

FLEXIBLE MASCULINITIES AT WORK

The term **“flexible masculinities”** describes authentic expressions of masculinity that embody a full range of human characteristics, emotions, and behaviors.

Although there is no single “right” way to be a man, **certain social environments—including the workplace—put pressure on men to behave in a certain way.**¹ At the exclusion of other traits and behaviors, men are often expected to be²:



These expectations for men are widespread in society, and they are especially problematic in the workplace because masculine traits become the default expectation for the behavior of all employees, regardless of gender. These workplace expectations, called **masculine defaults**,³ are typically over-valued, and this overemphasis can negatively affect everyone at work.

Because of masculine defaults:

MEN

- Feel **pressured to follow masculine expectations** and behave in only one way to be successful at work.⁴
- Can **experience decline in their mental health** and ability to thrive at work.⁵

Using data from over 7,000 men working in offices across 13 different countries,⁶ we found that when masculine expectations in the workplace are **high**:

- **69%** of men experience **low psychological well-being**⁸—compared to only 38% of men in organizations with low masculine expectations.
- **34%** of men experience **high workplace withdrawal**⁹ (e.g., neglecting tasks, being late for work, making excuses to get out of work)—compared to only 5% of men in organizations with low masculine expectations.

By promoting flexible masculinities, leaders can address and mitigate masculine defaults to improve the well-being of people of all genders as well as organizations.

WOMEN AND NONBINARY PEOPLE

- Are disadvantaged because they don’t “fit” workplace cultures that value masculine defaults.¹⁰
- Are punished when they try to conform, and also when they don’t.¹¹

ORGANIZATIONS

- Overemphasize a narrow range of leadership traits and miss out on critical, broader-ranging skills and behaviors across their leadership.
- Fail to reward employees with a full range of human traits necessary for success.



PROMOTE FLEXIBLE MASCULINITIES IN 3 STEPS

1 Recognize the traits and behaviors that are valued in your workplace.

Scenario:

Joe and Chris are both high performers up for promotions. Joe is praised for being assertive and directive and is promoted. It is commented that Chris is humble and leads with a more collaborative approach; he is passed over for the promotion and recommended for some leadership skills training.

Ask Yourself:

Does your workplace reward traits that are stereotypically masculine (e.g., assertiveness, risk-taking, boldness) or stereotypically feminine (e.g., empathy, warmth, patience)?

Why It Matters:

- Historically, workplaces reward stereotypically masculine over stereotypically feminine traits and characteristics.¹²
- A wide range of leadership traits are important for individual and organizational health and productivity¹³ and should be welcomed and rewarded regardless of who is displaying them.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Notice situations when others, or yourself, default to “masculine” expectations. Reflect on how these assumptions shape your own behavior and your perceptions of others.



2 Acknowledge where your workplace could integrate more flexible thinking about gendered expectations.

Scenario:

Pablo and his wife are about to have their first baby, and he wants to take time off to bond with their new child. He overhears his co-workers saying his request is “taking it too far” and, “It’s not like he’s giving birth; why does he get to take a vacation while the rest of the team picks up the slack?”

Ask Yourself:

How often are people of all genders encouraged to put work above all other considerations, including their mental health, well-being, and loved ones?

Why It Matters:

- Masculine defaults not only harm others, but men themselves are harmed by the pressure and anxiety those defaults can create.¹⁴
- Although no one institution, person, or group is responsible for creating the problem, we all have the power to resist the ingrained urge to hold men to masculine defaults.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Challenge deeply embedded assumptions that men should prioritize work above their lives outside work. Make a point of engaging in dialogue when you notice instances of rigid thinking about gender norms and then use questions to probe where that thinking is coming from and how they might reframe their perspective.



3 Think systemically about how to mitigate masculine defaults and gender stereotypes in your workplace.

Scenario:

Dylan notices that the law firm has many more partners who are men than women and nonbinary people. When Dylan expresses this concern to a senior colleague, he replies, “Well, that’s how it’s always been. Just give it time.”

Ask Yourself:

In your workplace, where would you look for structural inequities? Would you know how to recognize them?

Why It Matters:

- Having more equal gender distributions at every level of an organization, including in roles that are traditionally considered “for women,” can promote more gender egalitarian beliefs.¹⁵
- Ensuring that promotion criteria are based on a broad range of traits traditionally associated with both men and women will result in a more well-rounded leadership team.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Reconfigure hiring policies and practices that disadvantage gender minorities.¹⁶ Begin formally rewarding traits stereotypically considered “feminine” such as cooperation in leadership evaluations. Review Catalyst Award-winning practices from [The Hartford](#) and [UPMC](#) to learn how these organizations have removed masculine defaults from their processes.



