

Why the future of work is looking bright for women

Rachel Sugar Jun. 12, 2015, 2:45 PM 2,718 2

More and more companies are moving away from top-down hierarchies and toward more collaborative models.

In what might be the buzziest example in recent memory, Zappos ditched managers altogether, as part of their high-profile transition to Holacracy, an alternative model structured around "self-management."

But while Zappos may be extreme, it's hardly alone.

Not every company is ditching the very notion of management — far from it — but there is a mass migration toward flatter structures and looser hierarchies.

And according to research by Raina Brands, an assistant professor of organizational behavior at London Business School, that shift could be particularly good for women in leadership positions.

In traditional hierarchies, it hasn't necessarily been easy to be a woman in charge, in large part, Brands writes, because we expect those leaders to "exhibit power, dominance, courage, and boldness" — all traits we tend to associate with men. (Lest one assume those stereotypes have gone away by now: Back in March, the New York Times reported that among S&P 1500 companies, there in fact are fewer female CEOs than there are CEOs named John. There are also fewer female CEOs than CEOs named David.)

"Even if men and women behave the same," Brands tells Business Insider, "there's still this attribution bias. We just tend to think of men as better leaders."

Except, Brands is finding, it may be more complicated than that.

Her recent study, published in "Organization Science," suggests that male leaders are perceived as more charismatic (and therefore more inspirational and motivating) only in centralized networks — those star-driven organizations with "clear pecking orders and stratification of status and power."

But in more cohesive networks — the kinds of places where "everybody goes to everybody else for advice," Brands explains — female leaders are actually seen as more charismatic than men.

In one experiment, Brands and her colleagues had participants make assumptions about a fictional leader's abilities in centralized vs. cohesive networks. When the network was centralized, people found "Michael" more charismatic than his doppelgänger "Michelle."

When the network was cohesive, though, people saw "Michelle" as the more charismatic one.

And the researchers found the same assumptions played out in real life: Participants working in very hierarchical organizations saw male leaders as more charismatic, while participants working in dense networks attributed more charisma to female leaders.

On one level, that's evidence that gender stereotypes are alive and well and living in our offices. Across the board, we seem to perceive leaders as more charismatic when they fit with our gendered expectations.

Just as we expect leaders of hierarchies to exhibit traits we associate with men, we expect leaders of more cohesive networks to "strive for intimacy and solidarity" — traits we tacitly associate with women.

On another level, though, Brands' findings suggest good things for the future of women at work. The organizational models that favor "more cohesive and collaborative styles of leadership" are exactly the organizational models that are on the rise. And these, Brands says, "are the organizations where we're really going to see woman emerge as leaders."

But there's no need for the Johns and the Davids of the world to panic, she promises. "This doesn't mean that men are in trouble, because what we find is that cohesive networks help everyone."

Her research shows that everyone is perceived as more charismatic when they're surrounded by a cohesive network. "It's just that it helps the women more than it helps the men."