

# Overcoming the Male Leadership Culture

Rick Dove, [dove@parshift.com](mailto:dove@parshift.com)

## ■ ABSTRACT

Empowering women as leaders in systems engineering is a clarion call—a strong and emotional appeal to do something. But who is to do this empowering, why should it be done, and what stands in the way? This article speaks to both men and women, collectively and individually. For men that feel empathetic and supportive of gender equality, it will suggest why your empathy and support may not be what you think it is. For women who want to understand the nature of the inequality problem, it will show you key elements of what perpetuates it as a means to help address it. The principle goals of this article are to expose some key elements of the problem space, and to create an appreciation for the values of social sensitivity in working relationships and in leadership.

## INTRODUCTION

**T**he challenge: reorienting organizational and personal cultures to value, hire, promote, and include women as leaders in systems engineering. Many systems engineers may feel they do not do hiring and promotion; but in fact, they can and do enable, facilitate, and instigate good hiring and promotion decisions.

This article argues that:

- Diversity is numerical; inclusion is cultural.
- Alpha-male patterns and masculinity contest cultures dominate society.
- The male assumption of privilege is unconscious and invisible.
- Do-the-right-thing morality does not change underlying patterns.
- Rational, study-based data does not change underlying patterns.
- Effective behavior changing occurs for emotional reasons, not rational reasons.

Many citations in this article are short videos by good presenters with an entertaining eye-opening knowledge base. Enjoy them at your risk.

### *On Diversity and Inclusion*

Diversity and inclusion are broad issues, which can quickly lead to wide-ranging arguments with moral and social tones, and equality for the sake of equality. This article narrows its focus specifically to empowering women as leaders in systems engineering—at heart, an inclusion issue.

We can measure diversity numerically

and it relates to mix composition. Some count diversity across background categories: gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, religion, age. Others are now counting diversity across foreground categories: experience, frame of mind, and viewpoint (Williams 2017). In a sense, background is physical and foreground is mental.

On the other hand, “Inclusion is an organizational effort and practice in which different groups or individuals having different backgrounds are culturally and socially accepted and welcomed, and equally treated. ... Inclusion is a sense of belonging. Inclusive cultures make people feel respected and valued for who they are as an individual or group. People feel a level of supportive energy and commitment from others so that they can do their best at work. ... The process of inclusion engages each individual and makes people feel valued as being essential to the success of the organization. Evidence shows that when people feel valued, they function at full capacity and feel part of the organization’s mission” (Waluni 2018).

Diversity is what you have. Inclusion is what you do. Diversity is the mix. Inclusion is getting the mix to work.

### *Organizational Concerns—the Rational Arguments*

Systems engineering (as we view it here) occurs in the organizational work environment.

In the words of Michael Kimmel, a distinguished university professor of sociology

and gender studies at Stony Brook University, “Research ... has shown conclusively that the more gender-equal companies are, the better it is for workers, the happier their labor force is. They have lower job turnover. They have lower levels of attrition. They have an easier time recruiting. They have higher rates of retention, higher job satisfaction, higher rates of productivity. ... what you have to start calculating is how much gender inequality is already costing you. It is extremely expensive. So it is good for business” (2015). Kimmel uses the term gender-equal to mean gender equality, as in treating men and women equally in respect and inclusion. He does not mean it as a diversity numeric.

As documented on Wikipedia, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs contends that people attend to six psychological needs in a ranked order of importance to a viable and then satisfying existence, with lower-numbered needs taking priority over higher-numbered needs. As organizations are collections of people, it is reasonable to expect that organizational needs fall into the same priority rankings. Maslow ranks physiological needs (sustenance) as number one, safety as number two, and then social belonging, self-esteem, self-actualization, and transcendence as the final four. A predominant argument for gender equality is rooted in doing the right thing. Doing the right thing is about the final four. Doing what is right is about sustenance and safety. Sustenance and safety are more compelling for attention than the others—have to do

versus like to do. The business arguments for equal gender inclusion need to be rooted first in sustenance and safety.

Organizational sustenance and safety needs have changed over the years. One recognized need today is the pivotal role that innovation plays in organizational sustenance. Another is the need for effective team work.

