Gender in the Job Interview

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March 24, 2017

Illustration by Mark Shaver for The Chronicle

By Robin Mamlet

As women move up the leadership ranks in higher education, they find fewer and fewer female peers. That's been fairly well documented by the American Council on Education and other sources, and is no surprise to those of us in the executive-search industry.

Why that's the case is a topic fraught with complexity. There is the matter of stepping up and *Leaning In* to be sure, but there is also sexism — sometimes the overt kind and sometimes the subtle kind that occurs all along the leadership trajectory and affects who is mentored, who is labeled "leadership material," and who gets the kind of opportunities and assignments that lead most directly to advancement.

Of the many factors that limit women's advancement, two are things we ought to be able to resolve: how candidates present themselves in job interviews and how search committees interpret those interviews.

In any given month, I sit in on a few dozen interviews with candidates vying for presidential, provost, or cabinet-level positions in academe. One can't help but notice some distinct patterns in how interviewees behave. In my experience, women and men seeking executive roles frequently present themselves differently, and the differences typically do not work to the advantage of the female candidates.

Let me make clear from the outset: I am *not* suggesting that women should act more like men in interviews. There is a range of styles used successfully by candidates of all genders in front of search committees. I have found that if candidates have a strong substantive record — e.g., if it is built on extensive experience, articulated clearly, and cites convincing examples — they can convey that through a variety of leadership styles. Presentation won't make up for a lack of substance — not for long, anyway.

Likewise, I well understand the danger of making generalizations about gendered behavior. However, I believe the administrative careers of some women are suffering due to a misalignment between their self-presentation and their interviewers' expectations. That dynamic could be vastly improved with greater awareness on both sides of the hiring table — and with better direction from the managers overseeing the search.

That women and men use different communication strategies is controversial though nothing new. In her 1990 book *You Just Don't Understand,* Deborah Tannen, a linguistics professor at Georgetown University, spawned widespread discussion and scholarly debate regarding the differences in personal communication styles between men and women. (Women engage in "rapport-talk," she argued, and men in "report-talk.") Further, there is growing research (here's one recent example) regarding how implicit and explicit gender bias can play a role in the success or failure of women in job interviews, the workplace, and other career settings.

Allow me to share some of the gender-related behavioral patterns I often see in executive interviews within higher education.

Body language. Most men, when they come into an interview room, seem quite comfortable claiming space. They employ a straight, high-shouldered posture that suggests they are in command, and they don't mind spreading out at the table or using open, sweeping gestures and body language that suggest authority.

Some women excel at that, too. I can spot them immediately. They are comfortable occupying space and they "own" their spot at the interview table. Frequently, these are the few women who are already college or university presidents.

Amy Cuddy, a social psychologist and an associate professor in the Harvard Business School, studies body language and "power posing" — the "classic" feet on the desk with hands behind the head, or "standing and leaning on one's hands over a desk" versus sitting (or standing) with arms held close, hands folded, and legs crossed tightly. Cuddy's work is controversial, to be sure, but many candidates would benefit from reviewing it. Simply put: Some interview poses and body language convey greater confidence than others.

Qualifiers. The content of interviews can differ as well. Verbally, women often use qualifiers when they speak. They are more likely to sprinkle their responses with phrases like:

- "I don't deserve all the credit for that, of course …"
- "I have not had that responsibility yet, but …"
- "With more exposure in this area, I could …"

It is rare that I see male candidates expend energy qualifying their precise involvement in a success. But many women, in sharing their achievements, go out of their way not to overclaim or imply a disproportionate role. I can almost see the wheels turning in their minds as they speak: "I have to be fair. I should not take credit for all of it."

They are correct, of course. No one deserves sole credit for past institutional successes. In addition to talent, drive, creativity, preparation, and effort, success arises through good fortune, skilled colleagues, good timing, adequate resources, and other factors. Belaboring all of that in a job interview, however, does not serve a candidate well.

Women who feel the urge to credit others at length during the interview might ask themselves: For whose benefit am I wading into this level of precision? What is it accomplishing? I am not advocating that candidates, by omission, claim credit for achievements that go beyond their efforts. Briefly acknowledge the role of others but don't dwell on it. The interview is about *you.*

There are other behavioral patterns, too. When men are asked how they would handle a responsibility that is new to them, many tend to declare: "I can do that." Male candidates often come across more forcefully even where it's less

warranted. Female candidates are more likely to convey humility about tackling a new duty — much like a colleague in my company did the other day, saying, "tell me if it seems I am driving beyond my headlights." That sort of hedge, even if it's true, does not come off well in a job interview.

