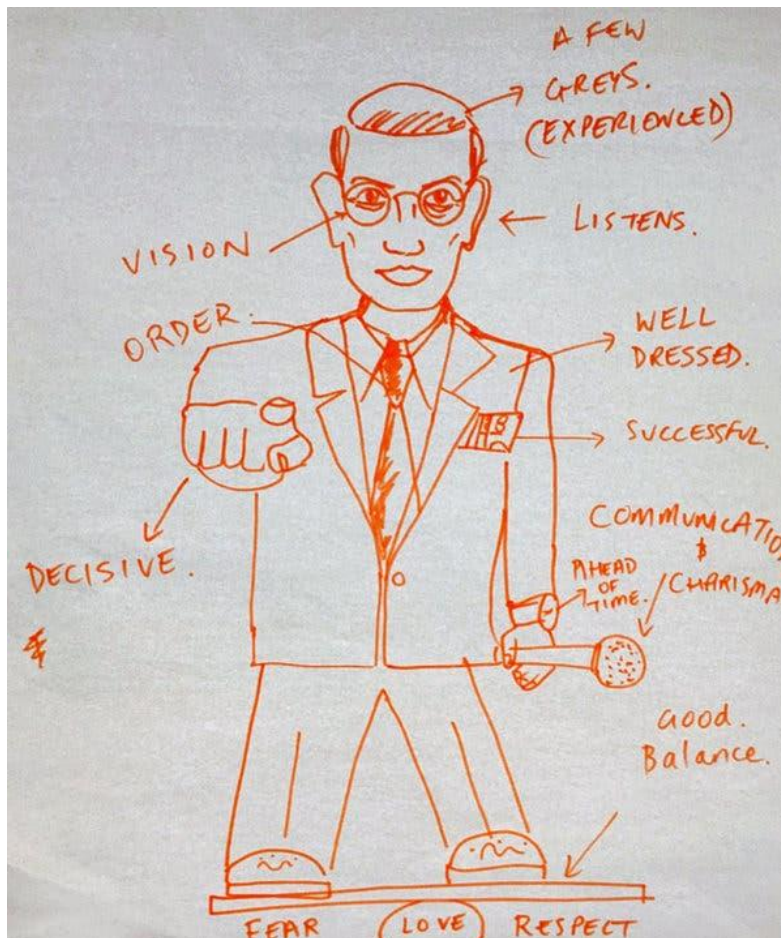


The Leadership Question (5)



What is 'leadership'?

Is Leadership Still Gendered? What do you think?

Gendering of 'leadership' has been deeply ingrained in our everyday, unconscious thinking, especially male thinking, despite all the advances of recent decades.

A *New York Times* article in 2018, 'Picture of a Leader, Is She a Woman?', reporting an exercise in which a series of sketches were drawn by various people on foot of a simple neutral prompt: 'Draw an effective leader.', makes the point.ⁱ

Asking people to draw their image of a 'leader' resulted invariably in images of 'leaders-as-men'.

Though these results could be expected, the article explained that they came about accidentally when a Professor of Organisational Behaviour at Warwick University, Tina Kiefer, was conducting a workshop of executives who did not speak much English. She found that, in gender terms, the results were almost always the same: *both men and women almost always draw men* and she is quoted as saying,

[e]ven when the drawings are gender neutral, the majority of groups present the drawing using language that indicates male (he) rather than neutral or female

although her clients often insisted that what they meant by 'he' is actually 'both'.

The article mentions studies by other researchers following up on the line of investigation opened by this exercise. One found that getting noticed as a 'leader' in the workplace is more difficult for women than for men even when a man and woman were reading the same script. In another, about a sales team in a fictional insurance company, the person labelled 'Eric' was more often identified as 'leader' than the person labelled 'Erica' in an exercise in which participants were asked to rate the speaker on the degree to which he or she had "exhibited leadership", "influenced the team", or "assumed a leadership role".

These are two of the examples reported and referenced in the article. There is a constant stream of studies, reports, and personal experiences recounting how women have been side-lined in meetings, boards of directors, and elsewhere in business organisations.

The problem of imbalance on board of directors in Ireland was similarly reported as follows in 2017 in *The Irish Times*: "When it comes to women directors on listed company boards, the needle is stuck on the dial."ⁱⁱ In other words, implicit or unconscious prejudice and bias often shapes decisions when responsibility for

selecting directors, and indeed other senior managerial positions, especially for CEOships and managing directors, is exercised.

In the particular instances reported above we see in practice that people genderise leadership, even if unintentionally.

We suggest this *genderisation* is a corruption of 'leadership'.

And we ask, how is this problem to be overcome?

Leadership, by definition, should not lend itself to such corruption.

So what do we do?

We can start at the beginning by changing the conceptual game by addressing *How We Think?*

Why come back to the basic question 'what is 'leadership'?'. What do you think 'leadership' is? And, when you think about it, have you genderised it?

*Our book **The Leadership Mind** by Connell Fanning and Assumpta O'Kane (2022) addresses this very important question of what is 'leadership' and proposes a way forward out of the genderisation of leadership. It can be ordered on Amazon sites as paperback and Kindle; as eBook on all leading digital book platforms; and at good bookshops. For more information see www.theleadershipmind.org and www.ucc.ie/en/keynes/. Sign up to our newsletter and keep up to date eepurl.com/bp_AI5 with our work at The Keynes Centre.*

[Connell Fanning](#) is the Founding Director of The Keynes Centre for supporting personal transformation and professional and organisational development for individuals and companies in all walks of life.

ⁱ Heather Murphy. Picture of a Leader, Is She a Woman? *The New York Times*, 16 March 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/16/health/women-leadership-workplace.html> on 17 March 2021, 12.08.

ⁱⁱ Mark Paul, No women directors, no problem, or so the view appears within Ireland Inc. *The Irish Times*, Friday, January 6, 2017. Accessed on 4.11.2022 at

<https://www.irishtimes.com/business/companies/no-women-directors-no-problem-or-so-the-view-appears-within-ireland-inc-1.2926770> .

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