### Innovation

Innovation in engineered product and in engineering process is necessary for organizations competing in markets of quick changing technologies and customer expectations. A Boston Consulting Group (BCG) study shows a clear relationship between the diversity of companies' management teams and the revenues they get from innovative products and services. "The evidence also suggests that having a high percentage of female managers is positively correlated with disruptive innovation, in which a new product, service, or business model fully replaces the version that existed before. One thing that doesn't seem to have an effect on innovation is the overall percentage of women in a company's workforce. Only when women occupy a significant share of management positions does the innovation premium become evident: innovation revenues start to kick in when more than 20% of managers at a company are female."

A caveat: this study correlates more females with more innovation; but the study does not establish dependent causality. An organization that has more females in management likely has many other factors different than organizations with fewer women in management. More women in management may occur because of these other factors, and more innovation may as well. I have cited this BCG study for its illustrative numerical result. If you do an internet search for innovation and gender, you will find many other supportive references.

### Team Performance

Anita Williams Woolley at Carnegie Mellon University does research on the concept of collective intelligence. Woolley has developed a test method to measure the collective intelligence (CI) of teams, somewhat like measuring the IQ of an individual. The CI test measures team performance across a variety of different types of team tasks. The purpose for creating the CI test was to develop a predictive capability for expected team performance, and to understand what factors produce higher performing teams. With several hundred teams tested, one important observation is the effect that female team membership has on performance, as shown in Figure 1

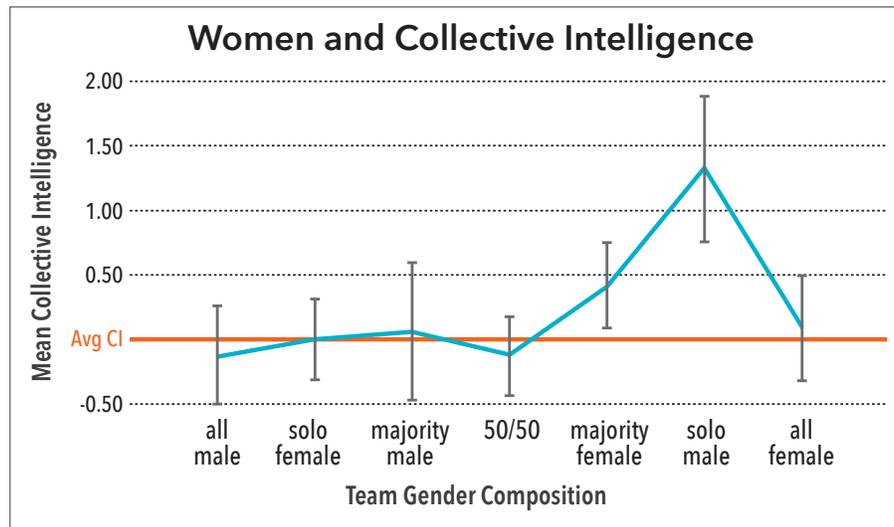


Figure 1. The observed gender effect from several hundred tests of team collective intelligence (Woolley 2016)

(Woolley 2016). Note that the "solo male" category means one man on the team among many women. Bottom line, teams with a majority of female members perform significantly better.

A second related observation in the study was the positive effect of social perceptiveness: "...part of that finding can be explained by differences in social sensitivity, which we found is also important to group performance. Many studies have shown that women tend to score higher on tests of social sensitivity than men do. So what is really important is to have people who are high in social sensitivity, whether they are men or women" (Woolley and Malone 2011).

The study's third observation was the positive effect of equal communication distribution (inclusion), without one person or a few that dominate.

### Personal Concerns—the Emotional Arguments

The organizational economic argument is rational, but the problem is emotional. "Management did not emanate from nature. Somebody invented it. Traditional notions of management are great if you want compliance. But if you want engagement, self-direction works better. Intrinsic motivators versus extrinsic motivators. Autonomy, mastery, and purpose, versus carrot and stick, and who wins? Intrinsic motivation ... in a knockout. ... There's a mismatch between what science knows and what business does. If-then rewards often destroy creativity" (Pink 2009).

According to Dan Pink: autonomy, mastery, and purpose are the three keys to personal motivation

- Autonomy: the urge to direct our own lives

- Mastery: the desire to get better and better at something that matters
- Purpose: the yearning to do what we do in service to something larger than ourselves

Mazlow's sustenance and safety—getting a job and keeping a job—takes rational precedence over the higher emotional motivators in Pink's list. Living willingly and enjoyably with that job, however, can leverage Pink's list to address motivation for personal cultural change.

