

TALENTQ

YOUR PEOPLE ARE YOUR BUSINESS

HOME LEADERSHIP PERFORMANCE CHANGE **CULTURE** IDEAS

SPECIAL REPORT ▾



MOST VIEWED

1 Think Outside the 9 Box

10752 views

2 Why the 4-Day Workweek Is a Terrible Idea

10129 views

3 5 Gender Balance Myths Most Men Still Believe

10103 views

4 4 Innovations That Will Transform Talent

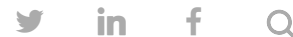
CULTURE

5 GENDER BALANCE MYTHS MOST MEN STILL BELIEVE

on March 9, 2020

To balance our workplaces, we need to blow up these misconceptions.

HOME



For the past two decades, I've dedicated my career to working on gender issues.

During the first decade, I led a professional women's network and listened to thousands of women from across Europe. And in the second, I worked with mostly male leadership teams around the world to gender-balance their businesses.

Sign up for the monthly TalentQ Newsletter, an essential roundup of news and insights that will help you make critical talent decisions.

But my work isn't done: If we truly want to balance our workplaces—and our homes—we need to address the following five persistent myths still held by segments of each group.

Gender Balance Myth #1: Motherhood

"Women make personal choices. That explains why there aren't many in leadership."

For most senior males I've worked with, this is the number-one reason their organizations aren't gender balanced. Women have babies and then "choose" to care for them (while men presumably don't do either).

They'll look at the gender ratios in their companies or teams and share anecdotes of women who refused promotions or senior roles for family reasons. If they have retention issues, it's because of "family choices."

The more they believe this, the more they reinforce stereotypes that make parenting and flexibility a women's issue. And the more they never look at what other issues need addressing (like culture, systems, or leadership role models), the more they fail to adapt the workplace to a more gender balanced century.

9411 views

5 6 Truths About Using Personality Data for Talent Decisions

8504 views

ABOUT TQ



The mission of Talent Quarterly is to make organizations more successful by providing their leaders with the science-based, insightful, and practical information to make critical talent decisions. We accomplish that mission by publishing serious, provocative, and practical articles and interviews that raise the quality of dialogue about talent. We believe the current dialogue on talent issues provides few insights and little guidance to senior-

HOME



are changing fast, with younger generations of men more interested in balancing family and work than any prior generation. They routinely complain their bosses will punish them if they do.

The men in most of the ExCo debates I facilitate prove them right. There's a big generational shift going on between boomer men and millennial fathers. We saw this a couple of decades ago between generations of women. The older generation expects "sacrifice," because they did. If you want to get ahead, you have to work hard and not see your children. This is linked to our second myth.

Balanced leaders do this: Gender-neutralize everything to do with children and family care. They introduce shared parental leave, encourage their young male colleagues to take it, and talk readily about their own personal lives to role-model the integration of personal and professional selves.

Gender Balance Myth #2: Meritocracy

"I couldn't care less if someone is male, female, or any other gender. All I care about is competence."

Both men and women share a touching, largely unconscious faith in the meritocracy of their organizations. But the value system on which these beliefs are built are carved in slightly different stone.

Men believe talent will automatically rise to the top (that's how *they* got there), while women believe if they do a good job (and continue to be the stellar student they've always been), they'll be promoted. Neither, of course, is actually or entirely true.

Women rarely want to do the sort of networking, politics, and self-promotion that are still often seen as a sign of the ambition needed for many senior jobs, especially not if the senior ranks are heavily male-dominated. Because women believe hard work and good results will be recognized and rewarded (despite substantial evidence to the

needed to adjudicate the claims made by consultants and academics about the effectiveness of talent management practices and products.

TQ NEWLETTER

First Name *

Last Name *

Email *

Submit

performers.

Women then conclude the system is discriminatory and biased against them. Men conclude that women don't "want" the jobs.

The real issue isn't bias—it's ignorance. Men and women are different in a myriad of ways that impact workplace perceptions, and hence, promotions. Because leaders ignore these differences and are convinced that treating everyone "the same" is a guarantee of fairness, women are judged on masculine-leaning norms and metrics.

Balanced leaders do this: Have an in-depth understanding of the real differences between genders and their consequences on customer preferences and workplace progression. They know balance is the result of conscious design and adaptation, not an extrapolation of male-normed organizations to women.

Gender Balance Myth #3: Minimization

"Diversity is so much more than just gender."

