

The Leadership of Women At Work

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ABSTRACT

Although women are natural leaders, given their innate ability to influence within the family, their leadership in work organisations is a relatively new construct. Many factors have contributed to this situation of women not assuming leadership at work, some of which are identified in this article. However, the modern understanding of an effective approach to leadership identifies traits that women are found to be largely endowed with. This paper posits that women can make effective leaders in work situations and points out some indicators of change and progress towards a male-female model that would lead to a greater possibility of a "female" leadership organization:

KEYWORDS

Feminisation of Leadership, Women, Glass ceiling, Influence, Effective Leadership Approach, Trust, Organisational Culture and Values.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Woman as manager is a relatively recent development. For centuries the roles played by women and men had been strictly demarcated and compartmentalised with women assuming the role of looking after the needs of the family and the home, while men were relegated the task of providing for the economic needs of the family through employment in business or services. This clear demarcation of roles has changed today, and it is found both, natural and desirable that women and men participate jointly in providing income for the family and in building up the family and home. This has brought about an experience of mutuality that makes women and men realize that they are co-partners in contributing their talents towards building the family and society at large.

2. THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN AT WORK: A CHALLENGE TODAY

These trends have resulted in an increasing number of women entering into occupations and professions hitherto accepted traditionally as masculine. Generally, in the past, women tended to enter into specific professions such as teaching, nursing, community services, medicine, secretarial and other white collar jobs. However today, a small but increasing number of women in India are entering into the managerial profession, though the numbers are much less than those in the western world. For example, women in private sector organisations accounted for 2.4% of the total administrative, executive and managerial employees in 1979, while the figure for the public sector was 2.9% in 1982 (Joshi, 1993).

Many factors are attributed to the low presence of women in managerial positions, prominent among them being:

- (a) gender stereotypes that assume that women may not be capable to handle managerial work.
- (b) an assumed lack of professional commitment among women because of domestic commitments and consequent effects on their prospects for promotion. (Spencer and Podmore, 1989).

Notwithstanding these circumstances, today women have entered into the managerial field, and a small but growing number are occupying top managerial positions in big businesses. Arundhati Bhattacharya of SBI, Vinita Jain of Biotique, Ravina Raj Kohli of Star TV, Chanda Kochar of ICICI Bank, Sulajja Firodia of Kinetic Engineering, Priya Nair of Hindustan Unilever, Usha Sangwan of LIC, Naina Lal Kidwai of HSBC, Anita Goyal of Jet Airways, Nehru Irani of Associated Breweries and Distilleries, and Anuraddha Desai of Venkateshwar Hatcheries, just to name a few, are star blazers among such women and are well on their way to proving that women can make it to the boardrooms as CEOs.

A recent survey of one hundred corporations by the Association of Management Development Institutions in South Asia and Cosmode Management Research Centre predicts an eight percent growth in senior management positions held by women in the next five years. However, an average of four of ten CEOs said that they considered the advancement of women as critical to the organisation. (Patil, 2002).

3. THE GLASS CEILING: SOME CAUSES OF THE SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR

The term 'glass ceiling' coined by Segerman-Peck (1991), refers to a last barrier based on prejudices against women that prevents them from advancing to high-level positions, thus keeping them stagnant at intermediate levels. This transparent barrier prevents many women with personal and professional capacity from reaching positions in managerial cadres, and from being promoted within them.

How is it that the full integration of women into the world of work has not yet occurred? What are the obstacles that prevent it?

One of the reasons that has traditionally had more weight to explain this de facto discrimination, which is not by law, has been the greater access to education and training by men than women.

This aspect, however, has changed a lot in the last years and today a large number of graduates in our faculties are women. These, in addition, to the technical schools, which were considered traditionally masculine.

Another reason for women's access to the world of work and their promotion to positions of responsibility are the different stereotypes linked to sexual roles. According to these, it is thought that the woman is better prepared to assume her role of woman and mother in the family space than to integrate into the company occupying positions of responsibility.

It is true that there is a larger number of women with more family responsibilities, than professional. However, the question is whether these women whose financial contribution is an auxiliary salary to their family, would have opted to leave the working environment had they seen possibilities of promotion in the company hindered by the difficulties of assuming both the family and the job responsibilities.

What is evident is that the woman is faced with a paradoxical situation in today's society: if she makes a choice in favour of the profession as against the family responsibilities, social pressure and the environment create a continuous personal dissatisfaction with her choice.

Another barrier that hinders the advancement of women in the world of work is the male attitude of not accepting women as partners of equal professional or superior rank; This in turn affects women themselves, creating an attitude of insecurity, doubt and questioning of their personal value that often pushes them to "throw in the towel".

We maintain that sometimes it is hard to live in a world of men and we must recognize that the world of the company has been traditionally male. However, the woman should not be satisfied with positions and responsibilities of inferior rank just because of that. The solution to overcome this bias would be that women acquire a serious and professional training.