### The Nature of the Problem — Cultural Patterns

Alpha males and females are present in all established groups within the primate species. The alpha male dominates in the group (except in rare matriarchal groups like Bonobos). This is a biological behavior pattern in the primate species. From studies of alpha males and group behaviors in certain primates, we have gained general understandings of the related dynamics, outlined in a fascinating video (de Waal 2017). Lest you have forgotten, humans are primates.

Alpha males get more reproductive activity. This is a form of natural selection in evolution, favoring the propagation of the most fit. An alpha male is not necessarily a dominator in physical competition, but rather the most fit leader as chosen by a coalition of followers supporting the alpha male's leadership position. Thus, a physically weaker alpha male dominates over a stronger contender when challenged, through physical support from others. Reproductive advantage has evolved biologically wired patterns driving the (often unconscious) ambition to be an alpha male. This is understandable for the successful

evolution of a species contending with a hostile environment. But for humans, the environment today is not nearly as hostile as when these patterns were necessary. These ingrained brain patterns are like the appendix—once a necessity, now an anachronism, showing little sign of going away.

Brain patterns are developed for immediate behavior control, eliminating the time and effort of reasoning. They are necessary unconscious mechanisms for survival. They govern behavior generally without question, persistently. The brain changes bad patterns that cause sufficiently consistent negative effects generally—often with the help of conscious reasoning motivated to reprogram the patterns.

Ingrained, unconscious, age-old, primate/human behavior patterns favor male leadership dominance. This is part of the assumption of privilege that males exhibit in cultures globally. For an explanation and examples of privilege being invisible to those who have it, see (Kimmel 2015).

The observations above are not meant to suggest that alpha male patterns are the origin of gender inequality. That is a separate subject argued well by Robert Max Jackson in a chapter from his upcoming book, *Analyzing the Persistence of Gender Inequality: How to Think about the Origins*. The observations above, and in the next section, are simply about some fundamentals that perpetuate gender inequality today. “Men’s capture of an advantaged position in industrial societies does not result from the continued significance of the conditions that initially caused male dominance in primitive societies. Instead, it is a product of men possessing political and economic dominance in the preindustrial societies immediately preceding industrialization. Because of their power, men could seize opportunities that opened in the new social order and maintain their advantaged position over women” (Jackson 2017b).

### *Masculinity Contest Cultures*

If you find the alpha male cultural pattern questionable, or want more evidence, download and read the introductory article in the September 2018 *Journal of Social Issues* (Berdahl et al. 2018) which proposes “that a key reason why the workplace gender revolution has stalled is that work remains the site of masculinity contests among men.” This is a thought-provoking and well-supported article. Selected quotations from the article follow, and just scratch the surface of what is revealed.

“Like race and social class, gender is a system of stratification that operates at the individual, interactional, and organizational level. Therefore, masculinity and femininity are not simply different things that have the

same value, but reflect a gender system in which (masculine) men have higher status, more power, and greater privileges than women (or less masculine men). Far from being a biological given, gender represents a socially created, enforced, and reproduced axis of power and inequality” (425).

“Culturally, masculinity is, at its core, about achieving dominance: over women, but also over other men. Hegemonic masculinity represents the most culturally honored form of masculinity—the form that is not only most revered when enacted by individual men, but most effective in maintaining power and privilege for men when enacted collectively. In contemporary western cultures, the hegemonic masculine ideal for men is to be rich, white, heterosexual, tall, athletic, professionally successful, confident, courageous, and stoic. Even if very few men enact and embody all aspects of hegemonic masculinity, its idealization makes these dimensions widely normative. Those who cannot or do not want to meet its requirements (gay men, men of color, humble men) may nonetheless appropriate, emphasize, or engage in some dimensions of hegemonic masculinity in how they act or think about themselves” (426).

“Although definitions of masculinity may change depending on time and place, several constants remain: Masculinity is defined through dominance, contains an antifemininity mandate, and must be proven. ... Whereas people tend to view womanhood as an ascribed characteristic, manhood must be earned, over and over again” (427).

The authors go on to say that there are “three common approaches to addressing the problem. One approach—fixing the women—assumes that women lack the confidence and skills to succeed in male-dominated domains, and need special training to adapt and compete. Another—valuing the feminine—assumes that women have unique qualities to bring to traditionally male domains, leading to interventions that promote the value of diversity in improving creativity and performance, but inadvertently reify stereotypes (valuing what is stereotyped in different groups). A third approach—addressing implicit bias—assumes the problem lies with accidental bias in selection and promotion, leading to bias training sessions for decision makers that teach them to learn to recognize and avoid their biases when evaluating employees. Despite the popular and intuitive appeal of these approaches, they have not yielded much progress to date” (439).

