



# **UNDERSTANDING GENDER AT WORK**

**HOW TO USE, LOSE AND EXPOSE  
BLIND SPOTS FOR CAREER SUCCESS**

**DELEE FROMM**

**CHAPTER 2**

Understanding Gender at Work: How to Use, Lose,  
and Expose Blind Spots for Career Success

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# EXPOSE

Gender blind spots significantly impact women at work. They create a disparity in the work experiences of men and women. They chill efforts by women to achieve career goals, cause them to stall, reduce their efforts, and even cause them to drop out. They negatively affect women's opportunities and hinder women in attaining leadership positions. Being able to recognize gender blind spots (GBS) allows you to keep moving forward, effectively deal with them, and reduce their power.

GBS are based on traditional gender roles and stereotypes: those artificial social constructs of masculine and feminine attributes that tell us how men and women should and should not behave. It is from these stereotypes that gender biases, limiting mindsets, gender habits, and gendered expectations are born. Behaviour that deviates from these stereotypes often causes feelings of discomfort in both the actor and the observer. Both people feel that something is not right because there has been a deviation from the expected script or pattern. And since these assumptions are often unconscious, we don't examine them or rationally challenge them.

So how does this play out at work when gender mismatch occurs? When women use masculine approaches, unconscious negative impressions are created. On the other hand, when women use feminine approaches they are not seen to be up to the job since the workplace tends to favour a

masculine approach. Another consequence is that masculine behaviour is viewed totally differently for men and women. Masculine behaviour at work shown by men is a match with gender assumptions, so all is well. The same behaviour shown by women, even when effective, is not a match and thus is deemed unacceptable by others.

This double standard can be very confusing and frustrating for women who are not aware of the underlying bias. And motherhood, which places a woman fully within the societal construct of what is feminine, is often viewed as being out of synch or in conflict with work. The result? Many negative myths and biases about working mothers arise to disadvantage them.

This chapter examines GBS in detail. The six GBS of particular importance for women in the workplace include

- Common Biases (external and internal)
- Self-Limiting Mindsets (internal)
- Gender Habits and Rituals (internal)
- Misreading Gender Habits (external)
- Gendered Expectations (external)
- Negative Stereotype Threat (internal)

These six GBS include both external blind spots – the biases of others that affect how they treat us - and internal blind spots – personal biases that determine our own behaviour. Although external blind spots are the GBS most often highlighted, recognition of internalized gendered beliefs is also important. Recognition of all types of GBS is important so you can identify them and reduce their effects. It's good to recognize when you can deal with them, when they should be dealt with by others, and to be able to shine a light on them. This recognition also allows you to select career strategies to outplay and outwit GBS while waiting for a future that favours feminine approaches and characteristics. This chapter

focuses on the career strategy, *Shine a Light*, while the next chapter, Plan, addresses all four career strategies.

## TYPES OF GBS

### COMMON GENDER BIASES

Many of the biases listed in this section are based on the same gender beliefs and stereotypes and thus the descriptions may seem to overlap. They are often subtle and not blatant, so the aim of these descriptions is to help you easily recognize these biases so you can bring them into the open for yourself and others. Although there are many biases described in this section, this list is not exhaustive.

*Prove it Again.* Studies show that for positions traditionally held by males, men are assumed to be competent but women have to prove their competence through achievements over and over again. This bias allows men to be promoted based on future potential while women are promoted on past performance. People who operate using gender stereotypes typically have low expectations of women at work and their potential. The saying that “women have to work twice as hard to get half as far” relates to this bias. This is supported by the experience of transgendered men and women who, having been both genders, report that being a man at work is so much easier.<sup>32</sup> Some women who recognize this bias learn to use it by playing into it. For example, they report their accomplishments and their team results to the CEO each and every quarter. They *go along to get along* and succeed.

*The Tightrope.* Acceptable behaviour for women in the workplace is narrower than for men since masculine rules are favoured and considered the norm. This bias underlies the tendency to label agreeable and collaborative women as not assertive enough or too feminine, and to label assertive women as aggressive, not collaborative, or too masculine. Many executive women I coach have been told they are too direct when they speak

assertively. I offer suggestions for managing this behavioural tightrope in the chapters Ask and Communicate in this book.

*Double-Standard.* This bias is operating when the same behaviour from a man and a woman is judged differently, with the woman being judged negatively. Examples of double standards are: *she's aggressive and he's a go-getter; she's selfish and he's too busy; she's abrasive and he's incisive; and she's a shameless self-promotor and he knows his own worth.* From a women's perspective, it is also known as the *damned if you do and damned if you don't* gender bias. This can be the most damaging of all biases for women in leadership or seeking leadership positions due to association of leadership with the masculine. Paradoxically, research shows that leaders who use feminine styles are more effective.<sup>33</sup> Survey data collected in 2014 shows that the public prefers these leadership styles as well.<sup>34</sup>

*The In-Group Bias.* We have a natural preference for others that are like us, whether they look like us, share our interests and opinions, or have similar upbringings or educational backgrounds. This is a bias shown by everyone. This means that people are more likely to hire or promote others like them and overlook those who have a different background. As most leaders or gatekeepers in business are men, particularly in certain industries, the in-group bias leads to the same group of people being hired and promoted up the ranks.

*Positional Bias.* This gender bias operates by dividing men and women into different careers, professions, and positions based on traditional gender roles. As a result, it can affect both career advice and hiring. It is evident when career advice is based on external characteristics, such as race and gender, and not on a woman's strengths, talents, and interests. In law, for instance, Asian law students get counselled to work in corporate and finance areas. Female law students are generally steered away from litigation practice. This does not mean that advisors are trying to be unhelpful or have bad intent. Rather it is evidence of implicit bias.

