

Article

Transcending Gendered Communication and Leadership Styles in the Workplace

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Abstract

This paper explores the possibility of advancing beyond gendered communication and leadership styles, emphasising that culture evolves through language, communication and social practices. Constructivists demonstrate how boys and girls are socialised differently and acquire distinct communication styles, and cultural perceptions of masculinity and femininity affect formal and informal aspects of organisations. In reality, women leaders are negatively evaluated and often experience bias when enacting the same communication, whereas men leaders are positively evaluated. Moreover, when their communication style deviates from the socially accepted ‘female’ communication styles, women leaders are negatively assessed. Thus, women leaders who conform more closely to socially accepted gendered roles perpetuate the gender roles.

This paper proposes ambidextrous leadership to advance beyond gendered communication styles and manage gender biases, combining ‘opening’ behaviours for building an inclusive and open work environment with ‘closing’ behaviours involving risk management and goal achievement. This style transcends gendered communication styles and can enhance relationships and productivity, especially in volatile business environments such as that in the post-COVID-19 era.

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In conclusion, the paper recommends that, irrespective of traditional gender labels, men and women leaders practice ambidextrous leadership to balance their styles based on the situation. It also suggests organisational training programmes for ambidextrous leadership, blurring the lines between ‘male’ and ‘female’ styles and adapting to the rapidly changing business environment. In today’s evolving organisational contexts, this approach aims to transcend gender bias and improve leadership.

Keywords: gender, women leaders, communication and leadership styles, ambidextrous leadership

1. Introduction

This paper aims to discuss the potential to transcend gendered communication and leadership styles by adopting a constructivist approach. Constructivists assert that knowledge is created and shaped by the intricate interplay of language, culture and social practices within a given context (Bommarito & Matsuda, 2015, p. 116), suggesting that culture is continually evolving and being constructed through communication and behaviour.

As a pioneer among gender scholars employing a constructivist approach, Wood (1996) explained how boys and girls are socialised differently and acquire distinct communication styles. Furthermore, Wood (2013) suggested that cultural perceptions of masculinity and femininity permeate the formal and informal aspects of organisations, but these perceptions are subject to change. However, in practice, although women leaders exhibit the same communication styles, they are often evaluated differently than their male counterparts. For example, when men as leaders are assertive, they tend to be evaluated positively; however, when women as leaders are assertive, they tend to be evaluated negatively. One of the reasons for this phenomenon is that once communication styles are labelled as ‘male’ or ‘female’, they tend to become entrenched. Moreover, due to the perceived association between leaders’ gender and their communication style, the labels ‘male’ or ‘female’ regarding communication styles may perpetuate gender-associated biases, influencing leadership evaluations. The greater the alignment of leadership communication styles and behaviours with traditional gender roles, the more favourably they are assessed. Thus, women leaders who conform more closely to socially

accepted gendered roles perpetuate the gender roles further. Because leadership roles have been closely associated with ‘male’ communication styles, to promote workplace equality, some scholars (e.g. McKenzie & Halstead, 2017) have proposed practical recommendations for women leaders. For instance, women leaders are encouraged to adopt ‘male’ communication styles, including assertiveness and humour, in stopping micro-aggressions. Although the importance of these recommendations cannot be over-emphasised, changing only on the part of women may not align with societal changes and the establishment of a new social reality.

Thus, it is important to understand how can women leaders manage gender biases, and what communication and leadership styles do leaders have to exercise. The rapidly evolving business environment, characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) (Du & Chen, 2018), provides a hint for both the genders. It suggests that men and women leaders can benefit from incorporating elements of both ‘male’ and ‘female’ communication styles to promote improved relationships with colleagues and enhance productivity, especially since the COVID-19 outbreak, which triggered significant changes in the business environment. Therefore, we aim to provide insights into a new leadership style: the ambidextrous leadership style, designed to improve relationships and increase productivity. Ambidextrous leadership comprises two primary elements: ‘opening’ behaviours, such as being empathetic listeners and embracing new ideas to drive innovation, and ‘closing’ behaviours, such as managing risks, optimising efficiency and achieving goals (Kim, 2022; Rosing et al., 2011). This leadership style transcends gender and should be adopted regardless of gender, particularly in organisations confronting high levels of VUCA.

