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Damned or Doomed—Catalyst Study on Gender Stereotyping at Work Uncovers Double-Bind Dilemmas for Women

Study examines how a "men-as-default-leaders" mindset derails women's advancement to business leadership

NEW YORK, NY (July 17, 2007)—Gender stereotyping, one of the key barriers to women's advancement in corporate leadership, leaves women with limited, conflicting, and often unfavorable options no matter how they choose to lead, according to *The Double-Bind Dilemma for Women in Leadership: Damned if You Do, Doomed if You Don't*, a study released today by Catalyst, the non-profit organization working to advance opportunities for women and business. This report, the third in Catalyst's in-depth series examining the pervasive and damaging effects of gender stereotyping in the workplace, focuses on the consequences of gender bias and three specific "double-bind dilemmas" frequently experienced by women business leaders. The study also suggests organizational solutions to counter the persistent effects of gender stereotyping.

Catalyst findings strongly suggest that gender stereotypes lead organizations to routinely underestimate and underutilize women's leadership talent. The 2006 Catalyst Census shows that, even though women make up over 50% of the management, professional, and related occupations, only 15.6% of *Fortune* 500 corporate officers and 14.6% of *Fortune* 500 board directors are women. "When companies fail to acknowledge and address the impact of gender stereotypic bias, they lose out on top female talent," said Catalyst President **Ilene H. Lang**. "Ultimately, it's not women's leadership styles that need to change. Only when organizations take action to address the impact of gender stereotyping will they be able to capitalize on the 'full deck' of talent."

Although multiple research studies show that men and women exhibit similar leadership styles, Catalyst's prior research indicates that men do not face the persistent gender stereotyping that frequently place women business leaders in "double-bind, 'no-win' dilemmas." According to the study, which interviewed senior business executives from the United States and Europe, men are still viewed as "default leaders" and women as "atypical leaders," with the perception that they violate accepted norms of leadership, no matter what the leadership behavior. Thus, the studies say, the masculine leadership norm creates three connected, but distinct, "double-bind dilemmas" facing women leaders today:

- **Extreme perceptions:** Women leaders are perceived as "never just right." If women business leaders act consistent with gender stereotypes, they are considered too soft. If they go against gender stereotypes, they are considered too tough.

"My observations show senior women to be at either end of the spectrum, drivers that do it themselves (even though they might have given it to someone). This type tends to give little recognition and is a perfectionist. The others are very effective delegators, giving lots of recognition and building loyal teams, but can be perceived as 'not tough enough'" (U.S. man, age 35-44, level not specified).

- **The high competence threshold/lower rewards:** Women leaders face higher standards than men leaders and are rewarded with less. Often they must work doubly hard to achieve the same level of recognition as men leaders for the same level of work and "prove" they can lead.

"Men and women are seen differently, and the difference in my experience and observation is that we (women) need to show it more times before they believe it. With a woman, they will want to see the behavior repeated more frequently before they will say that this is really part of the woman [sic] and her capabilities" (European woman, high-potential manager).

- **Competent but disliked:** When women exhibit traditionally valued leadership behaviors such as assertiveness, they tend to be seen as competent but not personable or well-liked. Yet those who do adopt a more stereotypically feminine style are liked but not seen as having valued leadership skills.

"...it may just be that people are more sensitive to how women behave in that regard. There does seem to be a little more tolerance for harsh behavior from men rather than women. Women are quicker to get labeled, and with men, it's easier to brush it off..." (High-potential woman, U.S.-based manager).

"I have experienced in the past that women can be distrusted in leadership roles, especially when they use a dominant style of communication. On the contrary, if they use a collaborative style serving their organization and empowering people, they get more recognition and sincere appreciation from their male equals" (Spanish man, age 31-35, middle management).

Catalyst believes that organizations need to develop and promote change to rid the work environment of the damaging impact of gender stereotyping and take advantage of the expanding pool of female leadership talent. "While women may address double-bind dilemmas with individual strategies," explains Ms. Lang, "this is clearly about organizations shifting their norms and culture to meet marketplace demands."

According to the study, simply learning about how stereotypes operate and holding individuals accountable can decrease the negative effects of gender stereotypic bias. Catalyst provides organizational action steps that companies can use to help root out the problem and reduce the effects of stereotyping in the workplace, including:

- Providing women leaders and other employees with tools and resources to increase awareness of women leaders' skills and of the effects of stereotypic perceptions.

- Assessing the work environment to identify in what ways women are at risk of stereotypic bias.
- Creating and implementing innovative work practices that target stereotypic bias. These practices can be particularly effective when they address specific areas of risk, such as in an organization's performance management procedures.

Organizations can apply this knowledge in several ways:

- Managerial training and diversity education—educating managers and employees to the origin and consequences of bias, inconsistencies between values and actual behavior, and causes and effects of gender inequality in the workplace.
- Performance and evaluation management—employing objective and unambiguous evaluation criteria.

The Double-Bind Dilemma for Women in Leadership: Damned if You Do, Doomed if You Don't is sponsored by **IBM Corporation**, and is the third report from Catalyst in its research stream on gender stereotyping. To learn more about this report, as well as the first two reports on gender stereotyping and other Catalyst research studies, please visit www.catalyst.org.

About the Survey

The study examined senior executives' perceptions of men and women leaders in the United States and Europe. There were 1,231 participants (296 U.S. senior managers and corporate leaders—168 women and 128 men, and 935 European managers and senior managers—282 women and 653 men). The second part of the study describes the results of qualitative analysis of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 13 women leaders in a large U.S. corporation.

About Catalyst

Founded in 1962, Catalyst is the leading nonprofit corporate membership research and advisory organization working globally with businesses and the professions to build inclusive environments and expand opportunities for women and business. With offices in New York, San Jose, Toronto, and Zug, and the support and confidence of more than 340 leading corporations, firms, business schools, and associations, Catalyst is connected to business and its changing needs and is the premier resource for information and data about women in the workplace. In addition, Catalyst honors exemplary business initiatives that promote women's leadership with the annual Catalyst Award.

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