



Women Leaders – Redefining Leadership?

- Prasenjit Bhattacharya

Are women leaders redefining leadership? “If Lehman Brothers were Lehman Sisters, we would not have a financial downturn!,” remarked a speaker in a recent roundtable discussion on women leaders.

What is the style of a successful women leader? In school, we used to read a poem on the queen of Jhansi. The poem was in Hindi, and it praised the queen who “fought like a man” (*“Khoob ladhi mardani woh to Jhansi wali Rani thi”*). Growing up, I used to hear people comment on how our former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was the only “man” in her cabinet. Margaret Thatcher, the previous Prime Minister of UK was called the Iron Lady.

However, the above examples are not examples of redefining leadership, indeed they are examples of reinforcing leadership styles typically associated with powerful men! A Study done by Caliper administered their well known personality assessment tool to hundreds of successful leaders- men & women, and concluded the following about women leaders vis-à-vis men:

1. Women leaders are more persuasive
2. Women leaders display more inclusive team building leadership style of problem solving and decision making
3. Women leaders are willing to break rules and take risks just like men, and
4. Women leaders are equally assertive, but feel the sting of rejection more.

However, so far I have not come across any Study that conclusively proves that women have a natural (biological or physiological, if you may) advantage over men in some leadership roles or styles. Indeed, any such conclusion plays the insidious role of excluding women (and men) from specific roles or roles that demand specific styles. And of course, there is no guarantee that a particular man or women you select for that key role will fit into the psychographic profile painted by a particular Study!

A Study by Catalyst shows that Fortune 500 companies with highest representation of women at top management had a shareholder return which is 34 per cent higher than those with the lowest representation of women. Similarly, a Study by McKinsey found that organizations with more women in senior management are more successful than organizations with fewer women in senior management across nine parameters measured by them.

However, the success of these organizations could be not just because there are more women, but due to the more inclusive nature of the organizations. In other words, the driver could be an inclusive culture which results in many things; diversity of opinion, more women in leadership, and ultimately business success.

The debate about leadership style of women could be a red herring, while the real issue is, perhaps, how to get more women into leadership levels.

We all know some of the reasons why the numbers of women leaders are less in Organizations. At entry level only about 18 per cent of all formal sector jobs are offered to women – a result of continuous disparity right from birth (birth rates are lower than men) to education (literacy rates are lower than

men). With such lower numbers to start with; two-thirds of those recruited are lost to industry by the time they should have reached top management. In many organizations, we see a familiar trend of a spike in attrition of women employees after a few years of recruitment as freshers, around the time many of them get married, and then again after they have children. This does not happen with men. In the US, where women account for around 50 per cent of the workforce, majority of children are in day care. The social context in India is very different from US and plays a big role in stereotyping women – though challenges in the organization faced by them are similar.

The need to retain talent – men and women – is obvious to most business leaders. While individual businesses may have little impact on changing societal issues, they can and must do their bit in making sure that more women are retained in the organization, and many more reach top management. At Great Place to Work® Institute we believe that you cannot be a great place to work® only for men or women. Diversity is a key people practice in many of the best workplaces. Having said that, there are many which are great workplaces for the women friendly practices they have. The following are some successful practices we have seen in organizations that our assessment team recognizes as great workplaces for women.

1. **Gender equity , diversity and inclusion are key aspects of their people strategy-** There is sponsorship from the very top. HSBC is one organization that has made gender equity and diversity a part of their business strategy. The employee demographics of these organizations often mirror their customers.
2. **Robust governance structure** – Policy against sexual harassment is only a pre-requisite. The “glass ceiling” for women can be broken not by creating symbolic “role models” who are perceived as isolated products of top management policy directives. Diversity councils of the kind HSBC has, or Diversity Offices of the kind Infosys has, are required to be driven by the CEO and the Board.
3. **Gender equity and diversity scorecard** – gender equity and diversity measures need to be linked to the performance scorecards of business heads. In one large organization we studied, over a period of 3 years, as the number of women employees went up by 80 per cent, the attrition in women employees came down by 20 per cent. Both figures were better than those for men, showing that more women in the workforce and better retention of women employees are possible. However, gender equity and diversity, like quality and productivity, does not happen if left to chance.
4. **Employer Branding** – Creating an employer brand as a women friendly organization is meaningful only if the actual experience of women employees is in line with the brand promise. However, the role of communication cannot be overstated –one advertisement showing a man could attract only 5 per cent women candidates. By merely replacing the picture with a woman’s picture, and replacing the words aggression and competitiveness with enthusiasm and innovation, the response from women candidates went up to 40 per cent.
5. **Align People Processes & practices** – Internal research at HP revealed that women apply for open jobs only if they meet 100 per cent of the criteria, compared to men who apply even if they meet 60 per cent of the criteria. AmEx does not leave it to chance. Women executives in AmEx have the next two jobs mapped as a part of their development plan. Aviva makes it mandatory for a woman (less represented gender) to be there in every interview panel. Accenture, after doing a global Study on how to promote gender equity and diversity, identified

recruitment, performance management and career management as some of the key processes that needed alignment. Godrej Group has designed a program called GROW – Godrej Revival of Opportunities for Women – to encourage women who have taken a break to come back to the workforce.

6. **Design and develop programs to enable work- life balance** - Employee Assistance Programs, extended maternity leave, concierge services, flexible working hours and telecommuting- except for the last, the rest are now common amongst the best companies to work for. Mindtree even shifts workstations for new mothers to enable them to be next to their children. Wipro allows employees to work for half days. Qualcomm has a fully staffed department called Q-life to make all the above happen.

Managers, both men and women, who have entered the workforce before liberalization driven growth phase of the economy, by and large share certain assumptions about the role of women, namely,

1. Career should be secondary to family
2. Control over one's economic, political, social and physical independence by men or other older women in the family
3. Denial of self expression
4. Justification of the above by extolling the virtue of sacrifice in the present for shared future rewards

Many women of Generation Y (c. Born after 1980), and many men of the same generation do not subscribe to the above assumptions of a social structure called Patriarchy, a structure that is fast changing, at least in urban India.

While doing a Study in a BPO to study successful leaders, we asked team members to identify positive experiences of leadership. A large number of men in their early twenties identified their team leaders, also in the same age group. What was interesting was that most of the team leaders were women.

Today's generation does not have the hang ups about patriarchy defined gender roles that the previous generation had. However, it is the previous generation which is occupying the senior management roles. We have found that creating awareness about their gender related beliefs, including what they practice at home, are relevant for senior managers, both men and women, to realize how they might be unknowingly creating the "glass ceiling". Any process to build gender equity will have to follow the three stages of gender compliance, gender fairness, and gender inclusion, before one can create a gender neutral workplace. And any process focused exclusively on women, to the exclusion of men, has a very slim chance of success.

Prasenjit Bhattacharya is CEO of The Great Place to Work® Institute, India. Views expressed are personal. Prasenjit can be contacted at pbhattacharya@greatplacetowork.in