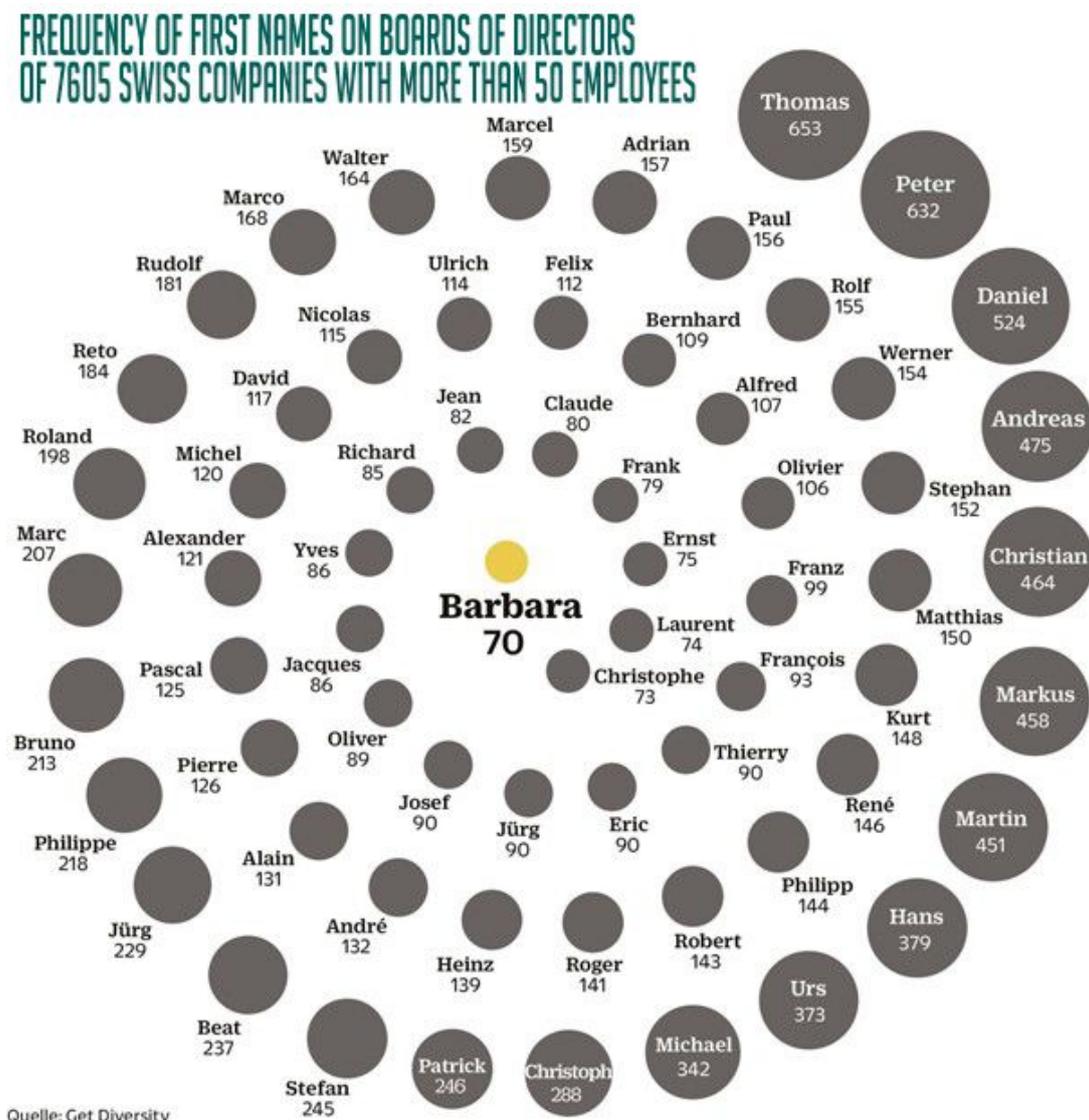


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THE EVOLUTION OF WOMEN IN A MALE-DOMINATED LEADERSHIP WORLD

In 2015, the New York Times published an analysis revealing fewer women on executive boards than men named John. Though this article is already a few years old, not much has changed. In 2020, the Neue Zürcher Zeitung wrote on the “Thomas-Principle”. The “Thomas-Principle” is the startling fact that the top 65 most frequent names found on Swiss boards of directors are all male, with the most frequent name being Thomas.