Therefore, we re-examine the challenges of studying gender and communication, particularly within organisational contexts. We suggest that men and women leaders should practice ambidextrous leadership, balancing and exercising their communication and leadership styles based on the situation, regardless of traditional ‘male’ or ‘female’ labels, enabling all leaders to transcend gender bias. Moreover, we suggest that organisations provide ambidextrous leadership training programmes for men and women in leadership. The objectives of doing so would be to blur the demarcation

between the traditionally accepted ‘male’ and ‘female’ communication and leadership styles and construct a new reality responding to the present fast-moving business environment.

2. Gendered communication styles

This section provides an overview of the literature on gender and communication in general and particularly in the workplace. Research on gender as culture has increased since the late 1970s, emerging as a counterargument to the notion that women use a weak version of language (West, 2015). A representative work is by Lakoff (1975), who proposed the male-dominance hypothesis and claimed that women tend to use pronouns such as ‘we’ or ‘you’ to be inclusive, use adjectives more frequently than men, and are more likely to use tag questions and uptalk. Based on Lakoff’s arguments, several studies have provided further insights into how women’s use of language perpetuates male dominance in society (West, 2015).

Maltz and Borker’s (1982) study formulated the gender-as-culture hypothesis, which posits that men and women begin to socialise differently from the early stages of their lives. Moreover, Tannen (1990) explained that individuals are socialised differently in different cultures depending on gender and that men and women do not understand each other as they hold cultural assumptions while communicating. Tannen’s assertions were supported by those of Gray (1992), who perceived men and women as being from different ‘universes’. Wood (1996) not only explained how men and women are gendered but also how different societies expect men and women to communicate and behave and how these expectations are maintained as a social structure:

Gender consists of meanings and expectations of men and women that are created and upheld by social processes and structure. For example, women are expected to be sensitive to others, nurturing, and emotional, and men are expected to be independent, assertive, and emotionally reserved. (Wood, 1996, p. 5)

Social expectations of men and women are communicated starting in the initial life stages, and individuals who do not use socially expected

communication styles based on gender may be treated as cultural outliers and punished. As aforementioned, gender socialisation starts before individuals acquire gender identities and realise gender differences. Mulac et al. (2001) conducted three empirical studies to verify the gender-as-culture hypothesis. The core element of the gender-as-culture hypothesis is that men and women use the same language but do so differently. The results of the three studies indicate that there is a preference for language use; moreover, the 'male' use of language is recognised as direct, succinct, personal and instrumental, and the 'female' use of language is recognised as indirect, elaborate and affective.

Tannen (1994) further investigated that workers practice different verbal communication styles at the workplace. Men tend to be task-oriented, maintain their hegemonic position and focus on providing information and reports efficiently; this target- and issue-focused communication style is called 'report talk'. Women are predisposed to be relationship-oriented, engage in collaborative relationships with their colleagues and concentrate on their similarities with their communication partners; this relationship-based communication style is referred to as 'rapport talk', which is promoted by women leaders who, rather than only focusing on work and tasks, take heed of individual employees and value their potential abilities.

Supporting the results of the aforementioned studies, the results of Mohindra and Azhar (2012) showed that men leaders tend to adopt an instrumental communication style and strive to maintain their hierarchical relationships with their employees, whereas women leaders engage in expressive ways of communication as they are inclined to strengthen their interpersonal connections. Similarly, Harper and Hirokawa (1988) found that when women leaders assign tasks to their employees, they provide legitimate reasons and explain the benefits of fulfilling them; conversely, men leaders tend to convince their employees to perform a task by emphasising the potential negative consequences of nonperformance of such tasks. Based on leader-member exchange theory, Fairhurst (1993) explained that women leaders are likely to build interpersonal relationships with their male employees by constructing the role of a 'caregiver' (p. 346) and that the high positions held by women leaders within an organisation are sometimes minimised by the relatively elevated societal status of men employees. Holt and DeVore (2005)

analysed the conflict resolution styles of men and women and found that, in organisations, men are more likely to adopt a forceful style when managing their superiors than women. They also indicated that, irrespective of culture, women are more likely to use a compromising style in conflicts than men.

