

The Struggle is Real: Identifying Prejudice and Discrimination Perceptions

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Introduction

Women hold 5.8% of CEO positions, 21.2% of board seats, 26.5% of executive and senior level management positions, and 36.9% of beginning and mid-level management positions (Catalyst, 2020). Over the past few decades, research on leadership and gender has grown. Historically, many of the studies on gender and leadership traits have been on how underrepresented women lead, particularly in positions of authority. These studies also examined potential reasons for this gender discrepancy (Haslam & Ryan, 2008). Kleihauer et al. (2013) recommended studies look at the leadership challenges of males as well to better understand the differences in the challenges faced based on gender. Broader examination is needed to understand barriers faced by all individuals as gender-roles shift and additional minority groups are recognized in the workplace. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to describe prejudice and discrimination perceptions of middle and upper managers.

This study addressed the National AAE Research Agenda priority area 3: sufficient scientific and professional workforce that addresses the challenges of the 21st century (Stripling & Ricketts, 2016). Specifically, this study looks at perceptions of prejudice and discrimination among leaders in middle and upper-level leadership positions. Attracting underrepresented students into agricultural fields is identified as an area of struggle (Roberts et al., 2016). Thus, understanding the barriers faced by underrepresented leaders in industry can inform the process of attracting and retaining talent from underrepresented populations.

Conceptual Framework

The challenges women and minority groups in the workplace encounter when trying to obtain upper-level leadership positions are compared to a leadership labyrinth (Eagly & Carly, 2007). The labyrinth "conveys the impression of a journey riddled with challenges all along the way—not just near the top—that can and has been successfully navigated by women" (Northouse, 2016, p. 399). Prejudice and discrimination are key tenants of the labyrinth and result in prevention of individuals attaining leadership positions. Stereotypes contribute to prejudice and discrimination in the workplace. Stereotypes represent beliefs characterized by presumptions of a group in society, whether that group is separated by race, nationality, religion, age, gender, or something else that shares similarities with values and characteristics. Stereotypes are used to distinguish groups apart and can do so accurately and inaccurately (Gill, 2009). The opinions of others shape women and men, and as a result, they are seen as stronger and weaker than their counterparts in some circumstances. For instance, male leaders need to exhibit the characterization of strength, while female leaders must exhibit sensitivity and strength to be viewed as effective (Johnson et al., 2008).

Methodology

A quantitative survey method was utilized and the reported data was part of a larger study. The objective was to describe prejudice and discrimination perceptions of middle and upper managers. The questionnaire instrument consisted of 15 items adapted from the Workplace Prejudice/ Discrimination Inventory (WPDI) developed by James et al. (1994). A seven-point Likert scale was used with the range strongly disagree to strongly agree. Centiment paid recruiting was utilized to generate and collect data from sample members, who were in middle or upper management positions in organizations. Because respondent feedback through Centiment

is anonymous, directly targeting Fortune 500 employees was not possible. Thus, the sample included only respondents whose companies made \$50 to \$100 million annually. The sample was balanced for gender. Responses from 240 individuals matching the aforementioned criteria were gathered using a Qualtrics online questionnaire. James et al. (1994) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .93 suggesting internal consistency. The 15 WPDI items and participant demographics were analyzed and percentages reported.

Results/Findings

Respondents ranged in age from 25 to 65 with an average age of 43 with 124 male respondents (51.67%) and 116 females (48.33%). White was the largest ethnicity category which accounted for 82.08% of respondents followed by Black or African American (11.67%), Asian (3.75%), and other which self-reported as multi-racial, Hispanic, or Mexican American (2.08%). Sexual orientation was reported by 89.17% of respondents as heterosexual (82.92%), bisexual (2.50%), gay and lesbian (1.67% each respectively), and non-binary (.42%). Respondents reported working full-time in a professional career more than 25 years (22.92%), 21-25 years and 16-20 years (17.08%), 11-15 years (20.42%), 6-10 years (17.50%), and less than five years (4.58%). Respondents had worked for a minimum of one organization and a maximum of 15 organizations since starting their professional careers with a median of 3 organizations.

For the WPDI scaled items, groups referred to gender, sexual identity, and ethnicity. Of the 15 items, 50% of respondents perceived prejudice/discrimination for four items. Respondents perceived prejudice existed in their workplace with 32.08% strongly agreeing and 25.42% somewhat agreeing. While respondents strongly disagreed (41.25%) and somewhat disagreed (21.67%) with "where I work all people are treated the same." Respondents reported strongly agree (27.50%) and somewhat agree (39.17%) for "supervisors scrutinize the work of my group more than that of other groups." "At my present place of employment, people of other groups do not tell me some job-related information they share with members of their own group" was reported as strongly agree by 26.67% and somewhat agree by 27.92% of respondents. Respondents strongly disagreed (41.67%) and somewhat disagreed (24.17%) with "there is discrimination where I work."

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

Respondents perceived prejudice and unequal treatment in their workplaces. Respondents also perceived scrutiny of work at higher levels and less access to job-related information than other groups. However, they did not perceive discrimination in their workplaces.

The data reported summarizes findings from the WPDI and should be further analyzed to determine if relationships existed between WPDI items, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. As indicated in the leadership labyrinth, minority groups including females, and those whose ethnicity and sexual orientation differ from the organization as a whole, may experience more barriers in the advancement process (Northouse, 2019). Further research is needed to understand differences in perceptions of prejudice and discrimination. Finally, relationships between other demographic factors including age, time in a current position, and time in a career field and WPDI items should be analyzed. This information could indicate areas for workplace development training and curriculum development.

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