Coaching the committee. Just as I advise candidates on how to interview well, I talk with committees about how to approach the interview process fairly.

The onus falls first on committees to keep in mind that different types of leaders present differently in interviews and that, while style is important, results matter most. Search committees must do a better job of recognizing the constraints of the interview process and the dangers of prejudging candidates or looking at superficialities. Committee members need to anticipate their own tendencies and biases — a topic about which my colleague Lucy Leske recently provided insights and tips.

Here are some of the things I tell search committees.

- Remember your charge. The goal is to find people who will succeed in the position, not necessarily ace the interview. The creation of a comprehensive leadership profile (a.k.a. job description) is a necessary precursor to an effective committee. The purpose of the interview is to get to a point of collective confidence on the merits of candidates to continue in the recruitment process and ultimately to fulfill the written objectives of the role.
- Don't be too quick to judge. As humans we form judgments in seconds. As search-committee members, our job is to give candidates the whole 75 minutes or more. The best candidates are not always the most skillful in talking about themselves. (A must read: "Introverts and Interviews" by another of my colleagues, Amy Crutchfield.) Sometimes they shine at the end of the interview, or impress in nuanced ways.
- Keep in mind that different people present themselves differently. Be on the alert for unjustified overconfidence, or confidence masked by deferential motions or verbal qualifiers.
- Consider the potential for double standards and double binds. I recently had a committee member express concern about a female candidate who, he felt, used the first-person "I" too often. Would he have noticed that in a man?
- Beware of dazzlers. There are people who simply interview well (and sometimes those are the same people who can't hold a job for long and so have had plenty of interview practice). Committees need to make sure to explore the depth of all candidates equally.
- Look at the big picture. Don't just rely on notes from the candidates' interviews. Also incorporate information gathered about them through thorough referencing, and behavioral and leadership assessments (which are increasingly being used).

Most of all, I talk with search committees about broadening their conception of leadership. Some committees genuinely want diversity, but do not necessarily want difference and become less enthusiastic when faced with challenges to their assumptions. Others are receptive to the notion that they must rethink the traditionally masculine picture of a leader. A search consultant like me can approach those committee members and ask them to reconsider when they respond negatively (as happens surprisingly often) to a female candidate who comes across in a powerful way or who does not display the qualities they believe represent leadership.

Assuming responsibility. Sometimes the committee just needs a little explicit direction. That's where those overseeing the search should step up. Trustees or hiring officers intent on having difference well represented in the finalist pool would be well advised to:

- Consider gender and other differences before building your search committee. In particular, this is an area where adding a young(ish) staff member (professional-development opportunity?) can often make a big impact, especially when that person is both sophisticated about difference and willing to speak up in the

committee room.

- Be clear in the leadership profile that candidates with a record of affirming difference will be valued in the selection process. Then be clear to the committee itself about the varied ways in which leadership can be displayed and the expectation that a strong finalist pool will include representation of more than one approach.
- Direct the search committees to select finalists who themselves value difference. To discern that, search committees must ask candidates to discuss examples that show how they have embraced difference and diversity through their own hiring and professional development of others.

What candidates can do. Like all good search consultants, I know my candidates, men and women. When I know that someone qualified for a position will not present as strongly as they could, I provide counsel ahead of time. "There are some things we should think through before the interview," I will say.

One thing I communicate is that interviewing is its own genre and province. A typical 75-minute session is a finite exercise that has its own rules and customs that must be learned and mastered. Among the advice I offer:

- Think ahead of time about how you want to come across to the committee. Sit tall and don't apologize.
- Consider your reputation. No interview starts as a blank slate. Candidates' résumés and reputations precede them, for better or worse. Before you get in the room, think about what they might be questioning about you. You will want to find a way to respond.
- Start strong. First impressions are critical. It is hard to undo perceptions that are established in those first few minutes.
- Take credit. Be ready to highlight your impact and achievements by having anecdotes at the ready that illustrate how you have approached various aspects of the job.
- Show confidence and presence. Committees are thinking: "Is this the person we want leading our institution? Would I follow this person?"

All of us involved in the hiring process benefit from a greater awareness of potentially gendered language and behavior. It is imperative that search-committee members, in particular, recognize the effect their perceptions can have on gender equality in leadership. If we want more women to ascend to top positions in higher education we must make the time and space of the interview session one that is fair and aware.

Robin Mamlet is managing partner of the education practice at the executive search firm Witt/Kieffer. Robin draws on nearly 35 years of experience in education, including 23 years in academic administration.