



# The Way Women and Men Lead – Different, but Equally Effective

**The results of one of the largest controlled studies of gender differences and leadership ever conducted**

**By Robert Kabacoff and Helen Peters**

Judy B. Rosener's ground breaking 1990 Harvard Business Review article, *Ways Women Lead*, kicked off the public debate as to whether or not women and men have a different approach to the leadership role. The topic was quickly taken up in numerous articles arguing issues of leadership style, effectiveness, and progress - or lack of it - for women in terms of the "glass ceiling." In addition to the interest in the business press, organizational specialists and social scientists were also engaged in answering the questions of the relationship between gender and leadership. More than 170 scientific studies of gender and leadership style, and more than 86 scientific studies of gender and leadership effectiveness, have been published over the last fifteen years.

## The Limitations of Most Gender Research

### Key Shortcomings of Studies on Leadership and Gender Include:

#### Limited Ability to Generalize the Findings:

The use of small numbers of participants in the study makes it difficult to generalize to a larger population.

**Overly Simplifying the Subject Matter:** Defining leadership too narrowly.

**Reliance on Self-Reports:** People often do not see themselves as others see them.

**Use of Subjects Who Are Not in Leadership Roles:** Trying to infer gender differences in organizational leadership from experiments on college students. (This is particularly true of academic studies.)

**Uncontrolled Differences Between Groups:** Often the men and women being compared differ with regard to job function, position within the organization, job experience, and type of organizational culture. When differences are found, it is unclear whether they are gender differences *per se*, or a reflection of these organizational differences.

Much of what has been published in the both the popular press and academic journals is interesting and thought provoking, but limited from a research prospective. Studies have often been based on small numbers of participants, reliance on anecdotal data, oversimplified views of leadership, and a lack of control for such important variables as age, organization level, job function, and experience. The reason for the relative lack of solid, quantitative research without the limitations noted above is simple – it is very difficult to gather enough useful data to study gender differences in leadership accurately (see side bar).

We think that our study has overcome many of these limitations, and presents some of the most accurate insights into the leadership style and effectiveness of men and women available to date.

## The Management Research Group® Study

Management Research Group (MRG) is a firm specializing in the creation of behavioral assessment instruments used for individual and organizational development. Over the last 15 years we have collected extensive and carefully detailed information on the characteristics, leadership styles, and levels of effectiveness of managers worldwide. Our extensive data archives places us in the unique position of being able to engage in organizational research in ways that were previously unavailable.

From a database containing information on the leadership behavior and style of over 150,000 managers, we were able to locate 900 pairs of men and women managers who:

- Worked at the same company.
- Were at the same management level.
- Held the same position in the same functional area.
- Had comparable number of years of management experience.

For example, we were able to match a female accounting division head, with 5-10 years of experience, working at ABC Industries with a male accounting division head, with the same years of experience, working at ABC Industries. This matching procedure assured that any differences in leadership style obtained were due to gender, not differences in organizational

**THE LEADERSHIP  
EFFECTIVENESS  
ANALYSIS™ MODEL**

**The model is comprised of twenty-two specific dimensions of leadership behavior that are measured against six essential functions of the leadership role:**

**CREATING A VISION**

- Conservative
- Innovative
- Technical
- Self
- Strategic

**DEVELOPING FOLLOWERSHIP**

- Persuasive
- Outgoing
- Excitement
- Restraint

**IMPLEMENTING THE VISION**

- Structuring
- Tactical
- Communication
- Delegation

**FOLLOWING THROUGH**

- Control
- Feedback

**ACHIEVING RESULTS**

- Management Focus
- Dominant
- Production

**TEAM PLAYING**

- Co-operation
- Consensual
- Authority
- Empathy

position or culture. The managers selected from our database represented a highly diverse group from 46 U.S. states and 6 Canadian provinces, a wide range of industries, and a variety of management levels.

