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NETWORK DRIVERS OF SUCCESS

How Successful Women Manage Their Networks

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How Successful Women Manage Their Networks

Why don't we see more women in top positions in organizations? For a long time, we've known that gender diversity pays off. Companies with higher rates of gender diversity among senior leaders outperform their peers by a 15% margin.¹ Those with the highest percentages of female board directors enjoy a 53% higher return on equity, 42% higher return on sales, and 66% higher return on invested capital as compared to those with the lowest percentages.² Further, gender diverse teams consistently outperform teams dominated by men. It's no wonder that a recent [Institute for Corporate Productivity study](#) found that executives at high-performance organizations are over 1.5 times more likely to indicate the gender diversity of their workforce as a "high" or "very high" priority.

In the face of this evidence, why is it that the number of women in senior leadership has barely budged over the years? Despite comprising nearly half of the workforce and earning more than half of all college degrees,³ women still represent little more than 25% of executives and senior managers, hold less than 5% of CEO jobs, and occupy less than 20% of board seats at S&P 500 companies.⁴ At this rate, the World Economic Forum estimates that the gender gap will not be closed for a whopping 217 years!

Given that men occupy most of the positions of power within organizations, the key to gender diversity efforts is the ability of men and women to build positive working relationships. But this has proved to be a challenge. Decades of research on organizational networks have shown that who you know—and who knows *you*—is critical to performance and career success. People in positive relationships are more likely to share valuable information, such as available job opportunities and insights into organizational politics, recommend each other for opportunities, vouch for each other, and provide work-related advice and support. Notably, feeling excluded from organizational networks has been identified as one of women's top barriers to career success.⁵

Frustrated by the lack of progress in closing the gender gap, an increasing number of organizations are training against the presumed underlying villain of gender discrimination: *implicit bias*. Implicit bias is the unconscious attitude or stereotype that affects our understanding, actions, and decisions in subtle and persistent ways. Implicit bias is the reason that we perceive a man who raises his voice during an interview as "passionate"—a good thing—but perceive a woman who does the same thing as unpleasantly "emotional." Implicit bias also makes it more likely that all of us—women and men—seek out people who look like us when forming relationships.

To combat the insidious effects of implicit bias, corporations have conducted a considerable amount of implicit bias training, the go-to response to claims of workplace discrimination. When a 2018 video of two Black men being arrested at a Starbucks for not making a purchase went viral, Starbucks's response was to conduct implicit bias training among more

than 175,000 employees, shutting down more than 8,000 U.S. stores in the process, costing an estimated \$12 million in lost revenue. At least 20% of U.S. companies now offer implicit bias training, including nearly all of the Fortune 500, at a cost of more than \$4 billion.⁶ Some estimate that more than 50% of all U.S. corporations will soon offer implicit bias training by the end of this year.⁷

But to what effect? Many now argue that implicit bias training may be ineffective.⁸ Changes in implicit bias are possible but tend to be very weak; psychologists show that most effects are gone within a few days of the training.⁹ Some [studies](#) even suggest that implicit bias training may *increase* bias by making people more uncomfortable and hesitant to interact with each other.¹⁰ If the training is mandatory, the results are even worse. Harvard organizational sociologist Frank Dobbin found that organizations with mandatory diversity training programs actually become *less* diverse.¹¹

Implicit bias training assumes that reducing bias will—among other things—result in more positive working relationships between men and women. But most studies of implicit bias have occurred within the narrow confines of MRI machines or tightly controlled cognitive studies. In the case of MRIs, the reality is that we are measuring the "reptilian" brain—our immediate response. Even though this is valuable, the studies often make claims based on a false assumption—that ***the initial impression never updates or changes***. Intuitively, this does not make sense. Although we all form initial impressions of people, repeated exposure to individuals also affects how we think about them for good or bad. Don't get us wrong—we know that implicit bias exists and can have a profound effect on many workplace

practices. But we must ask whether it truly is the demon that it has been painted to be in terms of long-term career success.

