

Leadership Excellence and Gender in Organizations

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Identity partners: Facilitating women's development of improbable work identities

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For many women, excelling in careers in business, STEM, or leadership feels out of reach given the male-dominated nature of these fields. For others, pursuing a career of any kind clashes with cultural or religious expectations that align with traditional gender roles. For women to step outside these constraints to develop an improbable work-related identity – whether as a high-powered executive or a professional at any level – may require investments beyond those typically associated with constructing a work identity. Numerous studies have investigated the effects of training, mentoring, networking, and role models on women’s career development (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011; Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Quimby & De Santis, 2006; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Less explored are the effects of one-on-one peer relationships from both work and non-work domains (Lepisto, Crosina, & Pratt, 2014; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). In this paper I build theory regarding the influence of an identity partner – an individual who plays a significant role in shaping and influencing an individual’s identity development (see Cooper, Moteabbed, Rockmann, & Thatcher, 2017) – on women’s ability to envision and develop a work identity rendered improbable by tensions between that identity and other deeply held elements of the self.