

Women and the psychology of leadership



Comparisons, generalizations and speaking on behalf of others are considered odious, or even arrogant on occasion. Even so, a lifetime of encounters with remarkable women in the so-called developed and developing worlds who seem largely unaware of their innate leadership excellence, prompts me to distil the distinct contribution that women bring to leadership roles.

My subjective conviction is further fuelled by ongoing work with women in diverse professional development scenarios that consistently attests to the significant return on an investment in their leadership potential.

If leadership is defined as the desire to serve, then the components of that service are perhaps a general awareness of any given environment or community with a clear ability to identify pressing requirements, the desire and decision-making capacity to meet the same, as well as the ability to put a workable solution in place. To my mind, this immediately gives extreme significance to the clichéd term *women's intuition*. It requires a special individual to see what others don't, and great courage to tackle what others prefer to leave alone.

While this might sound obvious, it is my impression that during the long struggle of women to achieve parity with men in business, political and social arenas this awareness has become somewhat dulled. Instead, the leadership objective for many has perhaps become the desire to suppress innate femininity to meet men equally in a male-oriented world.

One incessantly hears leadership referred to as "the ability to take control". This then seems to play out as a quest for power and influence. Small wonder then that so many women feel that they have to harden their hearts and present a masculine mask to the world.

I hear women so often expressing the feeling that they have somehow *let the side down* by behaving as women. This was powerfully illustrated by Indy racing-driver Danica Patrick who, after her 2008 win, expressed regret for crying when she saw her mother (at the trophy ceremony), saying she somehow felt she had let women down.

What on earth is wrong with showing emotion? Surely it takes great strength to be able to express emotion publicly. We all remember the ridiculous brouhaha about whether or not Hilary Clinton cried during the 2008 election campaign. Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* cleverly juxtaposed the incident with media clips of prominent males who had wept in preceding months.

Personally I value the ability of a leader to feel deeply, to express feeling and to accept the same in others. Also, I believe that women generally have remarkable innate ability to accept imperfection and vulnerability in others. This surely allows for calm in crisis and readiness to bring order to chaos.

The undeniable strength of a good mother and wife reflects just this—coping with mess when no one else will! In the business world this is a priceless commodity. Such a leader plays to

individual and team strengths without insistence on the more usual approach of willy-nilly imposing template-driven solutions.

In my own life, a series of spectacular women have seen what I could become. They recognized my idiosyncrasies and insecurities while encouraging me to follow my dreams. Importantly, they anticipate what I need and provide without being asked. Without them would I have survived as well? Would I take as many risks? Without their support in moments of doubt, would I be able to take realistic stock of my position?

How many great male figures have had the benefit of an insightful woman as a sounding board and source of inspiration? Is this not what mentorship, a critical leadership function, is all about? For me, the true emancipation of women is to bring these powerful visionary, trail-blazing and inspirational qualities to bear for their own account in the business world.

In a world of equity statistics that has *gender neutrality* as the ultimate goal, I am often upbraided by supposedly politically-correct men and women for identifying differences between the sexes. However, I feel appointing women to leadership positions just because they are women is insulting.

All women, just as all men, are not good leaders. Rather, I think the rationale should be to identify and accommodate what women leaders, as women, bring to the table. We would all benefit!

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