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World of Social Change

**WOMEN AS LEADERS**

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### **Abstract**

Women and men have many unique characteristics when it comes to socialization, communication styles and leadership styles, which are rooted in our history and culture. Identifying and embracing these gender differences provides an opportunity to broaden our understanding and perspective on leadership traits and styles.

Research indicates that women leaders tend to have unique characteristics that are particularly useful for senior management, yet significant barriers continue to exist for women to advance to these positions. Identifying and removing these barriers will provide for more equitable and balanced leadership, while improving the health and productivity of organizations.

### **Overview of the Sessionosh**

#### 1.1 Exploring Gender Differences and Identify the Barriers

All leaders have characteristic traits of behaving. With our gender bias, we have come to identify certain traits as being typically male or typically female. Inherent with these gender-



based beliefs are barriers to acquiring management positions – both real and perceived. Better understanding of relative abilities, traits and barriers is required before gender-based issues can be addressed in the work environment.

History and status quo represent two common barriers for female leaders. Since we live in a world that was primarily shaped by male leaders, the processes, systems, standards and norms of behaviour of our society were largely formed from the male perspective. Many gender specialists believe that we live in an Androcentric society. Androcentrism is a pattern of thinking and acting that takes the normal characteristics of men to be normal for all humanity – alienating women and children and those who do not fit the standard. To overcome androcentrism, we must ask for research conducted on women, read books written by women, record women's experiences and celebrate women to understand and value other ideas, perspectives and modes of behaviour.

### 1.2 Linguistic Styles

Linguistic style is a person's characteristic speaking patterns – directness, indirectness, pacing, pausing, word choice, use of elements such as jokes, figures of speech, stories, questions and apologies. Research conducted by Deborah Tannen, Professor of Linguistics at Georgetown University, suggests that ways of speaking are learned in childhood and these patterns are deeply influenced by culture and gender. Girls are socialized to downplay their personal performance and promote the group whereas boys are taught to take credit and be in the spotlight. This fundamental difference between boys and girls carries into our adult lives and influences the way we say things, what people hear and how people perceive us. Judgements about confidence, for example, can be inferred only from the way people present themselves, and much of that presentation is in the form of talk.

### 1.3 Do Women Make Good Leaders?

The subject of leadership and gender intensified after women appeared in the workforce in great numbers during the Second World War. At that time, top managerial jobs were almost exclusively allocated to men who were typically thought to be more efficient, more rational, more tough-minded and less emotional. These stereotypes have continued to influence perceptions of gender-based abilities and personality traits.

Some research has investigated the area of gender-based abilities and personality traits and found some interesting results. For example, Steinberg and Shapiro used a questionnaire to test the personality traits of 42 males and 29 females on a university management course and concluded that there were few personality differences between the sexes. In fact, some female students appeared to be more tough-minded whereas the male students were more tender-minded. The researchers argued that some women may exaggerate their masculine facets of their personalities to help them to compete more effectively for managerial jobs, which they can perform just as well as men. (OB-An Introductory Text 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Buchanan & Huczynski, page 602).

A more extensive study of more than 915 managers (645 men and 270 women) of large multinational companies was conducted in 1988. It concluded that in their role as managers, leaders and teammates, women outstripped the abilities of their male counterparts in 28 of 31 skill areas. The study, co-authored by Janet K. Irwin and Michael R. Perrault, was conducted by the Foundation for Future Leadership Group, an American organization dedicated to studying leadership characteristics.

In particular, the results of the study showed that men and women scored equally on only one leadership area –delegating authority. Men scored higher in two areas – handling pressure



and coping with their own frustrations. The women out performed the men in every other area. And, the study results indicated that women are better problem solvers and have better analytical skills than men - traits that are typically regarded as being very male oriented. This was a landmark study as it was one of the first to refute the stereotypical notion of gender based abilities and traits. In response, some academics have criticized the results by claiming that the relative percentage of males and females used in the study led to unreliable evidence. However, more studies on this topic are validating the findings. For example, a similar study from L. Pfaff and colleagues found that women outperformed men in 14 out of 20 managerial skill areas.

Despite this evidence and the growing number of female CEO's, there is still a huge discrepancy between males and females holding senior leadership positions. The international Labour Office recently reported the following figures: in North America, women hold 124% of the administrative management jobs and less than 6% of the senior management jobs. The figures for female senior directors in the UK are 5%, but is expected to grow to 20% within the next few years. Likewise, only 2.4% of the directors of America's top 500 firms are female, although this too is changing.

([www.ca.aston.ac.uk/~gardnena/ob\\_presentation\\_essay.htm](http://www.ca.aston.ac.uk/~gardnena/ob_presentation_essay.htm))

#### 1.4 Why Develop Women Leaders

Common traits of female management style typically focus on communication and positive working relationships and are particularly suited to the team-oriented leadership of our time. Research has demonstrated that women tend to have better social skills, stronger communication skills, and are more likely to put the success of the team first than their male counterparts. Studies have also shown that women may also be better at managing a diverse

workforce because they generally have less traditional values, are more tolerant of differences and they are less bound by social traditions.

It is critical that we work collectively to bring more women up the leadership ranks into senior positions. We must support developing leaders by allowing women diverse opportunities, promoting women for good performance, providing mentoring opportunities and a strong supportive network. Having a more balanced representation of male and female leaders in senior managerial positions will allow us to collectively flourish and leave a lasting legacy of equity and diversity for those that follow.

### **The Presenter**

Nora Sheffe has worked provincial, nationally and internationally leading groups of coaches, athletes and sport administrators. Her primary experience is with sport organizations, where she has worked as a provincial Executive Director of Sport for Disabled Ontario and as a National Program Director for the Canadian Wheelchair Sport Organization. Following her work in Canada, Nora moved to Zimbabwe to develop community based sports programs for local people. Programs were focused on including women, people with disabilities, youth at risk and people from rural areas – people often excluded from opportunities. Now back in Canada, Nora shares her time as a mother of 2 toddlers and a consultant working in areas of international development, health and women's issues.