A Company I Can Trust? Organizations' Mindsets About Ability Shape Women's Experience of Stereotype Threat at Work

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Many strides have been made to promote gender equity in the workplace, but women are still significantly under-represented in leadership roles in corporate America. Women currently make up 47% of the American workforce, but only about 25% of managerial roles.[1]

Within Fortune 500 companies less than 20% of board members and executive officers are female.[2] These stark statistics lay in contrast with the 80% of corporate board members who believe that gender diversity is beneficial for shareholders.[3] So why do these gender disparities continue to persist and how can they be ameliorated?

One component of representation gaps can be accounted for by what researchers call *stereotype threat*—the fear of confirming a negative stereotype about one's social group. Stereotype threat can cause reduced performance, trust, motivation, interest, and ambition among members of a stigmatized group.[4,5,6]

In corporate settings, stereotypes about women conflict with preconceived notions about business leadership, such as the belief that women are "too meek" to run a company. Such stereotypes may trigger stereotype threat among women in corporate settings.[7,8] Situational cues in workplaces can exacerbate or minimize stereotype threat by either reinforcing or tempering gender-based stereotypes.[9,10] For example, a photographic display of a company's history that shows only males in senior

KEY FINDINGS:

- Women expect to be negatively stereotyped by companies that endorse a fixed mindset about ability and this causes them to mistrust the company and display greater disengagement

- Implicit messages (e.g., mission statements) about a company's beliefs about ability better predicted women's organizational trust than explicit (visual) signals of gender representation within the company

leadership can reinforce gender stereotypes by signaling that only certain types of employees have succeeded in the workspace. Oftentimes these cues are subtle, yet they communicate clear messages about the company's values.

Researchers Katherine T.U. Emerson and Mary C. Murphy explored how such cues can trigger stereotype threat in organizations. The researchers were particularly interested in organizations' mindsets about ability. Similar to how *individuals* can hold growth or fixed mindsets about ability, the researchers categorized *companies* as possessing

This research summary highlights findings from the following article:

Emerson, K. T., & Murphy, M. C. (2015). A company I can trust? Organizational lay theories moderate stereotype threat for women. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 41,* 295-307.

a "fixed mindset" (a fixed view of abilities) or a "growth mindset" (a belief that traits and qualities can develop). If an organization conveys that talent is a fixed quality, this signals that the company management believes only a subset of people possess enough talent to be successful in advancing within its ranks—and negative stereotypes in society suggest which groups those will likely be.

In a series of three studies, Emerson and Murphy examined how an organization's mindset can affect levels of stereotype threat, perceived trust in the organization, and the ways in which individuals engage with the organization.

Study 1

The first study tested how an organization's mindset affects individuals' trust in the organization. 144 male and female undergraduate students from a public flagship university were randomly assigned to read either a fixed or growth mindset mission statement for a consulting company. The fixed mindset company's statement talked about recruiting the "best" employees and "encouraging, recognizing, and rewarding intelligence." In contrast, the growth mindset mission statement promoted the company as "growth-oriented" and "encouraging, recognizing, and rewarding development." Participants then completed a survey that measured their trust of the company.

How did the organizational mindsets affect individuals' trust in the company?

Female participants reported significantly more trust in the company that espoused a growth mindset than the company that espoused a fixed mindset. Men reported marginally higher trust in the growth mindset organization, but the effect was about 2.5 times larger for women. This supports the hypothesis that in a business setting, women may be more sensitive to cues about an organization's mindset. When companies espouse a growth mindset, it conveys to women that their ability is not fixed or static in the company's eyes, and they will be rewarded based on how they perform—not who they are. Therefore, negative stereotypes become less important in that particular workplace, as they can be disproved, and women can hold greater trust in the company.

Study 2

The second study explored whether women's expectation of negative stereotyping by a fixed mindset organization was partially responsible for the differing levels of trust between men and women observed in Study 1. It also assessed whether visual (explicit) cues have a stronger impact on trust than the more implicit cues about organizational mindsets conveyed by the mission statements.

