

Women and Leadership Series: Part 3

COMPARISON OF SUCCESSFUL FEMALE AND MALE LEADERS

For over 55 years, PRADCO has been evaluating people for positions, determining their fit with various work cultures and providing coaching to prepare high-potential leaders to excel.

Beginning in 2010, PRADCO embarked on an extensive study to identify the behaviors that characterize successful female leaders. The first whitepaper in the Women and Leadership Series, [Characteristics of High-Performing Female Leaders](#), was published in January 2011. This paper detailed the work competencies, leadership and interpersonal behaviors that relate to strong performance in female leaders.

The second in the series, [Developing Women Leaders](#), captures the personal stories of 15 successful women. In interviews, they related the factors that encouraged and supported their growth as well as the challenges they faced and the obstacles they overcame to achieve their career goals.

In this paper, we will answer the question many of our readers have been considering from the very beginning: How do successful female leaders compare to their successful male co-workers. As coaches and consultants, we will consider how we can use what we have learned about the similarities and differences to strengthen our understanding of effective leadership styles and to support both women and men to become the best leaders they can be.



Behaviors that Leaders Share:

*Ambition
Initiative
Assertiveness
Decisiveness*

The Foundations of Leadership

Our findings indicated that there were four foundational behaviors that made leaders successful regardless of level or gender. Both groups were made up of ambitious individuals who asserted their ideas, took the initiative to get projects started and made effective decisions. Female and male leaders start with a strong set of individual contributor behaviors and continue to call on them throughout their career. To learn more about the transitions people make in becoming effective leaders, we examined the differences between women and men at the middle management and executive level.



Middle Managers

Differences in Middle Management:

Women

*Participative
Proactive
Goal-Driven
Flexibility
Cooperative
Compassion
Empathy*

Men

*Organizational Awareness
Even-Tempered
Teamwork
Leading Change
Inspiring Others
Delegation
Developing Others*

When we look at middle managers, women continue to focus on strong individual behaviors, while men appear to transition quickly to getting the job done through others. Women may prefer to work independently or in partnership with teams, ensuring that the work is accomplished with the same high standards they had demanded of themselves. It may also be that women take longer to accept the importance of driving results through others, and therefore persist in getting the work done themselves. This makes sense if we recall the stories of the women interviewed in our second paper, suggesting that a woman needs to know her job and do it better than others to get noticed. Conventional wisdom also speaks to the need for women to work harder than their male counterparts to stand out. It is possible that it takes them longer to adjust to—or take the risk of—obtaining good results through their direct reports.



Executive Leaders

At the executive level, many of the differences noted for middle managers disappear. It may be that the responsibilities of an executive role minimize gender differences. Women who earlier in their careers displayed a super individual contributor pattern have developed into leaders who delegate and drive results through others. However, they do not develop stereotypical male leadership behaviors. Rather, they draw on their empathy and emotional awareness as primary methods for driving results. Men, on the other hand, focus on leading change and become more participative with decision-making.

Differences in Executive Management:

Women

*Emotional Awareness
Empathy
Optimism
Delegation
Driving Results*

Men

*Participative
Leading Change*

Summary

When we look at successful female and male leaders, we can identify some behaviors that transcend hierarchical levels and gender, providing a foundation for leadership effectiveness and growth. When we divide the group into two professional levels, the differences between women and men at the middle-management level suggest a tendency for women to take more of a step-wise route to higher level leadership roles. Perhaps because men are more likely to expect or even assume that the future leaders of their organizations will come from their ranks, they step more easily into new roles and the behaviors required. Women, who report feeling a need to prove themselves and “do better and be smarter” than their peers in order to be noticed and promoted, may find it more difficult to let go of the expert knowledge and diligent work styles that helped them win their new status. It should be a source of confidence and reassurance to see that women generally do make that transition, as the data on executive leaders demonstrates.



Differences between women and men leaders at the middle-management level suggest a tendency for women leaders to take more of a step-wise route to higher-level leadership roles, but they can get there with persistence.

Women can build upon the foundations of leadership and climb the ladder in their own unique ways.

In the final analysis, our data lend support to theories that assert that some important differences persist between women and men regardless of leadership position. More importantly, it is consistent with the idea that women do not need to adapt to a more stereotypical male way of leading to be effective and successful. It is important to be authentic in leadership, leverage relationship-building skills and encourage organizations to value and develop all of the talents that women bring to high-level leadership positions.

Implications for Coaching

To the coach and mentor, the middle-management stage of “super individual contributor” may provide the ideal juncture to engage high-potential female employees with aspirations for leadership. It is at this point in a woman’s career that support for her transition from “worker” to “leader” offers the best opportunity to explore the behaviors that typify leadership strength as opposed to worker strength.

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It appears that a woman’s journey to career fulfillment and corporate power may be more complex than that of their male counterparts. We reiterate the importance of **networking** for social support, **seeking formal and informal mentors** to gain organizational insight and influence, and **engaging in leadership and executive coaching** to examine the costs and benefits of focusing on work and career at the expense of other areas of life fulfillment and satisfaction.



We’ve also learned about the differences in style men exhibit at different stages of leadership. They seem to make a more natural transition from worker to manager, showing transformational leadership behaviors like change leadership and developing others at the middle management level. As they become more seasoned in their roles and experienced as leaders, these characteristics are maintained and those who adopt more collaborative behaviors may be perceived as ready for executive responsibility.



Coaches and managers can refer to the behavioral dimensions that emerge at each level as benchmarks for selection or development. Coaching a high-potential performer to demonstrate behaviors that signify success at the next level may lead to a promotion more quickly. This is a worthwhile effort to develop future leaders and promote high quality leaders over time.



About PRADCO

PRADCO delivers visionary, comprehensive methods for evaluating and developing success formulas for HR departments, leadership teams, and executives. PRADCO is intensely committed to providing the highest quality products and services that will improve organizational and employee performance through research, evaluation and development. High potential leaders, as well as more seasoned individuals, find themselves faced with challenging performance expectations. PRADCO consultants can help people overcome obstacles and maximize their potential.

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