

## **The 'Masculine' and 'Feminine' Sides of Leadership and Culture: Perception vs. Reality**

(Knowledge @Wharton, September 21, 2005)

Workers' general notions about the effectiveness of male and female managers can be as important as their actual leadership abilities or business results, according to a session on gender and leadership at a recent Wharton Executive Development program entitled, "Women in Leadership: Legacies, Opportunities & Challenges." As a result, women executives need to be exceptionally aware of their own leadership styles and strengths -- as well as changes underway in their organizations -- in order to make an impact, noted program director Anne Cummings, a former Wharton management professor who is now a professor of business administration at the University of Minnesota at Duluth.

During another session, Wharton management professor Sigal Barsade looked at the critical role the development of a strong corporate culture has played in the success of such companies as Mary Kay Inc., the country's second biggest direct seller of beauty products.

Cummings began her session on gender perceptions by asking the women executives attending the program to brainstorm a list of words describing female leaders. Among the words that surfaced: multi-tasking, emotional, empathetic, strong, intuitive, compassionate, relationship building, verbal, consensus building, collaborative and gossipy.

Then Cummings asked for a list of words associated with being a male leader. Strong, arrogant, intelligent, ego-driven, bravado, powerful, dominant, assertive, single tasking, focused, competitive, stubborn, physical, self-righteous and direct made the list. One woman marveled at the way men are capable of having an argument at work, then go out for a beer together as if nothing had ever happened. "Women hold a grudge," she said. "Men are passive-aggressive," countered another. "They sit in the bushes and wait." "Men have a sense of entitlement," said yet another executive. "It's a given that they will be successful."

Cummings said that over the past five years, when she has asked for this list at similar seminars, the descriptions have become more gender-neutral. "The notion of what makes an effective leader is changing, and you will find both [traditionally defined] 'masculine' and 'feminine' components," she said.

Scholars approach the question of leadership differences between men and women through the social construct of gender, or traits associated with masculinity or femininity, Cummings noted, adding that biology does not entirely determine gender issues because there can be masculine women and feminine men. "Much of what we think about in terms of leadership usually falls in 'masculine' traits, whether it's a man or a woman," she said. As an example, Cummings pointed to Linda Alvarado, who formed her own company in the male-dominated construction industry and again broke gender stereotypes to become a part owner of the Colorado Rockies baseball team.

"I do think our culture has a huge influence on" how women develop as leaders," she said. "More and more we are seeing that women have some very masculine styles."

### **Role Congruity**

But what exactly is a 'masculine' style? According to Cummings, men tend to be more task-oriented while women take on a more interpersonal style of leadership. Therefore, a "masculine" style tends toward assertive and task-based behaviors, while a 'feminine' style is more relationship oriented and 'democratic. "Additionally," Cummings noted, "men tend to take greater intellectual risks and have higher self esteem, whereas 'women are coping' and tend to be more efficient when it comes to solving problems."

Of course, all of this behavior operates on a continuum, she noted. "Most of us have a multitude of styles." Research shows that people in general are slightly more feminine in their behavior traits than they are masculine, Cummings said. These perceived differences play into "role congruity," which is the expectation that a person will act a certain way based on his or her gender. When someone does not meet that expectation, perceptions of leadership ability can wane, regardless of the leader's actual effectiveness.

"Men and women can do the same thing, but if they both act assertive, women are rated less effective because we expect men to do that," Cummings noted. Moreover, research shows that of the people who emerge as leaders in a laboratory setting -- where men and women come together without knowing one another -- male leaders are judged more effective than women leaders. "That's the scary part: Men and women can exhibit the same results and accomplishments and the perception of their effectiveness is different."

Within established organizations, however, there is less difference in the perceived effectiveness of men and women leaders, she said. "Some of these perceptions can be different when you are working in an organization where you have a track record as an effective producer.... In the real world we have systems of interaction. We have systems of power. We have systems of how departments interact -- who is promoted from what job -- and systems of experience that may also play a role that you don't see in the lab." Although the differences in real-world perceptions are smaller," she noted, "they are still there."

The culture of an organization, or even a part of the organization such as a division or other business unit, can determine the degree to which a woman's own feminine or masculine traits fit. "If your leadership style is more feminine and you are in a masculine culture, you have role incongruity, and you may not be that effective because people will perceive you as not fitting," said Cummings.

