

Common Differences

IS GENDER'S IMPACT ON LEADERSHIP REAL OR PERCEIVED?

By Lori Pizzani

Effective leadership is vitally important within any organization. Yet there are times when subtle—or, sometimes, not-so-subtle—differences in the leadership approaches and styles of men and women are glaringly evident.

Though similarities and differences do exist between how males and females approach leadership roles, experts say that the line between the sexes is blurring, and both camps are migrating toward a new middle ground.

A January 2015 study on leadership by Pew Research Center, based on 1,835 surveyed responses, found that male and female leaders, when judged as to intelligence and innovation, were seen as displaying those qualities equally. Likewise, three-quarters of respondents viewed honesty as being equally shown by men

and women, and the majority of respondents indicated no difference between men and women regarding the all-important characteristics of decisiveness and ambition.

UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENCES

There are definitely differences in how men and women serve in leadership roles. For instance, 65% of those surveyed believed compassion to be more characteristic of women leaders. In addition, being organized was seen by nearly half of respondents (48%) as being a characteristically female trait. Women were also considered more ethical, more apt to provide fair pay and good benefits, and better at providing guidance and mentorship to younger employees. Men, on the other hand, were seen as more willing to take risks and better at negotiating profitable deals.

“There are differences between men and women, but even more so, differences *among* women,” says Suzanne Bates, a leadership expert, executive coach, and founder and CEO of Bates Communications, based in Wellesley, Massachusetts. “Leadership is changing, but our thinking is stuck in the past.” Her company’s research on women executives shows that women are just as confident as men, meaning they are regarded by others as decisive risk takers who hold themselves and others accountable for their actions. “They make things happen in organizations,” Bates says.

Experts we spoke to said that these are often seen as being male traits. Yet other perceptions, including those of

peers and managers, tell a different story.

“Women are rated higher in qualities including integrity, concern, humility, interactivity, and inclusiveness. It may be that these social/emotional qualities—while vital to driving organizational outcomes—may not be as valued as some of the qualities men exhibit,” Bates says. “Men are rated slightly higher for restraint and practical wisdom.” These differences may explain why some organizations do not always value the qualities of leadership that women bring to the senior ranks.

“The mistake organizations make again and again in women’s [leadership] development programs is to send women through the same courses [as men] and tell them they need to work on confidence,” Bates says. When women are repeatedly told they lack confidence, it often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Men also feel anxious and uncertain at times, but they may not talk about it as often. According to Bates, what needs to be recognized is that women leaders don’t need to be “fixed” but rather “that there are actually more differences among women than between men and women in terms of leadership style.” The goal should not be to help women succeed so much as to help *each* woman succeed.

The variation between male and female leaders often comes down to how they respond when they are stressed or get derailed, says Barbara Mintzer-McMahon, professional training and coaching consultant and founder and CEO of the Center for Transitional Management in Orinda, California. According to her, women under stress go into “worrier” mode and say, “I can’t do this; I need more preparation,” while men go into “take the hill” mode and say, “Let me tell you what we’re going to do.” Leaders often need to be more self-aware, more conscious of how they react when stressed and what behaviors they exhibit, she says. This kind of “mindful leadership” allows us to understand the way we operate and how this impacts the work, the team, performance, and long-term sustainability.

Within an organization, it’s also necessary for leaders to look at where their stressors are coming from and what enhancers and challenges are preventing maximized performance, she adds.

THE POWER OF PERCEPTION

Overall, there are more similarities than differences in the behaviors of male and female managers, concluded Wanda T. Wallace and Robert B. Kaiser in the research report “Gender Bias and Substantive Differences in Ratings of Leadership Behavior: Toward a New Narrative.” Wallace, president and CEO of Leadership Forum Inc. in Durham, North Carolina, says that very often it simply comes down to style

KEY POINTS

Men and women have many similar leadership characteristics.

Differences are often found in leadership styles, individual personalities, and others’ perceptions.

The best leadership committees have a blend of men and women.

differences and perceptions.

The study found that female managers are perceived as being too forceful, controlling, outspoken, and demanding while struggling with being hands-off, empowering, and receptive to pushback. On the positive side, women were rated higher than men in providing reinforcement for satisfactory performance and for giving feedback—though they were sometimes viewed as overdoing it. Men were seen as being too hands-off and light on operational behaviors such as attention to detail and follow-through but were rated better on strategic behaviors and reacting to problems rather than proactively addressing them.

