Mars Vs Venus: Gender and Self-Image in the Workplace

Key Concept

When it comes to assessing their leadership capability, men and women react quite differently to feedback from their peers. Women are more inclined to take co-workers' views about them to heart. The way forward for both sexes' development as leaders is to understand these peer opinions, close the gaps discovered, and seek the right support to build on their leadership competencies.

Idea Summary

What is your view of yourself as a leader, and how does it compare to what those around you think?

Recent research shows that when examining their competence as leaders in four key areas (self-confidence, self-management, interpersonal understanding, and behavioural flexibility) both sexes initially rate themselves higher than their peers do. Over time, however, peer feedback has a more marked impact on women, in that they lower their self-ratings to a point where they practically converge with peer assessments of them. Men lower their ratings too following feedback, but not so strongly. Women effectively “close the gap between their self- and peers’ ratings faster than men, exhibiting more sensitivity to social cues”.

Although this greater sensitivity could be seen as advantageous to a female leader, it can be a ‘double-edged sword’. On the one hand, it leads to better self-awareness, essential for progressive leadership, but on the other hand it can create self-doubt and an inability to move forward.

Likewise, men may be less affected by peer feedback and therefore more confident in tackling new challenges, but they can also alienate themselves from those who are trying to tell them about their approach to leadership.

Business Application
Using peer feedback positively: Leadership development initiatives need to take account of the contrasting impact of peer ratings on men and women, and tailor programs accordingly. Women should regard such feedback as a useful tool for their leadership development, taking the cue from their peers to seek out the support and training that will enable them to take on new challenges. Men may be less affected by negative feedback of their competence as leaders, but it’s important to view such information positively in terms of their self-awareness. Men may ignore what others think of them at their peril.

Methodology: This recent study investigated the effects of peer feedback on 221 MBA students’ self-ratings of leadership competence over one year. The research examined the degree to which self-ratings and peer ratings changed 3 and 6 months after an initial appraisal.

Further Reading

Further Relevant Resources
Margarita Mayo's profile at IE Business School
Maria Kakarika's profile at Kedge Business School
Juan Carlos Pastor's profile at IE Business School;
Stéphane Brutus' personal website
IE Business School's Executive Education profile at IEDP