

SHATTERING THE GLASS CEILING

Leadership study strives to equalize advancement

By Ann Lynd

Female leaders may be underestimating their supervisors' perceptions of their work, according to a recent Bauer College study.

The study by Bauer professor Leanne Atwater, alumna Rachel Sturm (Ph.D. '14) and two other colleagues focuses on women in the workplace, examining how they predict their bosses' ratings of their leadership.

The research was inspired by a previous study conducted by Babson College's Scott Taylor, which found that women underpredict how others rate their socio-emotional competence. Atwater and Sturm, now an assistant professor at Wright State University, were curious to see if these under-prediction phenomena carried over into a leadership context.

"We felt that examining how women predict their bosses' ratings of their leadership would provide us with valuable insight into advancement opportunities for women and help answer the question of whether or not women are partially responsible for holding themselves back from advancing because they

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think their boss, who normally has control over an employee's advancement opportunity, thinks they are not a good leader," Sturm said.

The study's findings presented one clear notion about women's leadership and prediction ratings.

"Women leaders predicted their bosses would rate them lower on their leadership behaviors compared with men, even though they did not self-rate significantly differently than men and were rated by their bosses similarly to men," Atwater added.

The researchers later turned to the women interviewed in an attempt to find the root of the problem—why exactly were women under-predicting their managers' views?

They found that low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence were the main contributors, but women also counted on more positive feedback.

"They don't believe their bosses see them as competent. Women rarely see themselves as enough of what their boss wants," Atwater said.



Professor Leanne Atwater

“Women relied more on feedback and reassurance. When it doesn’t happen, they interpret it as not being valued or appreciated.”

The repercussions of under-prediction and a decrease in self-efficacy could affect women’s likelihood of going for positions of leadership and salary advancements.

“If they think they can’t do it, the employee will feel powerless and shut down in an environment where they question their own competencies,” Atwater said. “Self-efficacy may be negatively impacted and result in lower performance.”

This presents those in management with an opportunity to evaluate feedback practices. According to the researchers, using 360-degree feedback could change women’s ratings of how their bosses evaluate them, improving the likelihood of advancement.

“You’re going to have fewer women who are pursuing advancement if they don’t feel confident,” Atwater added. “The bosses weren’t giving women lower ratings than they were giving men,

so this is not a question of bosses finding women to be less capable; it’s women feeling less capable. We need to be doing everything we can to boost people’s senses of self.”

After concluding the research, Sturm has moved to a full-time teaching position in Ohio, where she is using her experience in the classroom. She shares the results with her students as a step in increasing awareness of under-prediction and to help give female students a more accurate account of their leadership capability.

“We hope to raise awareness of under-prediction for male and female bosses in the workplace so that they may change their feedback-giving strategies and encourage women leaders more, and to change, in a positive way, women’s perceptions of their leadership and how they think their bosses perceive their leadership in the workplace,” Sturm said.



Bauer Ph.D. alumna Rachel Sturm co-authored the study with Professor Leanne Atwater.