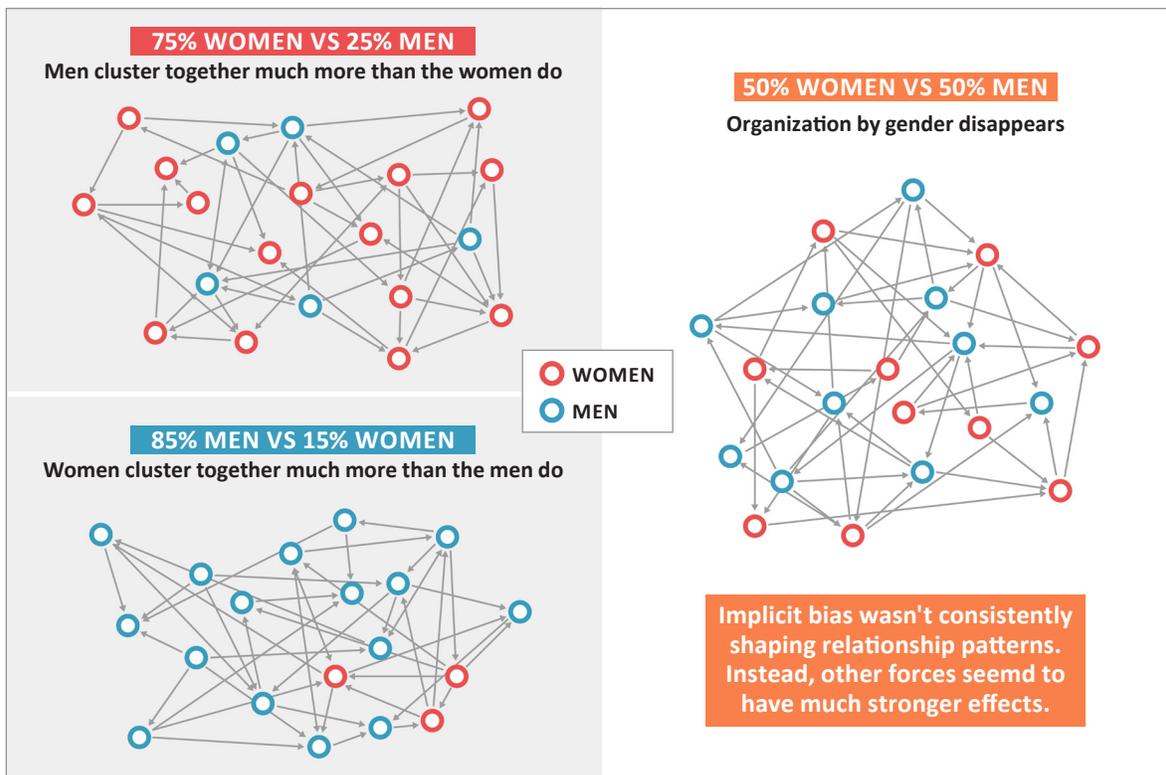
Specifically, we wondered: To what extent does implicit bias explain how and why men and women develop professional relationships critical to career success? Is there something else that also drives these relationships? We set out to answer these questions by analyzing network data collected from more than 30 organizations and 16,500 people over 15 years across a range of industries. We also conducted hundreds of interviews with individuals at different levels in their organizations and in different positions in networks.

What we learned was a shock! If implicit bias truly was the predominant driver of women's relational disadvantages, we would see men and women consistently clustered together

within gender and separately across genders. But that's not what we found.

To be sure, men did sometimes cluster with other men, and women did sometimes cluster with other women. But that happened only when they were in the minority in their organization. In fact, what we found was that, in organizations with a relatively small proportion of women, the old-boy network still existed, and women clung to each other. But in organizations with relatively equal numbers of men and women, relationships did not reliably organize around gender. Further, in those few organizations in which women were the majority, we saw men clinging to each other. In short, implicit bias alone could not explain the relationship patterns that we saw. Instead, other forces seemed to have much stronger effects.

Clustering of relationships with different percentages of men and women



The fact that people are less likely to form relationships with each other when they are in the minority—whether they are men or women—suggests that something else is going on. This is great news, particularly in light of the fact that an entire industry around implicit bias has developed despite the science that shows that simple awareness of bias does not change organizational diversity.

