

Blair Gerold

1 Market Street, Apt. 432
Camden, NJ 08102
732-742-7344
Blair.Gerold@gmail.com

Men and women are held to different standards in the workplace and in the public eye. Anecdotally, many of us have experienced comments or criticism of our appearance, mannerisms, or even voice, when only the substance of our male counterparts' work product seems to be fair game.¹ However, this differing treatment has been the subject of a great deal of study as well—specifically in the way that gender norms affect our perceptions of an applicant's "fit" for a particular position. When a woman acts outside of what are traditionally perceived to be normal gender roles, it causes a cognitive dissonance in the observer (both male and female) which results in the observer disliking or finding the woman to be less competent. While an aggressive male entrepreneur may be deemed competent, effective and likeable, the same actions—when taken by a woman—make her unlikeable and perceived as difficult to work with.² Similarly, in industries where corporate management is predominantly male, women are less likely to receive positive performance reviews, and for a given promotion must receive higher performance evaluations than their male peers.³

As depressing as these facts are, there is some silver lining. Despite the gender biases that act as barriers to women looking for new positions, once a woman is actually given a chance to do the work, biases can lessen. When compared to employees who have never reported to a female boss, those that have "are less likely to prefer male management."⁴ On a more micro level we can look to the "trustworthiness" ratings of Hillary Clinton, where polls show that while her perceived trustworthiness took hits while running for president in 2008 and 2016, she left her position as secretary of state with high approval and trustworthiness ratings.⁵ This again shows that biases seem to be stronger when a promotion is sought than when work is being done. That is most likely because none of these biases are based on actual deficiencies in ability to perform. This conclusion is furthered by evidence showing that in some instances the use of "fit" and qualitative factors in addition to objective criteria does not improve applicant success rates.⁶ What all of this comes down to is that while

¹ See, e.g., Anna Waters, *The Surprisingly Sexist World of High School Debate*, THE WASHINGTON POST, Sept. 23, 2016 (describing critiques of female high school debaters' clothing, vocal tone, and aggression against the lack of similar criticism for their male counterparts).

² IRIS BOHNET, WHAT WORKS: GENDER EQUALITY BY DESIGN pt. 1 (2016). Harvard Business School classes were given two case studies outlining the career of venture capitalist Heidi Roizen, one using the name "Heidi" the other "Howard." *Id.* All other facts were kept the same. *Id.* While the students (of both genders) rated both Heidi and Howard as highly competent and effective, only Howard was seen as a likeable individual, and someone the students would want to hire. *Id.* Heidi was regarded unlikeable and someone who would be difficult to work with. *Id.*

³ Karen S. Lyness & Madeline E. Heilman, *When Fit Is Fundamental: Performance Evaluations and Promotions of Upper-Level Female and Male Managers*, 91(4) J. OF APPLIED PSYCHOL. 777, 783 (2006).

⁴ Kim M. Elsesser & Janet Lever, *Does Gender Bias Against Female Leaders Persist? Quantitative and Qualitative Data From a Large-Scale Survey*, 64(12) HUM. REL. 1555, 1573 (2001).

⁵ Philip Bump, *Do Americans trust Hillary Clinton? Not when she's running for office*, THE WASHINGTON POST: THE FIX, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/05/04/do-americans-trust-hillary-clinton-not-when-shes-running-for-office>.

⁶ Richard A. DeVaul et al., *Medical School Performance of Initially Rejected Students*, 257(1) J. OF THE AM. MED. ASS'N 47 (1987). The University of Texas Medical School admitted 50 students it had initially rejected. *Id.* The differences between the pool of initially rejected students was 28% due to demographics and objective data, and 72% due to interview performance in front of the same admissions committee. *Id.* There was no significant difference in performance in school between the two groups, leading to the conclusion that the interview process was not an effective predictor of success. *Id.*

there are higher barriers to entry for women in male dominated fields (such as law and politics) once overcome, women still get the job done.

My understanding of the disparate treatment that occurs when a professional woman acts outside of her gender normative behavior has affected my professional career in a number of ways. While I could never say for sure if these unconscious biases caused me to miss out on a particular promotion or opportunity, I do know how it has affected the way I act on the job. While a bit trite of a sentiment, I know that I do not ask for everything I feel I deserve. I would always discount the raise I wanted or position I thought I was qualified for before asking for it. I negotiated against myself before I even sat down at the table. I know this means a lower outcome, either in position or in wages, but it seems like a smaller price to pay when put against the ripple effects of being labeled “difficult,” “ungrateful,” or “too aggressive.” For those same reasons, even once in positions of leadership I was never direct with criticism. I would fix employees work instead of sending it back, or try to disguise negative feedback with humor. These issues have affected my future outlook as well. After seeing how difficult it is to be an effective leader while maintaining the expected air of congeniality, I have looked towards career paths with more objective criteria for promotion, such as government work or careers with lock step promotion.

While the barriers imposed by unconscious biases are real, and the effects on women I’ve described are common, neither are immutable. That being said, change will require industries being willing to question the efficacy and commitment to diversity of their hiring practices. There are methods that have been shown to help decrease implicit bias, such as comparative evaluations⁷ and structured, horizontally reviewed interviews.⁸ A common theme however, is that fighting implicit bias requires change on a systematic level, not an individual one.⁹ This means that those who care about gender equality in the workplace need to become the decision makers on hiring committees and in Human Resources. We need to accept that everyone is susceptible to these biases, and that as a result we cannot continue to rely on subjective and untested traditional interviewing and screening techniques. There is no reason that the same analytical approach that is common place in marketing campaigns could not apply to hiring seasons. As those in charge of hiring are willing to experiment with their processes—incorporating the work of social scientists and other academics—and to look back one, five, or ten years later to determine what works and what doesn’t regard diversity, retention, and performance, we can find the best methods for focusing on how to pick out which employees will be successful in the future. When we tailor the hiring and promotion process to empirically predict who will succeed in a particular position there is no room for the individual gender biases we all carry, and all that will be left is a level playing field.

⁷ Iris Bohnet et al., *When Performance Trumps Gender Bias: Joint Versus Separate Evaluation* 16 (Harvard Bus. Sch., Working Paper No. 12-083, 2012) (finding that when candidates are interviewed and considered together, as opposed to individually, evaluators rely more heavily on past performance as an indication of success and less on gender stereotypes).

⁸ Iris Bohnet, *How to Take The Bias out of Interviews*, HARV. BUS. REV., April 18, 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/04/how-to-take-the-bias-out-of-interviews> (favoring structured interviews and horizontal comparisons of candidate responses over traditional unstructured interviews in order to improve the efficacy of hiring and decrease the reliance on implicit bias).

⁹ WILLIAM T. BIELBY, *THE CHALLENGE OF EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS: ALTERNATIVE PATHS TO MINIMIZING WORKPLACE GENDER BIAS* 7 (2013) (concluding that correction of gender biases will not come from a one size fits all solution, but a “bundles of practices, routines, understandings, and values that define how organizations approach their commitments and obligations to nondiscrimination and diversity”).