“We propose that a key reason why the workplace gender revolution has stalled is that work remains the site of masculinity contests among men. To the extent that men’s status at work depends on percep-

tions of their masculinity and performance as men, they are motivated to prove their manhood in the workplace, often at the expense and exclusion of women and non-hegemonic men. These workplace gender pressures make organizational culture change difficult” (440).

Berdahl et al. (2018) do not ascribe a blatant masculinity contest culture to all organizations universally—but do suggest that underlying elements of it are likely present everywhere. It is a cultural heritage globally. It, too, is responsible for perpetuating gender inequality.

“The explanation of the persistence of women’s inferior social position in modern societies must be sought not in the continued operation of its original causes, but in the efforts of men to preserve their advantages, as individuals and as a group, and in the ongoing institutionalized supports for these efforts” (Jackson 2017).

### *For Men Only*

Since you are reading this article, you likely feel empathetic to gender issues, perhaps even supportive—you know you are a “good person.” Dolly Chugh argues that feeling like a good person is blinding you from actually being a good person. Her 11-minute video (2018b) roots this in bounded ethicality, a human mental trait over which you have little control, and explains why your daily exercise of unconscious bias may be at odds with your conscious thoughts. For a deeper understanding, look into her book, *The Person You Mean to Be* (2018a), which has received positive reviews on Amazon such as, “Finally: an engaging, evidence-based book about how to battle biases, champion diversity and inclusion. ... Never has an author made it so easy to see our blind spots and the downsides of our best intentions. ... Dolly Chugh helps us identify our ‘platform of privilege.’”

If you resonate to the unconscious patterns of behavior, and wish to change them, a short 30 days of effortful personal behavior change is known to have a permanent effect on changing habitual behavior. However, this method, explained in the classic *Psycho-Cybernetics* (Maltz 1960), requires a personal mission—a compelling task with a clear completion objective.

It is unlikely that experienced male systems engineers, with time in grade, will become deeply socially sensitive—that is not a goal or expectation of this article. But males truly concerned about the gender issue will develop some social sensitivity. Should teams be composed of 90% women? No, but leadership should be socially sensitive and lead by example. Men need to appreciate the value of social sensitivity

even if they cannot walk that path with natural comfort, and should want to have social sensitivity in both male and female team members and leadership. Men can become sensitive to the values of social sensitivity in work relationships, recognizing it when it is present and when it is not, and the difference it makes.

Many see the problem as men unconsciously feeling inclusion as a threat (Berdahl et al. 2018, 428, 436, 437). For the male personal mind, ask not what you have to give up, but what you have to gain. What is the personal emotional appeal that might overcome the threat? What is a greater contradicting personal threat? For starters, how about an insecure job and job insecurity? The first is due to lessor company performance; the second is due to lessor personal performance. Read the writing on the wall, evidence abounds with very little Google search needed. What is a compelling reward that overshadows the threat? For starters, how about healthier, happier, productive lives at work and at home. A growing portion of the younger generation appears to understand, want, and value this. But they are unlikely to read this article, so you are not likely one of them. The single most eye-opening thing you can do now, and again, is to watch Kimmel's 16-minute video (2015).

#### For Women Only

Since you are reading this article, you likely feel caught in an oppressive and dysfunctional system and want that to change. You are also likely a systems engineer and understand that an effective solution requires insightful knowledge of the problem space to inform the requirements of an engaging solution.

Empowering Women as Leaders in Systems Engineering (EWLSE) is an unfortunate name for an INCOSE working group with a laudable objective. Empowerment according to Merriam-Webster is "the act or action of empowering someone or something; the granting of the power, right, or authority to perform various acts or duties." That has an inadequate ring to my ears. Real leaders that lead are not designated by a title. They are drafted by followers who recognize a leader.

Is EWLSE calling for empowerment to

be granted? Or is it engaged in the act of empowering? Men must come to grips with their causal factors (an introspective task), but someone has to lead in systemic solutions (an extrospective task). What better someone than those who have the highest passion?

