Unconscious bias in management diagnostics

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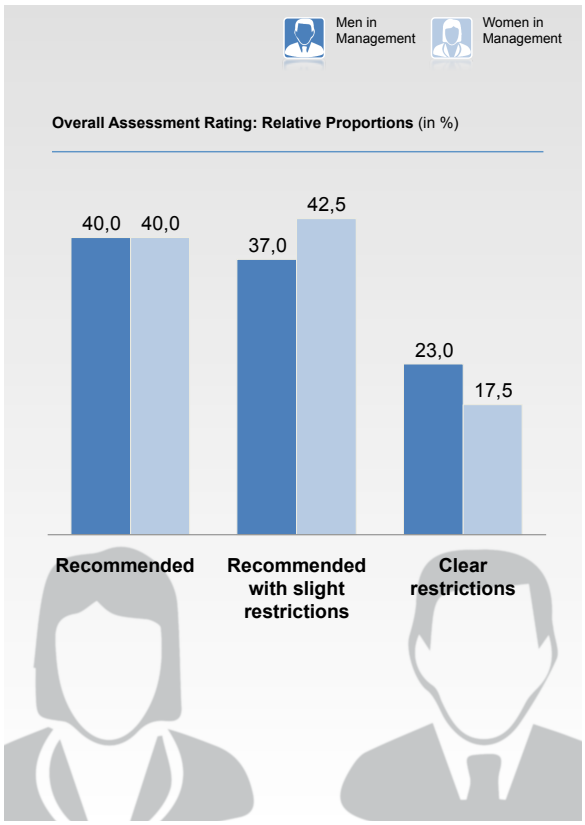
Unconscious bias (UB) describes tendencies that influence behavior in evaluating others and that stem from unconscious perceptions and learning mechanisms. They allow us to classify people quickly on the basis of particular characteristics and automatically categorize them into distinct social groups. In doing so, we also unconsciously attribute to these people properties that we have not observed directly, but that we associate with the social group in question. There is a psychological term for this: "social categorization." On the one hand, this behavior aids in our perception so that, in dealing with others, we can quickly and automatically recognize patterns and reduce complexity. However, on the other hand, it can cause stereotyping and over-generalization with regard to certain characteristics without ever having established a more nuanced observation of them. For example, categorizing a manager as "female" may lead to the unconscious attribution of characteristics, which – accurately or inaccurately – are seen as "typically female" (for example "empathetic," "understanding," "compliant," "not assertive," etc.). Another aspect of UB is a type of scale effect and describes the phenomenon in which behaviors are perceived and evaluated differently only in relation to a person's categorization. Due to learned stereotypes and prejudices, when a Scandinavian takes an extended lunch break, we may unconsciously interpret it as a "good work-life balance," but when a southern European does the same thing, it may be seen as a "poor work ethic."

Background: What are management diagnostics?

Management diagnostics entail the psychological examination of managers to assess their suitability or necessary development for management positions (Sarges, 2013, p. 2). For years now, the authors have worked with management diagnostics for mid- and large-scale companies, primarily conducting Individual Assessments (IA) of applicants seeking positions ranging from middle to top management. In the context of this one-day diagnostic process, many different procedures are used, including cognitive performance tests, a personality inventory, motivation questionnaires, a role-playing scenario, business case studies, and a competence-related, biographical interview. The final result is a qualitative and quantitative assessment of the candidate with regard to the previously defined management competencies as well as an overall recommendation regarding the position in question from at least two experienced advisors, whereby our advisor team comprises an equal number of men and women. The result of the IA is an extensive individual report with descriptions of the candidates' strengths, weaknesses, and areas for development with regard to the position in question.

