

NO HANDS TIED



Research reinforces the value of traditionally feminine styles of leadership.

“Park your femininity at home; it’s not wanted here,” Andrea’s supervisor – a woman - told her on Andrea’s first day on the job. Taking that admonition to heart, for the 17 years she stayed at that company, Andrea felt that she was working with one hand tied behind her back.

Andrea’s anguish causes us to reflect. Both of us entered the work force with the big wave of women in the 1970s. We’ve witnessed the social shift measured by a drumbeat of statistics: about 70% of women now work outside the home, compared to just over 30% in 1950; the female proportion of the workforce has soared to 50%.

Beyond those bare facts lie more intriguing “factlets:” girls get better grades than boys; in most developed countries, more women than men now go to college; women consistently achieve higher returns on their financial investments than do men, The Economist noted last April. But it also pointed to surveys that show that parents still prefer to have a boy. “...it is time for parents to think again,” concludes The Economist. “Girls may now be a better investment.”

Might women also be a better investment for organizations? The most effective teams are led by women and have at least 30% female members, as shown in preliminary findings from research being led by Professor Lynda Gratton at The London Business School’s Lehman Brothers Centre for Women in Business. Second best are teams led by men, but still comprised of at least 30% women. “We raise the question of whether there is a cost to companies of having senior teams largely made up of and led by men,” states the research summary posted to the LBS web site in November 2006. “The cost could well be to organisations’ capacity to maintain and build knowledge, to share and combine that knowledge and, most importantly, to innovate in their products and services.”

One goal of Gratton’s research is to test common assumptions about women as leaders and team members: “that women are more emotional and more able to cooperate with each other; are more relationship oriented and more able to create networks; are less competitive and more likely to create warm relationships with others; and are less task-oriented.”

The effort comes as many organizations are putting new value on relationship competencies, traditionally ascribed to women. We’ve recently been impressed, for example, by The Leadership Circle Profile, an assessment and development tool. Heading up its list of key competencies of what it calls “Creative Leadership” is “Relating: caring connection; fosters team play; collaborator; mentoring and developing; interpersonal intelligence.” Relating, in a business context, has to do with helping others “be not small” –bringing out the best in oneself and others. Research shows that the better one is able to do this, and balance this with “task behaviors,” the stronger one’s leadership is.

Notice the importance of balance. As a matter of fact, Gratton’s preliminary findings show that women’s strength is not only that their goals are more likely to be cooperative rather than competitive, but that they are able to balance relationship and task orientation. “It could be said that women leaders tend to combine both ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ ways of working – their style is androgynous,” explains the summary. “It is less common for their male counterparts to combine both masculine and feminine ways of working.”

In other words, the key issue is not how many women an organization has, or even how many women are in leadership positions. It is whether an organization has balance. It may be that teams that are 80% male or 80% female perform equally badly, no matter what gender is in charge. When Bob sees his teenaged son Remy with a group of boys, they can get pretty obnoxious quickly – they're all about one-upmanship and establishing a hierarchy. When we observe an all-girl group, we see different behaviors; but the thinking appears just as reactive. So maybe the secret to effective leadership teams is gender diversity. Perhaps women bring out the best in men, and vice versa.

More than that: perhaps what we're seeing is not the tension of men versus women, but interplay between masculine and feminine power – and the need for a balance of both. One way to get perspective on the difference between them is to look at responses to stress. Research at UCLA has shown that women respond to stress with a cascade of brain chemicals that cause them to tend to their relationships to other women – releasing oxytocin, which produces a calming effect. Men under stress, on the other hand, produce testosterone in high levels – fueling the classic “fight or flight” response.

The Chinese have focused on the difference in masculine and feminine power since ancient times in the concepts of Yin and Yang, primal opposing but complementary forces. Yang is the brighter element, active and masculine. Yin is darker: passive and feminine. But both are present in all things; they are interdependent; each contains the seed of and the other.

It's easy to be attracted to the light, to reward the active – and, thus, to promote the masculine energy in our organizations. But there are consequences to denying the yin, of telling workers to “park your femininity at home.” Not just that women's voices are silenced. But, also, one figurative hand is tied behind the back of the entire organization.

As our colleague, Chris Wahl, observes, where feminine energy is undervalued:

- Invitations to hear the intuitive, softer angles do not come forward as often.
- The whole business of “relating” loses validity; even though many men are relaters, the value of that is not appreciated.
- Given that “relating” is so highly correlated with leadership, the leadership of an organization will be adversely affected.
- Poor leadership leads to lower productivity numbers, as research shows.
- The wholeness of people is not seen, acknowledged, appreciated; and the small things that can make a big difference in motivation and loyalty don't happen (e.g., the kids' baseball team you coach wins a championship, yet no co-worker asks about it).
- Self-awareness is an underground conversation.

That last issue may be the most important of all. Several of us at Accompli have experienced The Leadership Circle process. What we've seen is that the bell curve for females and males does not show a distinction. What has been surprising is that high-scoring males and high-scoring females have little awareness that their leadership capabilities are rare. In other words, they don't know that they are operating at a higher level of consciousness than their peers! They are really surprised.

We've also noted that our two female colleagues scored overall effectiveness that is the best of our group – well into the 90% range, suggesting that they are highly aware leaders. Their scores are causing us to take a new look at our own habits in valuing the feminine, and balancing it with the masculine. Not just in our organization. But in our own leadership, and lives.

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