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# "Do women really make better leaders than men?" : an update

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# **“DO WOMEN *REALLY* MAKE BETTER LEADERS THAN MEN?”**

## **AN UPDATE**

### **ABSTRACT**

Women are continuing to make a major impact through their participation in organizations and their ownership of businesses and it is reasonable to assume that the number of women taking up significant roles in society will increase in the future. The growing impact of women in the workforce has kept the leadership style of women on the research agenda. Within the leadership literature, writers lamenting the lack of women in senior management positions do so primarily on the basis that modern organizations need the very style of leadership that comes naturally to women. By contrast, a number of studies have highlighted a generally held negative perception of women as leaders that could account for the dearth of female managers at the top. Against this background, this paper revisits the study of women and leadership given that leadership style remains a central theme in management literature and continues to be viewed as a critical factor in effective organizational performance.

#### **Keywords**

Leadership style, gender, women, transformational leadership, transactional leadership

## INTRODUCTION

A number of authors have noted that women are making a significant impact on national economies through their participation in organizations and their ownership of businesses. They have also noted that the trend for women to take up significant roles in society is likely to continue well into the twenty first century (Davidhizer and Cramer, 2000; Stanford *et al*, 1995; Valentine and Godkin, 2000). The increasing impact of women in the workforce has stimulated research on the leadership style of women. Within this research, there is a substantial body of opinion which holds that the leadership of modern organizations needs to be non coercive, based on teamwork and adept at building relationships (Colwill and Townsend, 1999; Hirschhorn and Gilmore, 1992; Kolb, 1999, Moss and Jensrud, 1995) and that this is the very style of leadership naturally employed by women (Fierman, 1990; Colwill and Townsend, 1999). Based on this premise, writers often lament the fact that there are not more women in senior management positions worldwide (Gardiner and Tiggeman, 1999; Alimo-Metcalf, 1995). By contrast, a number of studies have also noted a generally held negative perception of women as leaders (Deal and Stevenson, 1998; Powell and Butterfield, 1979, 1989; Schein, 1973, 1975; Schein and Davidson, 1993) that could account for the lack of women in senior management positions. Against this background, this paper revisits the study of women and leadership on the basis that leadership remains a central theme in management literature and, with the occasional exception (Meindl, 1990), continues to be viewed as a critical factor in organizational performance and effectiveness (Conger *et al*, 1988; Schein, 1992; Yukl, 1994).

The paper begins with a brief review of some of the models of leadership pertinent to discussions of female leadership. There is discussion of the extent to which preferences for a particular style or model of leadership is a function of biological gender. The paper then reviews some of the arguments that connect leadership style with gender and then moves to an examination of arguments de-linking gender and leadership approach. In light of the preceding analysis, the paper closes with a discussion of the extent to which female leaders may or may not be considered superior to male leaders.

## **LEADERSHIP**

Leadership is an inherently subjective notion (Moss and Jensrud, 1995). However there are notions of leadership that are assumed either implicitly or explicitly in the literature on female leadership. Much of the discussion of female leadership pivots on what has been called concern for production and concern for people by Blake and Mouton (1964). Other ways of conceptualizing this leadership dichotomy is through contrasting concern for tasks with concern for relationships (Hersey and Blanchard, 1988) and a focus on initiating structure as opposed to a focus of consideration for people (Stogdill and Coons, 1957; Halpin, 1959). Literature on leadership and gender often pivots on whether or not gender gives rise to a predisposition to emphasize one of the above dimensions of leadership at the expense of the other and some of the research indicates that female leaders tend to be more relationships oriented and male leaders more task oriented (Eagly and Johnson, 1990, Park, 1996). In recent years the transformational-transactional leadership construct has become a popular theme in leadership literature (Avolio and Howell, 1992; Bass, 1985; Hater and Bass, 1988; Neumann and Neumann, 1999; Ramsden, 1998; Seltzer and Bass, 1990). Unlike task versus relationships oriented leadership, the transformational-transactional leadership notion is viewed as a continuum allowing for individuals to employ transformational and transactional qualities at one and the same time (Bass, 1985, Bryman, 1992). Nevertheless, transformational leadership is generally held to be a superior form of leadership, built on transactional leadership but not vice-versa (Bass 1985). The transformational and transactional leadership notion are presented below:

### **Transformational Leadership**

- a. *Idealized Influence or Charisma*: The leader provides vision and a sense of mission, instills pride, gains respect, trust and increases optimism. Such a leader excites and inspires subordinates. This dimension is a measure of the extent of followers' admiration and respect for the leader.
  
