Safety in Numbers? Women Choose to Manage Smaller Teams due to Fewer Anticipated Negative Outcomes

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Summary

Women typically lead smaller teams than men. Prior research attributed this to men being chosen to lead larger teams. We demonstrate a novel reason: women choose to manage smaller teams because, compared to men, they anticipate facing more negative outcomes in larger groups.

Study 1

An analysis of 2011-2021 Congressional data finds that Congresswomen chair smaller committees than Congressmen

28 committee members

20 committee members
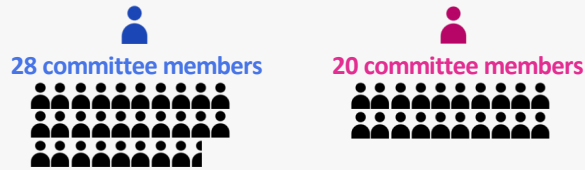
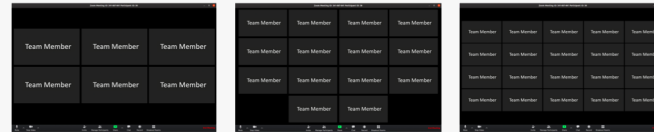*N = 188 committees | Men: M = 28.41, SD = 14.95 | Women: M = 19.94, SD = 12.00 | t(186) = 3.05, p = 0.002, d = 0.58*

■ Women
■ Men

Study 2

Women prefer leading and believe they are better at managing smaller teams compared to men

N = 499 | Prefer: t(493) = 2.80, p = 0.005, d = 0.25 | Best At: t(493) = 2.62, p = 0.009, d = 0.24 | Productive: t(493) = 2.91, p = 0.004, d = 0.26

■ Women
■ Men

Study 3

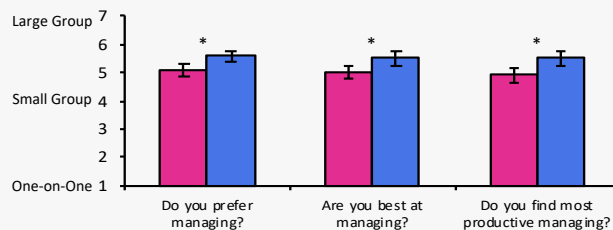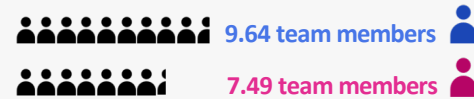Participants were told to indicate their desire to manage one of three Zoom rooms for a group task

Men had a stronger desire than women to lead the largest Zoom room

N = 288 | Men: M = 3.44, SD = 10.10 | Women: M = 2.89, SD = 5.64 | t(286) = 2.46, p = 0.014, d = 0.25)

9.64 team members

7.49 team members

Women reported a smaller ideal team size

N = 288 | Men: M = 9.64, SD = 10.10 | Women: M = 7.49, SD = 5.64 | t(286)=2.06, p = 0.040, d =.25)

Women indicated lower psychological safety while managing large teams

N = 288 | Men: M = 4.55, SD = 1.70 | Women: M = 3.97, SD = 1.80 | t(286) = -2.78, p = 0.006, d = -.34

Psychological safety beliefs significantly mediated the effect of gender on desire to manage a large team (indirect effect = 0.26, 95% CI [0.09, 0.49], p = 0.004)

■ Women
■ Men

Discussion

Women have narrower spans of control than men (Lee & Kray, 2021). This work demonstrates that **women may choose to lead smaller teams.**

As teams expand, so do social risks, especially for women. Women feel less confident than men at work (Herbst, 2020), and women who display confidence and self-promote experience adversity and lower their social attractiveness (Rudman, 1998; McClean et al., 2018).

As the **number of direct reports influences career trajectory and compensation** (Day et al., 2014), women's preferences for smaller teams likely has consequential implications.

References

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Rudman, L. A. (1998). Self-promotion as a risk factor for women: the costs and benefits of counterstereotypical impression management. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 74(3), 629.

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