We are all subject to this bias. Research shows that although we seem comfortable with female leaders in a variety of positions, we revert back to traditional gender roles for roles such as engineers, Fortune 500 executives, financial advisors, lawyers, or President of the United States.<sup>35</sup> This bias has been shockingly demonstrated on long-haul flights where female doctors are routinely treated with disdain and even hostility by cabin personnel. Highly trained physicians have been told to return to their seats or to remain in their seats after offering their help because the flight attendants refused to believe the women were doctors.<sup>36</sup> This particular blind spot makes it even more important to know how to manage and plan your own career.

*Testosterone Rex.* This is the false assumption that evolution, brains, hormones, and behaviour are responsible for sexual inequities. It's the notion that men evolved to be risk-taking and competitive for reproductive return, and these traits propel them to the top at work. And, as the logic goes, since sex differences are innate, this inequality cannot be changed. Counter to this assumption, there are no essential male or female characteristics. Using solid scientific evidence and meticulous reasoning in her entertaining books *Delusions of Gender* and *Testosterone Rex*, Cordelia Fine debunks ideas about gender differences and sexual inequities having their origins in biological differences. Angela Saini does the same in her book *Inferior*.<sup>37</sup>

*Different means Lesser.* This bias is based on the assumption that biological differences between the sexes translate into differences in innate cognitive skills and abilities. And by raising gendered differences we raise the unconscious assumption that women are not as capable as men.

When I first started teaching women's advancement courses there was pressure from other women not to talk about gender differences. It was based on a fear of this bias. Fast forward 15 years and scientific facts have dramatically debunked this bias. Meta-data analyzes show that there are no innate cognitive differences between men and women.<sup>38</sup> It appears

that most, if not all, existing differences are grounded in gender training. And this cultural programming can be reversed. Some women have used this bias to their advantage by outplaying and outwitting those who are blinded (pun intended) to women's abilities and underestimate them (see details in the "Use It" section in this chapter).

*Maternal Wall.* Women who become mothers tend to face the worst career penalties. It is assumed they lose all career focus and interest now that they are mothers. The specific negative biases about women who become mothers include: they will put in less effort, be less motivated for advancement, and will prioritize home life over work life. In short, they will be less available to career demands than men or women without children. And if they aren't showing the appropriate amount of commitment to family, or are very committed to their careers, they are viewed as bad mothers. The tightrope bias of narrowly acceptable behaviour for women relates to motherhood as well. (For a full list of gender biases facing mothers, and the facts debunking each, see the section entitled "Maternal Break" in the next chapter, Plan).

*A Woman's Place is in the Home.* With all the women in the workplace you might think this bias is long gone. But you would be wrong and here is why. Most workplaces were initially created for a fully supported male worker - someone who had a wife to manage and organize the home. Despite huge changes in the make-up of the work force, organizations and society still operate on this assumption. The result? Working women are shouldering heavier responsibilities than ever (see the next section, "To Have It All, We Have to Do It All"). The psychological repercussions are that when men do housework, they feel they are helping out whereas when women do housework, they feel they are doing their job.

The assumption that a woman's place is in the home has other negative implications as well. Current research shows that males with wives at home have an unfavourable view of women in the workplace, think workplaces



run less smoothly with more women, view workplaces with female leaders as less desirable, and consider female candidates for promotion to be less qualified than comparable male colleagues. Who are the males with the most resistance? Those populating the upper echelons and occupying the more powerful positions.<sup>39</sup>

*To Have It All, We Have To Do It All.* The false belief underlying this bias is also that a woman's place is in the home. Working women still do significantly more housework than men. Studies show that 76% of women who work still do the majority of housework, cooking (65% vs 39%), driving of children to events, scheduling of home repairs, and paying of bills (82% vs 65%).<sup>40</sup>

A related and equally pernicious belief is that to be successful at work means being a superstar at home. According to Time Magazine, approximately 80% of millennial moms believe that it is important to be the perfect mother.<sup>41</sup> This belief can create *Home Control Disease* – where women still focus obsessively on everything about the home and feel the compulsive need to ensure that it is all done their way.<sup>42</sup>

*Sexual Harassment.* It may seem odd to include this behaviour as a blind spot but it is due to the false assumption that it has disappeared from the workplace. Consequently, sexual harassment is not recognized when it occurs and is often overlooked. In some industries, such as tech and start-up companies like Uber, sexual harassment is rampant and goes unchecked.<sup>43</sup> The stories I hear as a coach make it clear that it is still very much around. And to add to the confusion, some leaders talk about sexual assault as if it were normal and not a serious criminal behaviour, or minimize it by calling it “locker room talk” or saying, “boys will be boys.”

These biases set up significant invisible and visible hurdles at work and home that make it harder for working women to advance and succeed. Many of these biases are used to provide excuses for gender inequities. They create differences in how the same behaviour by men and women is

perceived and the assumptions made about it. They create gaps in wages and the ability to advance. They cause women to focus their attention on how they are being perceived instead of allowing them to put that effort into doing the job. They make it difficult and sometimes impossible for women leaders to lead. They create and support a gap between numbers of men and women at the top of organizations. It is important to be able to recognize these biases in action, whatever the form, and be able to reduce their effects.

## **RECOGNIZE**

Gender bias can take many forms in the workplace. Some of these biases are obvious and easy to spot in action: the same type of people being hired and/or promoted resulting in very little organizational diversity, the inability to see a woman in a leadership role regardless of how accomplished she is, and the idea that any behaviour - regardless of how sexist - is just “boys being boys.”