- b. *Inspirational Motivation*: The leader acts as a model for subordinates, communicates a vision and uses symbols to focus efforts. This dimension is a measure of the leader's ability to engender confidence in the leader's vision and values.

- c. *Individual Consideration*: The leader coaches and mentors, provides continuous feedback and links organizational members' needs to the organization's mission. Individual consideration is a measure of the extent to which the leader cares about the individual follower's concerns and developmental needs.
- d. *Intellectual Stimulation*: The leader stimulates followers to rethink old ways of doing things and to reassess their old values and beliefs. This dimension is concerned with the degree to which followers are provided with interesting and challenging tasks and encouraged to solve problems in their own way.

(Source: Den Hartog *et al*, 1997; Hinkin and Tracey, 1999)

### **Transactional Leadership**

- a. *Contingent Reinforcement or Contingent Reward*: The leader's rewards to followers are contingent on them achieving specified performance levels.
- b. *Active Management by Exception*: The leader actively seeks out deviations from desired performance on the part of subordinates with a view to taking corrective action.
- c. *Passive Management by Exception*: The leader does not seek out deviations from desired performance and only takes action when problems present themselves. Conceptually, passive management by exception is distinguished from laissez faire leadership because the former guards the status quo by exception whilst the latter amounts to an abrogation of leadership responsibility.

(Source: Bass, 1985; Bass and Avolio, 1989; Hater and Bass, 1988; Den Hartog *et al*, 1997)

There is a line of argument in the literature on gender and leadership contending that female leaders tend to be more transformational than male leaders (Rosener, 1990).

In recent years multidimensional models of leadership have been produced that attempt to convey the complexity of leading modern organizations. An example is Quinn's (1984) competing values model. Quinn's leadership model conveys a picture of modern leaders having to play a number of sometimes complementary (e.g., Producer, Director) and

sometimes apparently contradictory (e.g., Innovator, Coordinator) roles in order to effectively lead organizations that are consistently faced with a number of often contradictory external and internal pressures. Limited research in this area has indicated that both male and female leaders may be equally effective according to this model (Thompson, 2000). The following is a further example of a multidimensional leadership model specific to an educational context (Cheng 1994):

*Structural Leadership* through rationality, efficiency, structure and policies.

*Human Leadership* through facilitation and empowerment.

*Political Leadership* through negotiation, networking, erecting coalitions etc.

*Symbolic Leadership* through emphasizing rituals, ceremonies and stories.

*Educational Leadership* through the dissemination of educational knowledge and instructional information.

In terms of Cheng's model, it appears that female head teachers in a UK context differ from their male counterparts by giving more emphasis to the educational leadership aspect of their role (Coleman, 2000). This brief review of some of the leadership models associated with studies of leadership and gender highlights the subjective nature of the leadership notion. This subjectivity is further revealed in research aimed at establishing the extent to which notions of "ideal" leadership styles vary with gender. For example, the studies of Alimo-Metcalf (1995) and Baugh and Scandura (1998) that indicate a female preference for transformational leadership can be contrasted with the research of Moss and Jensrud (1995) suggesting that men and women have common conceptions of what leaders should try to accomplish and of the ideal qualities of leaders.

## **GENDER AND LEADERSHIP**

### **The Notion Of Gender**

In leadership research, gender is commonly distinguished from sex with the former viewed as a collection of qualities labeled male or female (Bem, 1974; Gray, 1989, 1993) that

are created culturally, and the latter seen as comprising attributes that are the result of biological characteristics (Brandser, 1996; Kakabadse *et al*, 1998). Male gender qualities characterized as aggressive, independent, objective, logical, rational, analytical, decisive, confident, assertive, ambitious, opportunistic and impersonal are distinguished from female gender qualities described as emotional, sensitive, expressive, cooperative, intuitive, warm, tactful, receptive to ideas, talkative, gentle, tactful, empathetic, and submissive (Park, 1996; Osland, Snyder and Hunter, 1998). De-coupling gender from biological sex allow for the female leader to exhibit male gender qualities and vice versa although the literature normally equates male gender qualities with male leaders and female gender qualities with female leaders. The notion of male and female gender qualities facilitates the argument that male gender qualities are oriented towards the more impersonal, task oriented or transactional approach to leadership while female gender qualities tend towards a more nurturing, relationships oriented style of leadership that underlies the transformational leadership approach. However, the above is by no means a universal view and those that eschew the gender as a determinant of leadership style argument point to factors other than gender as determining a particular leadership approach. Arguments in favour of the gender-leadership style connection are examined below.