To add a visual cue component, the researchers included images on a company website, which either featured equal numbers of men and women or a 3:1 ratio of men to women. The website also had multiple references to the ratio of male to female employees, along with the mission statement text that implicitly conveyed the organization's mindset—fixed or growth. After exploring the company's website, participants completed a survey measuring their trust in the company and their expectations about being perceived as competent.

How did explicit visual cues about gender representation and implicit cues conveying organizational mindsets affect participants' expectations of whether they would be negatively stereotyped by the company?

Women in both the fixed and growth mindset company conditions expected to be perceived as less competent than men. Women also had lower expectations of being perceived as competent by the fixed mindset company than the growth mindset organization. In contrast, men reported similar (and high) levels of perceived confidence, regardless of whether the company's mission statement messaged a fixed or growth mindset.

Organizational mindsets were more predictive of women's expectations about being stereotyped than the explicit visual cues conveyed on the company's website. This is an important finding because it suggests that implicit cues about an organization's mindset, such as wording in a mission statement, may have a more profound impact on women's expectations about being stereotyped than more explicit evidence of disproportionate representation within the company. While representation is an incredibly important aspect of creating diverse, equitable workspaces, this study provides evidence that this is not the *only* factor organizations should be cognizant of when attempting to design inclusive environments. Less obvious signals may be just as important in how employees perceive their value within the company.

Did explicit cues about representation or implicit cues conveying organizational mindsets about ability have a greater effect on participants' trust in the company?

Seeing equal gender representation within the workspace was not enough to overcome the negative effect of a company's fixed mindset on women's trust of the company. Being presented an image with equal numerical representation of men and women alongside a mission statement that conveyed a company's fixed mindset still led to decreased levels of reported trust by women. This supports the idea that organizational mindsets may have a stronger impact on trust level than more obvious, explicit cues.

Women's mistrust of the organization was driven by their expectations of being negatively stereotyped as less competent. These results suggest that when women perceive a company's views of ability as fixed (fixed mindset), they may feel like they are more likely to be viewed through the lens of negative stereotypes and will have to work to disprove them at this company. They therefore lose trust in the company to treat them fairly and equitably.

Study 3

The researchers used a third study to look into downstream effects of being exposed to companies that espoused a fixed or growth mindset. In this study, 272 undergraduates were randomly assigned to view a slideshow about either the fixed or growth mindset company. The slideshow contained the same text that was featured on the company's website in Study 2. After viewing the slideshow, participants reported their levels of organizational trust on a survey and were then asked to imagine they had a job interview with a representative from the company that went poorly. They then answered survey questions designed to measure their level of disengagement.

Did organizational mindsets about ability affect prospective employees' disengagement?

Women were more likely to disengage after hypothetical negative feedback from a fixed mindset company than a growth mindset company. After imagining performing poorly in a meeting with the representative from the fixed mindset company, women reported higher levels of disengagement. While mistrust of the fixed mindset company led both men and women to disengage, this effect was more than twice as large for women than men.

Implications of this research

Emerson and Murphy provide evidence that subtle cues in an environment can have a powerful effect on individuals' perceptions, which in turn affect their performance. Organizations espousing a fixed mindset of ability can trigger stereotype threat by conveying to job candidates and employees that they are more likely to have to contend with negative stereotypes about their group in that particular workspace. The way a company publicly characterizes success and ability has a significant effect on people's levels of trust and engagement in the organization. Diminished trust and engagement can thus negatively affect these employees' prospects of promotion and professional success within the company as well as their likelihood of leaving the company should another

opportunity present itself. Although the effect is larger for stigmatized individuals, even non-stigmatized, majority group members have lower levels of trust and motivation toward the fixed mindset company. Therefore, espousing a growth mindset can have positive effects for everyone, not just marginalized groups.

These findings can provide guidance to organizations that are interested in recruiting, retaining, and advancing staff from underrepresented or stigmatized groups. Reviewing and remedying company materials, websites, and policies can be an important first step in addressing the implicit messages that are being sent to prospective job candidates and employees from underrepresented groups. But this alone will not create a more inclusive work environment. In order to truly promote a more diverse workplace, a company must also enact this theory in everyday practice. By 'walking the talk,' companies can create a culture that endorses and reflects a true belief in the ability of all their employees to grow and excel.

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