FLEXIBLE MASCULINITIES AT WORK

The term "flexible masculinities" describes authentic expressions of masculinity that embody a full range of human characteristics, emotions, and behaviors.

Although there is no single "right" way to be a man, certain social environments —including the workplace—put pressure on men to behave in a certain way.1 At the exclusion of other traits and behaviors, men are often expected to be²:

STRONG

TAKING

RISK-

STOIC

COMPETITIVE

regardless of gender. These workplace expectations, called masculine defaults,³ are typically overvalued, and this overemphasis can negatively affect everyone at work. **Because of masculine defaults:**

These expectations for men are widespread in society, and they are especially problematic in the

workplace because masculine traits become the default expectation for the behavior of all employees,

WOMEN AND MEN NONBINARY PEOPLE

• Feel pressured to follow masculine

- expectations and behave in only one way to be successful at work.4 • Can experience decline in their mental health and ability to thrive at work.5
- Using data from over 7,000 men working in offices across 13 different countries,6 we

found that when masculine expectations in

• 69% of men experience low psychological

the workplace are **high**7:

well-being8—compared to only 38% of men in organizations with low masculine expectations. • 34% of men experience high workplace

- withdrawal9 (e.g., neglecting tasks, being late for work, making excuses to get out of work)—compared to only 5% of men in organizations with low masculine expectations.
 - improve the well-being of people of

Scenario:

Why It Matters:

expectations. Reflect on how these assumptions shape your own behavior and your perceptions of others.

By promoting flexible

all genders as well as organizations.

masculinities, leaders can address

and mitigate masculine defaults to

also when they don't.11

- Are punished when they try to conform, and
 - ORGANIZATIONS • Overemphasize a narrow range of

leadership traits and miss out on critical,

 Are disadvantaged because they don't "fit" workplace cultures that value masculine

broader-ranging skills and behaviors across their leadership.

- Fail to reward employees with a full range of



Recognize the traits and behaviors that are valued in your workplace.

Ask Yourself:

boldness) or stereotypically feminine (e.g., empathy, warmth, patience)?

and characteristics.¹² • A wide range of leadership traits are important for individual and organizational health and productivity¹³ and should be welcomed and rewarded regardless of who is displaying them.

WHAT YOU CAN DO: Notice situations when others, or yourself, default to "masculine"



Why It Matters: • Masculine defaults not only harm others, but men themselves are harmed by the pressure and anxiety those defaults can create.14 • Although no one institution, person, or group is responsible for creating the problem, we all

have the power to resist the ingrained urge to hold men to masculine defaults.

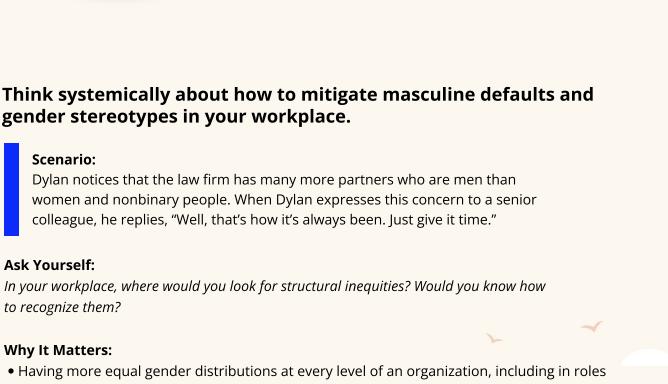
WHAT YOU CAN DO: Challenge deeply embedded assumptions that men should prioritize work above their

lives outside work. Make a point of engaging in dialogue when you notice instances of rigid thinking about gender norms and then use questions to probe where that thinking is coming from and how they might reframe their perspective.

Ask Yourself:

their mental health, well-being, and loved ones?

gender stereotypes in your workplace. Scenario: colleague, he replies, "Well, that's how it's always been. Just give it time."



WHAT YOU CAN DO: Reconfigure hiring policies and practices that disadvantage gender minorities.¹⁶

Ask Yourself:

to recognize them?

Why It Matters:

from The Hartford and UPMC to learn how these organizations have removed masculine defaults from their processes.

that are traditionally considered "for women," can promote more gender egalitarian beliefs. 15 • Ensuring that promotion criteria are based on a broad range of traits traditionally associated

with both men and women will result in a more well-rounded leadership team.

