FEATURED ARTICLE

As seen in MassPsych: The Periodical of the Massachusetts Psychological Association (Spring/Summer 2005/ Volume 49 No. 2)

Women and Men @ Work: Leadership and the Difficult Conversation

by Betty Doo, Ed.D

When examining gender issues in the workplace, certain trends are evident. Women have made tremendous gains over the past 30 years since The Feminine Mystique by Betty Friedan hit the streets. They are moving into leadership roles in greater numbers, including the small elite club of Fortune 500 CEOs. They are also easing their way into the corporate boardrooms, which are seen as the last great frontier.

The percentages of women working fulltime in the workforce is increasing rapidly. At the same time, men are moving into fields traditionally dominated by women such as nursing and education in greater numbers and there is a small but growing population of men who are choosing to be "at-home" dads, or work flex-time placing greater emphasis on home over work. These changes demonstrate progress in achieving a greater balance of equity for men and women as well as affording more options for all.

Yet there is more work to be done and barriers to equality in the workplace remain, most prominently seen in attitudes or obstacles that prevent women from advancing to senior levels. The storm created by Harvard University's President, Lawrence Summers, when he presented the hypothesis that women may not be reaching top leadership positions in math and science because of "natural abilities" demonstrates the diversity of perspectives that continue in both business and academia. Ironically the significant media attention this comment has received may prove to be very useful in moving the dialogue on gender and leadership forward.

As a psychologist who consults in the workplace, what I find most interesting when looking at gender issues at work, however, is not the presence or absence of discrimination, which unfortunately will likely continue for some time, but the complexities, or contradictions that emerge when examining the contributions of both men and women in the workforce. These are sometimes harder to characterize because of their subtleties.

WOMEN AND MEN AS LEADERS

There is, for example, a body of literature in the management field extolling the virtues of women as leaders. Tom Peters, a business thought leader/ guru and author of numerous books on management and business, is one major supporter of women. In his book, The Circle of Innovation (1997) he claims that women are smarter than men and they make better managers. He is emphatic about this and he has statistics to make his case. Interestingly for psychologists, he quotes Carol Gilligan's, In a Different Voice, (1982) when asserting that women are more focused on connection (vs. men on the self), better at relationships, less concerned with hierarchies, and this consequently makes them better leaders. Sally Helgesen, author of The Female Advantage, (1990) elucidated key qualities of women leaders by studying four women executives and

challenging what she calls “warrior virtues” that have been evident in corporate culture for quite some time. She does a nice job of presenting what these strong women leaders have to offer.

As psychologists today, most of us have an understanding of the research on gender differences concerning relationships, communication style, and related issues and we appreciate how these might impact managerial competence and success. Yet, as I read these writings, which granted have valuable and thought-provoking ideas, I find myself with conflicting reactions. First, I think: there is significant merit to the proposition that women bring much to the role of leader. Leadership requires developing relationships, maintaining networks, building teams and inspiring others. It is reasonable to assume women may thus have an edge. Being a woman myself, it is probably easy to accept this viewpoint because, well, lets be honest: it feels good.

But I then pause. I find myself with a very different reaction, one of questioning and doubt. This response comes from my personal experience in the work world, conversations with women and men, and what I have actually observed. The reality is: my experience with women managers has been mixed. I cannot honestly say that my best bosses and mentors have all been women; in several cases they have not been. Other women I have talked with share this viewpoint.

What is wrong with this picture? If women are indeed better managers, why is it my experience, and that of many others I have talked with, does not bare that out?

THE DEVELOPING LEADER

I observed an example of the strengths and liabilities associated with gender-based leadership styles when two of my kids were in high school. My daughter was a co-leader of a female acapella group in high school. She and her fellow co-leader were confronted with the challenge of a young freshman new to the group who was having difficulties mastering her solo part. The spring concert was fast approaching. My daughter and her peer spent many hours discussing whether to take her off the assignment, how to talk with her about it, what were the implications for the group. Finally they had “**The Difficult Conversation”.** The freshman was taken off the solo, disappointed but acknowledged she was struggling with the part.