In addition to verbal communication styles, scholars have reported that men and women generally differ in nonverbal communication (e.g. Richmond & McCroskey, 2004; Wood, 1996). Women tend to use nonverbal cues more frequently than men and are more sensitive than men to such cues. Specifically, men and women differ in the frequency with which they use facial expressions, haptics and paralanguage. In an organisational context, Byron (2007) suggested that women leaders are more proficient than men leaders at encoding others' nonverbal messages.

3. Challenges that women leaders experience

3.1. Role congruity and the evaluation of women leaders' communication and leadership styles

How, then, are women leaders' communication and leadership styles evaluated? Research has indicated that the evaluation of communication and leadership styles of women leaders is subject to multiple factors: who they interact with, the culture of the organisation and social expectations. Some studies have indicated that the evaluation of the communication styles of women leaders varies depending on their communication partners (e.g. Baird & Bradley, 1979; Ladegaard, 2011; Steckler & Rosenthal, 1985). For instance, Steckler and Rosenthal (1985) found that women leaders' perceived competence depends on the person they are communicating with; that is, women leaders are considered to be more competent than their male equivalents during exchanges with their supervisors and employees but less competent when they communicate with their peers. Steckler and Rosenthal (1985) concluded that these patterns might reflect the stereotypes of society and how men and women react to these stereotypes. Women leaders may attempt to present themselves more competently to their boss because their boss, who is often a man, may doubt their competence and hold traditional values regarding women's behaviour. Thus, women leaders may attempt to compensate and impress their bosses. Their women subordinates may not cooperate with women

leaders as they would with their male counterparts. Thus, women leaders must also impress their subordinates to be evaluated as competent. Steckler and Rosenthal (1985) further analysed that men leaders tend to accept the status quo of the hierarchical relationship in their organisation, and they do not have to impress either their supervisors or employees; however, they are competitive with their peers and attempt to prove their competence over their peers.

The assessment of the communication styles of women leaders also depends on organisational cultures or situations (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Kim & Shin, 2017) and the evaluator of their performance. When they are compelled to sustain their authority in a male-dominated organisation, they neither use an interpersonally oriented approach nor a participative leadership style. Context influences social structures and shapes gender stereotypes; accordingly, it determines the extent to which a certain 'female' leadership style is accepted, implying that a given style exercised by a woman leader may be effective in one context but not in another (Gipson et al., 2017).

Thus far, in this section, we have discussed that the evaluation of communication and leadership styles of women leaders may vary depending on the factors as follows: who they interact with, the culture of the organisation and social expectations. Moreover, even if men and women leaders perform the same communication, sometimes, women leaders are not recognised as 'leaders'. Cunningham, Crandall and Dare (2017) shared a story in which a woman leader participated in an organisational meeting. She was the first person to speak up and offer an idea for solving a problem in the organisation, but the idea was ignored. The second person, a man, said exactly the same idea, and the attendees around the table nodded and endorsed the possibility of 'his idea'. Rhode (2017) also said, 'Behaviour that is assertive in a man seems abrasive in a woman, and women risk seeming too assertive or not assertive enough' (Rhode, 2017, p.60)

Similarly, Walker and Aritz (2015) reported that because people tend to associate 'male' communication styles with leadership qualities, such bias favours men as leaders in a male-dominated organisational culture even when women display acceptable leadership performance. That is, although women exhibit communication styles expected of leaders (e.g. direct, confrontational,

assertive, competitive, task-oriented, dominating), they are less likely to be recognised as such by others, particularly in a male-dominated organisation (Walker & Aritz, 2015).