Women at the top are rare. This is not a new insight. In fact, it has already been highlighted from a variety of angles. So instead, we want to focus on the following three topics:

1. what the road to the top brings for the few women who make it,
2. the extent to which it affects the image of a woman,
3. and what deep personal conflicts women continue to struggle with, despite already “making it” in a male-dominated leadership sphere

In our opinion, far too little visibility is given to these struggles because there are hardly any long-term studies on the topics. Thus, the results of the few available studies that have been conducted deserve more limelight. THAT is what this article is about.

WOMEN & THE STEREOTYPE THREAT

the expectation that one will be judged or perceived on the basis of their gender rather than actual performance and potential.

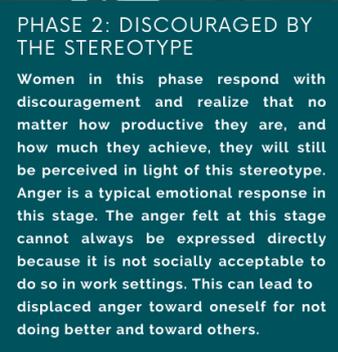
Phases of Stereotype Threat



Typically early in a women's career

PHASE 1: FENDING OFF THE STEREOTYPE

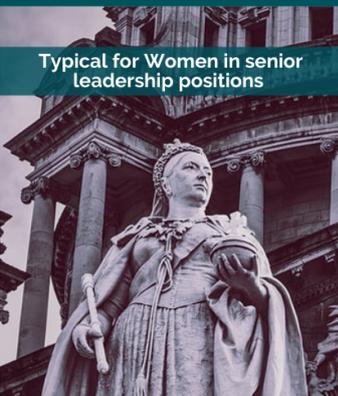
Women may use work strategies, such as striving to perform at a high level, to appear perfect and demonstrate a "bulletproof" image. This may result in high levels of productivity, but with a high psychic cost. In trying to show that the stereotype does not apply to them, they also try to show that they are not a typical woman; they will engage in counter-stereotypic behaviors and distance themselves from other women.



Typical for women in middle management

PHASE 2: DISCOURAGED BY THE STEREOTYPE

Women in this phase respond with discouragement and realize that no matter how productive they are, and how much they achieve, they will still be perceived in light of this stereotype. Anger is a typical emotional response in this stage. The anger felt at this stage cannot always be expressed directly because it is not socially acceptable to do so in work settings. This can lead to displaced anger toward oneself for not doing better and toward others.



Typical for Women in senior leadership positions

PHASE 3: RESILIENT TO THE STEREOTYPE

Women in this phase respond to stereotype threat with resilience strategies. They realize that stereotype threat will be present and will affect how others judge them. Therefore, they redirect their energy toward the goal of changing the context of their work environment, with the incentive that the environment will be more inclusive for other women. Women who respond to stereotype threat with resilience are likely to employ group-focused coping strategies, such as trying to improve the treatment of women.

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SOURCE: CONTENDING WITH STEREOTYPE THREAT AT WORK: A MODEL OF LONG-TERM RESPONSES. IN THE COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGIST 2011 39: 570. CARYN J. BLOCK, SANDY M. KOCH, BENJAMIN E. LIBERMAN, TARANI J. MERRIWEATHER, AND LORIANN ROBERSON

THE CRUX THAT WOMEN HAVE TO STRUGGLE WITH: THE STEREOTYPE THREAT

Stereotype Threats refer to the risk of an individual being perceived and judged based on their membership to a social identity group rather than their actual performance and potential.

We women are familiar with stereotypes. We can't calculate, we lack spatial perception, can't park, and don't have any technical understanding.

The list goes on endlessly. The fact is — women are too often judged based on their gender and not on their actual performance and potential. When women perform well, there's an unspoken "not bad ... for a woman."