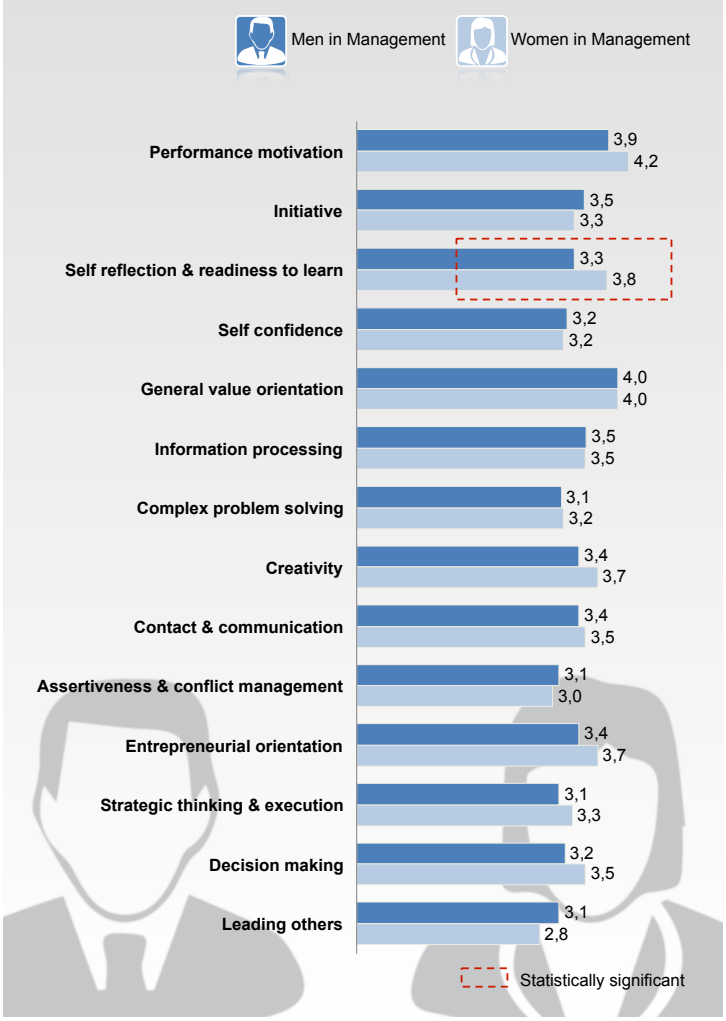


Are women better or worse managers?

On the basis of 420 randomly selected sets of data from Individual Assessments, we investigated whether there are actually substantiated differences between male and female applicants and how these differences might hinder women's ascent into higher management positions in the business world in terms of unconscious bias.

No differences in the overall analysis of the Individual Assessments

The initial and one of the most important findings was that the overall analysis of all the Individual Assessments showed no differences between female and male applicants. In the described procedures, women were just as frequently "well suited" or "not well suited" to the management positions as men.



Differences in individual areas of competence?

In the detailed evaluation of individual management competencies (and with comparable competency models in the IA), there were almost no differences between men and women. The area of "self-reflection/readiness to learn" was the only one that showed a significant difference in average values, and here women were evaluated somewhat better overall than men. This difference will be explained further below.
As a result, we examined all implemented diagnostic procedures in detail.

Cognitive skills: no relevant differences

Neither in the individual cognitive performance tests on logical conclusions nor in the context of a complex management case study was there a gender-specific difference in the analytic performance of the managers assessed. There were a few slight but statistically insignificant differences (for example, in the analysis of the case study women tended to work somewhat more thoroughly, men somewhat more quickly). In addition, basic research shows that there are some differences in the cognitive achievement profiles of men and women (for example, women tend to have advantages in verbal-logical processing, men in the spatial processing of visual information; see Voyeur et al. 1995). From our data, however, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Not every difference between men and women identified in tests and experiments is relevant to analytic performance in management.
- Differences in achievement and in working style are far greater within the group of the men or the group of women than differences between the two groups.
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Leadership: general differences in style

In the overall evaluation of leadership abilities in the context of a leadership simulation and a structured interview, there were no statistically significant differences between men and women, i.e. based on the specific leadership requirements of the respective positions in question, men were assessed to be "well suited" equally as often as women. However, differences tended to appear in some aspects of leadership and stated leadership motivation in the context of the interview. These differences corresponded to earlier investigations, which suggest that when they are in positions of leadership, women tend to put more value on development and connection with others, in the sense of participatory leadership, while men tend to place more emphasis on aspects of exerting influence and performance control in their leadership behavior (see. Desvaux & Devillard, 2008; Eagly et al., 2003).

What unjustified bias might be lurking here?

There is a potential source of a unconscious bias here: The fact that women tend to prefer participatory or cooperative leadership according to their descriptions in the interview may be attributed to the (false) conclusion that they are less assertive and effective. In other words: If women behave differently than the (male) norm, there is a danger that this difference might automatically be evaluated more negatively. However, our data show that based on previously defined success criteria for the respective positions in question, women performed just as effectively as men, only sometimes in a different way. In order to prevent this bias from affecting the choice of personnel, an evaluation must be conducted of the leadership behavior. It must be as sophisticated as possible. In addition, leadership models from the past cannot be used as a basis of comparison (which are usually defined by male standards). Instead, the gauge should involve the future challenges of the position in question, according to the company's strategy. In this way, Desvaux & Devillard (2008) also indicated that participatory leadership offers strategic advantages with regard to the integration of employees into processes involving change and innovations, for example.

