

## **Cultivating gender inclusive leadership in higher education: Insights from a laboratory learning experience**

**Sara Bonesso**

Department of Management, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy.

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### ***Abstract***

*Women continue to be underrepresented in managerial and upper echelon roles and the recent pandemic has intensified the barriers they face in their career path. Designing and delivering programs in higher education with the aim to cultivate a diversity and inclusion mindset in young individuals can contribute at narrowing the gender gap in leadership. The present study illustrates an educational program developed by a public University in Italy for master's degree students, with the purpose to stimulate the awareness of the gender equality debate and to provide tools to implement inclusive leadership behaviors and practices in the organizational contexts. The structure and the contents of the program, which has been delivered in a laboratory format, are discussed highlighting the learning approaches proposed, that combine lectures, group work, vicarious learning and conversation with experts. The case offers methodological insights and reflections on the issues that an inclusive leadership program should address.*

**Keywords:** *inclusive leadership; women leadership; gender equality; experiential learning.*

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## **1. Introduction**

While organizations are progressively making progress on many aspects of gender equality, female representation in leadership continues to be a cause for concern (Catalysts, 2021; The Economist, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the disadvantages women face in terms of career advancements and, as indicated by the WEF (2021), closing the global gender gap has increased by a generation from 99.5 years to 135.6 years.

Designing and delivering programs in higher education aiming at cultivating a diversity and inclusion mindset represents an important strategy that can narrow the gender gap in leadership (Debebe et al., 2016; Sugiyama et al., 2016). Randel et al. (2018:190) defined inclusive leadership as “a set of positive leader behaviors that facilitate group members perceiving belongingness in the work group while maintaining their uniqueness within the group as they fully contribute to group processes and outcomes”. In this article, we focus on inclusiveness related to gender issues, addressing the following question: how should inclusive leadership learning experience be designed in order to accelerate progress toward gender parity? A first issue to concerns sex composition of leadership programs. Even though women-only programs can provide the psychological safety that allow participants “to lower their defenses, share their experiences, and benefit from the support and experience of other women to work through their leadership challenges.” (Debebe et al., 2016, p. 237), a mixed-sex program may represent an opportunity to compare different gender perspectives and nurture in men allyship for gender equality. Second, the design of the programs needs to be aligned with the current and emerging literature in the field of gender inclusiveness. In this regard, Ibarra, Elly and Kolb (2013) lamented, for instance, the scant attention devoted to unconscious gender bias in the leadership programs. Moreover, these programs require the implementation of experiential learning approaches which allow participants to become aware of how inclusive gender leadership can be practiced in the organizational settings.

This study illustrates an educational program delivered in a public Italian University in the format of a laboratory for male and female master’s degree students. The laboratory aimed at: a) raising awareness of the meaning of leadership and inclusiveness, with particular regard to gender equality; b) identifying and deepening the skills that nurture inclusive leadership; c) developing the emotional awareness and self-confidence of the participants, which are essential skills for the exercise of an effective inclusive leadership; d) recognizing the organizational practices that can be implemented in the company to promote inclusive leadership; e) learning how to design gender inclusive leadership development interventions in organizational contexts.

In the next sections of the paper, the structure, the contents and the methodological approach adopted in the gender inclusive leadership lab will be illustrated. Implications on how higher education institutions can cultivate inclusive leadership will be discussed.

## 2. The methodological approach for designing the gender inclusive leadership lab

The laboratory has been designed within a project promoted by the University which aims to improve the employability of young women and strengthen the social and economic role of women in the labour market. It was delivered during autumn 2021 to a group of thirty master's degree students, both male and female, enrolled in different disciplinary areas (economics, humanities, science and languages). In order to be admitted to the laboratory, students were invited to fill an application form explaining their motivation to attend the program. The applications were assessed by a committee of instructors who evaluated the interest expressed by the students toward the issues of inclusiveness, gender and leadership. The laboratory has been structured in five seminars delivered in seven weeks. Figure 1 reports the main topic addressed by each seminar and the overall structure. Each seminar adopted different methodological approaches combining lessons, group discussions, vicarious learning through role models, and conversations with professionals. During the laboratory, students were also engaged in small groups in an experiential learning activity that consists of developing a project of gender inclusive leadership.