Men are rightly confused by the bundling of gender balance into a rainbow of diversity dimensions. Women are the majority of university graduates globally. They're the majority of consumers, decision-makers, and clients in an ever-expanding range of sectors. Why would companies call this "diversity"?

Does anyone call the Chinese a diversity dimension? The Chinese are the world's biggest market. If you want to sell to them or hire them, every company has learned you need to learn their language and culture.

Women's **global buying power** is twice the GDP of China and India combined. If you want to sell to them or hire them, you'll need to learn their language and culture. This won't happen if we keep framing

The near-universal bundling (swallowed by both men and women) of a majority into a basket of minorities has consequences. It frames “women” (which is what men hear when they hear the word “gender”) as one minority among many. It leads most men to think all diversity dimensions are *on a par*, and there’s no need to prioritize or focus on gender.

Companies are often trying to hide their urgent and necessary pushes for gender balance under a broader umbrella. But this just irritates most men, when they discover the only “diversity” getting measured on their performance scorecards is the gender ratio of their teams.

Balanced leaders do this: Clearly prioritize gender balance as a business issue. They’re skilled at explaining why gender balance matters to their businesses and equipped to sell the drivers for change to skeptical male colleagues.

Gender Balance Myth #4: Masculinity

“I need someone who’s hungry and ready to put in the hours and sacrifices I have. That’s leadership.”

Most men (and women) think leaders have masculine traits because that’s what works. Actually, most people think leaders have masculine traits because that’s most of what we’ve known.

The stereotypes about leaders are as strong as those about genders and skew heavily male. So supposedly objective and proven leadership criteria are actually based on past leaders and create a largely unconscious preference for self-replication.

The different skills and styles that women bring to the workplace often aren’t seen as gender differences. Instead, they’re usually judged as an unacceptable lack of desired masculine traits: self-confidence, hunger, 24/7 work prioritization, and personal-

been done.” It’s disruptive and different. That’s the point.

Gender balance invites male leaders to convince other men it’s time to gender balance. This goes against a certain myth of male solidarity. Men have been brought up to avoid displaying anything to do with femininity. Men create alignment among themselves in their attitudes toward women. So when men step up as active feminists and proactive pushers of gender balance, they’re publicly breaking the “bro code” and siding with ... women.

This isn’t helped by all the flattering titles women then adoringly label men with, such as “champion,” “sponsor,” or “ally.” It further marks them apart from their peers. This takes courage and consciousness of the likely reactions from other men. The real leadership skill is getting majorities of male colleagues brought into balance.

Balanced leaders do this: Know the best leadership is a balance of masculine and feminine energies and people. They discourage “alpha male” behaviors in both men and women and seek to create corporate cultures that are “gender bilingual” rather than normed to whichever group runs the place (usually men).

Gender Balance Myth #5: Mentoring

“I’m a real champion of gender balance and spend a lot of time mentoring my mostly female team.”

John was convinced he was the most progressive guy around. His team was dominated by women, he loved sponsoring women’s conferences, and he took pride in being a gender “champion.” He would appear to open these conferences, spend a few minutes encouraging women to “lean in” and “believe in themselves,” and then disappear to get down to real work.

There are a growing number of Johns around. You’ve probably known a false feminist. They’ve understood that supporting women can be



HOME

but they don't actually promote them. They use them. They enjoy being the (usually senior) man managing a team of women. Or they reinforce the mentoring mantra, recommending that women "man up" in order to get promoted: Adopt more masculine behaviors, or more feminine skirts. Play the game, don't change it. Adapt yourself. I'll take care of you. It's a bit insidious, and sometimes hard to read.

These men are comfortable with women. They may be less comfortable with other men, doing the kind of sponsoring and pushing of female talent required to get their team members promoted to other, bigger jobs. They love giving advice that bolsters their own egos, rather than developing and shouting about these women's strengths, and risk losing the talent—and often the workhorses—on their teams.

Balanced leaders do this: Have balanced teams that aren't dominated by either gender, and push their high-potential talent to grow and develop. They enhance the visibility of their team members, not of themselves. They lose a lot of talent to other parts of the business—proudly.

***Avivah Wittenberg-Cox** is the CEO of the leading gender consultancy, 20-first. She works with top management at some of the world's best-known companies to identify the business opportunities presented by gender balance and help them achieve it.*

PERFORMANCE