Wood (2013) added another insight. That is, men and women leaders tend to be judged differently for performing the same communication and shared an anecdote:

When I first started working, I tried to act like the men at my level. I was pleasant to people, but I didn't talk with coworkers about my life or their lives. I did my work, led my team with firm, directive communication, and stressed results. When I had my first performance review, I got great marks on achieving tasks, but there was serious criticism of 'my attitude'. A number of people---both my peers and staff I supervised---complained that I was unfriendly or cold. People criticised me for not caring about them and their lives. I pointed out to my supervisor that nobody made those complaints about men, and she told me that I couldn't act like a man if I wanted to succeed in business. (Wood, 2013, p.243)

This anecdote conveys that a directive communication style, perceived as a characteristic of men leaders' communication style, is negatively evaluated when enacted by women leaders. Furthermore, her supervisor, who is a woman in the anecdote, also intakes a gender stereotype---women leaders should be friendly and warm.

Thus, how are women leaders evaluated for their communication and leadership style if it deviates from a 'female' stereotype? Generally negatively, as Schaubroeck and Shao (2012) pointed out. For example, when women leaders strongly express anger, they tend to be judged unfavourably; by contrast, this negative assessment applies to their male counterparts when they visibly express sorrow, such as crying in front of colleagues. Thus, Schaubroeck and Shao (2012) claimed that a given communication style, whether perceived as 'male' or 'female', tends to be negatively assessed if it is inconsistent with social expectations. Supporting these findings, Wood and Eagly (2012) found that gender role beliefs shared in society help children

acquire the skills, traits and preferences that reinforce society's division of labour. Most adults consider these shared beliefs acceptable when they endorse society's expectations and adopt them as personal standards for their behaviour. Such phenomena can be explained using role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Since gender is one of the most visible aspects of women leaders, they are considered to possess gender-associated traits, such as being communal, caring and participative, whereas men leaders are viewed as agentic, determined, confident and determined (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Schein, 2001). These gender-associated stereotypes influence leadership evaluation; thus, people accept and favourably assess leadership behaviour that is congruent with gender roles (Cowen & Montgomery, 2020; Eagly & Karau, 2002) but negatively evaluate those that are inconsistent with stereotyped views of women leaders (Cowen & Montgomery, 2020; Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Eagly (2003) claimed that 'democratic relationships, participatory decision-making, delegation and team-based leadership skills are consistent with the communal characteristics typically attributed to women' (Eagly, 2003, p. 89). Work colleagues highly regard women leaders' 'communal, caring and participative communication styles'; hence, women leaders are strongly encouraged to participate in interactions in a caring manner (Sueda, 2018; Sueda & Inoue, 2017). Likewise, women leaders are frequently discouraged from adopting communication styles that are incongruent with socially accepted 'female' roles. Importantly, women leaders are more frequently encouraged to act in alignment with positive evaluations, perpetuating the notion that they must exhibit communal and caring leadership styles. Therefore, regardless of the researchers' intention, gender as culture promotes stereotypically 'male' or 'female' communication and leadership roles.

3.2. Challenges in studying gender and communication

The previous section demonstrates that the evaluation of women leaders' communication and leadership styles vary depending on multiple factors, and notably, when their communication and leadership styles do not fit their socially accepted gender roles, they are negatively evaluated. Conversely, when their behaviour aligns with their stereotypical gender roles, they are evaluated

positively. Thus, going along with socially accepted gendered communication styles stabilises and perpetuates them. Thus, has society been successful in constructing a new reality as Wood (2013) expected? Wood (2013) stated,

Yet, current views of gender won't necessarily be future views. You and your peers will make up and define the workplace of the future. One of the most pressing challenges for your generation is to remake our institutions to correspond to the lives of today's men and women. (Wood, 2013, p. 257)

The society has not reconstructed institutions to correspond to the lives of today's men and women. Therefore, to achieve this objective, the following recommendations may be considered.

