

WHITE PAPER

# Queen Bee Syndrome

## The real reason women do not promote women



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## Introduction

The lack of women leaders, especially senior women leaders, has triggered much discussion globally. While more women than men are university graduates in 97 of 145 major and emerging countries worldwide, women make up the majority of skilled workers in only 68 of those countries and are the majority of leaders in only four countries.<sup>i</sup> Moreover, women currently hold only 4% of CEO positions at S&P 500 companies.<sup>ii</sup>

CCL provides a single-gendered leadership training program for mid-career women. During training, participants discuss factors that hinder their career advancement. In most discussion groups, someone will mention the lack of support from senior women. For these mid-career leaders, a big challenge is that, those women who have broken the glass ceiling do not sponsor, promote, or support their career advancement. These senior women are sometimes called “queen bees.”

The “queen bee syndrome” is such a common perception that it has been captured in movies. In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Meryl Streep portrays a stereotypical queen bee, an alpha woman who is capable and holds power, but who is critical of subordinates, especially women subordinates.

Undoubtedly, queen bee is a negative image. A stereotypical queen bee bullies subordinates and obstructs other women’s career advancement. They are seen as selfish, insensitive, and power hungry. If a senior woman leader has a reputation as a queen bee, women in less senior positions often are advised to avoid working with her.

However, before putting blame on the queen bees, it is worth asking:

**Is it possible that senior women leaders are unwilling to support other women leaders because doing so could unfairly penalize these senior women leaders?**

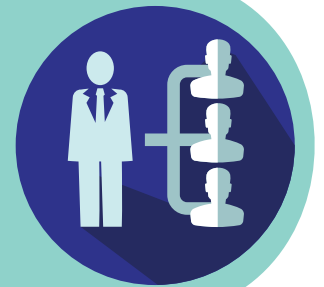


## The Cost of Women Valuing Diversity

To see if women leaders who support other women leaders are penalized, a recent study by one of the authors of this paper, using CCL data, examined whether women leaders are penalized if they demonstrate diversity-valuing behaviors in the workplace.<sup>iii</sup>

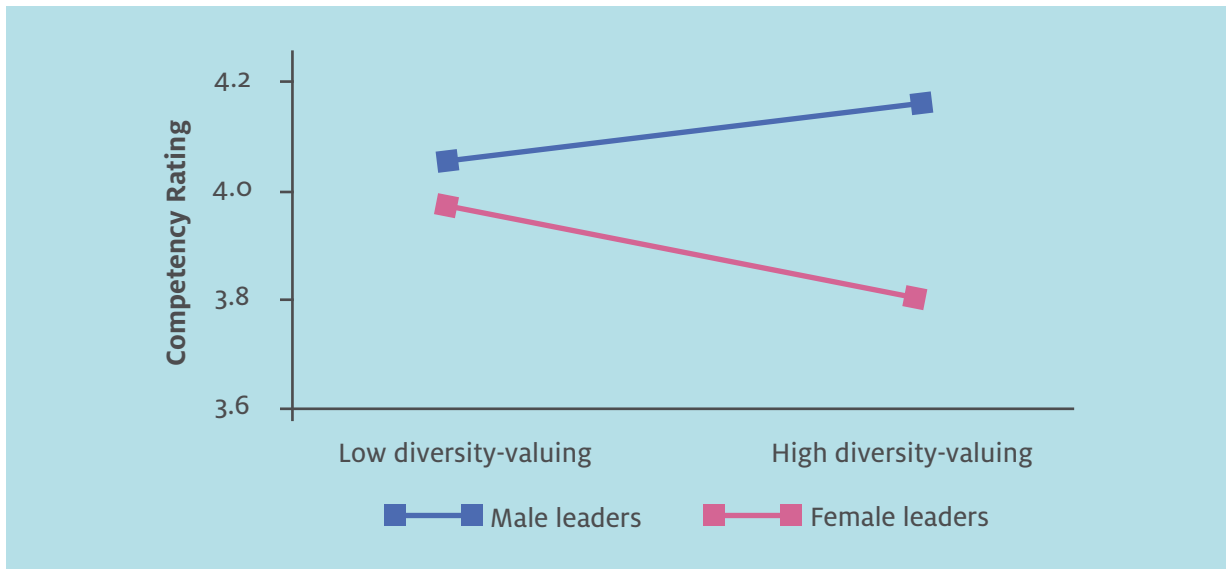
### Diversity-valuing Behaviors Include

- understanding and respecting cultural, religious, gender, and racial differences
- valuing working with a diverse group of people
- being comfortable managing people from different racial or cultural backgrounds



