

Gender Differences in Leadership
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The literature on Gender Differences in Leadership is a compound of divergent views, with little, if any, sign of reconciliation. At one extreme are those researchers who insist that women's ways of leading differ markedly from men's ways of leading. So distinct are the differences that Judy B. Rosener, (1995), A professor in the Graduate School of Management at the University of California, characterizes female management as "interactive" and male leadership as "command-and-control." Women leaders care, share, and nurture according to Professor Rosener (1995, p120).

Not so for male leaders, warns Professor Rosener, for whom career objectives, outcomes, and bottom lines are a priority. Male leaders show little, if any, concern with breaking down the barriers which separate people. On the contrary, their management style encourages status distinctions, rigid boundaries, and hierarchical divisions. Building relationships with subordinates, spending time with those whose concerns are only remotely related to the business opening their door to walks-ins—such behavior flies in the face of both their formal training and experience (Rosner, 1995, p.120).

Far less rigidly hierarchical, less formal, and more broadly communicative are female leaders, observes Sally Helgesen (1995) in her book entitled "The Female Advantage." There Helgesen points out that female leaders constantly model behavior which breaks down status distinctions. "Not letting their role get in the way." Helgesen continues, "they seek to empower those around them by being direct and natural in a way that minimizes their own ego and strips them of the trappings of power which emphasizes boundaries and divisions" (p.144).

Sandra Kurtzig (Rudolph, 1990), states that "a woman can show warmth that a man can't." As founder and president of ASK Computer Systems, Kurtzig admits that she has no qualms about "...walking around and stroking people...complimenting them in front of their peers and going up and hugging them" (p.1-2). Nancy Badore, Executive Director of Ford Motor Company's Executive Development Center Helgesen, (1995), makes a similar admission when she describes herself as being the crazy one in the organization.

[Being crazy] has to do with giving myself permission to be fully me, which is the only way I can be creative and spark creativity in others. Being crazy is also not letting my role here get in the way of being able to learn what I need to know. Not becoming so conscious of having an executive image in the company that I start pretending that I know what I don't. Being crazy means I let myself ask even really stupid questions. And I have to do that, because it's something I encourage around this place. When executives come in for the training programs, they're often reluctant to ask questions or challenge speakers, because they don't want to look like idiots. If we want to get them talking up the ladder - - sharing their ideas, not being afraid - we've got to get them past all that. One thing I can do is use myself as an example. They see I'm not afraid to look ridiculous, and that helps to set the tone. I'm very conscious of using myself as a model in this way, knowing full well that these guys might attribute the way I act to my being female (Helgesen, 1995, p. 151).

“Women are different,” states Diane Lewis (1998) rather matter-of-factly in her book Equal to the Challenge, “not just in the physical sense...but in dozens of more subtle ways; in our attitudes, our values, and our temperaments” (Introduction). Lewis continues: “These internal differences add up to one big external difference. We women often behave in ways contrary to our success, even to our survival, in the world of work” (Introduction).

For Lewis, as for countless other gender-based researchers during the last decade, “acting like a man” are characterizations whose reality “...is rooted in the basic facts of biology and physiology as well as in the fundamentally different ways in which boys and girls are raised and socialized in our culture” (Loden, 1985, p.63).

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Not surprisingly, then, female leaders, according to these researchers, bring to the workplace a gestalt, which contrasts sharply with that of male leaders. They point out that men and women differ when in their selection of general strategies for directing the work of subordinates (Powell, 1999). Women network; men do not. Women share information; men do not. Women place cooperation above competition; men do not. Women are more concerned with how things are done, with process, than with merely getting things done; they are more concerned with means than with ends. Unlike men, women do not have an instrumental view of work or of the workers. For women leaders, workers are ends in themselves, not means to an end.

In countless other ways, these researchers contend, female leaders differ from their male counterparts. For one thing, women structure things differently from men. When describing their roles in their organizations, women usually refer to themselves as being in the middle of things – not at the top, but in the center; not reaching down, but reaching out (Helgesen, 1995). For another, women are more accessible – twice as accessible as are their male counterparts (Powell, 1999). Even in their management of conflict or in their response to unscheduled office visits, men and women differ markedly, according to these researchers (Powell, 1999).

Leading the growing chorus of researchers who argue that successful female leaders do not possess qualities and skills different from male leaders are Jeffrey Sonnenfeld of Emory University and Cynthia Fuchs Epstein of City University of New York, Sonnenfeld (1995) points to the flaws in the research design and methodology in Judith B. Rosener’s study – a study which sparked vigorous debate about how women and men lead. Of Rosener’s study, Sonnenfeld (1995) writes:

Few of my colleagues would be persuaded by the survey, where a self-selected sample of an unspecified number of members of a women’s club were solicited and over two-thirds did not respond. Of those who responded, we do not know what industry and function they represent or even what hierarchical levels.

Finally, those women were asked to name their own comparison group of male counterparts. Distortion here is quite possible in that some women may have selected friends that were more accessible than their true hierarchical peers may have been (p.160).

Epstein (1990) generalizes her attack on gender-based research, insisting that “the category is people, not men and women” (p.150).