The truth is that “what makes a great leader doesn’t have a gender identity,” says Wallace. “The behaviors of great leaders are the behaviors of great leaders.” What typically sets men and women leaders apart are style differences and the perceptions of others about their leadership qualities.

Although differences do exist—for example, women look more at the long term and men the shorter term—others’ perceptions are absolutely key.

THERE ARE ACTUALLY MORE DIFFERENCES AMONG WOMEN THAN BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN IN TERMS OF LEADERSHIP STYLE.

“When a man strongly asserts his point of view and autonomy, he is hailed as a strong, competent leader,” says Carol Vallone Mitchell, founding principal at Talent Strategy Partners in Wilmington, Delaware, and author of the book *Breaking Through “Bitch”: How Women Can Shatter Stereotypes and Lead Fearlessly*. “When a woman exhibits the same executive qualities, she is labeled a brusque, overbearing bitch,” she adds. But, she cautions, women cannot and *should* not try to act like men.

“Women who are successful use an interpersonal, democratic style that embraces collaborative leadership,” Mitchell says. In fact, many men are starting to adopt these characteristics, which build trust as well as teams. “The market, especially since the 2008 crash, has forced companies to change the way they operate. This is the new normal, and so companies have accepted changes,” she adds. “Inclusiveness is being brought into the world, and I think we’ll see more acceptance of empathy. This will likely become the new must-have leadership model. The old guard and the need for men to be in power will be slowly filtered out.”

IN TRANSITION

Even if leadership is in the stages of a positive evolution, stereotypes do persist. Like it or not, persistent female stereotypes can lead to present-day biases.

“As a female leader, I often feel like I am walking a tightrope,” says Katie Christy, founder and CEO of Activate Your Talent in Fayetteville, North Carolina. “If I’m aggressive, I’m labeled as bossy. If I show compassion, I’m labeled as emotional. If I want to have a family, I’m written off as unable to

fully invest in a professional position. If I don’t want to have a family, I’m written off as socially deficient.” Christy says female leaders may find themselves trying to operate with the “perfect” Goldilocks style of leadership—not too hot, not too cold. But, she adds, the goal should be to be respectful to all so everyone can be who they truly are.

Women are still seen as remaining more open to self-development and feedback and amenable to addressing what they’ve learned. They’re also seen as volunteering more than men and “just getting it done” when there’s a task at hand, says Cathy Kushner, special assistant to the president at Excelsior College in Albany, New York, and director of the Murray H. Block Leadership Education and Development Center. But differences are narrowing, and the stereotypical perceptions are starting to break down. “We’re in a better place today,” she says. “We must be sure to steer clear of women stereotypes and look at each person individually. We need to be gender neutral.”

NEXT-GENERATION LEADERS

“Over the past 20 years, we’ve been growing next-generation leaders, and now fully 40% of these are women,” says Keith M. Eigel, co-founder of The Leaders Lyceum, a consulting firm in Atlanta, Georgia. He is also co-author (with Karl W. Kuhnert) of *The Map: Your Path to Effectiveness in Leadership, Life, and Legacy*. While he hasn’t seen significant differences between male and female leaders, he sees differences in individual personalities and the way that each person approaches leadership. He also says, however, that there’s a big difference between skillsets and developmental maturity, including the ability to reason, build a team, and deal with challenges. “It often comes down to where leaders are in the developmental journey.”

Eigel explains that there are different and distinct levels that leaders typically grow into, attain, and then move on from to achieve a higher level. Specific levels often correspond to ages and developmental maturity, but it’s often a challenging circumstance, such as a landmark event or hardship, that fuels “vertical growth,” he says. Leaders’ growth happens in the same way from person to person, although growth can be arrested along the way.

STIRRED, NOT SHAKEN

Multiple research studies and explorations of the differences between the leadership approaches of men and women show that gender differences actually add value to the collective leadership within most organizations.

The consensus of leadership experts is that having a leadership effort within an organization that includes both men and women is critical to success. Despite their different natural tendencies, strengths, competencies, and approaches, blending the two genders toward common business goals is the most effective leadership approach for a company.