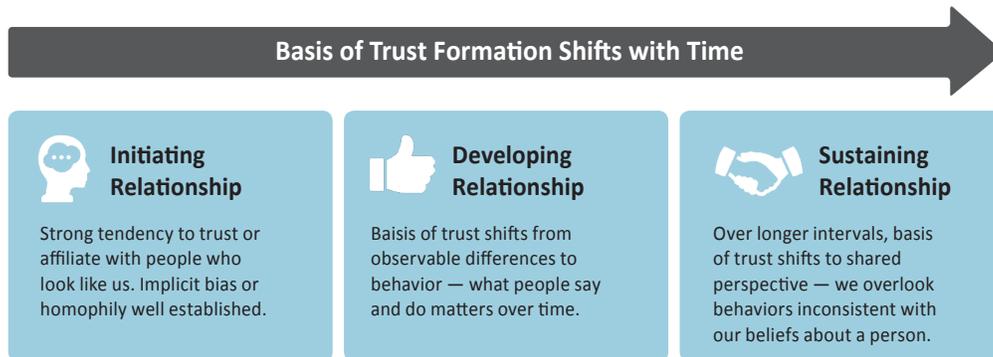
In retrospect, this eye-opening insight seemed obvious. As countless research studies and everyday experience attest, people will always initiate relationships on the basis of similarity, just as implicit bias would predict. [But relationships](#)

[develop as people learn more about each other.](#)¹² This is particularly true in organizations for which we don't have the choice to just avoid people from whom our reptilian brain might warn us—employees work in teams, execute work in process flows, and need to communicate regularly with specific stakeholders despite their physical appearance.

In short, we don't just have an immediate response to a person and then lock into this perception forever. Instead, what we—and they—say and do matters. Our research shows that it doesn't take long for the basis of trust to shift from observable differences—such as gender—to behavior. As people get to

know each other even better, perhaps by working together on a regular basis, they develop a sustaining relationship in which the basis of trust shifts again from behavior to shared

perspective. In other words, implicit bias is not driving network differences; working together is.



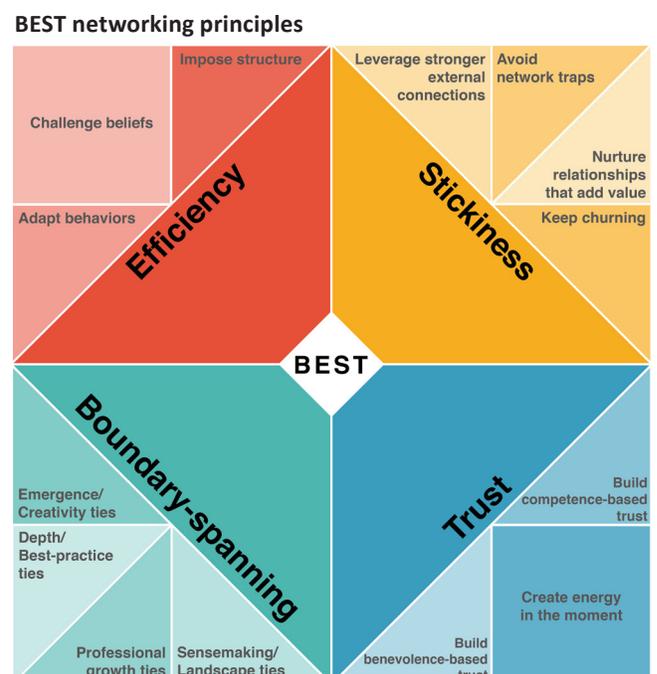
Levin, D., Whitener, E., & Cross, R. (2006). Perceived Trustworthiness of Knowledge. SOURCE: The Moderating Impact of Relationship Length. *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

Network Drivers of Success

Heartened, we took a deeper dive into our network data. We sought to understand which network drivers enabled some women to be successful whether or not they were in the majority. Again, we learned that what was going on was not what we expected. In some cases, the networking strategies that work for men also work for women. In other cases, however, the strategy playbook looked different for women.

Overall, we learned that four critical networking practices distinguished high-performing women from their less successful contemporaries:

- 1 Boundary-spanning
- 2 Efficiency
- 3 Stickiness
- 4 Trust (and energy-building)



1 Boundary-spanning

High performers have long been distinguished by networks that bridge into pockets of expertise more broadly. It is the breadth or structural diversity of one's network—particularly early-stage problem solving—that distinguishes high performers, not the number of people one knows. In fact, just knowing a lot of people often has a negative impact on performance. Women fall out of the upwardly mobile category when they focus on creating closely knit networks and don't tap broad networks to get work done and to increase exposure to important stakeholders. Recent research suggests that women who form strong and tightly knit connections with each other are more likely to achieve leadership positions than are other women (and men) **as long as they also have boundary-spanning relationships**.¹³ At least five types of boundary spanning ties help women—and men!—from a performance standpoint.

