

Can Women Break the Glass Ceiling and be Themselves?

By Robin Blanchard

Women are born with natural abilities that can make them great leaders: the ability to nurture, communicate, multi-task, collaborate, and sense when things are not right (women's intuition) to name a few. But what do we do? We downplay these skills thinking that they make us weak. When I was growing up, I heard women in leadership say, "It's a man's world, you have to be tough to survive." Women thought they had to act like a man to get ahead. I see that changing today. Women are recognizing that their natural skills are perfectly aligned to help them be great leaders.

What do the study's say?

Susan Perkins, and assistant professor of management and organizations at the Kellogg School of Management along with Pearce and Kathrine Phillips of Columbia University found that women heads of state were better suited to promote economic growth in ethnically diverse countries than men. Research shows that so-called "ethnic fractionalization" is associated with a decline in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). But these ethnically diverse countries have increased their GDP under women leadership. Why is this? Researchers believe this is true because although it is challenging to integrate a diverse group into an inclusive whole they believe women's more participative, and collaborative leadership style makes the difference. And this research supports that position.

A *Fortune Magazine* article supports this finding as well. Author Geoff Colvin posits that women's style of leadership including empathy, sensing the thoughts and feeling of others and responding in an appropriate way, works to bring people together. This is true even with no actual authority. Hohnette Elizie promoted peaceful protest in Ferguson Missouri and she had no formal authority, but she brought together people with significant amounts of frustration in order to protest peacefully.

This style of leadership is also effective with women who have formal authority. General Motors CEO Mary Barra successfully dealt with the faulty ignition switch crisis at GM. Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was successful in managing the Ebola epidemic in her county.

Participative and inclusive leadership is required in our diverse world and women are proving they have the natural talent to do it.

Business Insider did a study entitled "Women are more Effective." The study was conducted over the past decade and collected 360 assessment feedback data from a diverse number of leading organizations worldwide. Results from the study reflect over 450,000 feedback instruments on 45,000 leaders (2/3 male 1/3 female). Each recipient averaged 13 respondents-- peers, subordinates and supervisors; Women were rated higher overall than men. The study confirms that women actually scored higher than

men on 12 of the 16 leadership competencies. It is difficult to dispute these results giving the sample size.

The Harvard Business Review, “Are Women Better Leaders than Men” shows similar results with a study size of 7,280 leaders.

Kip Tindell, CEO of the Container Store, stated in a 2014 interview that he believes women make the best leaders (70% of his top leaders are women). He believes their skill sets—communication, empathy, emotional intelligence, and understanding conscious capitalism and servant leadership make them better.

Women’s leadership skills come naturally

In the book *Enlightened Power*, Helen Fisher wrote a chapter that describes some of the biological underpinnings of women’s natural leadership traits. She posits that there are some talents that women express more regularly than men and that these aptitudes stem in part from women’s brain architecture and hormones.

Studies of both male and female brains show that women’s brains have more nerve cables connecting the two brain hemispheres. This allows them to connect several things simultaneously. This is sometimes referred to as web thinking. The male brain is more compartmentalized, so sections operate more independently leading to a more logical more linear thinking or step thinking.

Fisher also identifies hormonal differences that effect leadership. Testosterone tends to focus one’s attention. Women’s lower levels of this hormone may contribute to their broader, more contextual view.

Nurturing/Empathy

Whether girls are born with it, or it is socialized when they are young, girls typically show more nurturing tendencies than men. Women sometimes think their natural ability to nurture and have empathy for others makes them soft. They often try and downplay this tendency in the workplace because of the thought that leaders must be tough. In reality, this competency strengthens leadership.

Common leadership theory teaches that leaders must take care of their people and that relationships in the workplace determine leadership success or failure. The human side of managing others has never been so important and recognized as it is today. A women’s natural ability to nurture is a strength in developing others.

It is a normal practice for a woman to ask “why” something is happening instead of just “what” is happening. What I mean is that if someone is not meeting goals or deliverables and not performing to expectations asking, “why it is happening” is more effective than pushing the person to perform or giving ultimatums for nonperformance. Women’s nurturing tendency will push them to ask the “why” and try to address the root cause instead of just looking at the results.

We need more leaders who back up their employees like a lioness cares for her cubs. A person's sense of well-being at work is directly related to their relationship with their boss. If they feel supported and valued, their performance will show it. Nurturing is not weak, it produces highly motivated employees.

Communication

Most of us know that women talk more than men. A study by the University of Maryland's College of Medicine found that on average, women speak about 20,000 words per day. Compare that to the average man, who speaks only 7,000 words per day.

When conflicts arise, the best way to resolve the problem is communication. Leadership training seminars focus on communication because it is at the root of all leadership solutions. And women do it naturally.

I recognize that communication must be effective and sometimes communication training is required, but my point is that women from a young age have innate superior language abilities which enable them to effectively communicate.

Women's intuition

Women's intuition is the ability women have of hearing what is not said and seeing what is not there. Desmond Morris, in his book *The Naked Ape*, talks about how women's sensory perception has evolved from the cave-man times when women stayed home in a dangerous environment taking care of the family while the man left to hunt. A woman had to develop skills to survive alone protecting the children and herself.

Women have an ability to see things even when they are hidden. Often women will know when something is wrong with a friend even if he or she doesn't admit it. A sixth sense perhaps. This intuition is a gift for leaders in the workplace to simply sense when there is an issue.

Collaboration

The book *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus* talks about how men react to stressful situations versus how women react. This also relates back to communication. Men typically go into their man cave to work through the issue alone. Women, on the other hand, want to talk about it.

Women typically are very good about communicating with others on an issue because that is how they will naturally react to a problem. This lends itself wonderfully to collaboration. Earlier in this article, I talked about international leaders and how critical it is to bring people together. Women show a better track record at doing this. This makes sense because that is normally how women naturally solve problems.

Another interesting fact about collaboration is that when birds and mammals are injected with testosterone, they begin to fight for rank and position. When injected with estrogen, they tend to produce nurturing and connecting behaviors.

Multi-tasking

This competency likely developed with early civilizations. Women were left managing everything including child rearing, and taking care of the home/cave in the early days while the men were focused on the pursuit of game.

As explained earlier, the web-based mind of women contributes to this trait. Women can access different parts of their brain simultaneously which allows them to do more than one thing at a time.

Self-Development

When a man is lost and confronted with the question, “Why don’t you ask someone for directions,” he will likely say “I can figure it out myself.” However, a woman is much more likely to ask. Women want to learn and they don’t particularly care what they look like doing it. Studies show this is true.

When the researchers looked at the competency called “Practicing Self Development,” they found that women continue this practice throughout their life while men tend to drop off after the age of 40. This competency measures the extent to which people ask for feedback and make changes based on that feedback. We know that as most people begin their careers they are very motivated to ask for feedback and take actions to improve. Over time, most people gain competence and tend to not ask for feedback as often. There is an interesting graph in the study worth looking at <http://www.businessinsider.com/study-women-are-better-leaders-2014-1>. Women continually look to develop themselves even as they get older which is a critical attribute of an effective leader.

Conclusion

I am not saying that women are better leaders than men necessarily, but that women’s natural abilities, if allowed to flourish, provide them with a stronger foundation from which to become an effective leader. We need to celebrate our natural gifts as women for they give us an advantage in the workplace.

The answer is a resounding YES, women can break the glass ceiling and still be themselves.

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