

Why aren't there more women in leadership roles?

In business today, women continue to be under-represented in leadership roles. In the past, this has been easily explained by social inequality excluding women from the opportunities but with the massive changes in society and the advance of equality that no longer holds true. The opportunities are there but women, at least in sufficient numbers, are not. So are women simply not capable of competing with men for leadership roles or is something else going on?

Many women who succeed do so by exhibiting typically male characteristics of single-mindedness, self-interest and competitiveness. An obvious example is Margaret Thatcher, complete with handbag as a weapon. It would be logical to assume that her success would have changed things for women but if we look at the political parties today, almost all the senior roles are still held by men.

So why has Margaret Thatcher not proved to be a role model for other women? The answer is that she did not represent the inherent skills and strengths of women as co-operative and collegiate individuals. A more exemplary role model would be someone like Anita Roddick who, rather than competing in a male hierarchy, created an organisation that matched her values.

In the musical 'My Fair Lady', Rex Harrison's character famously asks, "Why can't a woman be more like a man?" To which the answer is: Why should she? If women have to behave as men in order to be viewed as leadership material then that is to deny the inherently different skills women possess. As evolutionary psychologists remind us, we are evolved animals with evolved mechanisms and motivational drives that have been fashioned by our different roles in the past when our brains developed to drive our survival. In the past, men were traditionally hunters, risking life and limb to track down prey. Here the skills of game playing, risk taking and single-mindedness were evolved. Women on the other hand gathered food and minded children, roles that could be accomplished more successfully through collaboration and sharing.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that leadership is a male role, although our idea of leadership is most certainly a male-orientated one. Because most organisations have been created by men, they are predictably, though not necessarily consciously, designed for men and leadership in these organisations is about status, game-playing, hierarchy and risk taking, all predominantly male traits. For women to gain leadership roles, they have to some extent to play the male game - unless the rules of the game can be changed.

There are some that argue that post financial crisis, we now find ourselves in a world where the organisational model must change to avoid blindly walking back into the same mess. In other words, we need a model based on inclusiveness, co-operation and merit, a model that plays to the strengths of women. The old ideas of command and control will not suffice in a world needing creative ideas. Women are good at relationships and team work that are based on a collegiate approach, offering up the opportunity to tap into all the nodes of intelligence everywhere in an organisation and let the talent rather than the hierarchy lead. Changing male-biased notions of leadership is not going to be easy, not least because one wonders whether men can convert their subconscious notions of heroism into an overt courage to embrace real change, but the challenges ahead might just make it a very real necessity.

