

Gender Leadership

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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**.

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?