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Men, behave like women at work

LEADERS: Men make better bosses – or so we were made to believe. However, a recent survey revealed that 66 per cent of people are convinced that the world will be a better place if men think more like women. Audrey Vijandren talks to field experts to discover the best way to shepherd the flock – is it by cracking the whip, or being gentle and sensitive?

DRAWING from interviews at innovative organisations and Fortune 500 boardrooms, the best-selling book, *The Athena Doctrine: How Women (And the Men Who Think Like Them) Will Rule The Future*, revealed that femininity is the operating system of a 21st century environment.

A total of 64,000 people from 13 diverse countries were divided into two groups; the first half was shown a list of 125 human traits and was asked to define them as “masculine”, “feminine” or “neutral”.

Pride, guts, arrogance, confidence, aggressiveness and being career-driven were some of the characteristics predominantly classified as masculine. On the other hand, feminine traits included being humble, creative, sensitive, gentle, adaptable, supportive and kind.

When those characteristics were stripped of gender connections and shown to the other half of those surveyed, feminine traits such as team-player, reliable, popular and charming were identified as traits needed to do well in the business world today.

Characteristics such as being dominant, arrogant and ambitious were frowned upon.

Universiti Malaya Gender Studies Programme coordinator Dr Lai Suat Yan said traditionally, society used to be much more hierarchical, but it's changing with the new generation.

“Most employees don't respond well to a leader who's arrogant, because they want their input to be taken into account. It's a generational change and this is how society will operate from now on,”

However, this also depends greatly on who the other party is, said Lai.

“Sometimes employees who think you're gentle tend to demand more. There are various characters in any organisation so it's quite impossible to adopt one particular management style for everyone. Just as one size does not fit all, leaders and managers need to work with each employee according to their personality traits. However, it's important to be professional.

“For instance, if a male employee is egoistical, chauvinistic and very patriarchal, he will find it difficult receiving instructions from a woman. The female boss may have to use psychology in dealing with this worker.”

Lai added that recent writings have suggested that emotional intelligence (EQ), which women are generally more attuned to, plays a very important role in leadership.

Although some may believe portraying feminine values is a sign of weakness, Lai believes it's the opposite.

“Some assume a male boss who's nurturing and sensitive is a wimp or coward. But it actually takes more guts and courage to be that way when the need arises. He doesn't have to shout out orders from one end of the office to another to show that he is ‘boss’.”

“In the past, assertive women were seen to be aggressive, but the same assertion among men was acceptable because it was expected of them. There were obvious double standards in society. Women who were critical and vocal were labelled pushy and difficult.”

“Britain's Iron Lady, the late Margaret Thatcher, produced results but along the way she also made a lot of enemies. I agree with the observation that she was judged more harshly and hated because she was a woman. If a man did what she did, there probably wouldn't be so much backlash.”

“But today, roles have shifted and evolved, mainly because we're seeing

more women leaders. Things will happen slowly, but it'll be a gradual change.”

“As more and more females take on leadership roles, male and female employees will learn to appreciate the EQ they bring to the boardroom. And employers will also realise that most of these feminine traits prove more effective.”

When it comes to managing people, it's best to be assertive, but not domineering, especially if you don't want constant turnover, Lai



Helen Langhammer says television dramas depict the changing gender roles well



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added.

“It's ideal to combine assertiveness and EQ. Men who are domineering need to wake up and smell the coffee — old style management is not going to yield positive results. They should tone down.”

“A leader needs to be firm, yet gentle. And when push comes to shove, he or she must know where their bottom line is.”

“Whatever it is, charisma which includes being farsighted, convincing and confident is crucial. For example, many great presidents have had the guts to admit when they've made mistakes and were willing to take suggestions. So, why can't everyday leaders stop cracking their whips and start working with their employees on a more level playing field, by being more sensitive and less egoistical?”

Aspire Consulting director Helen Langhammer, however, believes there's a place for both masculine and feminine traits in the workplace.

“There is a time for tough and objective decision-making, and a time to nurture your team. I'm not convinced that men are incapable of nurturing or empathising, or women incapable of tough decision-making.”

“In my work as a business consultant, I've come across some women who've no difficulty separating fact from emotion, and I've come across men who are more emotionally aware than many of their female counterparts.”

She, too, believes that successful leadership depends on the people that are managed.

“What's most important in any manager — male or female — is that they're seen to be fair and to adhere to a clearly defined set of values.

“Personally, I prefer to work for a tough but fair boss who is going to challenge me and make me grow. As opposed to someone who vacillates or who goes easy on me, then reverts to stressed behaviour when results are not as expected.”

“Consistency is important in any boss, as is transparency — neither of which can be ascribed to either male or female behaviour.”

Television dramas, Langhammer said, depict the changing of gender roles well.

“One only has to look at the 50s prime-time television shows, where women were seen as the perfect mother and men seen as the omniscient patriarch. The first season of television drama, *Mad Men*, charts these gender differences beautifully. Contrast that with shows like *Sex in the City* and *The Good Wife*, where women start to demand equal treatment and became more prominent in office decision-making.”

Having said that, women are still paid less than men, even now.

“Ultimately, a balance of firm decisiveness and empathetic understanding of the people who you work with is crucial. There are times in business when tough decisions have to be made, but how they're communicated to people can make or break the overall success of the decision.”

“Flexibility of style, dependent on the person or people you are dealing with, while not losing sight of or compromising your values or your sense of what is fair, is important.”

What do you think?

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