Figure 1. The structure of the gender inclusive leadership lab

The learning goals, the theoretical background and the contents of each seminar are described as follows.

### 2.1. Leadership and gender equality

The aim of the first seminar was to introduce participants to the debate of gender leadership through the discussion of recent figures that depict nowadays the gender gap phenomenon (e.g. Catalyst, 2021; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021; McKinsey&Company, 2021; The Economist, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2021). After increasing students'

awareness on the gender gap issue and on the positive impact of gender equality on organization performance, the barriers women face to reach leadership positions were analysed. Relying on the contributions offered by the social role and role congruity theories (Eagly, 1987; Eagly, and Karau, 2002), a specific attention has been devoted to the unconscious bias (also referred to as implicit or second-generation gender bias), defined as “the powerful and often invisible barriers to women’s advancement that arise from cultural beliefs about gender, as well as workplace structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently favor men.” (Ely et al., 2011, p. 475). Second-generation gender bias is more insidious and intangible than other forms of bias, making it difficult to identify, address, and dismantle, because people consciously reject the gender stereotypes but they still unconsciously make evaluations based on them. As discussed by a recent research (Gino and Coffman, 2021), unconscious bias training turned out to be ineffective because only a few of these programs give participants practical tools for reducing bias. Therefore, during the seminar participants discussed the different scenarios in which unconscious bias could occur (for instance during the recruitment, selection and performance assessment processes), and they examined the strategies that could be implemented to limit the influence of gender stereotypes (Ammerman and Groysberg, 2021).

## ***2.2. Inclusive leadership in the organizational settings***

In the second seminar, inclusive leadership has been defined according to the main characteristics described in the literature (Randel et al., 2018; Roberson e Perry, 2021), and virtuous business cases have been examined to identify the interventions implemented in the organizational environment to cultivate inclusive leaders. Moreover, metrics for assessing inclusive organizations have been critically examined (e.g. Bloomberg Gender Equality Index, Equileap Gender Diversity Criteria) as a means to develop an action plan for promoting an inclusive workplace and increase the visibility of the gender equality initiatives inside and outside the organization. This seminar also offered students the opportunity to have a debate with executives in charge of the Diversity&Inclusion departments who narrated their experience in implementing inclusive leadership strategies.

## ***2.3. Self-awareness and social relationships at the basis of leadership development***

The third seminar was aimed at transferring tools to nurture participants’ self-awareness and self-efficacy, as primal competencies for becoming effective leaders. The gender confidence gap has been illustrated relying on the results of empirical research and talks from women leaders. Relying on Baldura’s (1977) sources of self-efficacy, some concrete practices have been illustrated in terms of mastering experience, acquiring competencies necessary to pursue future goals, learning from positive performance outcomes, benefiting from social role models, asking for and reflecting on verbal feedback, and considering emotional and physiological states. Moreover, the seminar opened the discussion on the role of social

relationships in reducing gender differences in achieving leadership positions even in male-dominated sectors (Alonso et al., 2021). A specific focus has been devoted to mentoring and networking relationships. Specifically, the evolution of one-on-one mentoring toward group and peer mentoring have been emphasized (Chopra et al., 2020) as emerging opportunities for women to get access to knowledgeable mentors who can support them in their career path. Furthermore, considering the challenges women experience building and benefiting from networks to achieve career success (Greguletz et al., 2019; Woehler et al., 2021), participants were introduced to different communities which aim at fostering women's professional networking, especially in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines. Finally, exemplar practices on how networking can nurture an inclusive culture have been discussed (Cross, et al., 2021).

#### ***2.4. Work-life synergy***

Competing role demands and family responsibilities have been indicated as one of the main barriers women face in their career progression. In their article, Kossek and Lee (2021) discussed the family-related career-limiting challenges women face in their career path and proposed the adoption of an organizational work-life inclusion where “work cultures and structures are generally perceived as supporting an individual’s ability to thrive authentically in family and personal life roles on and off the job, while progressing in a career” (2021:4). Therefore, the aim of the fourth seminar was to accompany the participants toward a shift from the concept of work-life balance, which represents roles as competing based on the role stress theory and the conservation of resource theory (Hobfoll, 1989), toward the concept of work-life synergy/enrichment which leads individuals to find ways to generate positive spillover from one role to another (French et al., 2018). The debate was centered on how work and personal life can interact and cooperate, and how organizations can promote for male and female work-life enrichment producing higher levels of satisfaction, health and performance, but also career opportunities.