First, although gender tends to be treated as an independent variable, researchers should also treat gender as a dependent variable and analyse how gender is created; moreover, researchers should be reminded that what is perceived as 'male' and 'female' changes depending on the context. Martin (2022) compared results derived from seven experiments and clarified that although gender is considered socially constructed, unlike sex, which is biologically defined, it is fluid and contextually created. In the experiments, gender-neutral traits shifted to 'feminine' when presented beside or after 'masculine' traits but became 'masculine' when presented beside or after 'feminine' attributes. For example, in one of the experiments, the participants were presented with software-generated faces, and a significant difference was observed in the gender categorisation of the neutral target. The neutral targets were identified as female when presented after male targets and perceived as male when presented after female targets.

Second, in empirical research, particularly qualitative studies, researchers can present a critical analysis of gender and leadership roles. For example, qualitative research on women leaders in Japan in the information technology industry and their male and female colleagues (Sueda & Inoue, 2017) suggested that the role models of these leaders are the sum of all the good qualities that they acquired from both their men and women supervisors. For example, one of the most remarkable qualities is their ability to motivate and encourage

employees to perform their jobs successfully (Sueda & Inoue, 2017). This ability involves talking to each employee, understanding their strengths and weaknesses, maximising their abilities and increasing their productivity by creating an open organisational environment. This communal interaction is regarded as typical of ‘female’ communication; however, a few women leaders in the study said that they learned from their men supervisors about the importance of creating an open environment and making themselves available for their employees. Furthermore, one woman leader stated that one of her role models was a very assertive woman supervisor who never compromised, and when something went wrong, she bravely pointed it out directly and took responsibility to start the work from the beginning. Although assertiveness and directness (Mulac et al., 2001) are often considered as ‘male’ communication styles, assertive and direct communication were enacted by the women leaders in the study. Therefore, the socially accepted ‘male’ versus ‘female’ communication styles are not a priori, and researchers must exercise caution in studying gender and communication.

Third, to recreate institutions to conform to the lives of today’s men and women, as Wood (2013) suggested, women, not men, are urged to change. McKenzie and Halstead (2017) proposed practical suggestions for women leaders who aim to promote workplace equality, for example, adopt ‘male’ communication styles, including assertiveness and a sense of humour, in responding to micro-aggressions. However, Chiristo-Baker and Wilbur (2017) claimed that the traditional way to develop women as leaders uses one-size-fits-all strategies and encourages women merely to learn to communicate like men and that organisational cultures should be changed to be inclusive.

Correspondingly, we explore the emerging trends of management and leadership in current organisational environments and propose the advantages of advancing beyond stereotypically accepted gender roles and actively constructing new gender role.

4. Leadership needed today

4.1. Leadership at the time of VUCA

As mentioned in the introduction, the current business environment of companies is characterised by VUCA. Particularly, COVID-19 has

substantially affected the workplace worldwide. Kniffin et al. (2021) identified three of the most remarkable changes since the COVID-19 outbreak. First, work style has changed, with work-from-home and virtual work practices becoming commonplace. For example, employees work in teams virtually, and leaders must motivate employees without meeting them in person. Moreover, a new appraisal system must be developed to assess remote work fairly and appropriately.

Second, COVID-19 substantially changed organisational environments and working situations. For instance, companies had to change their policies frequently due to unexpected situations, and many companies either restructured or disappeared. In these situations, employees feel psychologically unsafe and unstable, and companies, particularly their leaders, must consider the physical and mental health of their employees. Finally, as manifested by COVID-19, this time of VUCA requires leadership styles different from those that have been considered effective. Although authoritative and charismatic leadership is necessary for achieving organisational goals, continuing routine tasks, managing risks and making timely decisions, such decisions regarding leadership style, which has been categorised as solely ‘male’, will no longer be successful in this fast-moving business environment.

Being a leader requires a few qualities in this fast-moving business environment. The first quality is high emotional intelligence. Mayer et al. (2004) defined emotional intelligence as ‘the capacity to reason about emotions and of emotions to enhance thinking. It includes the abilities to accurately perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotion and emotional knowledge and to reflectively regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth’ (Mayer et al., 2004, p. 197). Emotion is instrumental to understanding leadership processes and effectiveness (George, 2000), and leaders should be aware of their own as well as others’ emotions and appropriately comprehend and manage them (Byron, 2007; Dulewicz & Higgs, 2003; Lopez-Zafra et al., 2012). Emotional intelligence is involved in the exercise of leadership and its utilisation determines leaders’ effectiveness by influencing employees’ work attitudes and outcomes. Although this is a difficult task, leaders must be sensitive to their employees’ emotional state, particularly in remote work where nonverbal cues

are limited (Kniffin et al., 2021).