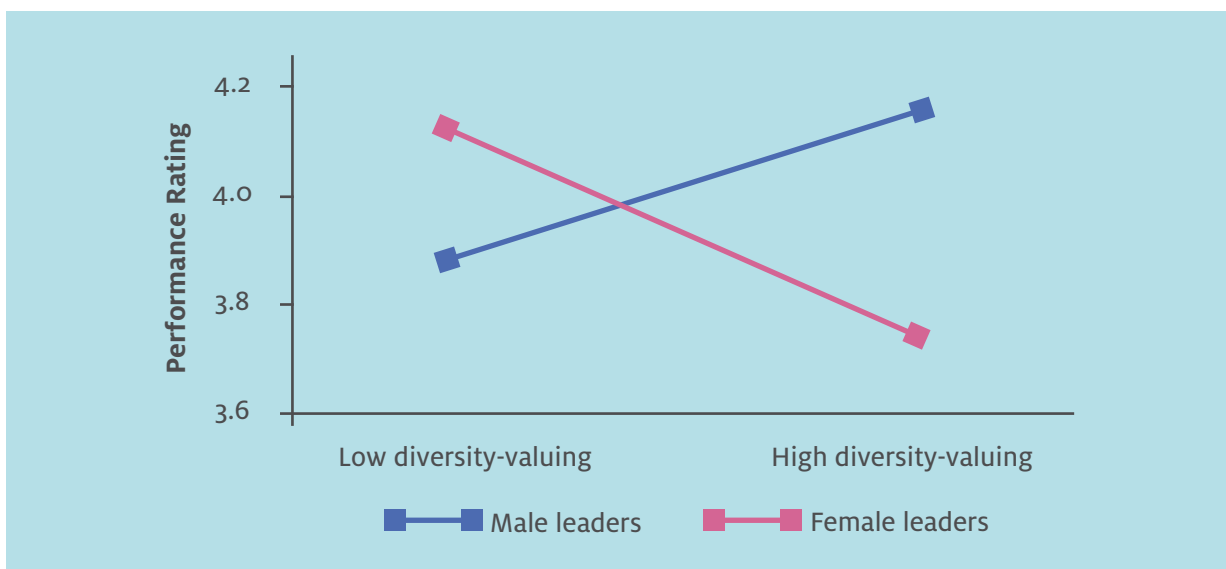
Using the 360-degree data collected from executive leaders' colleagues, the study examined the relationship between diversity-valuing behaviors (rated by the executive leaders' peers) and leaders' competency and performance (rated by the executive leaders' bosses).

**Figure 1: Leaders' diversity-valuing behaviors and their competency ratings**



Figures 1 and 2 show the results of this study. Figure 1 shows that, male and female leaders showing low diversity-valuing behaviors received similar competency ratings; however, female leaders demonstrating diversity-valuing behaviors received much lower competency ratings than their male counterparts.

**Figure 2: Leaders' diversity-valuing behaviors and their performance ratings**



This study provided compelling evidence that diversity-valuing behaviors by women leaders impede their advancement because they are penalized in the form of lower competency and performance ratings.

# The Cost of Women Promoting Other Women

Since women executives get penalized if they value diversity, what happens when they promote other women? Do they receive low competency and performance ratings? The study further focused on a specific diversity-valuing behavior: advocating hiring a female manager.

Working adults were asked to evaluate a hiring decision for a vacant senior vice president position. In particular, they evaluated the competency and job performance for the hiring manager making the decision.

Participants read a scenario explaining that a four-person top-management team had a split decision on which candidate to hire for an executive-level

job. Participants were shown photos of the two candidate finalists. The first candidate was a woman and the second candidate was a man. They also saw the hiring manager's photo, which matched the demographics of either Candidate 1 (both women) or Candidate 2 (both men).

Two scenarios were created. One is a non-diversity-advocating scenario, in which the hiring manager advocated hiring the white male candidate based on test scores alone, and the other is a diversity-advocating scenario, in which the hiring manager advocated hiring a female candidate based on test scores as well as a desire to increase organizational racial and gender balance. The hiring manager scripts for the two scenarios are below:



## Scenario 1 (non-diversity advocating)

### Hiring manager:

**“Enough discussion. My reasons for choosing [the white male candidate] were the most sound, so I am going to make the final call. Candidate 2 had the highest scores and so we are going with Candidate 2.”**