#### ***2.5. Inclusive leadership in practice***

The concluding seminar of the laboratory was devoted to the presentation of group projects. Students divided in small groups were associated with a specific theme and invited to propose interventions aimed at implementing the different facets of inclusive gender leadership in the organizational context. The themes addressed by the groups covered the all issues addressed during the learning program, and specifically: a) how inclusive leadership can foster self-promotion in the organizational context and overcome gender unconscious bias; b) how mentoring programs can be designed for facilitating women in their leadership path; c) how to activate professional networks to reduce the gender gap and develop leadership skills; d) how to implement organizational practices for achieving work-life synergy; e) how to evaluate and communicate organization’s inclusive leadership initiatives. Students received

a real-time feedback on their work from a committee which included some professional experts in the field of “diversity&inclusion” and the instructors of the lab.

Some quotes from the students’ experience are reported as follows, which illustrate the contents and the learning methodologies they appreciated:

*“The laboratory was an opportunity for me to confront myself on issues whose relevance I underestimated before, to listen to the experts and to test myself with the group project. It also helped me focus on my goals and the person I want to become. I really appreciated the atmosphere created during the seminars and the opportunity to interact and express oneself. It was also a space for sharing and discussion. It was a truly stimulating experience, as well as a personal and professional enrichment that I will certainly treasure.”*

*“In addition to the intervention of some experts in the field of gender equality and inclusive leadership, the laboratory helped me acquire tools that allow me to have more confidence in myself, in my ideas and in my abilities. ”*

*“Very interesting the different points of view of other students and experts. As a male, they enabled me to understand the different perspectives of each one and how certain situations are experienced, which perhaps before I did not fully grasp.”*

*“The positivity that I could breathe gave me a lot of energy, the gender gap in leadership was treated not with resignation but concrete actions were always offered on what can be done.”*

### **3. Discussion and conclusion**

Inclusive leadership is emerging as a critical set of behaviors required by today’s organizations. Universities play a relevant role not only in advancing the knowledge in this field but also in cultivating a culture of equality in tomorrow’s generation of leaders. The preliminary insights derived by the gender inclusive leadership program offer some reflections for instructors and practitioners. A first implication concerns the potential of a program based on mixed-sex composition. Participants’ reflections on their learning experience showed that, if implemented in academic settings, a mixed gender approach does not generate those limitations identified in similar programs delivered in the organizational contexts (Debebe et al., 2016). Both male and female participants perceived the laboratory as a safe environment where they had the opportunity to share their opinions without fear of judgment. The gender-sensitive styles of instructors and experts favoured an open debate through which students had the opportunity to become aware of the other gender’s perspectives in a way that they never experienced before, nurturing a process of personal growth. Moreover, this stimulated in both male and female a reflection on how to become actionable allies. Future studies can investigate further the contextual factors that enable

mixed-sex programs to be effective, overcoming the assumption that they inhibit safety for women and suppress their capacity to explore the gendered aspects of their leadership experiences. Secondly, the contents of each seminar have been designed coherently with the emerging literature in the field of inclusive and gender leadership, but also taking into account the major difficulties organizations are facing in promoting a culture of diversity and inclusion. The connection between the theoretical advancements and the emerging needs of the companies spurred the elaboration of a toolkit of practices which if implemented may contribute at narrowing the gender equality gap. Furthermore, the use of the experience-based learning activity of the group project facilitated the translation of the seminars' contents into the design of concrete inclusion initiatives. This collaborative learning approach not only represented a space of further debate on the gender leadership issue beyond the seminars, but also stimulated participants to creatively elaborate solutions in order to address the companies' challenges. Practitioners may benefit from the experience of such programs to redesign, in collaboration with universities, the companies' human resource management processes with the aim to encourage gender inclusive leadership behaviors (training, recruitment, performance management etc.) and to have access to a pool of newly graduates with a gender inclusive mindset that can be promoted inside the organization.

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