- *Emergence/Creativity Ties*. Bridges across two siloed thought worlds, such as expertise domains and functions, to encourage cross-fertilization of ideas.
- *Depth/Best Practice Ties*. Connections between people with similar expertise—across geography, company, or functional lines—to promote depth or efficiency of work.
- *Professional Growth Ties*. Relationships with informal mentors, especially those who maintain accountability for network development. In transitions or as work projects morph, these relationships are critical to supplementing expertise gaps.
- *Vertical Ties*. Relationships with formal or informal sponsors, who play an important role in the career trajectory of men and women. Sponsors are senior individuals who provide

2 Efficiency

At every level in their organizations, women in our study were *more* likely to be sought by their coworkers for information and advice but—at junior and senior levels—were *less* likely than men to seek information and advice from others, leaving them particularly susceptible to the performance degradation and burnout associated with [collaborative overload](#). Of course, collaboration is never equally distributed in networks. Our research over the years shows that 20–35% of valuable collaborations come from only 3–5% of employees. The good news is that engaging in just a handful of behaviors can help

access to jobs, high-visibility projects, and other powerful people. In our research, men and women perceived the benefits of a sponsor differently. Women identified their sponsors as senior leaders who *persuaded* them to take on a new position, even when they doubted their own capability. Men described their sponsors as senior leaders who *facilitated access* to opportunities by vouching for their capabilities. For both men and women, sponsors tended to initiate the relationship. Usually sponsors were skip-level (or higher) managers who had an opportunity to witness talent and wanted to promote it. Visibility was critical to this process.

- *Sensemaking/Landscape Ties*. Bridges between disparate people that enable an accurate picture of the stakeholder network relative to critical tasks. Senior leaders in our study were more likely to purposefully build relationships with stakeholders in anticipation of future collaborations.

Boundary-spanning networks are not difficult to form, but they do require individuals to be proactive and—in some cases—to move out of their comfort zone. One way to do this is to step back periodically and reflect on core objectives or projects for the coming six months to identify the project-relevant categories of people (or roles) with whom to build connections. Mentors and other leaders can further help employees by making introductions to people in each of the categories above to help build more boundary-spanning relationships. One major professional services firm provides detailed instructions to all of its high-potential employees regarding the types of connections they need to build to move to partner level status, such as relationships with senior people in a specific technical area.

women—and men!—create more efficient networks, typically returning [18–24%](#) of collaborative time.

To understand better the collaborative efficiency behaviors that successful women employ, we assessed results from 2,000 women and 1,500 men who have completed the on-line collaborative overload assessment developed from this research. Although a number of collaborative efficiency practices work equally well for men and women, our findings suggest that certain behaviors are particularly potent enablers for women, and a few can result in career derailment.

The Collaborative Overload Assessment is a diagnostic tool that captures the extent to which you manage excessive collaborative demands. More than 5,000 men and women have already used the tool to understand what they are doing right and what they can do differently to become more efficient collaborators. You can try the tool yourself at <https://www.networkassessments.org/collaborative-overload/>

Here are efficient collaborative practices and how they work:

✓ *Challenge beliefs.* The need for control and concern over identity and reputation drives some individuals to engage in excessive collaborative demands. Although men and women share many similarities in this regard, our results revealed that women enjoy several advantages over men when it comes to managing their beliefs. They were far less likely than men to report engaging in excessive collaborative work out of a desire to be recognized for their expertise or because their need for closure led them to communicate in ways that created unnecessary work or stress for others (e.g., late-night emails). Senior female executives avoided the FOMO trap—taking on more work out of fear of missing out. Further, all women were more likely to credit their higher comfort level with ambiguity and managing adaptation as a factor in their collaborative and career success.

Yet, at all levels—and particularly at lower levels—women reported a greater sense of obligation to respond to requests for their time and energy. Men rarely saw a downside of turning down a request for their time, but women reported “feeling bad” if they were unable to say Yes and often took steps to “soften” the blow by offering to give time in another way (e.g., informal meeting). In a sense, this is smart. Women who don’t respond positively to requests for help are perceived far less favorably than are men who don’t.¹⁴ Nevertheless, feeling the pressure to respond positively to requests for help puts women at increased risk of collaborative overload.

