement in leadership, communication, coaching, or decision-making processes typically involves subjective means such as managers’ and participants’ opinions[30]. When managers have had little interaction with women in management positions, typically because of the disproportion of males and females in upper management, their expectations may be biased towards a male model of performance. The differences between the typical masculine model of leadership and the androgynous style often practised by women managers may be perceived as inappropriate for the organizational system; and consequently may lead to lower evaluations of performance and fewer recommendations for advancement.

Research agenda

While there is a growing body of research examining gender differences in learning and gender bias in the academic environment, little work has been done regarding gender bias in management development training. These research suggestions are provided to consider if there is equity in management development training environments.

Tharenou et al.[4] determined that training is linked to management advancement, and that males receive more training than females. Building on their work, future research might begin with the dynamics of training candidate selection. For example, do some managers perceive less risk in choosing male candidates? Males already hold many upper management positions, so how much does that automatic measure of credibility, gained by precedent, affect
selection choices? Do male selectors simply elect those they know best? Informal support networks provide chances to reduce biases and increase comfort levels. How much are women hindered by not being included? Or are potential women candidates simply invisible to those making selection decisions? Are they overlooked, overshadowed by male protégés, who may be championed by mentors or sponsors? Since one hurdle in making upper management more accessible to women is getting them into management development training programmes, questions about bias in selection to these programmes are essential.

Additionally, as noted in Tharenou et al.[4], career encouragement is valuable to women in their quest for advancement. Consequently, how does lack of support from role models, mentors, or peers influence the tendency of women to let self-doubts and non-work responsibilities dissuade them from pursuing training as preparation for promotion? These issues also affect selection and should be addressed in the pursuit of increasing training options for women.

Darkenwald and Valentine's[31] deterrents to participation scale (DPS-G) may provide a useful place to begin answering this question. The DPS-G has been used to analyse deterrents to participation in adult basic education and literacy programmes and looks at a variety of barriers to participation, including both situational and dispositional factors. It has not been used as often to analyse deterrents in a corporate setting. Information on obstacles to women's and men's participation in management development activities could lead to research on organizational support mechanisms needed to encourage participation in management development and to minimize conflicting role demands.

Research also needs to be conducted examining gender biases that occur in management training classes. For example, what are the participation patterns in management development classes? Do these patterns change depending on the sex of the trainer? Will patterns change depending on the ratio of males and females participating in the training? Are there verbal and non-verbal differences in the feedback provided to male and female trainees? A pilot study conducted by McLean and Rocheford[32] found no statistically significant gender differences in frequency or length of interactions in a sales training environment. However, owing to the number of limitations of the study cited by the authors, more research should be done regarding interaction patterns. The INTERSECT observation instrument (Interactions for Sex Equity in Classroom Teaching) has been used frequently in college classrooms to determine frequency of interaction, the nature of teacher feedback, and the amount of sex bias in instruction[9]. Perhaps this instrument can be modified to use in training situations to answer some of the above questions.

In addition to observing patterns of interaction in the training environment, an examination of training materials may indicate gender biases as well. Content analysis of training materials can be used to assess potential prejudice in manuals, videos, session activities, and examples used in training. When
materials portray women in powerless or less significant roles in organizations, they create impressions that women are not suited for leadership positions.

Perception of inequities may also play a role in reinforcing gender bias in organizations. Do women perceive that they are treated differently in the training classroom? If they do, and if that situation prompts reactions of anger and resentment, do expressions of those feelings hinder advancement? If women do not perceive training biases, do they then leave development sessions with more self-doubts? Do they acknowledge that the tenets being taught do not fit for them and begin to question their worthiness to enter the ranks of upper management? Whether or not inequities are perceived, the results can have long-term impact as women choose to leave organizations or opt out of upper management tracks, perpetuating the glass ceiling effect. Survey and interview research regarding training session perceptions and evaluations may be used to respond to some of the questions surrounding this issue.

Summary
As we approach the year 2000, the realities of the global marketplace and a more diverse workforce will affect organizations in a significant way. Even "conservative" institutions that have histories of staid consistency are now faced with the challenge of change, and the knowledge that lack of innovation may mean not only reduced growth, but also the demise of the organization itself. The competitive edge of the future will be found in the potential of human resources. Maximizing talents of people will be the key to excellence when new technology and techniques have become standard.

The ultimate goals of management development efforts are to produce more effective managers who will help the organization to be more productive and efficient and, therefore, more competitive. Companies choosing not to develop and groom women for management positions are losing valuable resources [33,34]. The suggested research agenda illustrates many opportunities for exploring how organizations can be more supportive of women by enhancing the training and development process. Men will benefit as well through opportunities for broadening their management and learning styles. As a result, the organization can become more effective. Developing women for upper management positions will be a vital link in maintaining the competitive advantage that may mean the difference between success and decline in this new era of global business.

References