The second quality required of leaders is an open, humble attitude. To be a desired leader, one must listen to and embrace others and broaden their views (Chiu & Owens, 2013; Ou et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2023). Moreover, leaders with humble attitudes provide opportunities for people to raise their voices and share their ideas. Such attitudes afford employees psychological comfort and a sense of belonging. An organisational climate where employees feel psychological safety can stimulate voluntarily proactive work behaviour and creative ideas from employees, enhancing organisational performance. Furthermore, leaders' openness and humility can benefit organisations in their communication with communities (Cowen & Montgomery, 2020). Openly sharing information about companies and taking full responsibility for companies' actions, with thoughtful ideas based on caring for the broad community, help leaders gain the trust and support of communities. These outcomes can benefit companies' current and future business.

Thus, although these qualities are often related to women leaders (Byron, 2007; Eagly et al., 2003; George, 2000; Gu et al., 2021; Sueda & Inoue, 2017), the qualities should not be associated with only women leaders and should be possessed by men leaders as well. That is because, regardless of their gender, leaders need to know that the communication and leadership styles traditionally associated with women leaders have positive value and that they are not secondary but essential in the present business environment. Moreover, leaders need to balance what has been traditionally labelled as 'male' and 'female' communication and leadership styles to fulfil the various needs of their employees and embrace diversity. The next section will explain ambidextrous leadership, which requires emotional intelligence and an open, humble attitude (as discussed in this section).

4.2. Ambidextrous leadership and its effectiveness

What would be the most suitable communication and leadership style for this fast-moving business world? Which communication and leadership style incorporates leaders' emotional intelligence and an open, humble attitude? The answer is ambidextrous leadership: it has emerged as an appropriate and necessary style that can facilitate individual- and organisation-wide innovation

(Bledow et al., 2011; Levinthal & March, 1993; Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008; Rosing et al., 2011) and is suggested as the most effective leadership style in the VUCA world for the following two reasons: ambidextrous leadership greatly influences company performance, innovation, market appraisal and company survival, and it is relevant for companies in an uncertain environment (Saputra et al., 2022)

Ambidextrous leadership is defined as ‘the ability to promote both explorative and exploitative behaviours in followers by increasing or reducing variance in their behaviours and flexibly switching between those behaviours’ (Rosing et al., 2011, p. 957). Explorative behaviour refers to leaders’ opening behaviour that motivates them to afford employees’ autonomy so that they can freely generate original ideas and test them in the workplace. In this respect, explorative behaviour echoes socially categorised ‘female’ communication and leadership styles, and explorative behaviour requires leaders to possess emotional intelligence and an open, humble attitude, emphasised as necessary qualities for this time of VUCA. Leaders must be willing to allow their employees to commit mistakes and conduct tasks through experiments. This would encourage employees to feel psychologically safe to test and realise their innovative ideas.

Exploitative behaviour, alternatively, pertains to closing behaviour associated with the general managerial role characterised by monitoring and regulating employees’ work progress and goal attainment. In this respect, exploitative behaviour echoes socially categorised ‘male’ communication and leadership styles. Because leaders are required to coordinate all work intended to achieve organisational goals, a necessary task is for them to set the rules and routines of work and work processes. In doing so, leaders ensure that employees’ work and work attainments align with organisational goals. Exploitative behaviour is particularly important when organisations experience risks and ensures the efficiency of their work and the sustainability of their organisations. That is, explorative behaviour enhances overall effectiveness, while exploitative behaviour drives efficiency in organisations. (Saputra et al., 2022).