Women who had successfully reached the most senior levels in their organizations had another significant disabler: They let their need to be right lead them to spend too much time preparing for and engaging in collaborative activities.

- Our advice: Don’t see the word “no” as binary. Offer transparency into competing demands and then discuss alternatives to complete what needs to get done. Further, set limits on preparation. Most people discover that it is far more effective to become known as the person who can find something out quickly rather than the person who knows it all ahead of time.

✓ *Impose structure.* To improve collaborative efficiency, both men and women focused on priorities and reshaped roles, routines, and interactions. Women were particularly skilled

3 Stickiness

Women in our study demonstrated a greater stickiness in their relationships over time. For example, when we assessed networks at two points in time, we found that women were much more likely than men to form and maintain same-sex relationships. Further, women’s relationships—unlike men’s relationships—grew stronger and more mutual over time. In contrast, men were more likely to build relationships with

at employing regularly scheduled meetings to address one-off requests. Women were far less likely than men, however, to block out time each day for reflective work or to periodically review their calendar to remove non-essential requests, decisions, or meetings. By not imposing structure on their schedule, women give themselves fewer opportunities to engage in higher-level thinking. They also are more susceptible to performance degradation from switching costs—moving from one cognitive task to another. This is a subtle but very important way that collaborative overload hurts performance. Cognitive psychologists have shown that even the simple act of checking a text takes 64 seconds’ recovery to get back on track.

- Our advice: Schedule regular time for reflective thinking. Manage your own rhythm of work. For some, this means starting the day with email. Others wonder why anyone would let other people start their day and so prefer to engage in reflective work early. Regardless of preference, put structure into your work such that your rhythm of work is optimal for your performance and well-being.

✓ *Adapt behaviors.* More efficient collaborators engage in a range of behaviors—how they manage email, run meetings, leverage collaborative tools, and allocate time, to name a few—that enable them to regain 18–24% of their collaborative time. Often it is not the tools, per se, but the culture of use around the tools that enables greater efficiency. It turns out that men and women followed many of the same strategies when adapting their behavior to employ appropriate communication channels and promote efficient collaborative norms. There is, however, one big difference:

Women were far less likely to draw people toward collaborative work. Women were less likely to encourage collaboration by envisioning joint success, diffusing ownership, or generating a sense of purpose/energy around an outcome. They also were more likely to run inefficient meetings.

- Our advice: Create pull rather than push to bring people to the table. Clearly articulate a vision and generate enthusiasm to motivate collaboration, instead of hoping that the work alone will provide a compelling reason to collaborate. Focus meetings on desired outcomes, set—and adhere to—efficient agendas, and include only people who need to be involved.

either gender, adapting their networks instrumentally to meet shifting work demands.

Herein lies one of the most fundamental differences that our network data suggest underlie the ways in which women and men collaborate. Women tend to perceive their professional relationships as important for their own sake. The women we interviewed, for example, were much more likely than men

to report exchanging personal, authentic, and sometimes intimate information with select work colleagues, often bonding over family or children. Most men took a more instrumental approach to relationship building. When they reported socializing with their work colleagues, men were much more likely to describe their interaction as “good for team building” or as a necessary aspect of good work relations. For men, relationships are the backdrop through which work is accomplished.

These different ways of approaching work relationships have significant implications. On one level, greater relational stickiness may deepen collaborative demands as women feel ever more obligated to respond to demands for their time or attention. We know as well that network churn—forging new relationships and letting others go dormant—is a critical component of network effectiveness. People whose networks stagnate may not be reaching out to new stakeholders or seeking out new learning partners. Worse, they may be creating tightly knit echo chambers, blocking out new ideas and perspectives.

In work contexts characterized by a greater velocity of change or where project teams form and disperse more rapidly, relational stickiness is even more problematic. People who do not adapt their networks to match the new contexts or the pace of change in a given context may fall behind those who do adapt their networks more fluidly. Network adaptability is critical during times of transition. [Our research](#) shows that people need to initiate diverse networks, engage others, and refine their networks to successfully transition to new roles and positions. Those who don’t, don’t make it.