Motives more frequently expressed by women:

Recognition and Appreciation
Strives for positive feedback, confirmation and recognition; wants to be liked by others

Partnership and Affiliation
Attaches great importance to interacting in a partnership-like way; strives to establish good relationships with others

Motives more frequently expressed by men:

Influence
Wants to have influence on others; likes it when others follow own ideas and plans; strives for influential (leadership) positions

Independence and Self-Sufficiency
Likes going ahead flexibly and according to own plans without having to consult too much with others – e.g. superiors; likes being „my own boss“

Competition
Likes competing with and benchmarking own performance against others; enjoys winning and outdoing others

Motivation: Differences in expressed motives

The previously described difference in leadership style is also reflected in the applicants' motivation. There were no differences in female and male applicants' general motivation to achieve and readiness to work, but there were differences in the professional motivations they voiced.
With respect to management diagnostics, we differentiate between two kinds of motivations: explicit and implicit ones. "Explicit motivations“ are those one expresses explicitly. For example, many managers say that family is the most important life factor for them - which is often not reflected in their behavior, because in practice their work takes priority before their families. Explicit motivations can be reflected in people's behavior, but are not necessarily inevitable. Explicitly voiced motivations are often the result of social norms and expectations. In contrast to this, "implicit motivations" are guided by a person's more deeply lying needs and personality traits. Implicit motivations do not necessarily have to be reflected in the person's behavior. For example, a person seeking harmony can actually be quite willing to engage with conflict when his or her role (as an attorney for instance) or a social norm demands it. In the field of management diagnostics, people's implicit motivations are assessed based on psychometric personality inventories and in structured interviews on the basis of behavioral examples. Our candidates' explicitly stated professional motivations actually show clear differences between women and men. Women attach importance to "acknowledgment and appreciation" as well as "good relationships with surroundings" significantly more frequently, while men more frequently name motivations such as "influence", "independence", and "competition". These references also correspond to earlier findings from other investigations on gender differences in professional motivation (for example Wottawa, 2011). However, on the level of implicit motivations, these differences show up significantly less often or not at all. For example, our data from the psychological personality inventories showed that female applicants for management positions strive more ardently for influence and competition than they explicitly state they do in the application process. On the other hand, male applicants showed just as strong a need for acknowledgment as the female applicants. The results suggest that in explicit questioning about their professional motivations, men and women tend to answer according to stereotypes of their genders.

What unjustified bias might be lurking here?

On the one hand, our findings suggest that there can be gender differences in explicitly expressed professional motivations, which have however no systematic influence on general readiness to work and perform. In addition there is evidence that both male and female applicants may be subject to a gender bias in their own descriptions of their professional motivations. In fact, there is similar evidence in gender research on leadership behavior, which suggests that in a professional context, women have inhibitions in attributing motivations to themselves that are seen as "male" because they are afraid of the effect of such descriptions, i.e. that for example "wanting to exert influence" is seen more negatively in women than in men, even if their desire for influence is the same as men's. Thus Catalyst (2007) found that in this connection women find themselves in a "doubles bind", in a Catch-22 situation: If they characterize themselves according to a female stereotype, i.e. as a less dominant leader, they would be "liked but not very respected. " However, if they characterize themselves with a male stereotype instead, they would be "respected, but not liked." Similar evidence can be found in research on negotiation behavior, which shows that when women implement challenging and demanding behavior in making negotiations, they are seen more negatively than men with the same behavior (Babcock & Laschever, 2003).
In order to prevent this bias from influencing decisions in the context of selecting personnel, it is important not only to inquire as to applicants' explicitly expressed motivations on an abstract level, but also to explore carefully examples of their concrete behavior in terms of actual actions and decisions as well as the results they achieve. Differences between explicitly expressed motivations and actual behavior often show up in people's individual professional pasts. There are plenty of examples in our interviews of women asserting themselves fully and exerting influence, even if they do not always state that this is as an explicit motivation.

Self-reflection: Differences and their relevance

The greatest gendered difference in the competencies assessed in the Individual Assessment was "self reflection & readiness to learn. " Here, female applicants were more likely to analyze their own behavior openly and critically, and were accordingly more open to personal learning and development experiences. In the context of the interview, they were also more inclined to examine themselves and assume responsibility when evaluating failures. In addition, findings from a personality inventory suggest that female applicants take criticism more strongly to heart in everyday professional life than male applicants do. To state this in a slightly exaggerated way: Men and women not only perceive that they tend to lead in different ways; men regard their own style as "normal" and often do not think to question it. Women, however, often ask themselves whether they have done something wrong and look for the cause of a failure within themselves. Interestingly enough, very similar patterns also occur beyond this gender research, as for example in research work on ethnic minorities at U.S. universities (see Dynarski et al., 2008). These studies show that people who are part of a social minority tend to question themselves more strongly due to their otherness than a similar group in the social majority. These effects decrease when a group's numbers represent less of a "minority" - an effect that is also recognized in research on management diagnostics (see for example Regnet, 2013).