I found this situation interesting and spoke with my daughter about it. Meanwhile, I had been observing my son and his acapella group (all male) and I involved him in the discussion. I suggested that the same situation would have incurred a very different response from the male acapella group leaders, which my son and daughter both agreed would go something like this: “Joe, you suck. We’re going to have Mark do the solo”. End of story ---sorry for the language but that is how male adolescents talk.

Why do I find this incident so compelling? On the one hand, the initial reaction of the female group was one of care for the relationship, concern about not “hurting feelings” while also struggling with achievement issues specifically the desire to perform well in concert. However, it took many “person-hours” of deliberation, angst and discussion to come to that eventual outcome. The girl taken off the solo part was still unhappy with the decision. There was certainly a lot of personal drama involved.

The male group behavior would be simple, direct, and to the point—The concern is with results not with the feelings of the individual. The assumption is the results justify the means and that everyone would benefit from the change. The method of making the change is direct and harsh: (“Joe, you suck”), and Joe may feel badly for a while but will most likely move on. The group moves quickly to the next item that needs attention.

So, which approach is most effective? Is it true that the "female" approach is better? Is the direct, derogatory response from the "male" approach less mature? Of course we are talking about adolescents. Yet, one could argue that optimally we might want to take elements from each approach; having a direct, clear and focused conversation, but in such a way that the feelings of others are respected. That may be too much to ask of adolescents but it might be something we can expect of our adult leaders in the workplace.

HAVING THE DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

What I find fascinating in this high school scenario is that I see these situations play out in the work world over and over again. Focusing on relationships, feelings and personal connections is important but can sometimes interfere with discussions or actions that need to occur, especially when in a highly time pressured situation. Ironically, it can sometimes backfire like when choosing the indirect path that women (and men) sometimes use or over-personalizing a situation that could be handled in a straightforward manner results in an unintended negative outcome.

For example, a female manager was responsible for delivering news to one of her direct reports about a change in her position. She knew the direct report would be unhappy with the situation and she felt badly for her. Consequently, she avoided the discussion. She rescheduled the meeting several times at the last minute. When the discussion finally occurred, she was vague and long-winded in getting to the point and made attempts at softening the news by apologizing and explaining the rationale for the change several times. As a result, the direct report became increasingly more anxious as the discussion progressed. By the time she finally understood the change in her position she felt confused, frustrated and angry, not so much at the change itself but in how the information was delivered. In this case, a more direct approach would have probably been helpful.

On the other hand, a manager's lack of attention to the feelings of his/her team or colleagues can result in a harsh, and overbearing style that alienates people, leads to high turnover or can even create a hostile work environment. An interesting article in the Harvard Business Review, "Coaching the Alpha Male" (May 2004) by Kate Ludeman and Eddie Erlandson describes an all-too frequent occurrence of senior executives, frequently though not always male, who are bold, self confident and demanding to the point of being incredibly challenging to their colleagues and customers. Their lack of empathy and concern for others can create havoc in the workplace.

The question: "*Are women better managers than men?"* though provocative, is an outdated and moot point. Sorry Tom Peters. Instead, a more interesting question might be: *"How do we better prepare men and women leaders for having the difficult conversation?"* When confronted with challenging information to deliver, one frequently either avoids it, dances around it, or hits you over the head with it: none of which are optimal strategies. The difficult conversation in business is usually some version of "You are not performing up to par". It is often as simple as that. Simple, yes, easy: NO. And most people, men or women, find giving this direct critical feedback painful and problematic. Why? What makes it so hard for us to be direct and assertive while also sensitive to the recipient of our feedback? That is the $64,000 question.

Betty Doo, Ed.D. is a New England-based psychologist and workplace consultant. She can be contacted through email: bd@bettydoo.com.