

Women should not have to walk a tightrope between competence and likeability while men lead freely on their own terms, writes Mette Johansson

Women in the workplace often find themselves in a no-win situation, navigating a narrow corridor of acceptable behaviour that stifles their leadership potential. This phenomenon, known as the “double bind” sees women perceived as either too soft and weak or too assertive and difficult. This conditioning begins in childhood and persists throughout their careers, shaping societal expectations that hinder their ability to achieve their full potential.

Social conditioning starts early
From a young age, girls are encouraged to be polite, accommodating, and nurturing. When both a girl and a boy misbehave, it is often the girl who is first admonished with, “Be good”. This early socialisation makes it challenging for women to assert themselves in leadership roles without being labelled as bossy or aggressive. This ingrained bias follows women throughout their careers. In leadership positions, women are expected to soften their messages, while men are rewarded for being direct. Additionally, women often take on “office housework” – tasks such as note-taking and event planning – which, while necessary, do little to advance their careers.

The expectation to please vs being kind
Women are conditioned to prioritise others’ needs over their own, often leading to people-pleasing tendencies in the workplace. This manifests in several ways:
● Women frequently take on non-promotable tasks that do not contribute to career growth.
● They are expected to deliver direct feedback more gently than their male counterparts.
● They face resistance when attempting to set firm boundaries.
However, there is a crucial distinction between being nice and being kind. Being nice involves pleasing others at the expense of one’s own needs, while being kind means acting with respect while maintaining firm boundaries. Kindness is a strength in leadership, yet many women default to niceness, fearing that assertiveness will make them unpopular.

Caroline Farberger’s unique perspective
Caroline Farberger, a board execu-

The double bind that holds WOMEN BACK @WORK

utive and former CEO, offers a rare perspective on gender bias. Having transitioned from male to female, she has experienced first-hand how behavioural expectations for women are far stricter than for men. As a man, Farberger did not notice gender disparities in leadership. However, as a woman, she found it significantly harder to make her voice heard and influence decisions. Her experience underscores how the “corridor of acceptable behaviour” is far narrower for women, reinforcing the double bind.

The likeability vs competence trap
Women often find themselves caught between two extremes:
● If they are warm and agreeable, they are liked but not seen as competent leaders.
● If they are assertive and direct, they are seen as competent but unlikeable.
This dichotomy explains why women frequently receive feedback such as, “You should smile more,” while men do not. The expectation that women must be warm and nurturing creates an additional burden that their male colleagues do not face.

Emotion vs logic: A false stereotype
Women’s passion and emotional intelligence are often misconstrued as weakness. If a woman speaks passionately about an issue, she is labelled as “too emotional”. In contrast, a man expressing the same passion is perceived as strong, visionary, and committed.
A chief human resource officer (CHRO) in India’s logistics sector once remarked, “Women too emotional? Huh, you should see the men in the boardroom. If they don’t get their way, they slam their fists on the table, shout, and jump up.” Women are simply penalised for expressing emotions differently.
Emotion in the workplace should not be dismissed outright. Positive emotions such as pride, passion, and happiness contribute to a strong workplace culture. Even frustration – often leading to tears in women due to biological differences – should be acknowledged rather than penalised. Emotional intelligence should not just be expected from women but from all leaders.
The ‘Mummy Penalty’
Motherhood presents additional hurdles for women. If a woman has children, she is often perceived as less committed to her career, leading to

fewer promotions. If she does not have children, she may be expected to take on extra work because she has “no family responsibilities”.
Meanwhile, men with children are often viewed as responsible and leadership-ready. A man introducing

himself as “Sanjeev, father of three” is seen as a family man.
But if a woman says, “I’m Anita, mother of three,” the assumption is that she is more focused on family than work.

Changing the narrative: Systemic solutions
The double bind is not about individual women needing to change – it is about transforming the narratives that hold them back.
Women should not have to walk a tightrope between competence and likeability while men lead freely on their own terms.



(Mette Johansson is a leadership coach, author, and gender equity advocate, helping organisations cultivate inclusive and authentic leadership.)

Data-driven insights on gender equity

- Diversity boosts profitability**
- Companies in the top quartile for leadership diversity earn an additional nine percentage points in EBIT.
 - Credit Suisse found that companies with at least 15% female senior managers had over 50% higher profitability than those with less than 10% female representation.
- The gender pay gap persists**
- The Global Gender Gap Report 2022 predicts it will take until 2154 to achieve gender pay parity at the current rate.
 - Research in Denmark shows that wages decline in professions as female representation increases.
- Meritocracy is a myth**
- Women outperform men on 17 out of 19 leadership skills yet face higher scrutiny and fewer leadership opportunities.
 - Overconfidence is often mistaken for competence, leading to the promotion of less qualified men over competent women.

Practical steps for organisations

- To create an equitable workplace, companies must establish fair rules, systems, and cultures:
- Review recruitment & promotion criteria**
- Ensure hiring processes value competence over confidence.
 - Avoid over-reliance on self-confidence as a hiring criterion.
- Close the gender pay gap**
- Conduct annual pay audits to detect and correct salary disparities.
 - Implement transparent salary structures, as seen in Iceland.
- Address the ‘Mummy Penalty’**
- Provide equal parental leave and encourage men to take it.
 - Recognise caregiving skills – negotiation, multitasking, emotional intelligence – as valuable leadership competencies.
- Redefine leadership criteria**
- Promote leadership pathways for women through mentorship and training.
 - Value diverse leadership styles, not just traditional “masculine” traits.
- Foster inclusive work cultures**
- Create safe spaces for women to develop leadership skills.
 - Encourage sponsorship and mentorship for women in leadership.
 - Breaking the double bind requires awareness, conversation, and systemic change. It is not about being nice – it is about being kind, strong, and effective. Only when we dismantle these outdated narratives can we create workplaces where women and men have equal opportunities to succeed.

