



## **Do Women and Men Lead Differently?**

*by Colleen Franca*

I have always thought of a leader as someone who has a high degree of integrity and is able to inspire and motivate themselves and others to achieve exceptional results. These characteristics have nothing to do with the color of their skin, their religion of choice, the culture they come from, or their gender. So why is only a small percentage of women able to achieve higher level leadership positions, even though they make up 53% of the workforce?

An interesting study by the leadership consulting firm Zenger Folkman set out to determine if there was any differentiation between how men and women scored in a set of 16 competencies required for leadership effectiveness. The study included 16,000 leaders of whom two-thirds were men and one-third women. Using a 360 review format it measured how these leaders were perceived by their co-workers. Each leader had on average 13 respondents including their manager, direct reports and peers who rated them on key leadership skills. Skills included the ability to solve problems strategically, build and maintain relationships, navigate politics, promote teamwork and collaboration, champion change and communicate powerfully with authenticity. The results of the study was published in the Harvard Business Review in 2012 and summarized how both groups stacked up.

In terms of overall leadership effectiveness when comparing aggregate scores for male and female participants, there was very little statistical difference between how both groups fared. In fact male participants scored 51.8 while women leaders scored 54.5, slightly higher for all skills combined. When reviewing the scores for each individual competency, women actually scored higher than men on 12 of the 16 competencies.

Some differentiation arose with men scoring slightly more positive rating on skills for developing strategic perspective (+2.5 for males) and technical or professional expertise (+ 1 for males). Women had significantly more positive results for taking initiative (+6.6 for females) and driving for results (+ 4.6 for females).

The study also looked at how males and females rate on a competency called "Practicing Self Development" which measures the extent to which one asks for feedback and makes changes based on that feedback. They measured how this manifested at different points in a leader's career. Findings showed that while both men and women start out their careers on equal footing, over time women score



much higher compared to men later in their career. This finding suggests that early on both genders are interested in and motivated to improve themselves and are flexible to change. As men progress in their careers however, they tend to do less self-improvement or feel the need to change while women keep seeking to improve themselves throughout their careers.

If we take a slightly different view of leadership and look at the style or the manner in which one leads, we can refer to studies that brought to light some distinct differences between “how” women and men lead.

A 2009 study by McKinsey found that the leadership style used by the majority of women can be defined as people-based, using role modelling and setting clear expectations and rewards. Another study found that women tend to adopt a more democratic/participative style, are more collaborative and work to enhance and increase others’ self-worth (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003). That same study found that the leadership style more often used by men tends to prioritize operational over strategic issues and gives directions and orders, a command and control type model that is characterized as being goal-oriented, authoritative and decisive.

While both styles have their place and merit depending on the situation, one of the challenges is that because male leaders have been more prevalent, the practices used by many of them have been equated with leadership itself. In today’s complex environment, we need to adopt a more diversified approach to conventional methods of leading in order to achieve success.

So it is essential, especially at this time when talent is so sought after and the need for innovation is critical, that we need to change the perception that women are less effective as leaders. We have the data to support that women are just as effective as men in leadership positions, yet the perception and fear that women are not able to perform successfully still prevails. For this reason, many women are caught in a catch-22 situation as they are not given the same amount of opportunities as their male counterparts that could help them disprove this perception. And that alone is most likely the largest factor in why the higher you go up the ladder, women fall off steeply.

We need to increase awareness of the long-held biases that prejudice female leaders and give women a chance early on in their careers to prove themselves. Let them take on challenging assignments and give them the visibility and recognition they deserve for their successes. Let’s start focusing on what really matters: putting the right people, regardless of their gender into leadership positions so they can do what they are able to do successfully- **Lead**.

Research:

1. Sherwin, Bob. “Why Women Are More Effective Leaders Than Men”. Harvard Business Review, 2012.

Read more: <http://www.businessinsider.com/study-women-are-better-leaders-2014-1#ixzz3UeTrxyM9>

2. Eagly, Alice H. “Women As Leaders”. Harvard Business School Research Symposium on Gender & Work: Challenging Conventional Wisdom, 2013.