The Stereotype Threat often, but not always (see below), harms women's performance. Suppose a woman or girl is faced with a challenge to which a negative female stereotype applies (e.g., mathematics exams). In that case, this woman or girl will demonstrably be agitated, resulting in fewer cognitive resources available to perform the given task. Despite this handicap, some women still make it to the top.

The Stereotypical Threat is a constant companion to women on their way to the top, and unconsciously shapes their self-imagining and behavior. Researchers have shown that women usually go through three phases in the course of their careers.

1. THE DEFENSIVE PHASE
2. THE DISCOURAGEMENT PHASE
3. THE PHASE OF RESILIENCE

These phases are not necessarily linear and can be skipped or occur in a different order. In severe cases, women remain permanently stuck in a single stage.

To understand which mechanisms influence women's actions and the consequences this has on their self-image and behavior, we must first individually explore each phase.

1. THE DEFENSIVE PHASE

... mostly affects young women and is seen as the first reaction to the Stereotype Threat found in the professional world. In this phase, women apply copious amounts of energy to prevent usual prejudices against women from being brandished against them. "I am not like other women" is actively demonstrated with bold exclamation marks. Women in a defensive posture attempt to negate the existence of a "glass ceiling" - a social construct that prevents women from reaching the male-dominated top. They work more than their male colleagues, set themselves near unattainable goals, are superhumanly perfect, and hide behind an unassailable wall of morality. And indeed, women in this phase achieve unbelievable accomplishments and find success but incur immense psychological pressure and – due to overwork – physical damage.

Womanhood is discarded and replaced with a pant-suit. Women brandish masculine ties like a silk sword against femininity. They smoke cigars, laugh at sexist jokes, and mock women who desire children (a time-sink their long hours would never allow them). Their failures are not explained by the unequal judgment they face as women but are taken on as a personal failing. Often women isolate themselves from other women in this phase. Almost all successful women are familiar with this phase. It was probably during this phase that they made the most significant progress on the career ladder. Even upon reaching the labor force's apex - being on management and supervisory boards - some women still find themselves in the phase of defensiveness. This is because the defensiveness phase provides an advantageous mechanism for getting ahead in and surviving a male-dominated social ladder. It deals with Stereotype Threats and drives success. Studies have shown that defensive attitudes can increase performance (Kray et al., 2001; Kray et al., 2004; Oswald & Harvey, 2000). At the same time, this phase protects women from a feeling of powerlessness in the face of discrimination. They believe they are in control of their

actions. However, in the long run, women become disillusioned when - despite immense, unhealthy commitment - they fail again and again due to existing prejudices. But because they do not recognize these prejudices and attribute failure to a personal flaw, this has a lasting negative effect on their self-esteem. The enormous pressure that women expose themselves to achieve compounds leading to ever-higher levels of stress. The physical and psychological effects of stress are widely known. And these factors pave the way for the 2nd phase.

2. THE PHASE OF DISCOURAGEMENT

Despite the physical, mental, and emotional strain women have taken to achieve results in the defensive phase, women are nonetheless confronted with situations where they are evaluated based on their sex. Two possible reactions of being reduced in this manner are aggression and depression. Affected women enter the phase of discouragement. However, women aren't allowed to display anger or aggress in the workplace. It is deemed socially unacceptable. Whereas men are allowed to be boisterous, loud, and aggressive - these same characteristics, when displayed by a woman, are perceived negatively. In this unjust situation of being socially repressed - anger is the logical, emotional response! Many women who are not (allowed to) openly express their anger in the workplace find themselves directing their aggression towards themselves or towards their social network (children, partners, friends). But in both situations, this anger can have a long-term adverse effect on mental and physical health if not adequately addressed.

WANT A PUBLIC EXAMPLE?



