THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE QUEEN BEE PHENOMENON IN THE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality in the workplace has been a persistent issue for some time. With women today holding less than 6% of CEO positions and only 19% of executive board positions in Fortune 500 companies as noted by Catalyst, 2017organizations work toward understanding how to increase gender equality representation in leadership roles. Organizations may promote diversity, equity and inclusion efforts to attract more female leaders to their organization, however upon further research there are internal forces at work that are also providing obstacles to women, that being surprisingly other women. Rather than being advocates for gender equality some women labelled as "queen bees" through the Queen Bee Phenomenon in turn defend the status quo of fewer female leaders in the male-dominated workplace. This internal struggle within an organization negatively impacts not only female leaders, but junior women, male counterparts, and the organization as a whole. This review evaluates research on understanding the psychological mechanisms behind queen bee behavior and reviews the implications the queen bee phenomenon has on organizations while serving to challenge how queen bee interactions discriminate against women in the workplace.

Keywords: Workplace, Leadership, Queen Bee, Home Responsibilities.

INTRODUCTION

While women's representation in the workplace has increased substantially over the last few decades, women continue to be underrepresented in higher leadership roles within organizations. Historically, women are faced with overcoming negative stereotypes suggesting that women have lower career commitment due to family/home responsibilities, lower leadership abilities, and conflict with emotional stability (Derks et al., 2011). As a result, some European countries have even implemented gender quotas under the assumption that promoting a number of women to leadership roles will therefore increase the amount of opportunities for junior women (Derks et al., 2016). The idea behind this, believing that gender inequality within the workplace is caused primarily by men, assumes that female leaders will lessen the gender gap in leadership roles. In doing so senior women will hire, mentor and promote other women to help advocate female leadership diversity in an attempt to overcome negative female stereotypes (Derks et al., 2016). However psychological studies have shown that not all female leaders support this behavior, and that actually women can be primarily responsible at times for intentionally damaging the careers of other women. These type of women have been labelled "queen bees" and exhibit negative behavior towards other women that pose yet another challenge to women seeking career advancement (Kremer et al., 2019).

The queen bee phenomenon refers to the syndrome in which women pursue individual success in male-dominated organizations (organizations where men hold majority of executive and leadership positions) by conforming to the masculine culture while also distancing

themselves from other women (Derks et al., 2016). First defined in the 1970s, researchers at the University of Michigan conducted a study that evaluated women promotion rates and found instances where women who achieved success in male-dominated workplaces were opposed to the advancement of other women (Drexler, 2013). The study revealed how women who exhibited this behavior (1) presented themselves more like men by exhibiting masculine qualities, (2) psychologically and physically distanced themselves from other women, specifically junior women, and (3) supported the current gender hierarchy within the workplace (Derks et al., 2016). As result, the queen bee phenomenon offers evidence combatting the assumption that women will support women. The current in-depth review of the queen bee phenomenon will provide a better understanding of the causes and consequences of this behavior.

Gender Identity, Stereotypes & Biases

Several studies attempt to better understand the impacts of gender roles and gender identity in the workplace. Currently with today's gender roles the stereotype is that masculine attributes such as assertiveness, aggressiveness, competitiveness, and persistence are essential for leadership roles (Snipes et al., 1998). However, none of these attributes are stereotypically considered appropriate for women. As such women are faced with internal conflict facing contradictory demands of being feminine yet possessing the necessary attributes demanded in the workplace. Should they conform to their feminine gender role, research argues they fail to be managerial, yet should they conform to the masculine managerial style they face being considered less feminine (Mavin, 2008). This poses the idea that the amounts of women in leadership roles are conditional on their ability to modify their behavior to become more like men possessing masculine attributes (Mavin, 2008). Commonly used phrase "If you can't beat them, join them" may better simplify how women may conform to male-dominated workplace cultures in an attempt to gain advancement.

Further research on the gender differences in perception of masculine attributes among female managers provides evidence that women show more negative perceptions towards women displaying assertiveness than men. In a study conducted by Mathison (1986) participants in middle management roles were asked to listen to a recorded conversation between a man and woman where the woman displayed more assertive behavior than the man. The results displayed evidence that primarily women viewed an assertive woman more negatively, and that overall, men were more comfortable with the woman's assertiveness (Mathison, 1986). As a result, women in leadership displaying masculine attributes can expect to see greater conflict from those of the same sex, rather than their male counterparts.

