

Looking Below the Surface: The Gendered Nature of Organizations

Organizations are gendered: Having been created largely by and for men, modern organizations – their systems, practices, structures and norms – tend to reflect masculine values and life situations. Given this deeply rooted masculinity, it is, perhaps, not surprising that efforts to achieve gender equity by traditional means, such as improving recruiting practices or providing “sensitivity training” to managers, have been insufficient in achieving real and lasting change. Such measures have helped to correct overt discrimination and to facilitate women’s “fitting in” within organizations, but they focus on the symptoms of the problem rather than on its systemic root causes. They do not address the often invisible masculine assumptions that reinforce and reproduce gender inequities.

Organizational change efforts that take account of deeply rooted masculinity, on the other hand, focus on systemic issues. Change efforts of this type are grounded in two basic premises. The first is that our common sense “knowledge” about organizational life is unnecessarily narrow and limited in scope. Everything we regard as normal or commonplace – from what is accepted as appropriate workplace behavior to norms about competition, commitment, leadership and authority – tends to privilege traits that have been socially and culturally ascribed to males, such as independence, individuality and rationality, while devaluing or

ignoring those that have been socially ascribed to females, such as collaboration, caring, and support. Thus, our understanding of workplace phenomena and our ability to envision alternative structures and systems has been limited by what can be thought of as a gendered set of norms about effectiveness and success. The second premise is that when put into practice, these norms create idealized images of work, workers, and success that can indirectly maintain gender segregation and gender inequity in the workplace. Organizational change efforts that take account of deeply rooted masculinity, then, not only challenge some of the basic gendered assumptions that drive organizational behavior, they also seek to change the effects of these assumptions at the level of concrete, everyday work practice.

To illustrate, we use an example of gendered norms from an agricultural research center. The image of an ideal researcher at this center is rooted in a number of deeply-held and widely-shared assumptions about behavior, professional orientation, personality characteristics and life situation. The image includes things such as being action-oriented and “hands-on,” being willing to sacrifice and endure hardship in order to get the job done, as well as being able to travel long distances and spend long hours to get out in the field in order to be close to the data and problems. While on the surface these traits may appear both laudable and

gender neutral, they actually privilege masculinity in some interesting and not necessarily helpful ways. For example, the norms give preference to the field-based disciplines (where more men are represented) and diminish the importance of the lab-based disciplines (where more women are represented). Second, by equating commitment with the willingness to work long hours and travel whenever and wherever needed, these norms favor workers who do not have domestic responsibilities or who have a partner who takes care of the private sphere of life.

These assumptions about the ideal worker derive from a masculine social context and reinforce traditional masculine norms within the organization. These deeply rooted norms are taken for granted and simply seen as “the way work is done here.” The result is that workers who do not fit these masculine norms – whether women *or* men – are seen as less likely to contribute to the success of the organization and are therefore less likely to be promoted or considered valuable. The second result of these assumptions is that alternative ways of working that do not conform to these norms, such as strengthening delegation or maximizing efficiency in work processes to reduce time pressures, are overshadowed and not readily explored.

An organizational change effort that takes account of these gendered as-

sumptions would seek to challenge not only the assumptions themselves (for example, why is it that field-based work is considered more important than lab-based?), but would also seek to change the effects of these assumptions at the level of concrete, everyday work practice (e.g., reward systems, formal and informal norms about traveling to the field, and the use of technology to reduce time pressure). We believe that lasting effects in gender equity

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can only be achieved when assumptions are reexamined and changes are made in work practices that on the surface appear to be merely routine, gender-neutral, artifacts of organizational life.

One way of getting at the gendered aspects of the deep structure of organizations, such as the "ideal worker," is to use the concept of mental models:

*"deeply ingrained images and assumptions...which we carry in our minds of ourselves, other people, institutions.... Like panes of glass, framing and subtly distorting our vision, mental models determine what we see and how we act. Because mental models are usually tacit, existing below the level of awareness, they are often untested and unexamined"*¹

Mental models, then, are a set of assumptions that have certain characteristics. They are normative, identifying ideal images and modes of behavior, revealing beliefs, for example, about routes to success, or the characteristics of exemplary behavior or organizational loyalty. They are taken-for-granted or tacit, rarely questioned or discussed, but so natural as to seem routine and unremarkable. And lastly, mental models manifest themselves in concrete work practices, structures, processes and everyday routines. These can be formal processes, such as performance appraisal instruments, or informal processes, such as interaction styles, demonstrations of commitment (staying in the office to work late), or informal norms about dress codes or the length of lunch breaks.

Identifying and analyzing mental models is a powerful way of addressing gender inequity in organizations. Surfacing mental models allows staff and managers in an organization to talk about the tacit assumptions that drive behavior, systems, and processes, both at formal and informal levels, and to examine the gender implications of these assumptions. More important, it allows them to *select* certain mental models – those that meet the dual agenda of having unintended negative consequences both for gender equity and for organizational effectiveness – and reflect on them as *systemic* effects that influence not only their own personal work situation, but also the organization's ability to meet its goals. In other words, by making these mental models explicit, the status quo is

disrupted. This gives both men and women new ways of looking at their organization, and the systemic, rather than the individual, determinants of behavior and practices. Moreover, the "naming" of the mental models gives staff a legitimate means to discuss issues and values that are often either tacit or taboo in the organizational culture. This can open up new opportunities to experiment with work practices and systems that reflect more equitably the realities confronted by men and women in the workplace today.

We believe that to be truly beneficial and long lasting, gender and organizational change efforts need to focus on these deep structures and practices and seek to change them in ways that will be beneficial not only for women, but also for men and, importantly, for organizations themselves.

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¹ Senge, P., A. Kleiner, C. Roberts, R. Russ, and B. Smith (1994). *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*. New York: Doubleday.

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