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Journal 2: Women in the Workforce and the “Tug of War”

I haven’t been able to stop thinking about some comments a female student made in class past weekend regarding what she described as the “feminine” behavior of most of the women” and the male manager in the museum where she is employed. The words, “drama” and “crying” were used and the expression “too busy being emotional to focus on important issues” were asserted. This classmate was very clear to distinguish herself from what she saw as typical feminine workforce behavior. I always struggle with this type of language, but in particular when it comes from other women, and especially women in leadership roles. As women we face so many challenges in achieving equity in the workforce and I have often thought that if as women are going to be metaphorically whipped by a patriarchal workforce, I’ll be damned if we should also have to pick out our own switch to be whooped with. That’s a bit what this type of conversation feels like for me.

Williams and Dempsey (2014) describe four patterns in the workforce that create barriers to women’s advancement including; 1.Prove it again, 2. The tightrope, 3. The maternal wall, and 4. Tug of war. Prove it again refers to women needing to prove their competence over and over while men are often acknowledged for not only their previous contributions, but also for their potential. The tightrope is prescriptive bias stemming from cultural assumptions of how women should behave. The maternal wall refers to women being “pushed to the margins of the professional world” (Williams and Dempsey, 2014, p. 128). Tug of war occurs when gender bias against women can fuel conflict among women. The comments from class seemed to support both the tightrope and the tug of war that contribute to the obstacles women face in the workforce.

Williams (2014) explains how often high status, leadership roles are seen as requiring stereotypically masculine qualities. As exemplified in the museum example, women (and even some men as was expressed in describing the male leader) have to constantly concern themselves with walking a tightrope between being seen as too feminine while also being seen as competent and effective. Even more prevalent in the museum example though, was the tug of war pattern whereby “bias against women fuels conflict among women” (p. 98). Williams (2014) explains that because women often encounter discrimination, bias and additional barriers versus their male counterparts in the workplace, some women will distance themselves not only from behaviors seen as too feminine, but also distance themselves from other women and align themselves with men who they see as behaving in ways more aligned with advancement. Google CEO Marissa Mayer when asked about being a “girl at Google” has often responded “I’m not a girl at Google; I’m a geek at Google”. We see this example often and the comments from class reminded me how prevalent this type of thinking can be, even in a leadership doctoral course focused on diversity.

This disassociation or seeing oneself as “other” than the other women in their organizations is an interesting phenomenon. Derks, Ellemers, van Laar, and De Groot (2011) describe senior women in masculine organizational cultures who have fulfilled their career aspirations in part by dissociating themselves from their gender as ‘Queen Bees’. Google Queen Bee Syndrome and you will find dozens of mainstream media articles happily honing in on this stereotype. Unfortunately, this disassociation often results in women contributing to the gender stereotyping of other women. In my analysis of the museum employee’s commentary, the assertion wasn’t just that women were too emotional, but that there emotional behaviors inhibit their competence and effectiveness. While it can be interpreted that this female museum employee was frustrated by what she viewed as stereotypical female behavior (crying, gossip, etc.) I would argue that when we group women into stereotypically gendered categories of “too emotional = less competent” we as women are contributing to the workforce biases that too often hinder women’s workforce success.

While the media too often portrays the Queen Bee phenomenon in terms catty women keeping other women from advancing, Derks et al., (2011) study showed that the Queen Bee phenomenon is a result of social contextual circumstances and in particular the “social identity threat that women experience in companies that discriminate against women” (p. 530). As Williams (2014) espoused “bias against women fuels conflict among women” (p. 98). Derks et al., (2011) found that often it is the tension between women’s personal ambitions and the gender stereotypes expressed around them that creates a threat to their social identity and this is where tug of war problems emerge. Williams and Dempsey (2014) explain this through the analogy of lobsters in a boiling pot of water. The only way out of the pot is to climb on top of the other lobsters because only one can make it out. When women (or any minority group) experience tokenism whereby historical circumstances suggest there is only room for one to advance to the highest rung, it becomes a win-lose environment. In this case, seeing and defining oneself as “other” in ways that can be associated with more typical (meaning male) leadership traits is a strategy many women use and this is understandable. Unfortunately, it also contributes to stereotypes and biases that do not serve women’s advancement well. Perhaps research which brings attention to these patterns will assist in at least making leaders aware which may lead to changes in perception and ultimately movement towards change. As I said in class, you can’t clean your house if you don’t see the dirt.

Reference:

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