To make a successful leadership plan work, mixed leadership teams are best as long as there is coherence, says Annette B. Czernik, founder and managing partner at Inspired Executives in Frankfurt, Germany, and a veteran executive coach. According to Czernik, CEOs need to make a new and better

leadership model part of their agenda and become part of the performance-management/objective-setting process.

There are cultural differences, however, if not gender variables, that will impact leadership operations and day-to-day interactions, says Czernik. In the US, for example, a goal is established for an organization's leadership team to work toward, with individuals checking in along the way; in Germany, individuals tend to check in at deadline. Further, the feedback process is different, with leaders in Germany typically providing more directness in their approach (though this is not meant as personal critique). "Such directness wouldn't work in the US. Separating task and person is hard. The social structure is so important," Czernik says.

A BROADER VIEW OF LEADERSHIP

We are seeing an evolution in how leadership is considered within businesses, and many are showing a desire to change their approach. Rather than being seen as needing to fix women so they can be great leaders, organizations want to change and embrace all individuals as they are. This must start at the top, though, says Bates. "Organizations need a framework for what good leadership is." In her view, companies need to think about their leadership initiatives and goals and how to adopt an inclusive culture and then strategize how best to achieve those goals and take the necessary action.

KEEP GOING

Career Success: Navigating the New Work Environment [www.cfainstitute.org]

Additional Resources for Achieving Career Success: <http://cfa.is/1RPEoE7>

Bates suggests that each company's leadership carefully analyze its culture and clearly identify what is standing in the way of progress. Then each organization must truly embrace a broader view of leadership and what it will take to get where they want to go.

Christy suggests abandoning the male versus female debate altogether and adopting what she calls "full-spectrum leadership: the ability to possess a balance of both masculine (assertive and task-based) and feminine (relationship-oriented and democratic) traits and have the emotional intelligence to know when to utilize each." She suggests that full-spectrum leadership be built on having each leader embrace four pillars: (1) trust (establishing solid relationships built on confidence); (2) receptivity (being open and using intuition as a compass); (3) vulnerability (being aware of one's limitations and asking for help as appropriate); and (4) inclusiveness (soliciting many voices and listening to all of them).

Great individual leaders understand the need to embrace a difficult challenge when it occurs. "This is not easy, but it provides a great opportunity to grow," says Eigel. Leaders may also have their thinking challenged along the way, which provides an excellent opportunity to pause and decide how they are going to authentically contribute to the leadership initiative.

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"Perception Is the Co-Pilot to Reality"

Carla Harris, managing director and vice chairman of global wealth management at Morgan Stanley, began her career on Wall Street nearly 30 years ago after graduating from Harvard (undergrad and MBA). She realized quickly that the industry was far from the meritocracy she expected it to be—the human element interferes too much for true objectivity. Consequently, Harris developed a few pearls of wisdom for surviving (and thriving) on Wall Street, which she shared at the inaugural CFA Institute Women in Investment Management conference in 2015. In brief, her pearls include the following:

- **Perception is the co-pilot to reality.** As Harris puts it, "A very big component of your success equation is the perception that the marketplace has about you." This perception may or may not be the same as the one you have about yourself, so it's worth investigating and managing that alignment.
- **You must be comfortable with taking some risks.** To differentiate yourself in the marketplace, you need unique knowledge, experience, skill, and/or relationships. Developing these often requires taking some risks.

- **Nobody is you the way you can be you.** Trying to operate in the marketplace under the guise of a wholly inauthentic persona requires mental capital that you could instead be employing to positively differentiate yourself. It's not worth it.
- **There are two types of currency in a work environment: performance currency and relationship currency.** The value of your performance currency is quite dependent on the value of your relationship currency, because it is your relationships that will bring attention to your performance.
- **Success does not just happen.** You must take full responsibility for your career and be intentional about managing it.

Video of Harris's full presentation "Expect to Win: Proven Strategies for Thriving in the Workplace" can be viewed at <http://bcove.me/w7bpemlk>. A Take 15 interview, "What It Takes to Win on Wall Street: Proven Strategies," is available at <http://bcove.me/b47cwp9r>.