In addition to possessing more masculine attributes, queen bees may also work harder to distance themselves from stereotypical feminine attributes. Research shows that when members of negatively stereotyped groups progress in fields traditionally represented by other groups of higher status, they may attempt to distance themselves from their stereotyped group in order to gain acceptance in the higher status group (Derks et al., 2016). This behavior, described as self-group distancing, will occur when an individual opportunity can be gained as a result of disassociating oneself from the group identity. Common stereotyped feminine attributes describe women as more willing to help others, more nurturing, empathetic and gentle. As a result, queen bee behaviors are more evident when women see their gender as a liability to career progress, therefore queen bees will not demonstrate the stereotyped feminine attributes, and instead work towards psychologically and physically distancing themselves from women who do (Derks et al., 2016).

Physical & Psychological Distancing

Research has provided evidence that gender inequality through gender bias and stereotypes causes conflict among women in the workplace (Sheppard & Aquino, 2013). Evidence supporting this can be found in Ely's (1994) study where female junior lawyers working in firms with low proportion of female partners were compared to firms with high proportions of female partners. In the study Ely found that in firms that held less female partners, junior females experienced more competitive relationships with other females, and were less likely to view female partners as supportive mentors, compared to those firms that had more female partners at the firm (Sheppard & Aquino, 2013). Similarly, C.R. Kaiser conducted a similar study in 2014 in which female participants were measured on their degree of helpfulness with other female peers and subordinates in their organization. In the experiment participants completed a series of tasks rating other participants (not knowing their gender) under the belief that there was an underrepresentation of women in the study and that they themselves may have an advantage due to the limited amount of women participating. The results of the study showed that when women believed they were underrepresented they were more likely to hinder the advancement of other women rather than support (Kaiser & Spalding, 2015).

Queen bees who psychologically distance themselves from other women in order to disassociate themselves from their gender stereotype will additionally physically distance themselves from junior women as a result of the likelihood of same-sex conflict occurring. Personal circumstances, for example may create an indirect reasoning why senior women may distance themselves from junior women in the workplace. Through much research showing that women are expected to be primarily responsible for family and home commitments, women in leadership roles are more likely than men to be single or childless (Derks et al., 2016). As a result, women in leadership roles may feel that because of the significant personal sacrifices they have made they deserve (over females who have not made similar sacrifices) to advance in their careers. This is important to note as queen bees may not disassociate from all women in general, only those confirming negative gender stereotypes. Research has shown that women leaders are more willing to identify with and support women in similar hierarchy positions. This is due to the fact that these women have already overcome gender stereotypes, have experienced similar career challenges, and have made similar non-traditional life choices as themselves (Faniko et al., 2016). As this only supports women already in leadership roles, this too provides little to no support for junior women seeking mentorship and advancement opportunities.

Same-Sex Conflict

For junior women, having a female leader that exhibits queen bee behavior can be detrimental for their career as growth opportunities and development may suffer from same-sex conflict. Senior women who re-enforce negative gender stereotypes with their female subordinates can not only be negatively influential but less likely seen as sexist as compared to if male leaders provided the same influences (Derks et al., 2016). Queen bees may create psychological stress on junior women due to lack of support, negative feedback, or personal criticism. Junior women also expecting senior women to have their best interest may experience damage in their self-confidence as a result (Derks et al., 2016). As queen bees view junior women as a competitive threat to the workplace and to the status quo their behavior may be shown as hostile, unsupportive, or intentionally damaging. Researched in a South African study in 2011, women executives were surveyed on their experiences with unsupportive female leaders. As a result, the study showed that females working under leaders with queen bee

characteristics often felt intimidated, insecure, and threatened in the workplace creating even a hostile work environment (Johnson & Mathur-Helm, 2011). Additionally, leaders with queen bee characteristics are more likely to give lower-rated performance evaluations to their female subordinates than males, thus limiting junior women's advancement and work opportunities. In the same 2011 South African study, researchers found that female leaders were more likely than males to assess female candidates as less qualified than men and were more likely to deny opportunities for women to promote. Further support shown in a sex-role stereotyping study conducted by Snipes in 1998 suggested that female leaders held higher expectations on female subordinates than male subordinates. The concept behind this is that female leaders felt because they themselves worked hard to overcome gender stereotypes and advance up the corporate ladder, other women should work just as hard and without their help (Snipes et al., 1998). This provides evidence that leaders with queen bee characteristics are less likely to support their female subordinates' development. C. R. Kaiser suggests that it is oftentimes difficult to detect this type of bias from female leaders towards female subordinates due to its non-prototypical nature, thus allowing the behavior to go unnoticed (Kaiser & Spalding, 2015). As the behavior continues and intensifies not only does it discourage junior women from advancing, it can also be a source of turnover in organizations.