TRAVEL

Cairo, a city brushed by dust and steeped in history, offers a vivid glimpse into the past. Every corner tells a story, from the vintage cars of the ‘90s, now well past their prime, to the quiet streets where brave vendors hawk trinkets right in the middle of the road. And looming over it all are the ancient monuments – some 4,000 years old or more like the pyramids – standing as timeless witnesses to the city’s enduring legacy. These monuments outlast and outshine everything made in the last 40 years, perhaps even longer.
Unless you’re from a hotter region, the heat is a challenge you learn to endure. You have my respect if you can endure the heat, and as I sweat my way through it, I find myself standing before the Great Pyramids. Their limestone exteriors match the sand they sit upon, seamlessly blending in, so much so that it’s hard to distinguish where one ends and the other begins at the base. The top, however, stands in stark contrast – towering majestically over the endless sky. One can’t help but wonder if its vastness was designed to overshadow the heavens. I wouldn’t put it past the ancient Egyptians.
Everything here is larger than life – none more so than their obsession with the afterlife. The practice of mummification feels like one of the greatest scams of ancient times. The sheer scale, energy, time, and resources spent on this practice are mind-blowing. As I walk through some of the tombs in the Valley of the Kings and Queens, it becomes clear: Pharaohs spent the majority of their reign preparing for their inevitable death from the moment they ascended the throne. Planning and constructing tombs as soon as they began their rule might sound a little insane, but with good marketing and the right pitch, even the most outlandish ideas can take root. We now understand the kind of influence that can have. The tombs are expertly designed, with chambers and tunnels carved into the magnificent landscape of the Valley. The West Bank of Luxor, the ancient city of Thebes, home to these tombs, is a sight to behold. It’s easy to see why Thutmose I of the New Kingdom chose this as his final resting place. The Pharaoh did not spend the immense resources and time

Egypt stands as a testament to time

Be it the ‘90s cars well off their prime, the brave people selling knick-knacks right in the middle of the road, or the 4,000-year-old monuments, the dust-washed city of Cairo offers a glimpse into its storied past, writes Anvitha

it would take to build pyramids, opting instead for a more sustainable – and still grand – solution.
Leaving Cairo behind, I head toward the desert region of Aswan. The dry heat here is something to respect. But hopping aboard a cruise along the Nile offers a more enjoyable way to navigate the intense heat while experiencing Egypt in all its glory. The Nile is now a tamer, safer river thanks to the High Dam, which keeps both the waters and crocodiles under control. As someone from the land of temples, I felt a deeper, more solitary connection to the now-ruined temples. These ancient structures remind us of a bygone era – of rich, magnificent cultures that have long since faded, leaving only remnants. And yet, the gods and goddesses once worshipped here are forgotten by all but the stones. The same could be said of many great civilisations – from the Greeks and Romans to the Mayans – and, closer to home, the Vijayanagara Empire in Hampi. In comparison, India has fared somewhat better, as many of our temples are still in active use today. As I walk among these temples, I’m in awe of their height. The towering columns and pillars dominate



The Sphinx by the Pyramids of Giza in the desert of Egypt.



The Temple of Edfu, an Egyptian temple located on the west bank of the Nile in Edfu. PHOTO BY AUTHOR



Egyptian wall art paintings, also called reliefs, drawn on tomb walls or temples. PHOTO BY AUTHOR



Cairo beckons with its rich stories of Pharaohs, medieval splendour, and the vibrant heartbeat of daily life.



Buildings and columns of ancient Egyptian megaliths.



An early Egyptian wall painting.

the space, commanding attention in a way that feels almost otherworldly. The concrete structures we build today are worlds apart from the ancient pillars of Karnak Temple, which remains my favourite. Each pillar ten times larger and taller. One detail that struck me was the remnants of paint. What little is left on the columns offers a glimpse into what the entire structure may have looked like in its prime – overwhelmingly beautiful and grand. How the paint has survived thousands of years in the harsh heat is beyond me. The techniques and scientific advancements behind such preservation are largely lost to time. As I reflect on all I’ve seen, the evening prayers echo along the Nile – a sound from a faith that is relatively new to these lands, compared to the many faiths that have come and gone. Yet, the old, original faith lingers, its presence in the land unshakable, a quiet reminder that it once flourished in all its glory.
A repeated “Hello” snaps me back to the present, to the sun deck of our cruise. I, along with the other guests who had been lazily lounging, peer over the edge to see who’s calling out to us in the middle of the Nile. To our surprise, we spot two salesmen on a boat, skillfully tethered to our ship, trying to sell towels and bedsheets. As we watch, wondering how they plan to complete this transaction, they pull off a daring stunt: a towel, tightly rolled and sealed in a plastic bag, is tossed through the air and lands on our deck – four floors above! This land and its people, both old and new, have a way of transporting you – mind, body, and soul.