Sometimes gender bias is at play through subtle differences in how women are treated. A current term for less obvious or subtle forms of discrimination is *microaggressions*. These forms of discrimination can include objective rules being applied strictly to women but leniently to men; the attribution of an idea to a man although made by a woman; constant interruptions of women in meetings; and the acceptance of women when it makes work life easier and more comfortable for men. It may even include a difference for men and women in the amount of informal feedback.<sup>44</sup>

Another form of *microaggression* is mansplaining. This is when men explain something to women - usually something the women already know - slowly and with simple words. And as ridiculous as it sounds, it is common. Fifty percent of women report being mansplained at least once a day and it is estimated that this annoying behaviour costs \$200 billion a year in lost revenue.<sup>45</sup> Please don't be fooled by the descriptors subtle or micro. Current

research shows the negative effects of subtle gender bias on career success and satisfaction, stress, turnover, performance, and physical and mental health symptoms are as bad as, if not worse than, overt discrimination.<sup>46</sup>

So how do you recognize gender bias? The process below sets out three steps for revealing unconscious bias. It requires the help of a slow and careful neural processing system in the analysis of evidence and data. Objective facts versus subjective perspectives allow for exposure. Note that this process works for uncovering others' biases as well as our own.

### A Process for Identifying Unconscious Bias

#### **Recognize**

When actions or decisions of others are blatantly unfair or discriminatory against you, you will likely know. Micro-aggressions may be more difficult to spot so if you are feeling isolated, discouraged, or disconnected, start watching for hints of subtle bias and unfair treatment. Confirmation by others, such as colleagues, both to bias and micro-aggressions is often valuable to ensure that you are correct. It is also crucial to pay attention to your own thoughts, decisions, and actions for signs of bias.

#### **Evaluate**

Where an action or decision does not seem fair, examine the decision or action objectively. (Such decisions can include awarding bonuses, promotion, hiring, assignment of a special project, or an appointment to a committee). What impact does this decision or action have on an individual? Does it negatively influence the perceptions of others about this individual? What are the facts or hard evidence that support it? Is it based on evidence or on a subjective assumption?

#### **Confirm**

Ask others if they would have made the same decision. Do they think that the decision was biased in any way? Are they able to validly challenge your thinking about this? Ensure that you have all the facts and information. There may be facts or additional evidence that change your evaluation.

## **REDUCE**

Diversity training does not appear to reduce gender bias. In fact, early indications are that such training makes it worse by allowing bias to be excused and gender inequities normalized.<sup>47</sup> Clearly, understanding bias does not automatically provide tools for dealing with it, but it does suggest certain techniques.

Different techniques from multiple sources are put forward in this section. The first three - name it, question it, and correct it - are used in negotiation to neutralize or counter competitive tactics. Competitive tactics are employed in negotiation to create an advantage for the person using them. Since gender bias also provides an unfair advantage for the person using it, even if used unconsciously, it is appropriate to use strategies that counter such effects.

*Name It.* The best way to reduce the impact of gender biases is by recognizing and exposing them. If you see something, say something. You might say, “This type of behaviour is standard in this department. Why are you calling me aggressive? This sounds like a double-standard.” Name the bias and challenge its use. For example, a woman’s reputation has been shown to take a hit by helping other women. As a woman, mentioning this bias while you advocate for another woman reduces the effect of the bias. Interestingly, a man’s reputation is enhanced when he helps women, so if you are a man reading this, know that helping women helps you.<sup>48</sup> Naming a bias or microaggression to help others is a wonderful way to use social intelligence and to increase it.

*Question It.* This technique involves exposing the bias by questioning it. If you have had enough of mansplaining you may question the behaviour in the moment or later in the person’s office. Ask calmly and put the onus squarely on them by saying something like, “What makes you think that I don’t understand this concept or this material?” You may want to

ask them how they would respond in your situation to such behaviour. The intent here is to make them explain (not mansplain) why they are treating you in a biased manner. The point of questioning is to show how irrational the behaviour is.

*Correct It.* It can be helpful to explain the disconnect between facts and a decision or action. Where a woman has been passed over for promotion due to the same type of behaviour that supports a man's promotion, challenge the decision. Use an objective assessment or data. It may also involve pointing out the advantages obtained by others based on the biased decision or action. By using objective and hard data, the bias will be revealed for what it is – incorrect and unfair, benefiting some and not all.

It often takes great courage to name, question, or correct biases. There tends to be a disconnect between a company's stated priority for diversity and what employees see being done. For example, 70% of companies say they are committed to diversity but less than a third of their workers see senior leaders held accountable for improving gender outcomes. Similarly, over 90% of companies report using clear, objective criteria for hiring and promotions but only half of female employees believe they have equal opportunities for growth. Due to this disconnect, many employees are afraid to address bias head on. If less than a quarter of employees see their managers regularly challenge gender biased language or behaviour, it makes sense that employees are reluctant to do so.<sup>49</sup>

Although there appears to be a recent surge in awareness about the GBS of unconscious bias, people aren't being shown how to have courageous conversations. So if you are afraid to expose a bias or challenge a decision or action based on it, it is understandable. Wait until you feel comfortable and, until that time, consider using some of the following strategies instead.

*Building alliances.* Talking with others who agree and support you will make it easier to have courageous conversations about gender bias; you not only get support but you also harness the power of the collective. Talk with and enlist colleagues, sponsors, and mentors, possibly including people with seniority and influence in the organization. With others supporting you and confirming your view, it will be easier to be brave. You may want to approach someone in HR. Typically, but not always, this is a group that is very aware of, and sensitive to, gender bias and sexual discrimination, particularly when it is overt.

*Third Party Questioning.* Having outsiders challenge the lack of diversity in a company and point out how this bias handicaps the organization can be an effective way to shine a bright light on gender bias. The firm I worked for as a lawyer was sensitive to the vast number of women who were corporate counsel and ensured that files were staffed with women. If a client challenged the lack of diversity of an all-male team, the critique would be heard and changes made. In the process of publishing this book and creating a new website, I used my power as a client to ask to work with women. They were available in each case. And if they had not been available, I would have questioned why not. Women helping women is a great way to start to be a part of the change.