What unjustified bias might be lurking here?

An unconscious bias in the sense of an over-generalization could account for part of this, for example the stronger critical analyzing of the female managers in the professional context, and the view of women's behavior as "less self-confident or decisive." Here it can also be assumed that this unconscious bias affects not only the ones who make evaluations, but also the ones who are evaluated. Women might tend to attribute everyday experiences of failure to themselves and/or their otherness (for example unanswered emails, others' lack of commitment for their own projects), instead of seeing it as part of the normal adversities of everyday working life. On the other hand, men can judge women wrongly based on the perception of one gender difference. Even if the perceived difference is accurate in that particular instance, it does not warrant the subsequent assumptions as to the presence of further differences. The unconscious logic could thereby read: "Self critical" means "less confident in handling failures" which means "less resilient" which ultimately means: "less successful in handling challenges."

In order to prevent this bias from influencing decisions in selecting personnel, it is important first to examine carefully the ability for open self-reflection as a demonstrably important field of competence for all managers. In this regard, many companies see a positive attitude toward errors and the ability to learn from mistakes as strategically important in promoting innovations and minimizing risks caused by repeated poor decisions. In this sense, this difference mentioned in our data also led to an overall positive effect in the evaluation of female applicants in the field of "self reflection & readiness to learn." Furthermore, it is important not only to review applicants' self- and external-assessments, but also to use specific examples, concrete behavior, and the resulting measurable performance to form an image of each applicant. In this way, a male applicant's allegedly self-confident achievement may turn out to be ultimately less successful than the self-critical achievement of a female applicant.

Conclusions for practice

There are some behavioral differences between female and male managers that can be observed in the context of an application situation. There also tend to be indicators of different styles of leadership and motivations. However, on the one hand, one must note that the range of differences within either of the two gender groups is far greater than the differences between the two groups. On the other hand, our findings suggest that the identified differences have more of an influence on a person's evaluation in the application situation than on his or her actual effectiveness and performance in management. One should be aware of potential gender-specific differences so that in individual cases, one can make sophisticated judgments as to their relevance in terms of certain managerial tasks. Overall, however, it must be noted that the largest obstacle for women in management is not any actual gender-specific difference, but the stigmatizing and generalizing evaluations they face in the context of the largely male-defined standard.

There are several crucial factors when attempting to counteract an unconscious bias in selecting personnel: First of all, the standard for evaluation cannot comprise solely traditional roles. Instead, the gauge should involve the future challenges of the position in question, in the sense of a strategically oriented selection of personnel. Care should be taken so that the assessment procedure itself makes a clear separation between observation and evaluation. This means that one should not rely solely on a general personal- and external-assessment of candidates, as is a common corporate practice in talent reviews, for example. These should be supplemented with sophisticated observations of behavior, behavior-oriented interviews, and, if necessary, with external assessment procedures as well (as described in this article). Finally, both male and female applicants can be subject to their own unconscious gender bias in their self-assessments.

Furthermore, in the role of selecting personnel, it is important to become conscious of one's own patterns of perception. It is crucial to analyze critically the generalized attribution of characteristics. In doing so, one should not only seek evidence, but should also systematically seek counter-evidence of one's own hypotheses (principle of falsification). Not surprisingly, earlier research suggests that the smaller proportion of woman in the group of those assessed, the stronger the unconscious gender bias (see Regnet 2013). Female assessors can also be subject to an unconscious "male" gender bias if they are a clear minority in a panel or committee. Accordingly, an equal proportion of women to men should be ensured in the selection committee – even if this does not yet correspond to the actual proportion of women in the company.

In any case, in an increasingly networked working sphere that is dependent on innovation and change, companies could be better led if they integrated a greater variety of leadership behavior. In this regard, each form of variety is only helpful, whether it involves gender, age, ethnic background, sexual orientation, physical ability, and other dimensions: "(…) gender isn't necessarily the optimal way to frame good leadership (…). Rather, it's a flexible blend of positive and often differing attributes, whether they are traditionally masculine, traditionally feminine or gender-free." (DeAngelis, 2014)

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