

Solving the Problem with Problem Solving: Increasing Leadership Self-efficacy in Female Professionals through Problem Solving

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In today's world women are earning more degrees and asserting themselves in the professional world more than ever before. Despite their advancements, a disparity still exists between the number of men in leadership positions and the number of women in leadership positions in the United States workforce. Women have proven themselves to be qualified for high power positions, but there is still a barrier which prevents women from attaining equality in the positions of greatest power in a variety of organizations and fields. One such barrier is gender stereotypes, which lead to gender bias and low self-efficacy. Women are perceived to be better at stereotypically "feminine" behaviors such as caretaking, and are not seen as effective problem solvers. This perception leads to problems for aspiring female professionals, as problem solving is a gauge for assessing leadership acumen and ability. If women are perceived as lacking in the area that establishes leadership ability, this may be a contributing factor to explain gender inequality in leadership positions.

This study seeks to explore how female leaders can utilize a problem solving process that integrates co-design in order to increase leadership self-efficacy and be more collaborative and visible problem solvers. To do this, the areas of problem solving, co-design and self-efficacy will be explored through a variety of collaborative and generative research methods such as contextual analysis of secondary research, interviews, surveys, focus groups and interactive research sessions. Problem solving will be explored to gain a better understanding of why it is an indicator of leadership ability and how problem-solving skills can be made more visible. Co-design is a creative approach to problem solving that utilizes collaboration, creativity, visual elements, generative tools and is appropriate for a variety of contexts. By including this element into the problem solving process, women may become more confident and visible problem solvers with a variety of tools to utilize in their everyday practice. An examination of self-efficacy will determine if having a process with specific tools and methods to utilize will empower women and increase their confidence.

Providing female leaders with a set of tools in the form of a problem solving process workbook to help them become more comfortable and confident with problem solving may lead them to take on more responsibility and roles that showcase their problem solving skills. By positioning themselves to demonstrate their skills, exposure to effective female problem solvers may help to evolve this gender stereotype.