In stark contrast to their internal relationships, a core strength for women’s networks appears consistently to be their *external* connections. Women are much more likely than men to maintain relationships with co-workers from previous positions and jobs, through one-on-one phone calls and get-togethers, or even just through social media. Successful women leveraged the greater strength and external reach of their networks without getting derailed by collaborative demands and strong lower-level relationships. Star women analysts, for example, are more likely than men to successfully switch to a new company because they build portable, external relationships with clients and companies rather than depend solely upon internal relationships.¹⁵

Strong external networks offer natural boundary-spanning opportunities. They provide access to new ideas, job opportunities, or sales possibilities. Organizations have begun to tap the power of women’s external networks by instituting cross-organizational mentoring programs and providing explicit opportunities for women to connect to their community through nonprofit organizations. Savvy women build these connections whether or not they work in sponsoring organizations. By taking part in events hosted by other companies—and by inviting their network to participate

in their own companies’ events—successful women build their organizations’ expertise and brand along with their own.

Tips:

- ✓ *Nurture relationships* with men and women who add value to your network. People who do not add value should not be given a disproportionate amount of your time and relational energy. Instead, focus these finite resources on the people who do add value. You don’t have to ghost people to reduce the strength of your relationship. Investing less in a particular relationship might be as simple as turning down a few luncheon requests or responding more slowly to phone calls, emails, or texts. Stop saying Yes—or start saying No!—to unnecessary activities that keep you connected to the wrong people.
- ✓ *Keep churning.* Churn refers to the extent to which people move in and out of your network. Having adequate churn in your network can reduce the likelihood of relational overload and network rigidity. You want a small percentage of people in your network who are trusted advisors and truth tellers—people who can offer ideas based on a long history with you. But you also want a steady stream of new expertise and perspectives that aligns with the constellation of work activities. It is highly unlikely that all of the people who should be in your professional network this year are the same people who should be there even a few years later.
- ✓ *Leverage stronger external connections through mutual value creation.* Many women excel at creating strong mutual relationships. Use this to your advantage. Identify and engage people who are opinion leaders, or network influencers, to create legitimacy, reputation, and organizational know-how. Lean on established relationships for honest feedback and personal support during the inevitable setbacks and uncertainties of a transition. Continually seek ways to give expertise, information, or support. Be sure to also look for opportunities to acquire knowledge or learn new skills from individuals in your network. Women can get derailed if they focus too much on the social side of professional relationships without searching for ways that relationships can also support professional growth.
- ✓ *Avoid network traps that cause otherwise high performers to struggle or derail.* Our research over more than two decades has revealed several traps that derail rising stars, high performers, and leaders. Relational stickiness relationships could lead women to fall prey to *biased learning* if they place too heavy a reliance on a few trusted, well-liked, or familiar people or over-value one or two groups. Women also might find themselves occupying the role of a *disconnected expert* who does not know when the skills they have used in past roles are insufficient. Stay alert to common network traps, and adjust patterns of collaboration and connection to avoid network-driven failure over time.

4 Trust (and energy-building)

We mapped the networks of high performers in over 300 organizations and found that having a structurally diverse network—one rich in boundary-spanning relationships—is the *second* biggest predictor of a high performer. The biggest? It turns out that it has nothing to do with reaching out to your network but, instead, has everything to do with creating engagement and energy in others. Across the many industries and organizations that we have worked with, we consistently see that being an *energizer* is four times more predictive of performance than is anything else that we have seen in our research.

Energizers win not because they are happy people—although they usually are—but because the way that they engage with others results in better opportunities, ideas, talent, and resources that flow to them over time. People want to be around energizers. But energizers may not be who you think they are. Certainly, they aren't all stereotypical cheerleaders or hyper-extraverted networkers. In fact, a low-key person is just as likely to be an energizer as someone who is considered charismatic, and introverts are just as likely to be seen as energizing as extraverts. Rather, it is what energizers *do* that sets them apart.

[Our work](#) has shown that trust in relationships—in particular, two forms of trust: competence-based and benevolence-based trust—is foundational to innovation and effective collaboration.¹⁶ Without *benevolence-based trust*—trust that you have my interests in mind—people are reluctant to put forth and debate new or different ideas and perspectives. Without *competence-based trust*—trust that you are able to do what you say—people don't value the feedback and insights that they receive and so don't bother to share their ideas.

Energizers create enthusiasm in part because they engage in a set of foundational behaviors that build trust. When you interact with an energizer, you don't have to worry that you will be judged, dismissed, or devalued. Without fear of rejection, it's easier to share fledgling ideas or novel plans—to innovate, take risks, and think big. Energizers create trust, but trust isn't all that they create.