Each of the 1,800 managers were assessed against MRG®'s leadership model using the Leadership Effectiveness Analysis™ Questionnaire. The Questionnaire measures twenty-two specific leadership dimensions. These dimensions define the managers' ability to develop a vision or direction for the organization, to engender the support of others for that vision, to implement the vision in organizational terms, and to ensure that things happen according to the plan. The managers' orientation towards achieving results, that is setting high standards of performance for themselves and their organizations, and their ability to work within a team environment were also measured.

Each Manager included in the study completed a questionnaire rating their perceptions of their own leadership behavior. All 1,800 managers were also evaluated on a 360-degree basis (with an average of 1 boss, 4 peers, and 4 direct reports) using the same questionnaire format, yielding a total of 17,491 completed questionnaires. Peers and direct reports completed evaluations anonymously. In addition to assessing leadership behavior, the peers, bosses and direct reports also rated each manager on their effectiveness.

**To the best of our knowledge, this is the largest controlled study of gender differences in leadership ever conducted.**

When we analyzed our data, we found two important things:

- There are differences in leadership behavior between men and women. The managers in the study, as well as their bosses, peers, and direct reports, all reported similar differences between male and female leaders.
- There seemed to be no differences in the ratings based on the gender of the person doing the rating; both men and women reported similar perceptions of the differences between male and female leaders.

Obviously, our study yielded a tremendous amount of data (360 data for 1,800 managers on 22 leadership behaviors). The scope

of this article does not allow us to go into all the findings in detail. Readers interested in the detailed research report presented by Robert Kabacoff at the 1998 Annual Conference of the American Psychological Association are referred to Dr. Kabacoff's article, "Gender Differences in Organizational Leadership: A Large Sample Study," on the MRG website: [www.mrg.com](http://www.mrg.com). What we will present below is a summary of our findings comparing men and women on dimensions of both leadership behavior and leadership effectiveness, and what we think these findings may mean for individuals and organizations who are struggling to learn and understand how to be more successful.

## **Differences in Leadership Behavior**

Our research showed that in many ways men and women approach the leadership role in a similar fashion. But, we also found significant differences in leadership behavior between male and female managers. In order to make the results understandable and useful, we have summarized the differences we found between men and women's approach to the leadership role under two major dimensions:

- Task vs. Strategy
- Expressiveness vs. Constraint

Let's look at each of these dimensions, and the leadership behavior associated with them, in more detail.

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### **Task vs. Strategy**

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The first dimension looks at orientation toward task, focusing on getting things done, versus strategy, an orientation toward looking at the big picture. What we found was that:

- Women tended to be more task and results focused than men. Women scored higher on leadership scales measuring an orientation toward setting high standards of performance and the attainment of results. Women were far more apt to organize work in a structured way, to follow-up to ensure objectives were met, and to push for results.

- Men were viewed as more apt to take a strategic approach to the leadership role. Men scored higher on scales assessing an orientation towards strategic planning and business vision. Men appeared to co-workers to be more open to new ideas and willing to take risks. In general, men's orientation seems to be more thoughtful, considering both lessons from the past and the viability of opportunities for change in the future.

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### **Expressiveness vs. Constraint**

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The second dimension was expressiveness, the willingness to display enthusiasm and be seen as approaching the leadership role in a lively and dynamic way, as opposed to constraint, being more low key, reserved and thoughtful.

- Women are definitely seen as higher on the expressiveness dimension. They operate with more energy, intensity, and emotional expression, and have a greater capacity to keep others enthusiastic and involved as well. They demonstrate more concern for others, and are more apt to develop close working relationships and be more involved in the development of others. Women can be perceived as more candid and sincere than men.
- Men are seen to be more constrained. They are more likely to maintain a low-key, understated and quiet interpersonal demeanor through the control of emotional expressions. They are more apt to be seen as dealing with issues in an unemotional and objective manner than women. Men are also seen as using language more effectively to persuade others and to build commitment for their ideas and initiatives.

## **Measures of Leadership Effectiveness**

In addition to being rated on their leadership behavior, the 1,800 managers in our study were rated by their bosses, peers and direct report's on three dimensions of effectiveness:

- Overall Effectiveness
- Business Skills
- People Skills

Here is what we found.