Because of the interdependence between explorative and exploitative behaviours, leaders must promote these abilities by flexibly switching between

opening and closing behaviours, adapting behaviours to the requirements of a given organisational situation (Rosing et al., 2011). Such flexibility and contextual sensibility of ambidextrous leaders enable them to promote organisational innovation because they allow for organisational effectiveness and efficiency.

Research has confirmed that ambidextrous leadership behaviour significantly improves the performance of individuals and teams (Hu et al., 2020; Zacher et al., 2016). By adapting their behaviour to the situation, ambidextrous leaders increase work motivation and psychological capital among individuals and teams. The opening behaviour of ambidextrous leadership style advances and achieves diversity and inclusion management in companies. Leaders build trust with individual employees, promoting an organisational climate that allows employees to form their group identities and engage with their organisations. This positive, inclusive work environment can maximise the benefits of diversity by maximising the value stemming from individuality. Moreover, ambidextrous leaders' emotional sensibility and openness enhance employees' feeling of belonging to their organisation, as well as their hopefulness and positivity about their work (Kim, 2022). Such an atmosphere also engages employees' creative and innovative work behaviours, promoting organisational innovation and sustainability. It is also argued that ambidextrous leaders' appropriate combination of the two behaviours and flexible application allows employees to feel psychologically confident and resilient, promoting their passion for work (Zacher et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2020).

As has been discussed, sustained organisational performance is ingrained in exploiting existing competencies and exploring new opportunities (Jansen et al., 2009). Therefore, ambidexterity is key for companies to survive and thrive, further contributing to the well-being of employees and society. Leaders, particularly top-level leaders, are expected to engage in both behaviours to achieve sustained innovation (Tushman et al., 2011).

5. Advancing beyond gendered communication and leadership styles

The previous section has illuminated the importance of ambidextrous leadership, adopting both closing and opening behaviours to be effective in this fast-moving business environment and today's VUCA world. The

changes in the work environment associated with the VUCA caused by the responses to COVID-19 pandemic suggest the necessity and readiness to embrace ambidextrous leadership without gender association. Notably, closing behaviours are likely to be associated with ‘male’ communication and leadership styles, and opening behaviours are likely to be associated with ‘female’ communication and leadership styles. Ambidextrous leadership harmonises ‘male’ and ‘female’ communication and leadership styles and promotes that they shift between the two communication styles and choose a leadership style depending on the situation.

What is the implication for researchers who study gender and communication in general and in the workplace specifically? There are at least two implications that deserve attention. First, researchers must be reminded that opening or explorative behaviours, which are likely to be associated with the ‘female’ style of communication and leadership, are not secondary to closing behaviours. Sueda (2018) illustrated this point by finding that women managers engage in an ‘employee-oriented communication style’. By creating an open, friendly environment and changing communication styles flexibly, women leaders can pursue professional goals successfully. That conclusion suggests the importance of creating an open, friendly environment where employees respect and trust each other.

Second, ambidextrous leadership provides the possibility of constructing a new reality. Practicing both the opening and closing behaviours of ambidextrous leadership enable both men and women leaders to oscillate between the two types of behaviours and become experts in exercising both. Ultimately, the demarcation between socially defined ‘male’ and ‘female’ communication and leadership styles may become unclear, and consequently, gender bias may be reduced. Levine and Hogg (2009) stated, ‘Decategorization refers to a process of reducing the salience of ingroup–outgroup distinctions. An important consequence is that negative behaviours associated with ingroup–outgroup distinctions, such as prejudice, stereotyping and intergroup discrimination, are also diminished’. In other words, when men and women leaders can exercise ambidextrous leadership skills, for example, opening and closing behaviours, the distinction between ‘male’ and ‘female’ communication and leadership styles may become unclear and permeable. Moreover, because

of the blurred demarcation between ‘male’ and ‘female’ communication and leadership styles, organisations are ready to embrace those who do not fit traditional sexual or gender categories.

Thus, what are our suggestions for organisations? We suggest that organisations promote an inclusive environment where diversity and flexibility are embraced among employees. To achieve this objective, for example, in leadership training programmes, they should teach men and women who are current and potential leaders a wide range of leadership styles. Thus, the leaders are not limited to visualising a certain prototype regarding a desired leader.

