

Introduction

There is a lot of ambivalence on women's leadership. If a woman is successful in a male-dominated organization, she is considered competent, but is less liked than equally successful men. On the other hand, if a woman is nice, she is liked but not respected.

I have had the rare and unique privilege of commanding soldiers for nearly 38 years, and now leading schools where nearly 85 percent of the teachers are women. So you can see I have a lot of experience on gender-related issues in leadership. For starters, men and women are different and their styles of leadership are equally different. Men are from Mars and women are from Venus!

Nearly all the literature on leadership is male-dominated. The Alpha male is considered to be the dominant leadership model. Despite a quantum increase in female employees in all work places, there has been no change in our approach to leadership development. There have been two major impediments in development of female leadership. Male egos find it difficult to accept female leaders; but paradoxically, women largely favour male bosses. Moreover, women see themselves essentially as home-makers and not leaders.

The Female Brain

The vast majority of discussions on female leadership is misinformed and lacks neuro-scientific and genetic basis. It is, therefore, not surprising that several myths and half-truths are making the rounds to the detriment of women leaders.

Male and female brains are not the same. I will briefly describe the uniqueness of the female brain.

- a. The female brain is deeply affected by massive **hormones** that change a woman's reality often from week to week. The three most important hormones are estrogen or the mother of all hormones, its sister progesterone, and oxytocin, which makes women more empathic than men.

- b. As estrogen floods the female brain, women focus intensely on their **emotions, communication** and **relationships**.

- c. Women have 11 percent more neurons in their brain centres for hearing and language. Moreover, the **hippocampus** which controls memory and emotions is larger in the female brain. This means that women are better than men in expressing their emotions and remembering details of past emotional details.

Consequently, women place greater reliance on relationships, possess greater empathy, can read body language and faces with psychic efficiency, and have the ability to defuse conflict.

Gender Leadership Characteristics

The hormonal differences between men and women impacts upon their leadership preferences as under:



Transactional Leadership	Transformational
Hierarchical	Networking
Ends justify the means	Means are more important
Reason	Emotions
Rules	Relationship
Competition	Cooperation
Self interest	Group interest
Less empathic	More empathic
Withhold information	Share information
Ego Slows down unlearning	Unlearning is easier

Challenges in Workplace

Of all the challenges women face at the workplace, managing **work-life balance** is the toughest – child care, domestic chores, single parenting, running the home, and family responsibilities can be daunting. In turn these affect efficiency and commitment at work. These challenges are often put forward as reasons for not engaging in self-development.

Everyone faces problems of one kind or the other. An individual is born in suffering, some more, some less. Suffering is a part of human reality. If life has meaning, suffering too must have meaning. Suffering makes us stronger, more determined and better. It takes us to greater heights of human existence and is, therefore, not necessarily a bad thing.

I will argue that there is an urgent need to break out of this trap. The answer at the workplace is not more professional development; the answer is more **self-development**. Self-development leads to positivity, resilience, heightened self-esteem, and awareness of one's signature strengths. These emotional qualities are the foundation for wellbeing and happiness. Empowered women are able to deal with their personal problems better; they become better mothers, spouses, and great teachers in school.

Self-development is the golden key. **Self-development first, professional development later.**

The second challenge for women is to **look upon themselves as leaders**, individuals, and persons having an identity. Over the millennium, women have considered themselves as home-makers with the man of the house as the chief bread earner. This changed long back. Female managers like to work in functional specialties like HR rather than line management. They also prefer not to travel much. It is, therefore, not surprising that women make up only 3 % CEOs and 18 % senior managers in Fortune 500 companies.

A spinoff from the leadership factor is that many women managers look upon their workplace position as another job to be done. There is no quest for higher learning and greater professionalism.

The third challenge. A leader must be **visionary** regardless of gender. Leadership is about transformation, about change. That comes from vision. No vision means no leadership. Surveys reveal that women score low on envisioning – the ability to recognize new opportunities and emerging market trends, and thereafter, developing appropriate direction strategies. This appears to be a stumbling block in their journey to the top.

There are three possible explanations for women being judged less visionary than men. First, having nurtured their families for centuries, safety and security has become paramount in a woman's life. So it is natural for women to **avoid taking risks**, and being less entrepreneurial than men. Second, since women get into detailing and peripherals, they **are not big picture thinkers**. And thirdly, women are not comfortable with **envisioning the future**. Leaders are required to present an inspiring narrative to their followers about the future. On their part, women have the natural habit of

mastering details, and achieving quantifiable objectives. They are more comfortable being known as no-nonsense persons, competent, and in control rather than being visionary.