Moreover, both Sonnenfeld and Epstein maintain that to argue that females bring to the workforce qualities and skills which are different from those of males is to argue that there is a

characteristically feminine style of management. Such an argument, they contend, does not square with the reality. The reality, they insist, is that many of the qualities ascribed to female leaders aptly describe male leaders and unfairly omit world-class female leaders like Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi, and Eva Peron. In any case, ascribing one set of qualities to women and a different set to men is sex typing and sex typing, they warn, is wrong for several reasons. First (Sonnenfeld, 1995) it implies that men and women conceptualize power and influence in opposite ways. Second (Sonnenfeld, 1995), it denies the legitimacy of women to differ in style from one another. Third (Sonnenfeld 1995), it distorts the profile of male leadership,

“Collapsing all varieties of male leaders into one common militaristic style” (p.160). Fourth (Sonnenfeld, 1995), it implies that a particular gender has a monopoly on a given style of leadership.

According to Gary N. Powell (1999), nothing could be further from the truth. In a widely accepted scholarly review of the past few decades of academic research, Powell concludes “sex differences are absent in task-oriented behavior, people-oriented behavior, effectiveness ratings of actual managers, and subordinates’ responses to actual managers” (p.165).

Powell (1999) goes on to say that few studies which found stereotypical differences of management behavior and motivation were conducted in artificial laboratory or classroom settings, not the actual workplace, and often were based on a past generation’s unequal ratios between sexes. Finally, Powell (1999) points out, where the research suggested differences in the range of influence styles and a slight difference in treatment by managers of poor performers, the differences are often more a function of a leader’s self-confidence than of gender.

But even if one concedes that there are differences in leadership styles between men and women, argues Jane Mansbridge (1991), the differences (About one-fifth of a standard deviation) are so small that they are statistically insignificant. Mansbridge (1991) continues, “...the difference between men and women styles may be much smaller than the differences between managers of small and large companies, of old and new companies, or old and young managers” (pp.154-155).

Once again, then, to the question, “Do male and female leaders lead in pronouncedly different ways?” There is only one responsible answer---which male and which female? To insist otherwise, Mansbridge (1991) implies, is to beat a dead horse. The truth is that distinctions between male and female styles of leadership are, at best, deceptive and, at their worst, gross over simplifications of reality. The leadership styles of two well-known mayors of our nation’s capital offer a case in point.

Marion Barry served four terms as mayor of Washington, D.C. His third terms as mayor was interrupted in 1990, when he was arrested and convicted for possession of cocaine. After serving a six-month prison sentence, he returned to Washington and won a City Council seat. In 1994, he stunned his critics and opponents alike by winning the Democratic primary election with 47 percent of the vote enroute to his reelection to a fourth terms as mayor (Stewart, 1996).

Sharon Pratt Dixon began her 14-year association with the Potomac Electric Company in 1976. There, she served as associate general counsel, director of community affairs, and vice president of public policy. In 1990, Dixon left the private sector to win the office of mayor of Washington, D.C. becoming the first African American woman to serve as mayor of a major U.S. city (Mabunda, 1998).

Both Barry and Dixon are African American, both are lawyers by profession, and both are middle-class and middle-aged. Dixon is female; Barry is male. Yet, neither fits the stereotype of male and female leadership defined in gender-based studies of leadership. Barry, for example, is proof that a man sometimes leads in ways only a woman is supposed to lead. Dixon on the other hand, embodies leadership qualities which gender-based literature ascribes to males. The mayors’ styles of leadership are studies in contrast, to be sure, though with a surprisingly ironic twist.

Washingtonians generally characterize Barry’s style as interactive, transformational, at the center of the circle reaching out rather than at the top of the pyramid reaching down. Barry is perceived as warm, caring, sharing, intuitive, not hung up on hierarchy or protocol or on textbook management ideas. Barbara Washington Franklin (personal communication,

November 26, 2006), a prominent D.C. attorney, who has followed closely Barry's political career, characterizes the mayor as "open, accessible, down-to-earth, a hand-on, roll-up your sleeve, grassroots leader." And Mildred Beam Rukus (personal communication, November 30, 2006), a Georgetown-trained attorney who once worked for Barry, says of him that "he is creative, improvisational – a role player par excellence." Attorney Franklin attributes the mayor's open and flexible style to a self-confidence and moral aplomb born of experience garnered at all levels of city government – from the Finance committee to President of the Board of Education to members of the D.C. Council at large.

Washingtonians most familiar with the brief political career of Sharon Pratt Dixon, female success to Barry, remember her as being a far cry from the female leaders described in the pages of recent literature on gender differences. Mayor Dixon was neither warm nor accessible, insist some Washingtonians. Even her supporters concede that she was distant, which, in common D.C. parlance, means elitist. Far more formal than Mayor Barry and thus far less popular with grassroots voters, Mayor Dixon was policy-driven, a euphemism for rigid, inflexible, uncompromising. She was wedded to an agenda, the people say, in a way that Barry was not. Finally, members of the working class believe the mayor to have been insensitive to the needs of the poor, citing the 20,000 jobs she cut in order to reduce the budget deficit.

Against the backdrop of gender-based literature the Barry-Dixon example of role reversal appears to be an anomaly. At virtually every level of leadership - - local, state, national, and global - - examples abound of males leading in ways only women are supposed to lead and of females leading in ways only men are supposed to lead. "Why Can't a Woman Manage more Like . . . a woman?" Barbara Rudolph (1990) asks, somewhat incredulously, as she waves goodbye to those female managers who are, in her words, mere clones of male managers (pp.1-2). However, the farewell may be all too premature. The likes of Britain's Iron Lady Margaret Thatcher, J. Walter Thompson's Marion Howington, Brown University's Ruth Simmons, and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's Shirley Jackson are far from being an endangered species. Similarly, the likes of Anwar Sadat, Nelson Mandela, Jimmy Carter, and William Clinton are not about to become extinct any time soon.

In conclusion, do women's ways of leading differ from men's ways of leading? Which woman and which man?

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