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ENDNOTES

¹ Berdahl, J. L., Cooper, M., Glick, P., Livingston, R. W., & Williams, J. C. (2018). [Work as a masculinity contest](#). *Journal of Social Issues*, 74(3), 422-448.

² Cejka, M. A. & Eagly, A. H. (1999). [Gender-stereotypic images of occupations correspond to the sex segregation of employment](#). *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25(4), 413-423; Prentice, D. A. & Carranza, E. (2002). [What women and men should be, shouldn't be, are allowed to be, and don't have to be: The contents of prescriptive gender stereotypes](#). *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 26(4), 269-281; Vandello, J. A. & Bosson, J. K. (2012). [Hard won and easily lost: A review and synthesis of theory and research on precarious manhood](#). *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, 14(2), 101-113.

³ Cheryan, S. & Markus, H. R. (2020). [Masculine defaults: Identifying and mitigating hidden cultural biases](#). *Psychological Review*, 127(6), 1022-1052.

⁴ Berdahl et al., (2018).

⁵ Glick, P., Berdahl, J. L., & Alonso, N. M. (2018). [Development and validation of the Masculinity Contest Culture scale](#). *Journal of Social Issues*, 74(3), 449-476.

⁶ Data were collected from 7,044 men (0.2% identified as trans men) across 13 countries: Australia, Canada, United States, Germany, India, Italy, Mexico, the Netherlands, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Participants represented a wide range of industries, but were mostly from manufacturing (15.5%); high tech/telecom (14.2%); and healthcare, education, government, and nonprofit (14.5%). The average participant age was 42 years old, and ages ranged from 18 to 77.

⁷ Masculine workplace expectations were measured using the following prompt and three items created by the MARC research team: In many workplaces, men are expected to act masculine, such as by being aggressive, competitive, independent, and taking risks. In other workplaces, these expectations are less restrictive. Think about your workplace, and rate your agreement with each statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). 1) In my workplace, men are expected to be masculine as it is described above. 2) Men who act masculine are held in high regard in my workplace. 3) I would be made fun of for not acting as masculine at work. Together, these three items were highly reliable ($\alpha = .88$) and were thus combined to create a composite whereby higher values indicate greater levels of masculine expectations in the workplace. The composite was then dichotomized where responses 1-3 were coded as low masculine expectations and 4-6 were coded as high masculine expectations.

⁸ Psychological well-being was measured with an adapted form of Ryff's Psychological Well-Being scale: Ryff, C. D. & Keyes, C. L. M. (1995). [The structure of psychological well-being revisited](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(4), 719-727. Participants responded to seven items on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) Likert scale. These items were averaged to create a composite ($\alpha = .72$), where higher values indicate greater levels of psychological well-being. The composite was then dichotomized where responses 1-3 were coded as low psychological well-being and 4-6 were coded as high psychological well-being.

⁹ Work withdrawal was measured with five items on a 1 (never) to 6 (always) scale drawn from: Hanisch, K. A. & Hulin, C. L. (1990). [Job attitudes and organizational withdrawal: An examination of retirement and other voluntary withdrawal behaviors](#). *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 37(1), 60-78; Hanisch, K. A. & Hulin, C. L. (1991). [General attitudes and organizational withdrawal: An evaluation of a causal model](#). *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 39, 110-128. Our adapted scale demonstrated excellent internal reliability ($\alpha = .87$), thus the items were averaged to create a composite, where higher values indicate greater amounts of withdrawal behaviors at work. The composite was then dichotomized where responses 1-3 were coded as low work withdrawal and 4-6 were coded as high work withdrawal.

¹⁰ Lyness, K. S. & Heilman, M. E. (2006). [When fit is fundamental: Performance evaluations and promotions of upper-level female and male managers](#). *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91(4), 777-785.

¹¹ Heilman, M. E. & Okimoto, T. G. (2007). [Why are women penalized for success at male tasks? The implied communality deficit](#). *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92(1), 81-92; McKinnon, M. & O'Connell, C. (2020). [Perceptions of stereotypes applied to women who publicly communicate their STEM work](#). *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 7, 160.

¹² Cheryan & Markus (2020).

¹³ Varney, J. (2022, September 12). [10 qualities of a good leader](#). *Southern New Hampshire University*.

¹⁴ DiMuccio, S., Sattari, N., Shaffer, E., & Cline, J. (2021). [Masculine anxiety and interrupting sexism at work](#). *Catalyst*; Mayer, D. M. (2018, October 8). [How men get penalized for straying from masculine norms](#). *Harvard Business Review*.

¹⁵ Eagly, A. H. & Koenig, A. M. (2021). [The vicious cycle linking stereotypes and social roles](#). *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 30(4), 343-350.

¹⁶ [Break the cycle - Eliminating gender bias in talent management systems](#). (2018). Catalyst.