Moreover, instead of providing training programmes for women leaders to engage in ‘male’ associated communication and leadership skills, organisations should cultivate men and women leaders who can exhibit ambidextrous leadership and flexibly alternate their opening and closing behaviours for each organisational situation. For instance, organisations might need to plan and offer leadership training programmes or simulation sessions to men and women leaders so that they can promote ambidextrous leadership skills by enhancing contextual sensitivity, flexibility and empathy towards others.

6. Conclusion

This paper aimed to discuss how to advance beyond gender-based communication and leadership styles in the workplace using a constructivist approach. Constructivists posit that what individuals know is shaped by language, culture and social practices in a given context. Thus, culture continually changes based on how individuals communicate and behave. As Wood (2013) stated, the current views of gender will not necessarily be the future views, and institutions can be reconstructed to respond to the present lives of men and women.

However, the situation in practice calls for establishing new gender and leadership roles. Leaders’ enacting the same communication are evaluated differently depending on gender. For example, when men leaders are assertive, they are usually viewed as good leaders, but when women leaders are assertive, they are often viewed or assessed negatively. One reason for this difference is that once communication styles are labelled as ‘male’ or ‘female’, these labels

‘stick’, which can lead to gender bias. Alternately, socially accepted gender roles affect the evaluation of the leaders. The more a leader’s communication style matches traditional gender roles, the better others’ perceptions of them are. Thus, women leaders who act in ways that are seen as traditionally ‘female’ may reinforce these gender roles.

Thus, how can men and women leaders manage gender bias? The fast-changing business world, full of volatility and uncertainty, inevitably requires constructing a new reality in the workplace. This necessity has become especially urgent since the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in substantial changes to the business world. In response, a new leadership style, the ambidextrous leadership style, which focuses on building better relationships and increasing productivity, should be considered. This style involves two main elements: ‘opening’ behaviours, such as being a good listener and embracing new ideas, and ‘closing’ behaviours, which regard managing risks, being efficient and achieving goals. Notably, ‘opening behaviours’ are associated with socially accepted ‘female’ communication and leadership styles, and ‘closing behaviours’ are associated with socially accepted ‘male’ communication and leadership styles. Ambidextrous leadership is appropriate for anyone, regardless of their gender, especially in organisations experiencing substantial change.

In conclusion, this paper has highlighted suggestions for further research. First, treating gender as an independent variable would automatically lead researchers to analyse whether gender difference is a significant independent variable. Notably, caution is necessary when conducting studies that treat gender as an independent variable. Therefore, qualitative studies can explain how people construct meanings of gender and leadership and contribute critical data analysis by increasing their focus on the research environment.

Second, researchers must emphasise the positive meanings of what have been generally classified as ‘female’ communication or leadership styles by adopting both ‘male’ and ‘female’ communication and leadership styles and balancing them as a first step to advancing beyond gendered communication and leadership style. This will become a common ground for leaders to be open-minded, flexible and attuned to changes in this global society where individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds, including gender and sexual orientation, can collaborate.

Third, gender roles are created and recreated constantly, and language use, behaviours, and communication styles interact and contribute to its construction and reconstruction. Thus, researchers should observe and analyse how ‘male’ and ‘female’ as categories are constructed, how the strict distinction of gender roles is blurred, and boundaries and meanings attached to gender change frequently.

Last, we suggest that overcoming gender bias means that men and women leaders should use ambidextrous leadership. Thus, leaders should be flexible and adapt their communication and leadership styles depending on the situation, regardless of their traditional gender labels. In the future, instead of encouraging women leaders to communicate as men leaders do, leadership training should be provided for men and women leaders and have them practice various communication and leadership styles. Participating in such training programmes would help leaders advance beyond ‘male’ and ‘female’ communication and leadership styles and become inclusive and coordinate diversity, including those who fit neither the ‘male’ nor the ‘female’ category, depending on societal change.

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