**Overall Effectiveness:** Overall Effectiveness included measures of such things as effectiveness in current position, future potential, and credibility with senior management. Bosses saw men and women as equally effective overall. Peers and direct reports rated women as slightly higher than men on this dimension.

**Business Skills:** Business Skills include such things as understanding financial issues, aptitude for business, and the ability to quickly get to the heart of issues. Bosses and peers rated men higher on business-oriented skills, while direct reports rated men and women equally effective on this dimension.

**People Skills:** People Skills measures included such things as sensitivity to others, likableness, and ability to listen. All three-observer groups rated women higher on people-oriented skills.

Our effectiveness results are not totally surprising considering the differences we found in leadership behavior. In terms of behavior, women are generally seen as using a more energetic, relationship oriented, and friendly approach to accomplish objectives. This is reflected in their higher ratings on the People Skills dimension of our effectiveness measures. Men were seen as exhibiting more strategic behaviors, and being more restrained and objective. These behaviors may well be translating into their higher scores on measures of Business Skills.

Most importantly, both men and women are seen to be as effective, as credible, and as promotable overall.

## **Implications for Development**

We know there is no one right way to lead. As our study demonstrates, different leadership behaviors can result in the same level of perceived effectiveness in the management role. What we also know is that the demands on leaders are growing as the world becomes a more complex place, markets become more competitive, and the worldwide war for talent and expertise heats up. The wider the range of leadership skills and abilities an individual can bring to their organization, the more certain they can be of successfully overcoming the obstacles and exploiting the opportunities that today's managers must meet on a day to day basis. That is why organizations need to support leadership training and development, and reward the behavior they say they are looking for: women taking risks and being more strategic and men developing greater people skills. Most importantly,

men and women need to value their differences and learn how to learn from each other.

### **What Women Managers Can Learn From Their Male Counterparts**

Previous MRG research has shown that strategic thinking is one of the leadership behaviors most predictive of leadership effectiveness, and the ability to craft a strategic vision is often sought after in individuals selected to fill senior level management positions. Female managers may benefit from additional training in strategic analysis and planning, coupled with an increased focus on the persuasive skills needed to sell ideas and gain support for them. As women add these important elements to their repertoire of leadership behaviors, the men they work with can serve as role models and coaches.

### **What Men Can Learn From the Women on Their Leadership Team**

The current significant interest in how interpersonal factors may affect teams and team building, coaching and mentoring, and sensitivity to diversity suggests that male managers may benefit from additional training as well. Interpersonal skills that focus on empathy, listening, sensitivity to differences, and the ability to give effective feedback may be opportunities for development. Men can learn from women how to be more successful in building relationships and developing others.

### **What Organizations Can Do**

In almost every survey published in recent years, leadership has been identified as a key to future business success. But almost all organizations also report that they do not have enough talented, trained individuals to meet their current, much less their future, leadership needs. Development of today's and tomorrow's leaders is critical and must be funded and supported as a key element of every business strategy. Organizations can get the most from their investment in development by aligning leadership expectations with strategic business objectives, identifying those leadership behaviors that are most critical, and providing targeted training, development, and coaching for all leaders, men and women alike.

**About the Authors:**

**Helen Peters**, M.A., is former Managing Director (EMEA), Management Research Group®, Munich, Germany

**Robert Kabacoff**, Ph.D., is V.P. of Research and Development, Management Research Group®, Portland, Maine

Results of other Management Research Group® studies on leadership can be found on our website at [www.mrg.com](http://www.mrg.com).



**Management Research Group®**  
Ardeen Mews, 10/11 Marine Terrace  
Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin  
Ireland  
Telephone: +353 1 280 4430  
Fax: +353 1 280 4434  
e-mail: [info@mrg.com](mailto:info@mrg.com)

**Management Research Group®**  
14 York Street, Suite 301  
Portland, Maine 04101 USA  
Telephone: + (207) 775-2173  
Fax: + (207) 775-6796  
e-mail: [info@mrg.com](mailto:info@mrg.com)