

Zoe Kinias

Academic Director of INSEAD's Gender Initiative,
Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour.

Key Finding

Self-affirmation, achieved by reflecting on personal values, can eliminate gender gaps in business students' performance.

Business Application

Leaders can encourage employees to reflect on their own personal values to boost overall organisational performance.

Management science and examples from business show that psychological factors influence organisational success. When organisations create environments in which employees are actively engaged and challenged, everyone performs to their abilities. But if an organisation is very imbalanced, in terms of the overrepresentation of one demographic group in leadership roles and examples of success, members of other demographic groups may be concerned about confirming negative stereotypes. This is known as "stereotype threat". Both laboratory experiments and field studies have shown deleterious effects of stereotype threat on women's motivation and performance. In my research, I have found that when business school leadership (i.e., the dean of degree programmes) encourages everyone to reflect on their core personal values while joining the school, any gender gap in performance resulting from stereotype threat is eliminated over a two-month period. This ameliorative effect is due to the removal of a gender gap in self-doubt. In the same context, without this reflection exercise, women experience more self-doubt than men.

In the hope of killing two birds with one stone, some organisations aim to boost performance and adherence to corporate/organisational norms by encouraging everyone to reflect on organisational as well as personal values. My research shows this simply does not work. In two randomised control trials, I found that the inclusion of organisational values in the personal values reflection exercise eliminated beneficial effects. Before an organisation attempts to use a reflection intervention, it is crucial that someone within or working with the organisation has a deep understanding of psychological processes. Of course, organisations should not view this sort of boost in resilience as a stand-alone solution to gender imbalance. In fact, my work signals the importance of working in multifaceted ways to achieve balance across organisational roles to benefit both business and society.

Read more:

Z. Kinias, 11 August 2016, "A Simple Exercise Can Help Women Overcome Self-Doubt to Succeed", Harvard Business Review. Available at <https://hbr.org/2016/08/a-simple-exercise-can-help-women-overcome-self-doubt-and-succeed>

Zoe Kinias is the Academic Director of INSEAD's Gender Initiative and an Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour. She is an expert on diversity and resiliency. To know more, visit her [website](#).

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Research interests: diversity: gender, nationality and ethnicity; applied social psychology; wellbeing and resilience