Energizers go a step further and engage in behaviors that instill a sense of purpose and energy in the work. But it is not *their* purpose and energy. Rather, it is the sense of purpose and energy of *others*. As a product of these investments, energizers win because people bring them their newest, boldest ideas and their most exciting innovations. Although most top energizers in networks are themselves high performers, the real magic comes from what they bring out in others. Energizers attract other high performers, have lower attrition rates and higher engagement scores among the people they work with, and increase their own performance over time as their own abilities are enriched by what is shared with them.

When we asked men and women in our study who energized them, we made a surprising discovery. Women were more

likely to identify other women as energizing, especially at senior levels. When the percentage of women in the organization is low, women were even more likely to identify other women as energizing. What surprised us most was why the women in our study identified other women as energizing.

Although women identified some of the same reasons that men did as to why people were energizing, they were much more likely to single out *benevolence-based trust* as critical to the energizing relationship. Some women noted that their new ideas felt “fragile” and that they could share them only in a “safe space.” Others described energizers as providing needed emotional support. In stark contrast, the men we interviewed explained that energizing people either helped them explore new ideas or provided a welcome, critical eye on more fleshed-out ideas before they were shared with others. For them, the foundational component of the energizing relationship was *competence-based trust*.

Both men and women were more likely to identify women as energizing. But it's not that simple. Gender stereotypes can lead some people to feel that women *should* offer benevolence-based trust and to resent those women who don't. Perhaps this explains why our research also found that women were more likely to be identified as *de-energizing*, especially by other women. More so than men, women described de-energizers as self-centered complainers who talk too much about themselves and rarely listen to the concerns of others. Men—sometimes when describing the same individuals—were much more likely to describe de-energizers in instrumental terms: as people who blocked their ability to get work done.

Although competence-based trust is important to both men and women, benevolence-based trust is more foundational to the energizing relationship for women than for men. We know from other research that women in the workplace often face a trade-off between being perceived as competent and being perceived as warm and likable.¹⁷ This could make it difficult to build both competence-based and benevolence-based trust. Yet, as we noted, women in our study were *more* likely to be identified as energizing by both men and women, suggesting that they may have an edge when it comes to being an energizer. Whether they are men or women, successful energizers cultivate both types of trust.

Tips:

✓ Lay a strong foundation for competence-based trust

- Demonstrate your capability, expertise, and knowledge so that people learn to trust your competence. Avoid making comments that downplay your abilities or that attribute your success to random factors. Convey ideas quickly through concrete examples and storytelling to shift attention onto what you have done and what you could do next (and away from whether you can actually do it).

- Be consistent in what you say and do. Build a reputation for integrity by letting others know that you will follow through on a commitment and then follow through.
 - Lay a strong foundation for benevolence-based trust
 - Show others that you have their interests, not just your own, in mind. Many women we interviewed felt that it was easier for them to build trusting relationships than it was for men. They cited their listening skills as their main relationship-building strength and one of the reasons that people sought them out. Use listening skills to develop a reputation as someone who listens more than talks.
 - Give before you ask for help and without expectation of benefit (e.g., time, resources, information, referrals).
 - Connect with people off-task. Get to know their backgrounds, interests, or aspirations.
- ✓ Create energy in the moment
- Be fully engaged when you interact with others. Look and act not only as if you have all the time in the world—even when you don't!—to listen to what others have to say but also that you welcome the opportunity to listen. It takes less than a second to smile and make eye contact.
- Focus on possibilities and opportunities rather than on constraints and barriers. Adopt an energizing mindset. Energizing people encourage new ideas. They get excited about possibilities. Never make No your first response to a new idea or proposition. Even if you do end up rejecting an idea, separate out your rejection of the idea from the person who presented it. Often, there is no need to reject anything because—through the course of your energizing conversation—a novel idea will develop into an exciting new possibility.
 - Use humor—even at your own expense—to lighten tense moments or remove unnecessary turf wars from interactions.

It's time to stop focusing on implicit bias training as the sole villain and to look to other ways to promote gender diversity. If the ultimate goal of gender diversity efforts is to build organizations in which employees work together and evolve as professionals without regard to gender, then let's focus on the relationships themselves. Our research suggests that, by creating opportunities for men and women to work together, and by supporting BEST network practices, organizations and individuals can dramatically reshape their networks. Creating gender diversity at all levels in organizations is not only the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do.

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