



# Leadership: Breaking the Gender Ties That Bind

LEADERS CAN BE CONSTRAINED BY HABITS DERIVED FROM GENDER-BASED PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOR.

Tricia Naddaff explains how coaches are in a unique position to help leaders develop beyond the gender ties that bind them.

Much has been written about the ongoing efforts to create better gender balance in leadership. And while the effort tends to focus on issues related to women in leadership, organizations will be better served when both women and men are encouraged to develop more fully in their leadership roles. Because of coaching's deep approach to development, coaches are in a unique position to help leaders move beyond stereotypes and gender-based approaches to leadership by helping them broaden their skill sets, increase their effectiveness, and expand their career opportunities.

## HOW DO MEN AND WOMEN APPROACH THE LEADERSHIP ROLE?

Management Research Group (MRG) has been studying gender and leadership since 1998. In our most recent study, in 2015, we looked at 22 leadership behaviors and 22 leadership competencies in 13,100 leaders from more than fifteen countries. We matched men and women across several demographics that also influence differences in approaches to leadership, including

country, industry, management level, job function, and age. Focusing on observer perceptions (bosses, peers, and direct reports), we found gender differences in 17 of the 22 leadership behaviors.

The differences range from moderate to slight, and combine into important themes. Women place more emphasis on behaviors that support transparency and connection, including enthusiasm, feedback, communication, and empathy. Women also place more emphasis on accountability and results, including goal attainment, leadership responsibility, and the willingness to be forceful. Finally, women place more emphasis on execution: being organized, attending to details, and following up to ensure implementation is on track.

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In contrast, men place more emphasis on thinking strategically, contemplating both conservative and innovative options, and acting independently. Male leaders are also more reserved in their emotional expression, and place more emphasis on being cooperative, asking for assistance, and delegating to others. Finally, men place more emphasis on persuading others to endorse their ideas and proposals.

This study included an additional 22 competencies, and the ability to think effectively is the only competency where women and men are rated equally. Women leaders receive higher ratings on 18 of 22 competencies, including various forms of interpersonal effectiveness, cognitive measures of effectiveness, credibility, and the two overarching leadership competencies: overall effectiveness and future potential.

The men in this study were rated higher in three leadership competencies: business aptitude, financial understanding, and ability to see the big picture.

While the competencies on which women rated higher are significant and varied, the three competencies where men rated higher are often critical determinants for promotion to higher levels of leadership, and therefore are likely contributing factors to the lower numbers of women in senior leadership positions.

These differences in behavior and leadership competencies can be attributed to genuine differences in approach but also to observer misperceptions caused by the unconscious biases that lead all of us to interpret behaviors through the distorted lens of gender-based expectations.

Perhaps if organizations were more open to varied approaches to leadership, such gender differences would be less of an issue.

However, because people in all cultures tend to have unconscious biases about how leaders should behave, and what they should look and sound like, people who do not fit these descriptions are often undervalued as

leaders. Our discomfort with behaviors that run counter to our gendered expectations—men who demonstrate softer emotions, for example, and women who are forceful—can result in harsh assessments.

#### WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL LEADER?

MRG's research continually demonstrates that leadership success varies based on context.

However, our research also shows that some approaches to leadership are relevant to a broad range of situations and are therefore worth exploring relative to gender patterns. The behaviors that influence overall leadership effectiveness include thinking strategically, assuming leadership responsibility, communicating clearly, following through on commitments, demonstrating enthusiasm, and influencing through persuasion.

When we conduct research on high-potential leaders, we find many of the behaviors listed above remain important, in addition to a strong focus on achievement, innovation, and less deference to authority.

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Finally, studies exploring potential links between employee engagement and profitability continue to make leadership strategies that build employee engagement highly desirable. And while there is still much disagreement over the precise definition of employee engagement, we do know that leaders who offer transparent communication and empathy build employee trust, commitment, and loyalty.

### HOW CAN THESE INSIGHTS HELP IN COACHING?

While every leader is unique and happily does not fit neatly into any stereotype, certain coaching themes tend to arise more frequently based on the gender of the leader being coached.

Specifically, many women leaders will benefit from coaching in one or more of the following areas:

**Delegation** — Women tend to delegate less than men, often because they believe they can do the work faster and/or more competently than those they may delegate to, and/or because they are reluctant to add to the workload of their staff. By not delegating more, women leaders keep themselves tethered to tactical work, leaving themselves less time and energy for strategy, innovation, and reflection. Coaching to support increased delegation will enable women leaders to free up time for more strategic leadership work.

**Strategic and innovative thinking, including expanding financial and market knowledge** — Women leaders do not have less motivation than men to think or work in strategic and innovative ways. Women who are currently placing less emphasis in these areas do so largely because they feel they

lack the time, space, access to information, and opportunity to practice. Coaching in this area not only helps women be better positioned for promotion to more senior roles, it often leads to women having greater influence within their organizations and greater satisfaction in their work.

**Persuasion** — Many women feel uncomfortable overtly selling their ideas, preferring more subtle methods. Helping women develop approaches to confidently convince others of the value of their ideas and proposals not only enables them to be more influential, winning more support for their recommendations, but also gives women more confidence for ever-bolder professional moves.

Many male leaders will benefit from coaching in one or more of the following areas:

**Communication and effective emotional engagement** — Men who show gendertypical patterns of leadership, including less transparency and connection with others, risk unintentionally creating a less engaged workforce. Coaching in support of clearer messaging, greater transparency, and authentic and open emotional engagement helps to build greater trust and commitment, and therefore higher levels of engagement in others.

**Following up and actively taking responsibility for the leadership role** — Most leaders need to balance their individual contributor responsibilities with their managerial and leadership responsibilities. On average, men tend to spend more time focused on their individual contributor responsibilities, often operating independently, and, when delegating,

assuming that periodic check-ins and following up are not necessary. Helping men adjust this balance more in favor of focusing on their managerial and leadership responsibilities is likely to increase their effectiveness in achieving results with and through others.

**Coaching and developing others** — As organizations become increasingly concerned about their talent pipelines, there is a corresponding increase in the need for leaders to be good coaches and developers of others.

Coaching male leaders in the mind-sets and behaviors that support these efforts will not only help build more robust talent pipelines for organizations, but also build employee capabilities, loyalty, commitment, and engagement.

There are, of course, significant risks in looking at approaches to leadership based on gender.

When we peer too closely through the gender lens, we can fall into the easy trap of gender stereotyping. Each leader is unique. That said, leaders often exhibit some patterns of behavior that are shared with their gender community. While in many ways those patterns help make leaders effective, in other ways they limit leadership effectiveness. By being attuned to gender-based patterns that can limit effectiveness, coaches have the opportunity and privilege of helping to facilitate insight and growth by liberating leaders from the gender ties that bind them.

#### References

<sup>1</sup> Nadaff, T. (2015). 'Releasing the Transformational Power of Gender in Leadership.' Presented at HR Business Directors Summit, Birmingham, UK, February 2015. Conference presentation

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tricia Naddaff is the President at Management Research Group ([www.mrg.com](http://www.mrg.com)), an international leader in creating high-quality assessment tools and conducting extensive research in Leadership, Career Development/Personal Growth, Sales and Service. Tricia works closely with MRG's worldwide network of coaches, consultants and end-client organizations. A contributing author to the book *Enlightened Power* (2005, Jossey-Bass), she has been consulting for over 30 years and has a particular interest in engaging in the exploration of global leadership, gender in leadership, and leading authentically.