

Gender Bias Is A Costly Mistake

by Jon Craighead

There is a crisis in leadership everywhere. You can't pick up a publication or observe any media outlet without learning of some leadership failure. Women in the business world today are talented and able. Yet statistics substantiate that women in critically responsible positions of authority are significantly under represented. While gender equity is a part of today's conversation, statistics point out the fact there is still much to be done. This article isn't about being fair or nice to women; it focuses on how we get the best people in the right positions to make the biggest difference.

One popular explanation for discrimination against women is insecure men who want to keep women in their place. This mindset will eventually be resolved in time by cultural changes. However, discrimination is more likely generated by a lack of female assertiveness or promotion. If this is a credible explanation, then a more meaningful inquiry would be to examine the formulation of female self efficacy in the early stages of life.

In a recent McKinsey & Company article addressing unconscious bias, actress Geena Davis asserts that films distort gender perceptions by favoring males over females, and that this media bias negatively impacts women in adulthood. Through her work in such films as *Thelma and Louise* and *A League of Their Own*, she became aware of how few opportunities there are for women to feel empowered by movies. Then, when she became a mother, she noticed the same trend in children's media. "I was thunderstruck by the dearth of female characters. But no one else seemed to be noticing." When she brought it to the attention of studio executives and producers, she was assured it was no longer a problem.

Stunned by this reaction, Davis commissioned a massive study on children's television and films which resulted in her founding the Institute on Gender in Media. Among the study's revelations it was found that in family films, male characters out-numbered female characters by a ratio of three to one, and that 81 percent of characters with jobs were males. Especially remarkable was that women represented only 17 percent of crowd scenes. She points out that this number coincides with the "stall out" number of female representation in other places such as "Fortune 500 companies, law partners, tenured professors, [and] Congress."

The salient point is that little girls have fewer role models than little boys. This creates a psychological ceiling, installed at an early age, which continues to influence women's decisions in adulthood. The reality is that a child's perception of the world is often shaped by what she sees in the media and in the people around her. Likewise, she is influenced by how both men and women relate to her. We must not ignore the potential for unconscious hesitations being planted and reinforced at these early stages.

Gender inequity is more than a just social issue; it is a costly mistake. Another McKinsey & Co article titled "Why Diversity Matters" states that it is clear that women are a valuable resource. Their research found that "companies in the top quartile for gender or racial and ethnic diversity are more likely to have financial returns above their national industry medians. Companies in the bottom quartile in these dimensions are statistically less likely to achieve above-average returns."

Further evidence is provided in an analysis by Quorum Strategies, a consulting startup in D.C. that offers data on legislators. It states that over the last six years Senate women have been more likely than their male colleagues to introduce legislation. Since the 111th congress which was sworn in 2009, the average female senator submitted 96.31 bills while the average male senator submitted 70.72.

The challenges today require every resource we can muster. Women leaders are a resource we can't ignore, and when we do it is at our peril.

In 2010 we did a study of women in leadership in which we conducted a series of interviews with 102 business women in eleven states. The struggle of women in business has not been an easy one, and fortunately for us these interviewees persisted with inexorable inner resources and courage. A report on the study is posted on our website.