### **Gender Determines Leadership Style**

Central to the argument that gender determines leadership style is the idea of “socialization”. Specifically the thesis is, that because of the socialization process, women have developed values and characteristics that result in leadership behaviours that are different from the traditional competitive, controlling aggressive leadership behaviours of men (Helgesin, 1990; Loden, 1985; Rosner, 1990; Schwartz, 1989, Shakeshaft, 1989). Helgesin (1990), for example, argues that women’s central involvement in managing households, raising children and juggling careers gives them a capacity for prioritization in a leadership capacity that men typically do not possess. Similarly, Grant (1988) argues that the dominant male culture has projected onto the subordinate female culture all aspects of life that are psychologically unpleasant with the result that women have developed a foundation of extremely valuable psychological qualities that are particularly relevant to leadership based on relationships, encouragement and support. Implicit in this argument is that men, through lack of exposure to the situations that women commonly face, do not possess these psychological qualities. Eagly (1987) argues that expectation is a central aspect of the socialization process. Thus, people

behave according to societal expectations about their gender role and the expectation that women will be more caring and relationships oriented than men largely accounts for different approaches to leadership based on gender.

Complementing the socialization argument, a number of studies argue for significant differences in the practice of leadership between men and women. Rosener (1990), for example, in a survey of male and female executives with similar jobs and education and of a similar age, found that women tend to be more transformational in their leadership than men. Rigg and Sparrow (1994) concluded that female leaders emphasized the team approach more than men and were regarded as more people oriented than their male counterparts while male leaders were considered more paternalistic and authoritarian than female leaders. Kousez and Posner (1990), using their version of the transformational leadership model, found that female leaders were more likely than male leaders to practice “modeling the way” (“walking the talk”) and “encouraging the heart” (giving positive feedback to individuals and teams). Similarly, Comer *et al* (1995) have noted that female business managers tend to be rated higher than male managers on the “individual consideration” dimension of transformational leadership. Yammarino *et al* (1997) have noted that female leaders rather than male leaders tend to develop the individualized, unique relationships with subordinates necessary to effect the transformational leadership style. Bass *et al* (1996) found that in a sample of respondents from US “high tech” Fortune 5000 firms, subordinates rated female leaders higher on all transformational leader dimensions compared to male leaders. This result was consistent with the results of an earlier study that took place in a single sex religious order setting (Druskat, 1994). Daley and Naff (1998) have argued that women tend to use democratic and transformational leadership practices more often than men do. In a cross cultural study involving Norway, Sweden, Australia and the USA, Gibson (1995) found that male leaders were more likely to emphasize goal setting than female leaders and female leaders more likely to focus on facilitation of interaction than male leaders. In the context of the chairing of US state legislatures, Jewell and Whicker (1994) found that female leaders were more likely to be consensual leaders and less likely to be command leaders than men. A follow up study by Rosenthal (1997) confirmed these results. Results such as those presented here have given rise to argument that strongly favour women over men as leaders. For instance, Helgesin (1990) and Cantor and Barney (1992) have contended that women bring to the leadership situation communication, intermediary and interpersonal skills the quality of which is beyond the capacity of men. Equally, Johnson (1976) has argued for the superiority of female leaders in



nurturing and empathizing with subordinates and Fierman (1990) for the superior ability of women in building the “esprit de corps” vital to the modern team based organization. In an educational management setting, Hope-Arlene (1999), has argued that female school principals in Canada are more likely to employ the “power through” and “power within” approaches to leadership associated with empowerment and participation than the “power over” approach associated with control and dominance that is a masculine image of power. Similarly, Coleman’s (2000) survey of all female headteachers in England and Wales indicated a preference for a collaborative, people oriented style of leadership. Coleman has noted that her results are consistent with other studies of female headteachers and principals carried out in the USA, The UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

### **Gender Does Not Determine Leadership Style**

The idea that gender determines leadership style is by no means a unanimous view in leadership literature. In the study of sex differences per se, Maccoby and Jacklin (1974), for example, have noted that a major problem is the failure to report no differences. The studies of Butterfield and Powell (1981), Campbell *et al* (1993) and Ronk (1993) have all concluded that leadership style is independent of gender. Powell (1990), in his analysis of a number of research studies, found that male and female leaders exhibit similar amounts of task oriented and people oriented leadership behaviour. Kolb (1999) has asserted that two decades of research indicates few, if any, differences in the leadership behaviours of males and females. Similarly, Davidson and Burke (1994) have contended that almost all the evidence shows little or no difference in the traits and abilities of managerial and professional women and men. Furthermore, Ferrario (1994), citing Brenner’s (1982) study, has stated that the examinations of the personality traits of women managers have found no evidence of any dissimilarity to men when education and level in the organization are controlled. Referring to the employment of transformational leadership, Carless (1998) has stated that there is a notable lack of evidence on gender differences. Komives (1991), for example, found no significant differences in the ratings of residence hall director across seven university campuses in respect of the exercise of transformational or transactional leadership. Similarly, in a study that surveyed undergraduate evening students employed by a variety of organizations in the US, Maher (1997) found no significant differences in the evaluation of male and female supervisors on their use of transformational and transactional leadership. Using a version of the competing values model of leadership competencies (Quinn *et al*, 1990), Vilkanas and