The EWLSE name puts a focus on women, which perpetuates the them and us distinction. A discussion of groups with a name that focuses on women is cause for thought: "if we want to change this, then we have to stop perpetuating the myth of gender roles entirely. And that means helping men and women overcome the stifling confines of societal dictations" (Hu 2015). Some, at least additional, working groups might help—ones that are gender-independent, but focused on values that women exhibit, that men should aspire to, and that systems engineering needs, such as high-performance teaming, leadership sensitivity, and others in that vein.

An internet-available quote by Roseanne Barr is a bit over the top as usual, but makes a point: "The thing women have yet to learn is nobody gives you power. You just take it."

Robert Max Jackson seems to say sit back and let nature take its course, "As I have argued at length in my book, *Destined for Equality*, we have been experiencing an extraordinary transformation of society without anyone having planned it and without anyone apparently responsible for it. Somehow a fundamental aspect of social organization, men's social dominance, which seemed universal and irreversible for thousands of years, has gone into a fatal decline. Women now vote and hold political office, they get jobs readily, and they have successful careers in most occupations. While we remain well short of full equality between women and men, we are far closer than we were two centuries ago" (Jackson 2017a). But do you want to wait another two centuries? If a tipping point is upon us, you can help accelerate the transformation by taking a lead in systemic intervention.

#### CONCLUSION

The principle goals of this article are to expose some key elements of the problem space, and to create an appreciation for the values of social sensitivity in working relationships and in leadership. It is intended

to be informative and thought provoking, and does not attempt to offer a solution path, but rather an understanding of at least some considerations for solution requirements.

The problem is fundamentally systemic legacy. As systems engineers, we have the tools and knowledge to recognize and map this system. Systems engineers are skilled in systems analysis, goal requirements, and inter-system relationship/interaction design-for-purpose. Inclusive gender equality is an issue whose time has come. Fixing it will not happen just because it is fair or morally and ethically right. Those are rational arguments pitted against emotional inertia.

An enforced organizational cultural mandate is in the works at many places but seems to need someone on an uncompromising mission at the top, with ample disciples and a focus on changing entrenched culture. Berdahl et al. put common approaches into doubt: "The three popular approaches to addressing the underrepresentation of women in male-dominated occupations and roles—fixing the women, valuing the feminine, and reducing bias—have helped some women succeed, but have ultimately kept intact organizational cultures that reflect and reinforce norms and values of white and class-privileged men" (2018, 440).

Women's suffrage, the right to vote, is not an appropriate model. This was a change in law that allowed women to vote. A top-down dictum by organizational leadership can provide diversity, but not inclusion. Inclusion cannot be installed by fiat. In this author's opinion, it can only be installed by a bottom-up assimilated change in personal behavior and culture. The (somewhat) abolition of slavery, and the new thinking (somewhat) on same-gender sex and transgender acceptance may be a parallel to study for how culture change deals with an entrenched systemic issue.

"...gender equality is not a zero-sum game. It's not a win-lose. It is a win-win for everyone. And what we also know is we cannot fully empower women and girls unless we engage boys and men. ...without confronting men's sense of entitlement, I don't think we'll ever understand why so many men resist gender equality" (Kimmel 2015). ■

#### REFERENCES

- Berdahl, J. L., M. Cooper, P. Glick, R. W. Livingston, and J. C. Williams. 2018. "Work as a Masculinity Contest." *Journal of Social Issues* 74(3): 422-448. doi: 10.1111/josi.12289.
- Chugh, D. 2018a. *The Person You Mean to Be: How Good People Fight Bias*. New York, US-NY: HarperBusiness.
- Chugh, D. 2018b. "How to Let Go of Being a "Good" Person—and Become a Better Person." Filmed October 2018 in New York, US-NY. TED video, 11:41. [www.ted.com/talks/dolly\\_chugh\\_how\\_to\\_let\\_go\\_of\\_being\\_a\\_good\\_person\\_and\\_become\\_a\\_better\\_person](http://www.ted.com/talks/dolly_chugh_how_to_let_go_of_being_a_good_person_and_become_a_better_person).
- de Waal, F. 2017. "The Surprising Science of Alpha Males." Filmed November 2017 in Palm Springs, US-CA. TED video, 15:54. [www.ted.com/talks/frans\\_de\\_waal\\_the\\_surprising\\_science\\_of\\_alpha\\_males](http://www.ted.com/talks/frans_de_waal_the_surprising_science_of_alpha_males).