*Use Behavioural Design.* Studies have shown that gender blind assessment and the use of objective criteria in hiring practices result in the selection of more women. Symphonies had a scarcity of women musicians until screens were introduced in the auditioning process in the 1970s resulting in gender blind auditions. The result was a rise in the percentage of women in orchestras from less than 5% to over 35% today.<sup>50</sup> Similar results have occurred with gender blind assessment of software coding showing that when people are assessed on pure ability, women are more likely to make the cut.<sup>51</sup> Iris Bohnet in her book *What Works: Gender Equality by Design* argues that in addition to women's empowerment initiatives, solutions from behavioural design should be used. This includes

replacing intuition, informal networks, and traditional rules of thumb with quantifiable data and rigorous analysis. Many corporations are now operating their HR departments like their finance or marketing departments – based on evidence. Their HR departments have become people analytics departments. Using this approach of objective and gender blind assessment will greatly help reduce the effect of gender bias in the selection and promotion of individuals.

*Use Technology.* Anti-bias apps now exist to circumvent unconscious gender bias. For example, *Textio* scans job postings and flags phrases that would repel women; *Gap-Jumpers* hides identifying information until job applicants perform a skill test; *Blenddoor* allows job seekers to check out recruiters on diversity ratings while recruiters get to see the skills and experience of job seekers without information about sex, race, or age; and *Unitive* guides managers through the hiring process and finds ways to prevent them from acting on bias. Look for ways to incorporate technology so that decisions will be gender blind.

*Use it.* This strategy entails recognizing gender bias and using it to your advantage. It has been called “stereotype tax” by Annie Duke, a poker player, to refer to male poker players who are so blinded by gender bias that they underestimate a woman’s abilities. The result? She wins! And what works in poker works in negotiation. Examples from negotiation include: being relentlessly pleasant, using the iron fist in a velvet glove tactic, using cooperative strategies, and invoking relational and communal approaches. Some women in C-suites routinely send a list of their recent results and that of their team to their CEO every six months. They openly recognize they were hired to produce results.<sup>52</sup> This strategy of playing into the bias or stereotype works best where: the organization is unlikely to change anytime soon, it is very unlikely you can create change on your own, you need your job and fear penalties if you speak out, or you don’t feel comfortable using the other strategies discussed.

This strategy is not for everyone, so if it feels disingenuous, use one of the others described here.

*Try Humour.* A senior business woman attending a seminar on leadership told the group that she deals with gender bias and inappropriate comments by saying in a lighthearted tone, “Do I have to call the diversity police?” She says it does the trick and makes the offender aware they have crossed a line. The use of humour can be tricky as it can easily turn into sarcasm or even anger, so tone is important. To appear lighthearted, you might want to try divorcing the substance of the comment from the demeanor. A C-suite woman from a very male dominated industry revealed to me that she often used competitive language with a smile and a laugh. Although she may have been issuing a command or demand, her tone and non-verbal language were not threatening. Imagine a light tone used with the phrase, “ah, the lovely smell of testosterone in the morning” followed by a light chuckle. Or “are you still using that outdated command and control approach?” If you know your audience and do it in a socially intelligent way, it can be a great way to signal that the behaviour is not appropriate while showing you are a good sport about it all. This is social intelligence at its finest.

*Persuade them.* Use principles of persuasion to change biased policies or procedures. If the person you need to persuade adheres to principles of fairness, use that in the discussion. If they are persuaded by economics, use the bottom line or data showing cost savings or profit. If they are swayed by efficacy, then prove your contribution with data showing your results. If they are swayed by what others think or do, use social proof. You might even use unconscious triggers of persuasion as they are very powerful tools.<sup>53</sup>

*Disrupt.* The essence of this approach is to act as if the future has arrived and GBS don't exist. In the “Trainwreck Files,” Sady Doyle says that Hillary Clinton has always acted as if a woman could be the President of



the United States.<sup>54</sup> Women who are disrupters move us forward by living possibilities and not accepting the limitations of the present. They let us believe that change is possible. To be a disruptor is not easy; society often takes many years, sometimes hundreds of years, to catch up to the change. One current example of potent gender disruption is shown by young people who insist on non-binary gender identification.<sup>55</sup> Disruption is one of the four career strategies I put forward in the chapter Plan.

For more suggestions on how to expose and defeat gender bias, I strongly recommend Jessica Bennett's insightful and witty book *Feminist Fight Club: An Office Survival Manual (For a Sexist Workplace)*. If you are like me, the cover alone will have you smiling.

### **IMPORTANT INSIGHTS ON RECOGNIZING AND REDUCING GENDER BIAS**

- Be open to recognizing bias in yourself. We are all socialized with traditional gender norms to some degree. No one is immune.
- Do not excuse or normalize bias even though we are all complicit. It is discriminatory and creates an unfair advantage for one group.
- Treat people as individuals and avoid automatic assumptions based on their race, gender, age, sexual orientation or other identity markers that categorize them as a member of a particular group.
- Replace subjective methods for decision-making such as intuition, informal networks, and traditional rules of thumb with the use of objective and quantifiable data.
- Establish clear, transparent, and objective criteria for making decisions about salary, bonuses, promotions, and hiring.
- Recognize that unconscious gender bias does not necessarily align with openly held beliefs. Most people openly agree with gender parity but are biased.

- Be aware that biases flourish when decisions are rushed and competition is high. Allow adequate time for making decisions and reduce competition between employees.
- Sponsor, mentor, and coach employees who are not like you.
- Get curious about others and avoid assumptions based on external characteristics.
- Know that attempts to reduce bias by suppression or repression are not effective and may amplify them.
- Remember that biases are not permanent – they can be changed with intention, attention, and new facts.

## SELF-LIMITING MINDSETS

Self-limiting gender mindsets are based on internalized gender beliefs that result in women putting limits on themselves. They are unconscious admonitions and injunctions about what women should or should not do. They prevent women from trying things at work or developing skills that will advance their careers because they violate a gender rule or stereotype. Here is an example from coaching that illustrates the powerful and often puzzling effects of these GBS.