Carton (1993) found no significant differences in the competencies that male and female managers display in the roles they exhibit. In an educational management context, Thompson's (2000) study indicated no difference in the leadership effectiveness of men and women based on multidimensional models of leadership effectiveness.

Adherents of the view that gender is not a key determinant of actual leadership style, need to explain, first, why perception is often to the contrary and secondly, if the gender socialization process mentioned earlier does not determine leadership style and behaviour, just what does? Stereotyping is central to an explanation of why gender is often perceived to be the central determinant of leadership style. In terms of the title of this paper, gender stereotyping is largely to the detriment of females in implying that they are inferior to men in leadership capacity. Valentine and Godkin (2000), for example, have noted a substantial body of work that suggests women face socially prompted stereotypes about masculinity and femininity that undermine their credibility as organizational leaders. Thus, female supervisors are more likely to be blamed for negative outcomes experienced at work (Cooper, 1997) and men tend to receive more favourable evaluations from subordinates than do women (McGlashan *et al*, 1995). Valentine and Godkin (2000) also refer to more than one study showing that subordinates tend to view female managers as overly emotional, sensitive, and indecisive when confronted with difficult work situations. Similarly, the study of German students by Kruse and Wintermantel (1986) revealed that ratings of males of the concept of man correlated highly with the concept of leadership while the concept of woman correlated negatively with the ratings for the concept of manager and the concept of leadership. Interestingly, it appears that the negative stereotyping of women managers is not solely a male phenomenon. Osland *et al* (1998) have noted US research indicating that both men and women equate successful management with male characteristics. Also, Jeanquart-Barone and Sekaran (1994) found in their study that female subordinates trusted female supervisors less than they trusted male supervisors. In identifying a gender contrast effect, Luthar (1996) found that stereotyping does not always work in favour of male managers at the expense of female managers. In her experiment with 290 undergraduate seniors, she found that autocratic female managers were viewed as being significantly higher performers than autocratic male managers. By contrast, Jago and Vroom found (1982) that female managers perceived to be autocratic were evaluated negatively while male managers were evaluated largely positively and have suggested that this is due to the link between stereotyping and expectation. This link has been elaborated upon by Campbell *et al* (1993) who have reasoned that when a leader is

performing as expected in a given situation according to the stereotypical view of his or her gender, the result is harmony and, possibly, objectively effective leadership performance. Equally, a leader perceived to be performing contrary to gender expectations (e.g., the autocratic female manager) might result in perceived and, possibly, actual leadership ineffectiveness.

Stereotyping is central to the rejection of the gender determining leadership style thesis because stereotyping explains how the perception of a particular leader's performance can differ from the actual performance of that leader. Rejection of the gender determining leadership style thesis also implies that there are alternative, non gender based ways to account for actual leadership behaviour. One such explanation has been proposed by Kakabadse *et al* (1998) who argue that leadership behaviour is largely determined by organizational demographics. Their study of managers in the Australian Public Service and the UK National Health Service indicated that leadership style was not the result of gender but of demographic characteristics such as tenure in the organization and in the job and experience of senior management responsibilities. Fierman (1990) argues that managers of both sexes are a self selecting population and those who choose a managerial career share a great deal in common. Consequently, similarity in the leadership styles of men and women are likely to outweigh any differences.

Smith and Smit (1994) have noted the structuralist theory of leadership behaviour that gives a subtle twist to the gender determining leadership behaviour argument. Although females do not bring with them to the workplace a gender based styles of leadership resulting from socialization, structuralist theory acknowledges differences in actual leadership practice coincident with the sex of the leader. The theory postulates that, within the workplace, the sexes are treated differently in terms of job status, duties, tenure and promotion opportunities and this causes men and women to behave differently at work. Essentially, structuralist theory converts the theory of societal socialization that grounds the gender differences in leadership proposition, into a theory of organizational socialization. Organizational influences on the leadership behaviour of women have also been noted by Kanter (1977) who coined the term "tokenism" to describe the situation that many female managers find themselves in, namely operating in a male dominated environment and therefore isolated. Such a situation can have a detrimental effect on women's mental health, can lead to increased visibility and the consequent attraction of a disproportionate share of attention, all of which provides a set of

performance pressures unique to female managers (Gardiner and Tiggeman, 1999). This combination of factors may result in female managers displaying leadership behaviours that are different from their male counterparts.