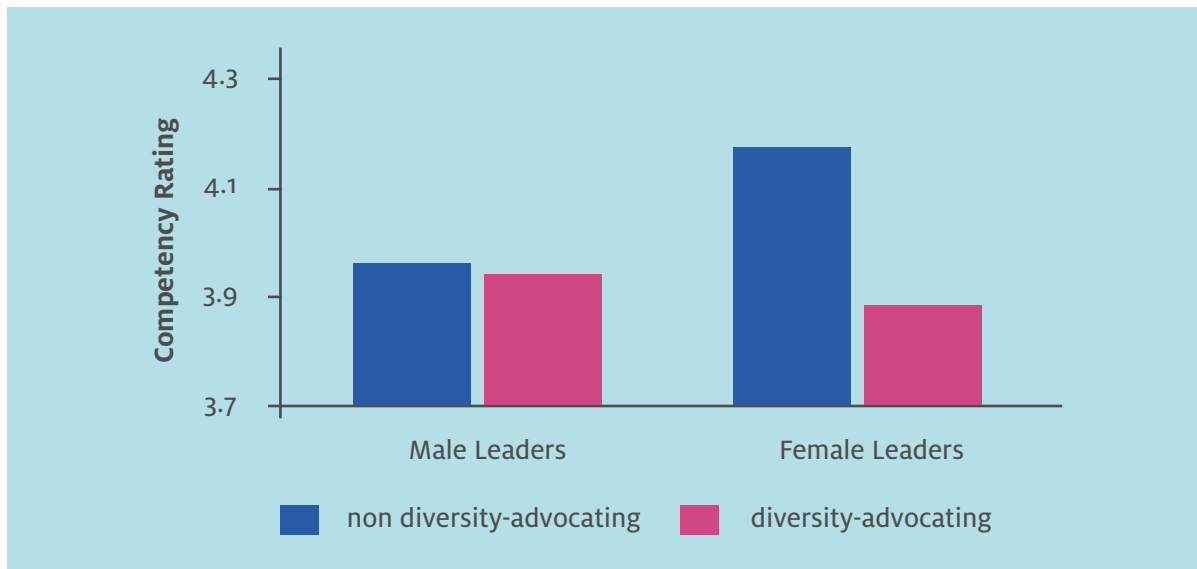
## Scenario 2 (diversity advocating)

### Hiring manager:

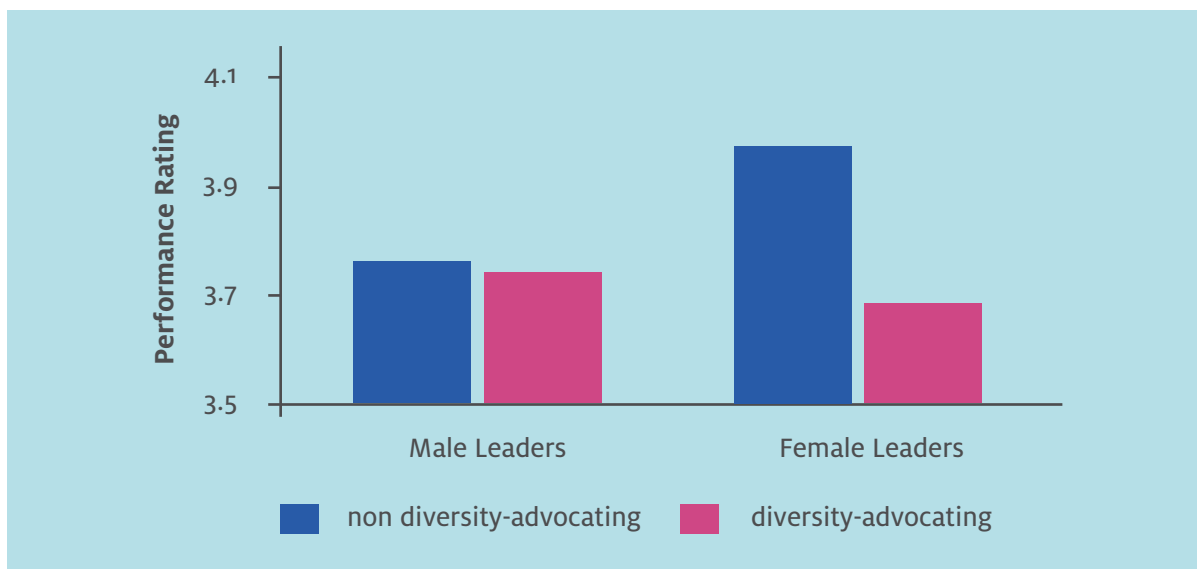
**“Enough discussion. My reasons for choosing [the woman candidate] were the most sound, so I am going to make the final call. Candidate 1 had the highest scores *and increases the racial and gender balance of our leadership team* so we are going with Candidate 1.”**

Figures 3 and 4 show the results of comparing across groups. Male leaders' competency and performance ratings were not affected whether they advocated diversity or not. However, advocating diversity significantly affected how others perceive female leaders' competency and performance; female leaders received much lower ratings for both competency and performance when they decided to hire the female candidate, even though the decision making also considered candidates' capability.