The fourth challenge is the **glass-ceiling effect** – unseen barriers that prevent women from reaching the top rung of the corporate ladder. Undoubtedly, male egos, male advocacy, and sexual discrimination are responsible for this. To make matters difficult, high performing women do not receive sponsorship. They underestimate the value of sponsorship and place their future in the hands of hard work. Sponsorship has to be managed carefully as it can be mistaken for sexual interest.

There is another discriminatory factor that contributes to the glass-ceiling in a subtle way. Men get promoted on their potential, whereas women are assessed on their performance, thus slowing down their progress. In India, 45 % women believe that they are treated unfairly in their workplace because of their gender. See Figure 1 below.

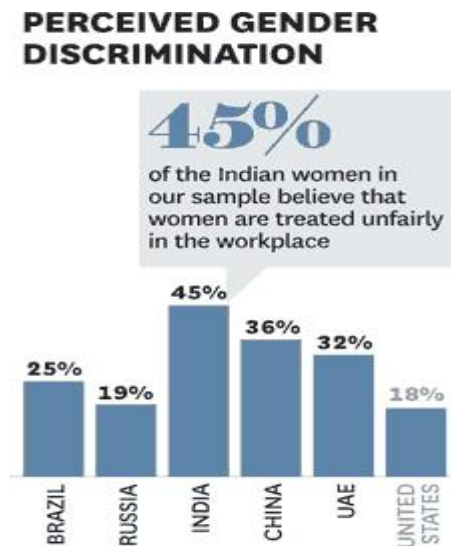


Figure 1: Perceived Gender Discrimination

Mentoring

Of all the strategies to develop high-potential women leaders, **mentoring** is undoubtedly the best. Mentors are not sponsors; they do not play an advocacy role in favour of their protégé. The aim of mentoring is more of **self-actualization**, level 5 in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and developing leadership competencies for the 21st century. I do not favour mentors coaching their mentees for professional development; because there is a danger that mentoring can turn into sponsorship. I believe that is the role of the CEO and other senior executives.

The selection of the mentor is the key to success. The mentor must possess a balance of feminine and masculine traits – an integrated person. Women respond more positively and proactively to such persons, and, therefore, there are greater chances of the programme being successful.

The **functions of a mentor** would be:

- a. Serve as a role model.
- b. Focus on personal development and self-actualization including feedback.
- c. Familiarize their mentees with the attributes of the female brain and the role of hormones, and how they can be leveraged as leaders.
- d. Create cognitive dissonance, to enable unlearning.
- e. Increase mentee's sense of competence and self-worth.
- f. Assist in identifying "blind spots."
- g. Advise on how to overcome gender related obstacles.

The Way Ahead

There is no such thing as a unisex brain. Men and women are wired differently. So let us not pretend that they are the same. To do so is doing disservice to women. This I believe is the start point, to **understand and cope with the challenges of female leadership**. I would say that several women would not have in-depth knowledge about the effects of their various hormones. Ignoring the biological differences between men and women and the pivotal role hormones play in female chemistry, also overlooks the way women process thoughts and play out their emotions.

When women are asked what wishes they would like a fairy god mother to grant them, the common answer is: *"Joy in my life, a fulfilling relationship, and less stress with more personal time."* Modern life makes these objectives difficult to achieve. This is a pipe dream and women must gear themselves to face the hard realities of the 21st century. Likewise, men need to acquire many of the leadership traits of the 21st century that are predominantly feminine, like relationships, networking and collaboration. By intensive training and mentoring it is possible to **narrow the gap between the male and female brain**. The human brain is plastic and will respond to re-wiring.

Gender leadership should be placed high on the agenda of leadership development. Issues that require brainstorming and debating are many, for example, **how to nurture women who display clear leadership potential?** How to deal with

male biases against women leaders? The leadership track we have introduced is one giant step in this direction; but we are looking for more ideas.

Conclusion

Man is bisexual. Unfortunately, men go through their lives suppressing their femininity and women go through their lives suppressing their masculinity. When the two merge into one the true leader is born – the unisex leader. Can we at least make a move towards this direction?

Leadership is an art and a science like any other subject or aspect of life. In fact, there are more intangibles in this domain, and this is why leadership training is exacting. It places heavy demands and is not for the faint-hearted. The pace and competition in life is awesome, leaders are expected to be accessible 24x7 and that blurs the boundaries between home and work. There are intense demands on time too. Leaders need thinking time, leaders realize that excessive hours at work eat into their personal and social time, and leaders are required to make personal and family sacrifices.

Leadership generates great mental pressures and literally drains one's emotional energy at times.

Are you ready to become leaders?