### **FEMALE LEADERS – BETTER OR WORSE THAN MALE LEADERS?**

Given the inconclusive nature of the research on gender and leadership, one might sensibly adopt Fierman's (1990) position and argue that the debate is inconsequential because it is results that count regardless of gender. Certainly stereotyping pervades arguments for and against the leadership competencies of women in comparison with men. Arguably, those contending that transformational leadership competencies are largely the domain of the female leader are as guilty of stereotyping as those who would equate effective leadership with male characteristics. Assuming that there are differences in leadership style between the sexes, this does not necessarily have to imply negative connotations for one of the sexes. For example, Carless (1998) has drawn attention to the "gender congeniality" perspective that focuses on the fit between gender and particular leadership roles. It may be that certain leadership situations such as in the military require leadership defined in masculine terms and therefore congenial to men. Equally, the leadership of hospitals or educational institutions may be defined much more in feminine terms and therefore may be more congenial to women. The idea of gender congeniality raises the issue of organizational context and Maher's (1997) research indicated that conclusions on whether or not female managers are more transformational than male managers need to take account of context. Maher's study indicated no difference between male and female managers on the transformational-transactional leadership dimensions across a number of organizations. Maher's results contrast with the results of Druskat's (1994) study that was embedded in a particular organizational type and that of Bass and Avolio (1992) that was conducted in a particular industry.

Widening the context of leadership beyond the organization leads to considerations of national culture. Luthar (1996) has noted that much of leadership research including research on gender and leadership emanates from the US where democracy is embedded in the culture. This has led Carless (1998) to question the extent to which the findings of US studies can be replicated in other cultures. It is likely that the preferences for a particular style leadership on the part of subordinates of leaders under study and of researchers on leadership will reflect, to some extent, the national culture of both subordinates and researchers. Regarding

subordinates' preferences for a particular leadership style, Erez and Early (1993) have suggested how national culture inter-plays with an employee in the evaluation of a particular leadership approach. The employee processes information concerning a particular leadership practice in terms of the contribution that this practice makes to the employee's sense of well being and self worth both of which are strongly influenced by national culture. If the practice contributes to the fulfillment of the self-derived needs of the employee, then that practice will be evaluated favourably (and so, presumably will the leader of either sex who is effecting these practices). Further, preferences for a particular sex in leadership roles may reflect the extent to which the national culture in which the leadership is enacted can be classified as masculine or feminine (Hofstede, 1980). In this context, Mueun Bae's (1998) study indicated that the leadership style employed by a particular individual might be more a function of culture than gender.

In view of the above, it seems that any conclusion on whether women are "better" than men in leadership roles or vice versa may be missing the point. Arguably, a hostile, rapidly changing environment, replete with conflicting and competing pressures, confronts most modern organizations. This situation demands leaders that have the flexibility to range over an array of leadership qualities that have been labeled masculine and feminine. This fact has not gone unnoticed in the literature on gender and leadership with emphasis often given to the need for modern leaders to be androgynous, a term that is used to describe a leader, regardless of biological gender, able to combine the best of male and female leadership traits (Korabik and Ayman, 1989; Reavley, 1989). Sargent and Stupak (1989) have argued that the androgynous leadership blend is the style relevant to managing modern organizations with their "multigender, multinational and multisocial environments" (p. 32).

In sum, the answer to the question "do women make better leaders than men?" would seem to say more about the questioner and the respondent. The questioner already seems to have missed the point in asking the question and any answer other than one along the lines of "it all depends" also misses the point. In answering "it all depends", on the basis of the arguments presented in this paper, the response means that a female leader may be considered superior to a male leader in a particular setting only to the extent that she is able to display the flexibility of leadership intrinsic to the androgynous style and her male counterpart is unable to display such flexibility. A rather "tidy" ending to this paper is disturbed somewhat by Moss and Jensrud (1995) who have taken the organizational socialization argument referred to

earlier and turned it into a theory of female leadership superiority. They have argued that female leaders may indeed possess a leadership competence exceeding that of their male counterparts that has enabled them to overcome discriminatory barriers not faced by men. Moss and Jenrud's argument suggests that future research on leadership might include additional studies of the extent to which "the organizational experience" varies with gender and the affect of such variation, assuming it exists, on leadership style. However, researchers need to be aware that one likely conclusion from this research could well be "it all depends"!

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