



ARE MEN AND WOMEN DIFFERENT AS LEADERS?

Implications for HR

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The facts speak for themselves – today women are having a greater impact on business and politics than ever before.

It wasn't until 1971, less than 40 years ago, that women were able to vote in Switzerland. Fast forward a few decades and following the most recent election, the Conseil Federal is now made up of a majority of women (four out of seven).

Last year, women held 49% of the jobs in the US and 50% of all managerial positions. Even a report from the US Department of Labor back in 2006 noted that women outnumber men in such occupations as financial managers; human resource managers; educational administrators; medical and health services managers; accountants and auditors; budget analysts; property, real estate, and social community service managers. Sure, there is much to be done as far as women achieving the upper echelons of leadership both politically and especially in business. Overall, significant progress has been made, although most European countries lag behind the United States. But have organizations adjusted to the new gender landscape that will in all likelihood continue to evolve?

Impact on organizations

Labor markets and work organizations are clearly divided according to gender. Particularly, there are big differences when it comes to the *beliefs* regarding gender and leadership behaviors. These beliefs influence women's opportunities for career advancement, including managerial selection, promotion, placement and training decisions. And women tend to receive less favorable or prejudicial evaluations.

Organizations *may* have been successful in creating the “she-male” as a livable compromise with which both men and women can coexist and thrive at least to some extent, and where some of the more overt forms of inequality have been removed. But this “progress” may also repress some characteristics that could be considered female advantages for leading teams and people, such as sense of community and nurturance.

In which situations should men and women be treated differently, if any? What structures, initiatives and policies will lead to a long-term, fundamental gender equality in organizations and empowerment to bring out the strengths of each individual, male or female?

As answers aren't so straightforward, managers often act according to what they believe to be true. They choose to lead either according to what they believe to be the differences between men and women, if any, or according to what other people believe are the differences, both prototypes as well as stereotypes. We find that managers tend to hold one of three different sets of assumptions, or paradigms, about women and men in organizations. Each set of assumptions has implications for general management and HR practices. Too often, dialogue in companies breaks down because the people involved have not identified their different starting assumptions. And each set has implications for a good path forward.

Three paradigms guiding gender management

Paradigm 1: The gender-blind view. Women and men leaders are not significantly different and should therefore be treated the same.

Believers in this paradigm are likely to implement HR initiatives that increase opportunities for women to access to the organizational system. They see the lack of senior women in management as a “pipeline” issue. Since women and men lead in the same way, the fact that there are fewer women in management roles can be attributed to their historical role as mothers and homemakers. Advocates of this paradigm would like to see more women in the workforce – if they are under-represented in management then presumably the company is missing out on some good managers.

Specific HR initiatives might include mandating that job candidate pools include a certain proportion of women, targeting awareness campaigns to women without changing the content of the campaign, and ensuring that there are a certain proportion of women in high potential pools within the organization. The HR system gives women opportunities and encourages them to try to take advantage of them, but does not change anything in their performance assessment or in the nature of the opportunities themselves.

If such initiatives are successfully implemented, women will be more aware about avenues for advancement or professional development and will change the way they think about themselves in relation to these opportunities. Organizations will have more women in the pipeline who are ready for promotion.

Paradigm 2: The gender-conscious view. Women and men leaders are significantly different and should be treated accordingly.

Believers in this paradigm are likely to implement HR initiatives that address the particular needs and characteristics of women. They believe that women's contributions have been under-valued and therefore may begin with special programs such as flexi-time, part-time and re-entry after maternity. They may also re-write performance criteria and reward systems to include behaviors that women supposedly excel at, such as transformational, supporting others and community-building. They are likely to build special mentoring programs for women. These HR systems focus on customizing the work experience for women, valuing their unique characteristics and ultimately empowering them. They may also dispute the assumed separation of work and home environment, as rooted in a "male model".

If these kinds of initiatives are successfully implemented, many women would feel valued for their different views. They would become more committed to the organization, and better able to manage different roles in constructive ways. The organization itself benefits from a skill set, such as long-term commitment and community building, which can lead to innovation.

Paradigm 3: Perception creates reality. Women and men leaders are not significantly different, but people believe they are different (stereotyping) and these stereotypes create barriers.

Believers in this paradigm are likely to implement HR initiatives that contradict gender stereotypes. They believe there are fewer women in senior positions because of a perceptual bias that is reinforced by social behavior through society, and they see stereotypes as limiting people's potential for performance. They may showcase role models of women in non-traditional occupations, behaving in ways that counter stereotypes of women. For example, they may ensure that senior women as engineers and as line managers have highly visible roles. There may be training sessions on how to behave assertively or communicate forcefully. The company is likely to deliver workshops examining

stereotypes and their consequences, encouraging people to look beyond stereotypes to actual individuals. Another initiative is to provide men with more experiences working with women so they can question or re-examine stereotypes.

If these initiatives are implemented successfully, women in the organization will be freer to act authentically without carrying the weight of others' expectations or biased evaluations. This benefit will extend to men as well and the workforce will be more empowered. The organization will likely see a decrease in stereotyping, not just of gender, but across the board. This could help put more people in the right job.

Going forward

In outlining the paradigms, we do not advocate a particular approach. That is for each organization to answer and each HR executive to contemplate. In fact, some combination of paradigms is likely to create the most progress for all of us as individuals contributing to organizations, and for future generations. Let's stop avoiding the questions and start discussing the assumptions.

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IMD and W.I.N, the global women's leadership organization, will join forces in exploring the topic of women in leadership on March 10-11, 2011.

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