SANDERS VS CLINTON
MALE VS FEMALE

the righteous anger
of a tough leader

the screeching of
a nagging woman

THE
PERCEPTION OF
MALE AND
FEMALE
AGGRESSION

HOW SIMILARLY AGGRESSIVE AND
LOUD RHETORIC OF SANDERS AND
CLINTON WAS EVALUATED
DIFFERENTLY IN THE MEDIA

Bernie Sanders v. Hillary Clinton. Both of them engaged in loud, impassioned speeches and confrontations. Liberal media heralded Sanders' shouting as the righteous anger of a formidable leader. Whereas Clinton's verbosity was dismissed as hysterical screaming or the annoying nagging of a woman. An extensive social and political vocabulary describes loud women; words like shrill, croaking, screeching, yowling, and nagging are almost exclusively associated with women. And serve to reinforce existing stereotypes.

At attempting unsuccessfully to express their anger, women often re-evaluate their self-worth. They protect themselves by separating their self-esteem from their successes or failures. While this sounds healthy and sensible, on closer inspection, it is not. Although it shields the ego, disconnecting self-esteem from achievement often leads to less motivation. This, in turn, leads to less job satisfaction and reduced job performance. A woman might also experience further withdrawals. Many women develop a negative attitude towards the organization in which they work and avoid various work situations. While in the defensiveness phase, they were taking long drags from cigars with their male colleagues, women now distance themselves and limit interaction with colleagues to purely business matters. Sick leave rates increase, and some women might even resign. According to a study conducted with more than 475,000 female managers in 2008, female manager retention rates were significantly lower than their male colleagues.

3. THE PHASE OF RESILIENCE

Women who have made it through the discouragement phase are now in a more robust recovery phase. Resilience is defined as "The ability to recover quickly from illness, change, or misfortune," but it also includes the ability to develop beyond the original starting point. Women in the resilience phase respond to Stereotype Threats by courageously working to restructure social and organizational environments and support other women.

Female leaders in the resilience phase can recognize negative prejudices and start to fight against them by educating others. When women in the resilience stage are discriminated against based on their gender, they enter into a constructive but direct confrontation.

An example? Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez responding to Ted Yoho calling her “a fucking bitch”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ll4ueUtkRQ0>



In addition to open confrontation, women in the resilience phase particularly emphasize positive female attributes and promote sisterhood with other women by joining women’s associations or - if an absence is found - by creating their own. The idea of solidarity and fighting together for a better future strengthens and motivates resilient women. Success is often redefined by women at this point. It is oriented according to their own standards and is no longer based on external evaluations or a linear upward trend on an arbitrary company ladder. In this phase, many women start their own companies. The proven steady increase in the number of women setting up small businesses can probably be attributed at least in part to the ongoing Stereotype Threats in large companies and the redefinition of success criteria in response. Women are tired of looking up through a glass ceiling. They are increasingly looking for new ways to be self-employed instead of struggling with unwarranted rejection or discouragement. In the course of developing resilience, many women feel a deep appreciation for their femininity.

In short, the three phases of the evolution of women in male-dominated leadership worlds are characterized by three guiding principles:



1. I AM NOT AFFECTED BY DISCRIMINATION. IF I FAIL, IT IS MY FAULT ALONE.
2. I AM AFFECTED BY DISCRIMINATION. NO MATTER HOW HARD I TRY, I WILL NEVER BE EQUALLY VALUED.
3. WE ARE AFFECTED BY DISCRIMINATION, BUT WE FIGHT AGAINST IT AND DO NOT LET IT STOP US FROM GOING OUR OWN WAYS.

KNOWING IS POWER AND RESPONSIBILITY

As women it is incredibly important to understand the 3 phases we go through in our professional careers due to Stereotype Threat. Only if we are aware of what Stereotype Threat is and how it is impacting us daily in our work life will we hold the power to protect ourselves from incriminating internalization. With this knowledge, however, we are also given the clear and important responsibility of addressing diversity and inclusion issues. Above all, we must educate young women about the dynamics that determine their career paths, and we must support each other. We strongly recommend that women who believe that they live completely equal lives take the [Implicit Bias Test](#) of Harvard University, to test their own unconscious biases. (But you may pour yourself a glass of wine in the process to help you.) We also believe that this knowledge holds the power to initiate and promote a discourse across the invisible wall between feminists and nonfeminists. Only then will changes be possible in the long term and with a broad impact.

QUELLEN UND WEITERFÜHRENDES

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