



Female Intuition: Women Leaders Mean Business

Women are now leading the way in business with qualities such as open communication and persuasiveness. Herb Greenberg and Patrick Sweeney reveal how companies can benefit from female leadership and analyse the responses from interviews with women in power.

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Are there differences between how men and women lead? Results from a recent Caliper study suggest women leaders are more assertive, persuasive, willing to take risks and have a stronger need to get things done than male leaders.

"We're looking at a different paradigm of leadership, and it plays naturally to the strengths of women," says Regina Sacha, vice president of human resources for FedEx Custom Critical. "The tide has turned."

"The leadership skills that come naturally to women are now absolutely necessary for companies to continue to thrive. It is certainly the reverse of how it was when I first started out in the workplace. It seems like poetic justice."

In this study, Caliper conducted in-depth interviews with and assessed the personality qualities of 300 women leaders in Brazil, China, Japan, the UK and the US. Participants included women from such firms as Accenture, Bank of America, Deloitte & Touche LLP, Deutsche Bank, Dun & Bradstreet Inc., JPMorgan Chase & Co. and Johnson & Johnson Co. Inc.

FEMALE LEADERSHIP QUALITIES

In both a written survey and follow-up interviews, women leaders shared – with enormous candor – details of failures and mistakes they've made, which could have derailed their careers. They also reflected on what they've learnt through adversity, and they carried on with more determination, focus and a clearer understanding of their own strengths.

These female leaders were compared to a matching sample of male leaders drawn from Caliper's extensive database, representing similar industries and job titles. As women demonstrated a higher level of persuasiveness, a stronger need to get things done and a greater willingness to take risks than their male counterparts, these traits combined with their openness, flexibility, empathy and strong interpersonal skills create a leadership style that is inclusive, consensus building and collaborative.

Male leaders in the study were also strong in these areas, but the women set an even higher standard.

When it comes to decision-making and problem solving, the difference in style between men and women starts with listening. The women leaders in the study were all genuinely interested in hearing all points of view, then making the best possible decision.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN LEADERS

This inclusive style of leadership is based on open lines of communication, according to Susan Rice, CEO of Lloyds TSB Scotland. "The people I work with will say the process of me asking them questions helps to clarify their own thinking and they actually come out a little sharper," she says.

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Jacqueline Dout, CFO and secretary to the board for Pella Corp., agrees, as she says she spends 40% of her time motivating, challenging and coaching people. "As a leader, I believe the biggest challenge is to make sure people are motivated, involved and contributing, because that diversity of thought is what brings value to an organisation and makes it successful."

When Dun & Bradstreet Inc. CFO Sara Mathew talks about her career-defining moments, she remembers those times when she weathered unexpected storms that tested her severely.

She recalls a significant moment that occurred in an earlier position with another Fortune 500 company. She had decided to completely revamp the firm's investor relations programme and make it one of the best in the country.

As part of the presentation of her proposal, she conducted the company's first-ever live webcast, to which hundreds of investors tuned in. But the webcast fell apart at the seams.

"I did a terrible job," she remembers, "as nearly every major financial publication in the country noted. In an instant, everyone in the industry knew who I was, but not as I wanted to be known. I could go on and on citing what went wrong and, although it was years ago, I can still remember every detail like it was yesterday."

After that fiasco, her CEO was quite firm about one thing: "We will never, ever, do this again."

Mathew says it probably took her a week or two to pick herself up and see what needed to be done. She knew her window of opportunity had closed, and she had to get it open again.

"The most important time to act is immediately after something goes wrong," she says. "It's recognising the situation and admitting that, 'yes, I made a colossal mistake'."

So she went back and analysed exactly where, when and how things went. She figured out how she might have handled the situation differently, what resources she had within the organisation and, most importantly, how to convince her CEO to ignore the media and the stockholders and give her a second chance.

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HOW TO BE A SUCCESSFUL LEADER

The qualities she ultimately demonstrated – her belief in herself and her cause, her ability to learn from her mistakes, her persuasiveness, her open style of problem solving, her carrying on with a new-found confidence and her willingness to take risks – are the strengths that helped her, and the other women in the Caliper study, succeed as leaders.

Jeannette Lichner, managing partner of Bank of America in the UK, says, "The strong leadership profile exhibited by these women executives points to the future. The female view that we strengthen ourselves by strengthening others is redefining leadership."

By playing to their natural strengths, women are, in fact, creating a new style of leadership – one that is conducive to today's workplace, which draws upon collaboration and teamwork to succeed.

[Herb Greenberg and Patrick Sweeney, president and CEO and executive vice president, Caliper](#)

First published 29 February 2008

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