**Figure 3: Leaders' diversity-advocating behaviors and competency ratings**



**Figure 4: Leaders' diversity-advocating behaviors and performance ratings**



Both Parts I and II of the study reviewed above provide strong evidence that when women leaders value diversity and promote other women, they get penalized. This is because, in a male-dominated environment, advocating diversity highlighted women's demographic characteristics and activated the negative stereotype that they are incompetent and nepotistic.

So, what is the implication of this study?



## Be Aware of Gender Bias

Gender bias is rooted in historical and cultural values and no one is exempt from such bias.

Gender bias is often subconscious. Traditional stereotypes of leaders such as being assertive, masculine, and logical are considered predominantly male qualities. Women who want to advance their careers often find themselves facing a double-bind. For example:

- ▶ Women leaders are “damned if they do, doomed if they don’t.”<sup>iv</sup>
- ▶ Women leaders are perceived as either competent or liked, but difficult to be both.
- ▶ Women leaders are considered bossy if they are assertive, but they are ignored if they don’t assert themselves.
- ▶ Women leaders get lower pay on average. However, if they negotiate hard, they are perceived as being pushy.
- ▶ If a women leader candidate has children, recruiters are concerned that she does not have enough time for work. If a candidate does not have a child, recruiters are concerned that she may take maternity leave in the near future.
- ▶ And as the studies reviewed above found, if a women leader does not promote other women, she is considered a “queen bee,” but if she does, she gets penalized.

Because of gender biases, women often find themselves between a rock and a hard place. Since stereotyping is inevitable, we need to recognize it. And in the case of negative gender stereotyping, awareness is a crucial step towards correcting the problem. So, pause before you spread the queen bee rumor. These women could be acutely aware of the dangers of advocating for other women.



## Examine the Context

The early research of queen bee syndrome in the 1970s found that women who achieved success in male-dominated environments were at times opposed to the rise of other women. People have focused so much on the queen bees that they neglected the context. Recent research actually discovered women were more likely to fill senior positions in companies where a female had been appointed chief executive.<sup>v</sup>

In an environment where men have higher social status than women (explicitly or implicitly), women need to work hard to join the high social status club, and once they are there, they could feel threatened by other women who might replace them.

Hence, what we need to do is to nurture an environment where men and women are treated equally. When we have more women in the system, especially in the higher echelons of the organization, a women leader advocating for other women will no longer be seen as favoritism or nepotism.



## Champion Diversity and Inclusion

Creating a diverse and inclusive work environment is not only women's responsibility. When men advocate diversity, they are not penalized. In fact, in one of the studies reviewed above, male leaders

who demonstrate diversity-valuing behaviors were perceived as being more competent and received higher performance ratings. Involving men in the diversity campaign can prove to be a win-win for all.



## About the Research

This white paper is based on a recent research published in the *Academy of Management Journal*. The full paper is available upon request from the second author of this paper.

### Part I of the Study

The sample consisted of 350 executive leaders (C-level, board level, and VP or director levels) who attended an executive leadership development program at CCL®. Prior to the program, Benchmark Executive®, a CCL® 360-degree survey, was sent to participants' colleagues. Each executive leader was rated by a single boss, and an average of four peers. The executives in the sample all worked in the US, and 31% were female. As for rates, 31% of the peers and 13% of the executives' bosses were women.

Executive leaders' bosses evaluated their competence on:

- a. Effective (Gets projects done well and on time);
- b. Impressive (One whose achievements stand out);
- c. Is ready for more responsibility; and
- d. Productive (Gets a lot done).

Executive leaders' bosses also evaluated their performance by answering three questions:

1. How would you rate this person's performance in his/her present job?
2. How effectively would this person handle being promoted in the same function or division (moving a level up)? and
3. Where would you place this person as an executive, relative to other executives inside and outside your organization?

### Part II of the Study

The sample consists of 307 adults employed in the United States. 41% of them were women. In the original design, researchers examined three categories of women: Asian-American, African-American, and white. For the simplicity of this paper, the aggregated data for women are reported here.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The World Economic Forum, *The Global Gender Gap Report*, (2015). <http://reports.weforum.org/globalgender-gap-report-2015/>

<sup>ii</sup> Catalyst, *Women CEOs Of The S&P 500*, 2016. <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/women-ceos-sp-500>

<sup>iii</sup> Hekman, D., Johnson, S., Foo, M.D., & Yang, W. (2016). Does diversity-valuing behavior result in diminished ratings for non-white and female leaders? *Academy of Management Journal*, March 3, 2016. Doi: 10.5464/amj.2014.0538. Catalyst, (2007). <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/double-bind-dilemma-women-leadership-damned-if-you-do-doomed-if-you-dont-o>

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/07/queen-bee-syndrome-women-work-myth-researchcolumbia-business-school>

## About the Authors

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