

Women in Leadership: A Shift in Mindset?



By Joan Runnheim Olson, M.S., ACC

For years, women have been told that to succeed in the workplace, they need to “act more like men.” These days, however, that mindset is beginning to change and women are now being viewed as possessing special traits that enable them to be effective leaders.

Gender Stereotypes

What are those traits? And, are gender stereotypes still posing challenges for women?

Despite the fact that 50 percent of the working population is comprised of women, and that more than 50 percent of women have managerial positions, they still hold only 15.7 percent of C-level positions at Fortune 500 companies. According to a recent study by Catalyst, Inc., gender stereotypes continue to prevent women from reaching the summit.

The study underscores the fact that women often find themselves in the proverbial “double bind”. If they lead in a collaborative way, they are often seen as being ‘too soft’. If they are too aggressive, they are often viewed as being ‘unfeminine’. The bottom line: rarely are women viewed as being both competent and well liked, according to the study.

Shift in Mindset

There are some however, who see this mindset slowing beginning to shift. “Rather than women changing to adapt to the business climate, I see the business climate moving toward a more nurturing, collaborative model that supports the intrinsic strengths of women,” says Amy Coulter, vice president and founder, VisionShare Inc. in Minneapolis.

Amy Groningen, director, Office on the Economic Status of Women in St. Paul, Minn. echoes that sentiment. “It seems as though traits that were once viewed as being ‘traditionally feminine’ are now taking on more of a positive, mainstream point of view in terms of how organizations and entities are led,” explains Groningen.

Recognizing the unique talents that women bring to the workplace, some organizations are making changes to foster a more ‘female-friendly’ environment. In a Newsweek article titled “Women and Leadership”, Donna Orender, president of the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA), notes that women are more collegial and focused on team building. According to Coulter, “Top down management is being replaced by team approaches and flexible, family-oriented schedules are more the norm than the exception. It has taken time, but the workplace today is embracing women’s strengths.”

Focusing on Your Strengths

Too often it seems as though women leaders focus too much on trying to fix their [perceived] weaknesses or traits uncommon to men. In their book “Now Discover Your Strengths”, authors Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton, point out that women [and men] need to capitalize on their strengths and talents, rather than focus on their weaknesses.

Key to Success

While some women are beginning to shatter the glass ceiling, others remain glued to the sticky floor. It seems the key that unlocks the door to success is for women in the workplace to acknowledge and focus on their strengths. As time goes on, more and more companies will soon realize the special gifts that women offer and reward them for it.

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