A woman with an important interview coming up approached me for coaching. She found it challenging to talk about herself in interviews. Even stating the facts of her accomplishments was difficult; she always responded by saying that everything was in her resumé. As a prominent lawyer who had coached many young lawyers, she had great confidence generally, so this limitation was especially puzzling. When asked about her childhood, she revealed that from a very young age she had been taught that humility was essential and bringing attention to herself was sinful. With this one powerful insight, she was able

to overcome her issue and talk easily about herself in the interview.

Self-limiting mindsets often generate feelings of discomfort that prevent us from acting. These mindsets can cause us to downplay our credentials or give us the sense we are imposters so that our skills, talents, and experiences are never sufficient for whatever is required.

Self-limiting mindsets often result in missed opportunities at work. They, unfortunately, lend credence to the perception that women lack confidence, motivation, and ambition. So in addition to being passed over due to gender bias, women are less likely to raise their hands for a job or promotion. They might pass on a leadership position because they don't think they can lead. Women have to be asked to run for elected office a total of six times before seriously considering it.<sup>56</sup> There are many good reasons why women choose to scale back their career ambition such as personal goals, stage of life, or responsibilities. However, the limits women place on themselves are ingrained through gender training and prevent them from taking on positions with more responsibility or asking for opportunities.

Another way a mindset can hinder and limit working women is through gender beliefs about what they should be doing. These beliefs, often transmitted from mother to daughter, take the form of women believing that they have to do everything at home and that it won't be done right or managed well enough by others. Tiffany Dufu describes this particular mindset in her book *Drop the Ball: Achieving More by Doing Less*. She even gives it a name -- Home Control Disease.<sup>57</sup> This can allow women to sense they have control and power when feeling powerless. However, this mindset and behaviour often results in the opposite effect - feeling even more out of control and powerless. As Tiffany and other women have realized, trying to do it all is impossible.

Self-limiting beliefs often seem valid and correct to the holder as they get confirmed through the holder's selective perception and memory of events, experiences, and information. This is called confirmation bias. In other words, we see and remember what we believe. This bias makes self-limiting mindsets very difficult to recognize.

## **RECOGNIZE**

One important way to recognize a self-limiting mindset, particularly as it relates to career skills, is through feelings of discomfort. If you experience these as you engage in a skill that is advantageous for you to develop, reflect on the situation. If the feelings don't make sense or are out of proportion for the situation, these feelings are most likely based on outdated associations and messages from childhood.

The hardest part of changing your mindset is recognizing your underlying beliefs. Tiffany Dufu made a realization about her own limiting gender belief, House Control Disease, when her husband gave her a book by Allison Pearson, *I Don't Know How She Does it*. The main character was so familiar that a light bulb went on and Tiffany recognized herself as having the same struggles. Often others can more clearly see the mindsets and outdated beliefs we operate by, just as we are able to see theirs. If you are struggling to find a hidden gender belief that is limiting you, ask a trusted friend, mentor, or close family member. They will know.

## **REDUCE AND REPLACE**

Sometimes all it takes is a flash of insight to illuminate the limiting mindset and cause a behavioural reset. Often it requires more. Using the analogy of cultural training as computer programming, new coding is required. Detection of the malicious code and replacement with a functional one - one that allows you to think differently - requires some work on your part. Your beliefs are yours, you have control over them

and what you have learned, you can relearn. You can replace limiting mindsets with others that are beneficial for your success.

If you feel uncomfortable doing an activity although you know objectively it would be good for you to do, try to identify why you have the discomfort. Once you have identified the beliefs that are limiting you and causing uneasiness, write them down. Make them visible and conscious.

Then select a new belief that is more realistic, beneficial, and suitable. Write it down. It might be the belief that telling others about your accomplishments is important as it makes your value visible.

Remind yourself that a belief is just an idea or thought that you keep repeating and reinforcing. Beliefs shape your behaviour and your judgement. Imagine what it would feel like holding the new belief. Think about how much easier the activity would be, how good it would feel, and how you might behave differently.

Beliefs shape our behaviour and structure learning experiences. With new beliefs we do different things, see different things, and remember different things.

Once you recognize that beliefs are subjective and can be changed, you can start to look for tools that support your new beliefs. With the realization that your beliefs are creating assumptions and attitudes that don't work, you are on the way to changing them.

## **GENDER HABITS AND RITUALS**

Unconscious gender habits are approaches, responses, and behaviour we learn as children through gender training and use as adults, often without awareness. Gender habits can be very detrimental to a work reputation. During a communication seminar a woman shared a recent experience she had with a gender habit. After she had finished a presentation at

work, a colleague told her that she had added “Okay?” after every single slide. Interestingly, she was totally unaware of doing it. This is a clear example of an unconscious gender habit appearing under stress. In this instance asking “Okay?” was about connecting with the audience and getting their approval. The audience, made up of men and women, most likely went away with the impression that the presenter was unsure about the substance of her presentation.

It is not just feminine style habits that can get in the way. Masculine style habits have the potential to alienate the speaker from the audience - such as acting overly confident, being too much of an expert, not connecting with the audience, or winning points at the audience’s expense. So it is important to be aware of your particular gender habits so that you can recognize when they occur and stop them from creating negative impressions.

