

Strive for Greatness—Analyzing How More Women in Top Leadership Positions Could Change the Nature of Leadership

By Kenneth A. Shaw

In the past several decades, U.S. women have increasingly ascended to top leadership positions in all walks of life—government, education, nonprofit institutions and the business sector. While women are still underrepresented in top leadership ranks (now holding about 16 percent of Fortune 500 top corporate jobs), it is no longer an oddity to have them in top positions in such firms as Welch Allyn, Pepsico and WellPoint, to name a few.

Those of us in higher education are not surprised with the growth in women leaders. Women now constitute 58 percent of college attendees nationally. More significant, they are outpacing their male colleagues in ways that count. They earn higher grades, hold more leadership positions, spend more time studying and earn more honors and awards, according to a study published by the American Council on Education in 2006. And this trend toward more women leaders will continue for the foreseeable future in spite of structural barriers, which make it difficult for many women who want both a high-powered job and a family life. To paraphrase a Bill Clinton axiom: It is in the numbers, stupid.

But what does this mean? Will more women in top leadership positions change the nature of leadership? I don't think so, at least not appreciably.

First, I proudly acknowledge that in many ways men and women are different. Vive la difference! As John Gray has stated, "Women are from Venus and men are from Mars." But let's not get carried away.

The real questions are how effective people lead and whether a difference exists in leadership style between successful women and

men. From my personal experience, when it comes to leadership, gender matters are highly overrated. The common stereotype has the male leader as fact-based, dealing with things rationally and making decisions quickly without much discussion. Supposedly, these alpha males have little concern about the feelings of others; they want to get the job done and fast.

The stereotype of the typical female leader is a person more interested in relationships than results. Supportive and caring to a fault, she emphasizes process and everyone feeling good over outcome.

Are there leaders with these extremes? Of course, but they usually aren't effective, regardless of gender. The best leaders I have witnessed have both a "male" and "female" side. They are sensitive to the needs of others, but they don't go overboard. They are concerned with process, but at the same time, they are decisive. They focus on results, and they know how to push the agenda hard when necessary.

Daniel Goleman, author of "Emotional Intelligence" and "Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships," describes the best leader in the following way: great listener, encourager, communicator, courageous, sense of humor, shows empathy, decisive, takes responsibility, humble, shares authority. These are not gender-specific traits.

So, dear friends, the issue is not which gender makes the best leaders. Rather it is to identify and nurture those who have the ability and motivation to become great leaders and to give them the tools to make it happen. Let's expand the pool to include all of our employees and let's develop them. Celebrate the fact that the expanded pool includes very high-quality women employees. This is a good way to stay competitive in the future.

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