Along with the above, other authors, referring to this initial inequality of men and women, indicate a series of internal and external factors. We will name them briefly:

- Gender stereotypes, i.e. generalized beliefs about the supposed male and female traits that distinguish gender from one another - are still in force (Baron and Byrne, 2005). However, as we shall see later, in recent years in the command posts there is a trend towards a higher valuation of attributes considered feminine. Qualities, we will see later, such as the ability to communicate, empathy, negotiation, teamwork and the search for consensus are a priority among the requirements for hiring managers.
- Segregation of the labour market. As a consequence of the existence and persistence of these gender stereotypes, the work is divided into male and female jobs. Thus women are concentrated in certain feminized professions that in times of economic precariousness such as the current one are the most vulnerable, hence today we speak of the "feminization of poverty".
- Sexual harassment at work. It is a form of discrimination suffered by women (Shaffer, Joplin, Bell, Lau and Oguz, 2000) and one of the most aversive barriers to career development (Phillips and Imhoff, 1997). It encompasses any conduct of a sexual nature or other conduct based on sex, which affects the dignity of persons at work. This type of behaviour is still prevalent in the workplace, despite legislation, organizational policies, preventive training, and the increasing attention that the media are engaging in the issue (Berryman-Fink, 2001).
- Psychological harassment at work (mobbing). It is a severe form of harassment where a woman is made to feel inferior and believe that she is not fit for the post. (Dieter Zapf, 1999)

4. WHAT WE MEAN BY LEADERSHIP

Ralph M. Stogdill, in his summary of theories and research on leadership, points out that "there are almost as many definitions of leadership as people who have tried to define the concept."

A meeting of the GLOBE project including 84 scholars representing 56 countries yielded the following definition of organisational leadership: "the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organisations of which they are members" (House et al., 1997).

Here, managerial leadership will be understood as the process of directing work activities of the members of a group and to influence them. This definition has four important implications.

- Involve other people.
- It involves a distribution of power.
- It implies an ability to influence.
- It is inserted in an organizational culture and that includes a series of inalienable values.

To govern as a leader implies to be able to incorporate in one's own life the best technical capacities, as well as habits based on values that introduce challenge in one's own work and in those with whom we develop initiatives.

5. A FEMALE LEADERSHIP STYLE

Having described leadership, can we establish a relationship between gender and leadership?

Some writers speak of transactional and transformational leadership. The first is more linked to men and is based on formal power, the achievement of objectives and the power of the post within the organization chart. The second is more linked to a feminine style of leadership and has its strength in the charisma of the person who directs, one's capacity for

relationship and communication so that the objective is not so much a "product" as much as the identification of values of the employees with those of the organization. Women are more likely to adopt this style as it has to do with relationships and nurturance

The innate qualities of women make them natural transformational leaders. Some of these characteristics are discussed below:

1. Women are more relationship oriented than men. They build relationships, motivate others, and use encouragement to improve performance. Their capacity for interpersonal relationships helps them to increase the potential of their employees and encourages their subordinates to deliver better results, even exceed the expectations.
2. Women are more open to participation and collaboration than men. Women are found to value communication, collaboration and participation to a greater degree than male counterparts. Feedback, suggestions, expressing opinions in problem solving are found to be greatly encouraged by women managers. This creates a feeling of being valued and builds trust which brings better results in the long run.
3. It is demonstrated that women are more capable of being enthusiastic about work, usually rely more on cooperation than on competition, are more versatile and tend to do several things at once (multi-tasking), have a natural inclination towards collaboration and working in teams, they flee from the formal structure and hierarchy to achieve results, although it does not mean that they ignore them. Women are generally less strategists than men but very good at implementing measures and programs; they direct and work by making use of their innate tendency to interpersonal communication and even some say, they are less prone to stress.
4. Another significant feature is that they enjoy good intuition. The intuitive/inductive system allows one to take solutions on complex aspects with less quantitative data and relying on the experience and the observation of the reality through different points of view taking advantage of rational and emotional data in an integrated way.
5. And in general they give more attention to people. Here is the wonderful art of listening: to know how to listen means to show attention and receptivity, and it suggests dialogue and interaction, but at the same time it involves elaborating in detail the information that is collected in order to manage the expectations of the people, with whom one interacts. Listening allows women to build bridges between the needs of the company and the desires of the people; thus, this style proves to be functional both for the individual and for the company.

And so, we could list other traits but it does seem interesting to point out that some of the leadership models that are being presented today in the world of the company, have to do with the feminization of an approach to business management.

6. FINAL CONCLUSIONS

Finally, we can make some conclusions always with the conviction that one opens paths by walking on them and that we still have a long way to go in making it possible that women assume leadership in work organisations.

However, we dare to point out some indicators of change and progress towards a male-female model that would lead to a greater possibility of a "female" leadership organization:

- The change of male attitudes: acceptance of women in all spheres of life.
- The change of feminine attitudes: greater assertiveness and security in themselves.
- Non-sexist vocational guidance.
- The advantages of "woman leadership"
- Breaking stereotypes with objective studies.
- The co-responsibility of men and women in family responsibilities.

- Social assistance to make work and family compatible.
- Flexibility at work through shared and part-time work.
- Raising the awareness of companies, institutions and society at large in equal opportunities policies.

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