## **RECOGNIZE**

Feminine habits are often difficult to recognize because they tend to be used unconsciously and often when we are under stress. They tend to be our default mode and make us feel comfortable. Unfortunately, they can also reinforce gender bias and play into gender stereotypes. So it is important to be aware of what they are and how they can show themselves at work. Some common ones include

- Not asking
- Taking up less space physically
- Using tentative language patterns
- Avoiding conflict
- Blaming yourself for failure
- Negotiating well for others but not yourself
- Avoiding leadership positions
- Not self-promoting

## *Understanding Gender at Work*

- Asking questions for rapport not information
- Avoiding office politics

In contrast, masculine habits include<sup>58</sup>

- Trying to win all the time
- Interrupting others
- Acting overconfident and appearing entitled
- Making destructive comments
- Using bantering to communicate
- Preferring command and control style leadership
- Using expansive postures to signal authority
- Negotiating well for self-interests
- Knowing and aligning with the goals of the organization
- Telling others about successes and wins
- Blaming others for failures

You may have noticed in reading the lists that not all of the habits are detrimental. Gender habits are neither good nor bad – right nor wrong. They depend on the situation and the people involved. And because humans are complex, males and females display both masculine and feminine habits. The habits we have depend on our upbringing, the messages we received, the role models we had, and the images we saw.<sup>59</sup>

So how do you become aware of your particular gender habits? Like the woman who added “Okay?” to each slide discussion, you may be fortunate to have colleagues who tell you about your habits. If not, ask. Perhaps the habit involves tentative language patterns that don’t synch with your otherwise confident professional demeanor. Perhaps it relates to negotiating well for others but not for yourself. Whatever it might be, find out.

## **REDUCE**

Each skill chapter of this book aims to help you become aware of gender habits you may have. Once you have identified them, you can consciously reduce those that may be getting in the way of your career success and advancement. Gender habits can also be a great strength when used contextually and consciously, so being able to identify beneficial ones is also important.

## **MISREADING GENDER HABITS**

Gender habits and approaches from one gender culture are interpreted by members of the other gender culture based on the rules they learned in childhood. Consequently, such habits are often misread and misinterpreted. Since status and achievement are paramount in masculine culture while relationships are key in female gender culture, feminine behaviours often suggest a lack of confidence when viewed through masculine lenses: behaviours such as being modest, not bragging about successes or promotions, working to fit in with the group, and reducing physically are all behaviours that run counter to showing higher status.

To be clear, such behaviour rarely has anything to do with a lack of confidence, competence, skill, talent, intelligence, or ability, and everything to do with gendered patterns that are learned in childhood.

To illustrate the confusion that can result, a coaching client who is a director of communication and marketing in a tech company worked quickly and quietly behind the scenes to create presentations and videos that were consistently rated as excellent not only by the employees of the company but by the executives as well. She was therefore puzzled and hurt when one executive, with whom she had a wonderful relationship, advised her that she needed to make her value more visible. In his opinion she needed to do a victory lap after a great presentation and in failing



to do so, she appeared to lack self-assurance. My client was puzzled, confused, and even offended until I explained his masculine perspective. Making her value visible to others in the organization would not be achieved only by getting the work done well but also by ensuring others were aware of it. According to her colleague, she needed to promote her accomplishments to be accorded the status she was due.

## **RECOGNIZE**

To help you understand and recognize this type of blind spot, I have listed some common masculine misinterpretations of feminine behaviours revealed by clients below.

- Being new on the job and asking questions of a male boss was the method used by one of my clients to build rapport with him. When he told her that she seemed to lack the knowledge and competence that he knew she had, she came to me to figure out what was going on.
- The only woman manager at an aeronautics plant was a great puzzle to all the other managers as she negotiated the highest salaries in the company for her team but the lowest for herself. They could not figure out why she showed such inconsistent negotiation skills.
- One woman in a seminar told me that she prefaced all of her questions with “this may be a dumb question” or “it may just be me ...” to avoid any pushback and ribbing from her male colleagues. When she realized that they most likely viewed her as uncertain and lacking in confidence as a result, she decided on the spot to drop the preface and instead deal head on with any possible pushback.
- The only woman on a professional panel consisting of older men started her presentation by downplaying her experience in comparison to the illustrious panel. A male in the audience

took her literally and later prefaced a question to her with an explanation of a very well-known legal case. The female audience members who recognized the mansplaining told me they gasped audibly as the man asked his question.

Many feminine habits are often misinterpreted as a sign of low confidence, or even of low competence, using masculine norms. In my experience this misinterpretation of a lack of confidence is the number one reason women are referred for coaching by corporations and firms.

This is a true clash of gender cultures when those who value the group (as well as input, feedback, feelings, and ideas) are viewed by those who value individual achievement and status as lacking in self-confidence and personal power. And since these judgements come from fast processing, the misinterpretations are often made quickly and unconsciously. That is, the assessor may not even know what behaviours were involved but the overall impression is a lack of confidence or competence. And the impression is typically very strong and lasting.

## **REDUCE**

The skill chapters in this book provide information about feminine habits that are frequently misread and misinterpreted, together with tools and techniques for behavioural change. Information about feminine gender habits is provided so you will feel less frustrated and more in control as you anticipate gender bias and manage impressions. These skills will ensure that when you speak, lead, or negotiate you are doing so in the most effective way and you can avoid triggering any gender stereotypes that will lessen your power, message, or brand. This information will allow you to recognize and reduce any habits that may get in the way of others seeing you as competent, confident, and socially intelligent.