¹Berdahl, J. L., Cooper, M., Glick, P., Livingston, R. W., & Williams, J. C. (2018). Work as a masculinity contest. Journal of Social

Psychology of Women Quarterly, 26(4), 269-281; Vandello, J. A. & Bosson, J. K. (2012). Hard won and easily lost: A review and synthesis of theory and research on precarious manhood. Psychology of Men and Masculinity, 14(2), 101-113. ³ Cheryan, S. & Markus, H. R. (2020). <u>Masculine defaults: Identifying and mitigating hidden cultural biases</u>. *Psychological* Review, 127(6), 1022-1052.

and healthcare, education, government, and nonprofit (14.5%). The average participant age was 42 years old, and ages ranged from 18 to 77. ⁷ Masculine workplace expectations were measured using the following prompt and three items created by the MARC research team: In many workplaces, men are expected to act masculine, such as by being aggressive, competitive, independent, and taking risks. In other workplaces, these expectations are less restrictive. Think about your workplace, and rate your agreement with each statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). 1) In my workplace, men are expected to be masculine as it is described above. 2) Men who act masculine are held in high regard in my workplace. 3) I

would be made fun of for not acting masculine at work. Together, these three items were highly reliable ($\alpha = .88$) and were

thus combined to create a composite whereby higher values indicate greater levels of masculine expectations in the workplace. The composite was then dichotomized where responses 1-3 were coded as low masculine expectations and 4-6 were coded as high masculine expectations. ⁸ Psychological well-being was measured with an adapted form of Ryff's Psychological Well-Being scale: Ryff, C. D. & Keyes, C. L. M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 69(4), 719–727. Participants responded to seven items on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) Likert scale. These items were averaged to create a composite ($\alpha = .72$), where higher values indicate greater levels of psychological well-being. The composite was then dichotomized where responses 1-3 were coded as low psychological well-being and 4-6 were coded as high

9 Work withdrawal was measured with five items on a 1 (never) to 6 (always) scale drawn from: Hanisch, K. A. & Hulin, C. L. (1990). Job attitudes and organizational withdrawal: An examination of retirement and other voluntary withdrawal behaviors. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 37(1), 60-78; Hanisch, K. A. & Hulin, C. L. (1991). General attitudes and organizational withdrawal: An evaluation of a causal model. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 39, 110-128. Our adapted scale demonstrated excellent internal reliability ($\alpha = .87$), thus the items were averaged to create a composite, where higher values indicate greater amounts of withdrawal behaviors at work. The composite was then dichotomized where responses 1-3 were coded as low work withdrawal and 4-6 were coded as high work withdrawal.

¹³ Varney, J. (2022, September 12). <u>10 qualities of a good leader</u>. Southern New Hampshire University.

11 Heilman, M. E. & Okimoto, T. G. (2007). Why are women penalized for success at male tasks? The implied communality deficit. Journal of Applied Psychology, 92(1), 81–92; McKinnon, M. & O'Connell, C. (2020). Perceptions of stereotypes applied to women who publicly communicate their STEM work. Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, 7, 160.

¹² Cheryan & Markus (2020).

4 Berdahl et al., (2018). ⁵ Glick, P., Berdahl, J. L., & Alonso, N. M. (2018). Development and validation of the Masculinity Contest Culture scale. *Journal* of Social Issues, 74(3), 449-476.

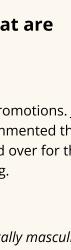
psychological well-being.

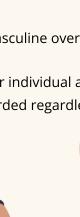
Science, 30(4), 343-350. ¹⁶ Break the cycle – Eliminating gender bias in talent management systems. (2018). Catalyst.

¹⁰ Lyness, K. S. & Heilman, M. E. (2006). When fit is fundamental: Performance evaluations and promotions of upper-level female and male managers. Journal of Applied Psychology, 91(4), 777–785.

CATALYST

PROMOTE FLEXIBLE MASCULINITIES IN 3 STEPS Joe and Chris are both high performers up for promotions. Joe is praised for being assertive and directive and is promoted. It is commented that Chris is humble and leads with a more collaborative approach; he is passed over for the promotion and recommended for some leadership skills training. Does your workplace reward traits that are stereotypically masculine (e.g., assertiveness, risk-taking,













Begin formally rewarding traits stereotypically considered "feminine" such as cooperation in leadership evaluations. Review Catalyst Award-winning practices

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² Cejka, M. A. & Eagly, A. H. (1999). <u>Gender-stereotypic images of occupations correspond to the sex segregation of</u> employment. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 25(4), 413-423; Prentice, D. A. & Carranza, E. (2002). What women and men should be, shouldn't be, are allowed to be, and don't have to be: The contents of prescriptive gender stereotypes.

ENDNOTES

Issues, 74(3), 422-448.

⁶ Data were collected from 7,044 men (0.2% identified as trans men) across 13 countries: Australia, Canada, France, Germany, India, Italy, Mexico, the Netherlands, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Participants represented a wide range of industries, but were mostly from manufacturing (15.5%); high tech/telecom (14.2%);

¹⁴ DiMuccio, S., Sattari, N., Shaffer, E., & Cline, J. (2021). <u>Masculine anxiety and interrupting sexism at work.</u> Catalyst; Mayer, D. M. (2018, October 8). How men get penalized for straying from masculine norms. Harvard Business Review. 15 Eagly, A. H. & Koenig, A. M. (2021). The vicious cycle linking stereotypes and social roles. Current Directions in Psychological