

ARE WOMEN LESS CREDIBLE AS LEADERS?

WOMEN & CAREERS



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LEADERSHIP is often defined as the ability to influence others to do things to achieve a common goal. Credibility is the belief and trust people have in a leader that enables a leader to be influential.

In essence, to assess the leadership of women, in this article, we will look at the factors that make women leaders credible and those that may reduce their credibility.

CREDIBLE FACTORS

In a study done by Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman in 2011 where 7,280 leaders had their leadership evaluated by peers, their bosses, direct reports and other associates based on 16 leadership competencies, it was found that women excelled in the majority of areas.

They noted with surprise that women excel not just in the "nurturing competencies," which have been seen traditionally as their strengths such as developing others, building relationships, exhibiting integrity engaging in self-development but also in other areas as well.

They pointed out that two of the scores where women are rated highest compared to men – taking initiative and driving for results – had long been assumed to be men's stronghold.

What's more interesting is that of all these 16 competencies, overall, women scored higher in everyone of them except in the area of strategy ("develops strategic perspective"):

The top 16 competencies top leaders exemplify most

	Male mean percentile	Female mean percentile	T value
Takes initiative	48	56	-11.58
Practises self-development	48	55	-9.45
Displays high integrity and honesty	48	55	-9.28
Drives for results	48	54	-8.84
Develops others	48	54	-7.94
Inspires and motivates others	49	54	-7.53
Builds relationships	49	54	-7.15
Collaboration and teamwork	49	53	-6.14
Establishes stretch goals	49	53	-5.41
Champions change	49	53	-4.48
Solves problems and analyses issues	50	52	-2.53
Communicates powerfully and prolifically	50	52	-2.47
Connects the group to the outside world	50	51	-0.78
Innovates or professional expertise	50	51	-0.11
Develops strategic perspective	51	49	-2.79

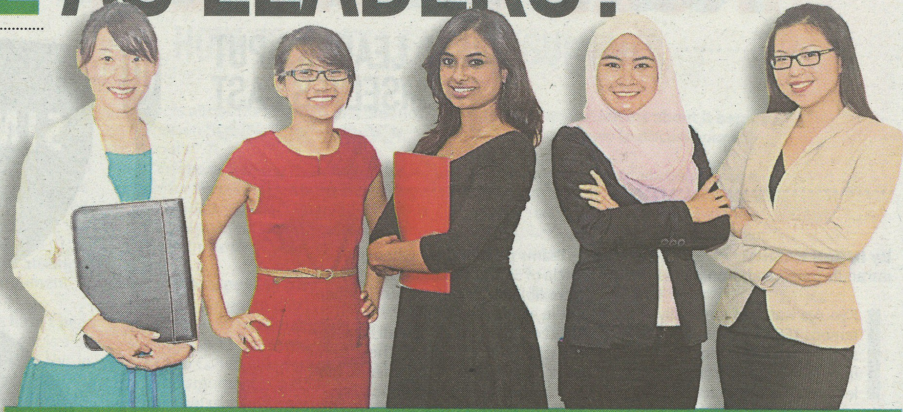
Source: Zenger Folkman Inc., 2011.

Another study in 2011 by Catalyst, a US non-profit company, points out a difference of 26% in return on invested capital between the top-quartile companies with 19% to 44% women board representation and the bottom quartile companies with no women directors.

In yet another research in 2008 by Pew Research Social and Demographic trends, it was found out of the top eight leadership traits in order of importance surveyed, women outscored men in four of the traits, namely, honesty, intelligence, compassion and creativity.

Men only scored higher in decisiveness, whereas in the leadership traits of "hardworking" and "ambitious", both men and women scored equally.

Hence based on these actual surveys conducted and many more that are not included



here, it is convincing that women are no less credible as leaders as compared to men.

In fact, the survey results show in many areas women are in fact better leaders and hence more credible than men.

With the advent of Gen-Y and the new workforce inclination towards a more open, nurturing and creative workplace, it is no surprise that many survey results point to women's traits and leadership styles which are more aligned to such values and hence will make them more credible leaders in today's environment.

Studies have shown that women are naturally better listeners, warmer and better at building relationships and more collaborative.

The workplace and work values have changed. Unless men do change from their bias towards "command and control" or "take charge" modes to a more open, nurturing and creative leadership approach, women will continue to be viewed as more "credible" than men as shown by these surveys.

LESS CREDIBLE FACTORS

Having looked at those areas where women are seen as more credible as leaders than men, let's now focus on those factors that make women less credible. Some of these factors come from the women themselves.

Sheryl Sandberg, author of *Lean In*, who is also the current chief operations officer of Facebook, points out that women sabotage themselves. She writes in her book, "We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in."

There are factors that certainly holding women back in their careers. For example, many women may not take a more proactive and assertive role to seek out opportunities for higher positions as they may view that they need not be as ambitious as men as they are not breadwinners in the family.

Many women think that work-life balance is more applicable to them than men, after all, since they traditionally take the bigger share of domestic chores including giving birth and taking care of children.

With regard to self-sabotage, a good illustration is given in Sandberg's book, where she tells the story of a keynote speaker, Peggy McIntosh, from the Wellesley Centre for Women, giving a talk called "Feeling Like a Fraud."

In it, McIntosh explains that many women feel fraudulent when they are praised for their accomplishments. Instead of feeling worthy of recognition, they feel undeserving and guilty, as if a mistake has been made.

It is this kind of attitude that women themselves have that make them their own worst enemies and hence making them appear less credible as leaders or potential leaders for higher positions.

Of course, there are other areas women should look out for so that extremity does not dominate their behaviour. For example, survey statistics have also shown that while women are much more emotional and compassionate, and these characteristics *per se* do not affect the credibility of women, if exhibited out of proportion, they might begin to diminish their professionalism and hence affect their leadership credibility.

In addition, there are other behaviours that women have that can affect their credibility as leaders. While it is quite acceptable to use some natural charm exhibited through their femininity, there are certain behaviors which will tarnish their image as leaders.

For example, a woman's overt flirting with excessive use of feminine charm might be interpreted by others as using "unfair advantage" to win others over. This will dilute the regard people have of her ability as a leader. Of course, a woman's dressing with too much exposure portraying a "sexy" image would also compromise her professionalism.

In my consulting work having trained over 500,000 leaders and executives where about half of them are women, I have observed some other self-defeating behaviours which can affect the credibility of women. Here are some of these behaviours:

- Over-accentuating gender difference to win sympathy
- Trying too hard to be like men – for example emulating a very hard handshake
- Running down the leadership ability of their own gender
- Becoming too personal when professionalism is called for
- Acting "girlish" when under stress, for example, stroking hair or playing with jewellery
- Clocking up too much downtime to do domestic things

While women can develop competencies equal to men, they have the advantage of the "softer characteristics" that are aligned to the desired work culture of the new generation which calls for a warmer, friendlier and more caring workplace.

Whether in reality, women can edge over men in leading future generations will certainly depend on whether they are leveraging on all the "credible factors" that are already inherent in them or they are overcome by "less credible factors" because of their own doing.

Truly women will be no less credible leaders if they practise a healthy blend of "masculine" and "feminine" behavioural styles, meaning they are courageous enough to be direct, authoritative and objective, and at the same time, they know when to be more nurturing, open and empathetic when the situation calls for it.

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