## **GENDERED EXPECTATIONS**

Expectations of appropriate gender behaviour based on gender stereotypes are very powerful. They are so powerful that they cause male basketball players to act irrationally and throw foul shots in the least effective way. Almost every single basketball player in the NBA uses the overarm technique, a technique that is far less effective than the alternative – the underarm shot. The latter method involves shooting from between the knees and flicking the wrists. It allows for more control of the ball and statistically is much more successful. Wilt Chamberlain, a famous American basketball player and holder of numerous NBA records in scoring, rebounding and durability, stopped using the underarm shot despite improving his stats of successful shots from under 40% to over 60% in just one game. When asked why he stopped using it, he said, “I felt silly. I felt like a sissy even though I knew it was wrong not to use it.” Interestingly the underarm method is called the “granny shot” and tends to be viewed with disdain by the crowd. And Wilt is not alone in feeling the pressure. All NBA players (except for one) currently use the less effective method of foul shooting in a sport that is all about making shots.<sup>60</sup>

The power of gendered expectations also caused female students at Harvard Business School (HBS) to adopt less academically successful behaviour. Research shows that the women who started out with equal academic and career achievements to the men received significantly fewer academic honours upon graduation than their male classmates received. What was the difference in behaviour between men and women? Although the women prepared more for class than the men, they participated less. The reason? In order to balance social and professional relationships, many women admitted to self-editing in the classroom to manage their out-of-classroom image. They did not want to violate traditional feminine stereotypes by arguing forcefully in class.<sup>61</sup> Bright

young women censored themselves so they would not be disliked outside the classroom.

The power of gendered expectations is not just psychological. Research shows that when women act in a way that is counter to gendered expectations they may also experience social and economic sanctions.<sup>62</sup> Assertive women were found to receive lower wages and fewer promotions than assertive men. And the managers responsible for such promotions and wage increases were found to be totally unaware of this sanctioning – showing yet again the unconscious nature of these GBS. Similar economic sanctions, although less severe, were found to apply to men who were friendly, relationship-focused, and cooperative (gender atypical traits). Thus, implicit gender bias affects both men and women in the workplace when they act counter to gendered expectations.

## **RECOGNIZE**

Recognizing gendered expectations and understanding the potential consequences of violating them allows you to anticipate these biases and respond more appropriately. The following is a list of situations where the women recognized in real time the gendered expectations being placed on them and were able to respond well.

- A young woman lawyer who asked for a higher starting salary *based on the criteria used by the organization* was met with an “awkward silence.” She recognized the reason and held firm during the negotiation.
- A group of junior women recognized that their supervisors - men with wives at home - did not provide work to them due to their different lifestyle choice of working. As a result, they looked for work elsewhere.
- A female executive was told during a performance evaluation that she was too direct in her communication style and should

learn from other women in her company how to communicate less directly. She challenged the assessment citing examples of males at her level who were even more direct.

- A brilliant young student was advised by a high school teacher that she was too aggressive and that boys would not like her. She was undeterred by this traditional gender advice and went on to become a successful criminal defense lawyer who has managed to use her competitive nature to great advantage.

Being conscious of gendered expectations and understanding the perspective of others is a powerful way to change these GBS, as well as a great start to becoming socially intelligent and politically savvy.

### **REDUCE**

The same strategies that work to reduce and diminish the effect of gender bias allow you to respond well to gendered expectations. Early identification and selecting the best counter strategy for the situation are key. You may decide to name it and correct it: “There seems to be a double standard operating here. There are many men who are Senior VPs that are even more direct than I am.” You may decide to reduce its power by questioning it: “You seem to be taken aback by my asking for a fair salary based on your own criteria. Why is that?” Or you may talk to others about it and build alliances for change.

Still another way to deal with expectations is to consciously play into them. Learn to ask in a way that is gender typical. Numerous examples are provided in the chapter Ask. Employ words associated with a feminine approach to align with other’s expectations. Use “we” instead of “me.” Wherever possible, ask what you can do for them. Talk about your team or colleagues and how much you enjoy working with them. This strategy is the opposite of disrupting whereby you make others comfortable by behaving in expected ways – you consciously *go along to get along*.

## NEGATIVE STEREOTYPE THREAT

A negative stereotype threat (NST) occurs when a gender stereotype negatively influences a woman's cognitive performance. This is a true mind bug. When people are faced with a cognitively challenging task and they identify with a social group that does poorly on that task, they perform poorly. The perceived threat activates emotional brain regions, which in turn raises stress levels and interferes with attention and concentration. Not surprisingly, performance suffers. An NST can be based on race, socioeconomic status, age, gender, or a combination of these.

Research shows that both female and male performance can be selectively affected by bringing gender identity to the fore, including describing sex differences in performance at the beginning of test sessions. A classic example involved giving women a math test after reminding them that women aren't as good at math as men are. The result was that women consistently underperformed. When no description was provided about performance, men and women had the same level of results.

The tasks that activate gender NSTs are those generally thought to show gender differences in performance, such as verbal and social sensitivity tasks for men, and math and mental rotational ability for women. However, the research showing cognitive sex differences is being challenged by the examination of other factors, such as age and culture, and the use of meta-analysis.<sup>63</sup> Based on this, it appears that gender stereotypes create cognitive sex differences rather than the other way around.

Of particular concern is the finding that the effects of a stereotype threat may emerge as early as kindergarten.<sup>64</sup> Still another disturbing finding is that an NST can be activated in women using subtle cues, including: having to indicate your gender on a form before a test session, being

the only female in the room, experiencing the implicit sexist bias of an instructor, and watching “air-head” females in commercials. And subtle triggers have a greater effect than blatant cues.<sup>65</sup> Thus, NSTs may be more of an issue now than they were decades ago when blatant discrimination was more prevalent. It has even been suggested that NSTs may account for generally elevated stress levels in working women.<sup>66</sup>

How does an NST play out in the day-to-day work environment? If you notice you are the only woman on a team heading into a boardroom you may start to have thoughts about your worthiness, skills, and abilities even without being aware you are having them. Gender training and fast processing cause you to think thoughts that accord with negative stereotypes about women.

In addition to diminishing performance, NSTs have also been found to activate a defensive mindset. A person may become cautious, careful, and conservative in an attempt to avoid failure, and cease being bold, innovative, and creative.

A new NST that I am seeing in young women who are coaching clients is the negative stereotype associated with age. Young millennial women are worried that when they question their career choice or their fit within an organization they are seen as a “typical complaining and lazy millennial.” As a result of this NST based on age, they are paralyzed to move on or to consciously analyze their situation to make good choices. Negative stereotypes are never helpful, so early recognition is key to stopping the impact and effect of this type of threat.

