

Leadership and Gender: Why it Matters - How it's Changing

By Anne Perschel



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that promote more women to top leadership teams as a strategy for business improvement. Anne also serves as a master executive coach at Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology coach certification program; is a board member and Vice President of Programming for the New England Society of Applied Psychology; a member of the board of the Girl Scouts of Central and Western Mass; and serves on the membership committee of the Human Resource Leadership Forum.

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The article emerged from a conversation with Linda Carli, co-author Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership and social psychology professor, in which we discussed our research and our experiences. We did what women do so well. We shared, built on what the other said, opened new doors and possibilities, and enjoyed the energy of the exchange.

So many women, so few in leadership roles - why?

The window of opportunity to free women and men from the confines of gender stereotypes is opening now. To take advantage of and further this change it is important to understand the history of gender roles, particularly in relation to leadership, and why the shift is happening now. Longstanding stereotypes about men being strong and assertive and women being communal, soft and understanding are key to understanding why women who are successful achievers are typically not in key leadership roles. But this begs a bigger question. Why do we think of leadership as masculine in the first place? And how does seeing leadership in this way create a blind spot for leadership done differently but with the same—or even better—results?

A brief history of leadership in the 20th century begins to answer the first question. In the early 1900's when most people were not well-educated, the "great man" theory espoused leadership by a small number of men thought to possess superior intellectual and moral capabilities. Three factors led to a shift away from this theory after World War II. First, the G.I. bill enabled more men to become well educated. At the same time the manufacturing industry in the U.S. was booming and creating a need for more managers.

Finally, as college educated G.I.'s filled these roles, they formed a generation of managers and leaders who shared the military's command and control style. These factors perpetuated hierarchical organizations with cascading levels of management and the prevalence of the command and control model. In this system, most leaders were men and leadership was equated with masculine traits including the tendency to be dominant, aggressive, and individualistic, to take charge, provide answers and exert control. (1)

In the late 20th century, as women took on management roles, they had to learn how to survive in the command and control culture. It is a well-known phenomenon that minority group members who enter the dominant culture blend in at first and are especially likely to be seen in stereotypical terms when they are viewed as tokens. Consultants who work on diversity issues refer to the "rule of three" - the need to include at least three members of a minority group in order for their voices to be heard and to influence the dominant culture. As a result of being one or two among a peer group of men, women in business roles still walk a very tight line. They live in a double bind.

Women are required to demonstrate just enough masculinity - assertiveness and individualism - and to balance this with the right degree of femininity - softness and community orientation. They receive little credit for either and are subject to criticism if they stray too much to either side. "A woman who is strong and assertive, a command and control type, is seen as difficult and bitchy, but a woman who is warm and helpful is seen as weak and incompetent," says Carli.

On the other hand when men are warm, empathic, and thoughtful they are perceived very favorably but behaving this way is seen as a bonus not a requirement. Men have more leeway and options for how to lead. Women have fewer degrees of freedom and are held to different

and higher standards. As a result, they have to be more conscious of everything they do, another factor that makes their challenge more difficult.

How Gender Stereotypes are Changing

The good news for men, women, and business is that women are resolving this double bind through transformational leadership which plays to their strengths—developing relationships and focusing on the greater good. Transformational leaders are also more successful and achieve better results. Why? According to Carli the modern organization has to be fast and nimble. Leaders have to create an environment that encourages self-motivated people who learn and adapt quickly. This takes a highly empowered work force that can only be built by leaders who hone communal qualities such that every person knows they play an important role in advancing the organization's goals.

Transformational leadership is fast becoming the standard for great leadership. As this happens, women—who demonstrate greater propensity for this type of leadership—are being noticed as well. In turn, men are also being freed from gender stereotypes and the pressure to be aggressive and individualistic.

Equally as important to achieving this shift away from gender stereotypes is the fact that men are participating more fully in family roles—as caretakers of children, home and aging parents. Carli states that personalities are driven by opportunity. We develop the characteristics required to fill our roles, meet goals, and address the challenges presented along the way. This is illustrated by the development of greater assertiveness by women in professional roles. She also notes a recent Gallup poll indicating that 29% of men would stay home to raise their children if they had the choice. If their hopes are realized they will increase their interpersonal skills and ability to care for and about others.

In summary, as men and women take advantage of increased opportunities to participate in roles once reserved for the “other” sex, gender stereotypes, including those about leadership, are and will continue to fade.

(1) Perschel, A. (2009) “Women in Leadership: From Politically Correct to Competitive Advantage.” Available at germaneconsulting.com.

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