Male-Dominated Workplace

In a male-dominated workplace it is important to note that men are not confronted with gender-specific expectations around leadership as compared to women. By default, stereotypically masculine traits such as assertiveness and competitiveness are considered desirable for all men at work, both junior and senior (Faniko et al., 2016). This allows for more male advancement to occur, limiting opportunities for junior women. Though the term alpha male has been used to describe men in positions of power that emphasize their masculinity and career commitment compared to junior men Faniko et al. (2016) there is no equivalent queen bee label to describe queen bee behaviors exhibited by men (Mavin, 2008). It is evident that men support other men through networks, mentorship, and social relations but they are not expected to do the same towards women (Mavin, 2008).

In the male-dominated workplace men in leadership roles are not expected to support women advancement, however could be seen as discriminating if found not promoting diversity. As women in leadership roles are expected to be champions of diversity initiatives queen bees that fail to support junior women are more likely for it to go unnoticed simply because they are women. This double standard should be carefully reviewed within organizations.

Additionally, negative behavior or attitudes from men in leadership roles is often expected, accepted or ignored by both genders (Mavin, 2008). Consequently though, female leaders displaying negative behavior should expect to see greater criticism from their female counterparts (Mathison, 1986). These differences also present an additional obstacle women face in their career advancement.

Future Improvement

Given the extensive impact of queen bee behaviors on opportunities for women at work, future research should focus on finding ways to eliminate this dynamic (Derks et al., 2016). In recent years organizations have invested in improving organizational success by diversifying the gender distribution within their organization. While that is beneficial for women seeking advancement, it is recommended that organizations additionally focus on altering their culture on the perception of women in the workplace. Should the culture remain biased and continue to

enforce negative gender stereotypes, organizations will reinforce queen bee behavior. Instead, by diminishing gender bias as part of the organizational culture will promote the values that come with gender diversity (Derks et al., 2011). This culture may become more supportive, allow for further developments for junior women, and eliminate the need for women aiming to achieve individual success to become queen bees.

Overall the queen bee phenomenon is not a standard response for all female leaders. However, when women experience social identity threat due to gender bias, discrimination and negative stereotypes in the male-dominated workplace, the environment may trigger queen bee behavior (Derks et al., 2016). While this may motivate some women to support gender equality programs in the workplace, others seeking to advance individual opportunity rather than group opportunity may exhibit queen bee behavior.

As established previously women are primarily responsible for advocating for women's progress in leadership roles. However in Rindfleish & Sheridan's (2003) study where senior executive women were asked if they actively promoted programs to increase female representation in managerial levels, over 60% of them said no, with 43% of participants stating it was not important (Mavin, 2008). Though many female leaders acknowledge there are barriers for women seeking career advancement, oftentimes research finds they do not want to be responsible for leading change initiatives in the organization out of concern they may be labeled as a feminist (Mavin, 2008). This stereotype will discourage female leaders in a male-dominated workplace from challenging the status quo until male leaders are able to engage and lead change initiatives.

Overall, studies suggest that the queen bee phenomenon can be minimized by reducing threats to women's social identity, whether through interventions that reduce negative gender stereotypes in the workplace, or interventions that allow women who exhibit queen bee behavior to cope with their identity threat in a different manner such as self-affirmation (Derks et al., 2016). Future research can also be done on building tools that can assist women seeking to advance in their organization as well teaching how to identify and overcome possible queen bee behaviors in the workplace (Johnson & Mathur-Helm, 2011).

CONCLUSION

Though there is evidence that demonstrates the willingness of women executives to support junior women in their development and advancement this review provides specific evaluation on the queen bee phenomenon and instances where it could hinder female advancement in the workplace. As some female leaders fear being outperformed by women advancing, they become driven by self-interest and exhibit detrimental behavior for junior women in a number of forms. Through gender identity, gender stereotypes, and same-sex conflict, the queen bee is created within the male-dominated workplace, creating a variety of negative consequences.

This review provides awareness on the vast implications the queen bee phenomenon has on the advancement of women in the workplace. The queen bee phenomenon calls attention to the ripple effect the behavior has on female leaders, their female subordinates and the organization as a whole. A method used to combat queen bee behavior in the workplace can be for organizations to actively reduce experiences of gender bias and work towards implementing steps to improve the position of women. It is also recommended that change initiatives be developed and led by both men and women to eliminate potential labels or stereotypes. When women no longer perceive their gender as a liability in the male-dominated workplace and are

able to focus on their individual attributes that are beneficial to their career advancement will queen bee behaviors be diminished if not eliminated. Though much progress has been made over the last few decades on female advancement in the workplace, changing the manner in how women currently advance in male-dominated workplaces will allow future generations of women more opportunities to advance.

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