## **RECOGNITION**

The belief that you will not do well on a task for no rational reason is a sign of an NST. This belief will likely cause anxiety and may stop you from doing the task altogether. The triggering of an NST can be subtle and so anticipating where it can arise and noting when your performance

level dips are good places to start looking for it. Do you have a pattern of lowered performance that is inexplicable? Get curious and figure out why. The reason may be an NST.

Another sign of an NST is feeling like an imposter. Women tell me this feeling arises when they are the only woman in a meeting. They feel they will be exposed as a fraud. When in the grip of this thinking, the defensive mindset is activated; women hesitate to be bold and creative and instead hold back on higher order cognitive functions to fit in.

Another trigger for an NST is exposure to the masculine habit of testing. Males tend to strive to know where everyone ranks in terms of status and achievement. Due to gender bias, it is generally assumed that women rank one down. This masculine tendency to test, coupled with a lack of women at senior levels in most organizations, can easily create psychological feelings of isolation and low self-worth – fertile ground for the activation of an NST. Once you recognize when you are being tested, it will make it easier to avoid having negative thoughts about yourself and prevent an NST.

## **REDUCE**

The reason early recognition is so important is that once the emotional brain is activated by an NST, it is difficult to deal with it using mental will alone. Cognitive control of the emotional brain is almost impossible and trying to suppress or dismiss negative thoughts uses precious mental resources, distracting you from the task at hand. In short, suppression makes it worse. When you are in that skittish, anxious space, try to take a break - go to the washroom or get a coffee. As you do this, clear your mind and focus on your breath. In other words, meditate. Meditation has been shown to be an effective way of dealing with negative thoughts and extreme emotions. As you relax, your concentration and focus will improve.



The best ways to reduce the effects of NSTs are to anticipate and prevent them. Here are research-based suggestions for doing this.<sup>67</sup>

- *Identify with a high-status group.* When individuals feel secure in their abilities and comfortable about their place in the group, they have less stress and can concentrate on tasks with ease. NST research confirms that individuals primed to identify with higher status groups, even when they belong to low status groups, perform better.<sup>68</sup> So focus on those aspects that elevate you: your intelligence, skills, experience, potential, and talent. If you have a senior position, focus on the status you have. If you have an advanced educational degree or degrees, focus on your level of education. This is a strategy used by people as they age. Age bias is the strongest negative bias and research shows that people avoid NST as they age by not seeing themselves as old but instead identifying with younger groups.<sup>69</sup> If this sounds like a weak strategy, remember that we are dealing with an irrational mind bug and this approach does outsmart it.
- *Anticipate and Debunk.* Approach tasks associated with gender NSTs as calmly as you can and recognize anxiety as being due to NSTs and not as a reflection of your abilities. Arm yourself beforehand with the facts about those tasks and skills so you don't buy into false negative gender stereotypes. For example, a feminine approach is often most effective in negotiation and leadership despite the widespread belief that a masculine style is superior for these skills.
- *Reframe the Situation.* Think of the task as a way to improve your abilities, expand your skills, and enhance your experience. This frames the task as a positive experience rather than a negative one in which you won't do well.
- *Disrupt Negative Gender Stereotypes.* Surround yourself with powerful and positive women, and seek mentors who support

your success. Being around such women will change the unconscious negative stereotypes you hold – stereotypes that have been transmitted to you during childhood and are no longer valid.

In order to reduce gender NSTs at a societal level, rigorous scientific studies are needed to debunk research that claims cognitive sex differences. Furthermore, successful women need to be showcased to create positive images and new gender associations for boys and girls. By dispelling the myth of gender differences, we can provide new associations for the fast processing system of generations to come.

## **CAREER STRATEGIES**

It is understandable if you feel frustrated or overwhelmed in reading about these many forms of GBS. Be reassured that just by becoming aware of them you are on your way to successfully dealing with them. The next chapter, Plan, sets out four career strategies for dealing with GBS to help you better navigate the gender minefield at work.

The interest and passion of men and women at all levels to make gender parity a reality is encouraging. Here are some practical suggestions in working towards this goal.

## **WHAT ORGANIZATIONS, LEADERS, AND MENTORS CAN DO**

### **COMMIT TO GENDER PARITY**

- Hold yourself and your organization accountable for improving gender outcomes.
- Open the door to women. Put them in senior roles and give them the support to succeed.

## *Understanding Gender at Work*

- Be open to feedback and learning about implicit bias – gender, race, and age.
- Be a role model and confront inequities head on through organizational strategies.
- Call out any biased practices, policies, or behaviour. Shine a light on any that penalize or disadvantage women. If you are silent you are complicit.
- Encourage a culture of courageous conversations and exposing biases.
- Be part of the movement to sign the Women’s Empowerment Principles, an initiative of UN Women, and the UN Global Compact to guide businesses in promoting gender equality.
- When gender differences in promotions, salary, performance evaluations, and leadership positions exist, figure out why. Use data.
- Ensure a metric of equality – make success measurable and attainable.
- Level the playing field when hiring by removing demographic information from job applications and using objective tests and structured interviews to assess candidates.

### **CHAMPION WOMEN**

- Sponsor women colleagues. Use your influence to advocate for them, speak up for them, and support their advancement in your organization.
- Showcase women who have succeeded, making their success obvious and ensuring that women are well-represented at each level.
- Appoint highly qualified women to the higher levels of leadership in your organization including executive teams, corporate boards, managing partners, and C-suite positions.

- Ask women what would make them feel more included.
- Conduct exit interviews for women. Include questions about what made them feel included, anything that made them feel excluded, and what can be done to specifically attract and retain women.
- Use microaffirmations on a daily basis that recognize an individual's value and contribution.

## WANT TO READ MORE?

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