The differences between leadership styles are not necessarily positive or negative in building leadership, but executives need to be aware of their style and how they come across to others in their organization and outside. "All I'm saying to women is that you need to read your environment and build your skill set so you can lead a variety of different people," Cummings said. She noted that executives can use standard personality assessments to gauge their own individual leadership traits and those of the people they are managing. One commonly used assessment is the Bem Sex-Role Inventory which asks respondents to describe themselves using 60 adjectives identified

as feminine, masculine or neutral. "Think about where there are strengths and where there are potential pitfalls," said Cummings. "There are leadership styles that are determinants of your behavior that are different from masculine and feminine."

Women also need to understand the culture of their organizations in order to set up negotiations with stakeholders to build a legacy. "To the extent that women want to leave a leadership impact, they need to be strategic and analytical about the domain they are working in and understand their strengths as well as areas [that need work]." It's important, Cummings added, to figure out how to lead people who have other styles and how to "build the competencies of other women around you."

### **The Power of Culture: Mary Kay**

In another session, Wharton management professor Sigal Barsade focused on how understanding the power of corporate culture can help individuals and companies succeed. Like Cummings, Barsade noted that a good fit between employees and culture is important: "If you really want the kind of commitment and superior performance of going above and beyond what [your company needs], it comes down to the person-culture fit. You need to find people who are going to believe in the values of your organization."

When it comes to a strong corporate culture, Barsade noted, it's hard to beat Mary Kay Cosmetics, which rewards its top sales people with pink Cadillac's, diamonds and other gifts in an annual awards ceremony that rivals the crowning of Miss America. Once a year, thousands of Mary Kay sales consultants from around the world gather in Dallas, Tex., to honor their own. They sing Mary Kay songs. They give tearful testimonials about how the company changed their lives. They memorialize their founder, Mary Kay Ash, who died in 2001 at age 83.

All that translates to the bottom line, "what Mary Kay does very well is understand its employees and their needs and values," said Barsade. "It can orient the culture so the fit between the people and the organization is very tight and allows Mary Kay to get really superior performance."

Strong corporate cultures also view people as a critical resource and value them as individuals, said Barsade, who noted that Mary Kay Ash sent all her sales people hand-written birthday greetings. Ritual and ceremony, like the Mary Kay awards extravaganza, are also important, along with clear expectations about the direction of the company. "Ultimately, culture is the informal system that people put together to know what the company wants from them."

While the culture of a company is informal, Barsade said senior managers have the power to shape it. "Culture, strategy and structure all have to work together, and top management is absolutely critical because they are the ones who not only determine the culture they want, but help to define the strategy and decide whether the structure is going to support the culture."

The first clue to understanding an organization's culture is to look at what is rewarded -- not just monetarily, but also informally, said Barsade. "Ultimately that is what the culture will promote." Sometimes, the company touts one set of values but actually rewards another. For example, she pointed to Enron, which outwardly promoted the value of

integrity. "You can have wonderful plaques in the lobby and cards with the values printed on them," she said, "but sometimes those things -- and what is truly rewarded -- are not in alignment."

Barsade said culture can be thought of like an iceberg with certain parts visible, but the bulk lying unseen beneath the surface. "The depth of culture is what's below the surface, and we sometimes don't know we are in a culture until there is a clash." At the bottom of the cultural iceberg are basic assumptions, said Barsade. "We don't even talk about them because they are so obvious." At a for-profit company the most basic assumption is that the organization's mission is to make money. For non-profit, basic assumptions are trickier but typically center on a mission or providing a service.

Values and beliefs form the next layer of the iceberg. At this point corporate plaques and slogans promote values such as responsible citizenship, integrity or even fierce competition, said Barsade. "This is the level on which we usually talk about corporate culture." Rising above the surface of the iceberg are behaviors, which Barsade explained present themselves as artifacts and norms. Corporate norms become a shorthand way for managers to lead employees, and -- like the perceived gender-based leadership styles Cummings described during her session -- represent "a social expectation of what is appropriate or inappropriate."

Citing the research of Charles O'Reilly at Stanford University, Barsade said organizational culture can be plotted against two key dimensions. One is the intensity of values and the other is the crystallization of values, or how widely values are spread throughout an organization. A company with high intensity and high crystallization has a strong culture, like Mary Kay.

According to Barsade, research indicates managers have only about four to six months to socialize a new employee into the company's culture. She offered advice to the women executives in the program about promoting social integration and networks within their own companies cultures. "Don't let [new hires] be isolated that first week. Make sure someone is going out to lunch with them every day -- someone senior. Get them linked in very fast." Also, companies should point to successful role models. You need to say, "this person is a success, and this is how they got there."