



Soft hands, iron gloves

How women's leadership can transform the workplace

The role of women's leadership today is far more radical than trying to score points in a culture that we have always found alienating. It is about changing the game completely and creating a different, healthier set of rules.

In her article, "The Female CEO" (Fast Company, August 2002), former chief executive officer Margaret Heffernan writes that women in the corporate world who have families ultimately find that they have to make other trade-offs, such as giving up private time. "I found that as I gave myself over to my job, I inevitably put my health at risk. It was a choice I had to make: either take time to exercise or give that time to my children," she notes.

Compromising on personal health is a hefty sacrifice. But an even more serious symptom is that the health of our society is suffering, too.

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Random House), Jane Jacobs writes that:

"Neighbourhoods were much safer when older women watched from the stoep."

As some of our most talented women join their male colleagues in the race for success and recognition, who is taking care of our children, our sick, our elderly and our communities? And why would we want to when the financial and social rewards offered by the business world are so much greater?

Like many of my colleagues, I am eternally grateful that I am part of an era where the dilemma of work/life balance and finding meaningful work is even an option for women today.

As women who work, we have choices and options of which our mothers never dreamt.

But are we making enough of these opportunities? Are we taking the time to have the tough conversations that have the power to reshape the workplace and improve our society?

Do I mean that women should stop working and become full-time caregivers once more?

Absolutely not. But I do believe that our cultural value for care needs to catch up rather urgently with our cultural value for achievement.

I think that asking the same old questions means we are in danger of perpetuating an unhealthy status quo rather than challenging it.

The female highfliers about whom we read in the business press are regularly trotted out as evidence of the gains that women have made in the workplace. But these role models do not reflect the double shift required by the average working woman who struggles to cope with balancing work, mothering and homemaking.

The good news is that in the emerging economy, feminine values are rated more highly than ever before.

As visiting professor Dr Norman Chorn writes in a previous issue of the *Wits Business School Journal*, feminine values are not only about women. The modern organisation needs to emphasise traditionally feminine leadership qualities such as collaboration, emotional intelligence and empathy in order to survive.

This does not mean that traditional masculine values are all outdated. But it does mean that they need to be complemented by another set of values in order to achieve balance as well as progress.

It further means that women's preference for relationships over competition makes them uniquely poised to act as agents of change.

The new generation of women leaders places values at the heart of business and has an aversion to a lack of honesty and authenticity in the workplace; they crave the creation of an organisational culture where people can thrive, be creative and unleash their potential; they know instinctively that an organisational culture where we can be comfortable about expressing our many roles is a fertile environment for the retention of talent and independent thought.

But the truth is that many men are frustrated by an archaic system. They may not suffer financially and politically in the same way that women do, but they are as keen to break free from old-fashioned male stereotypes.

Prof. Antony Clare, British psychiatrist and author of *On Men: Masculinity in Crisis*, says that men's values are changing, too. "It seems to me that men are beginning to question the extent to which work and the public world dominates their thinking, waking lives," he says.

So if we agree that the old rules are unhealthy and archaic, what are some of the strategies we can use to create a new game plan?

The glass ceiling in the breakfast nook

A report on “How Women Lead” in *Newsweek* tells us that “study after study shows that it is a working woman’s second full-time job – as caregiver – that makes it most difficult for her to stay on the career ladder.”

Change at home requires a twofold strategy.

Firstly, we need to take home the conversations that we are having around glass ceilings in the workplace and right into our personal lives. Training, job sharing and delegation are concepts that are as important at home as they are at work.

Many men are refreshingly open to these discussions. The new focus on personal growth and meaning has led many of them, particularly from midlife onward, to interrogate their lifestyle choices and be more present fathers.

Secondly, just as we manage at work, we need to learn to share the glory as well as the responsibilities.

All too often, women collude in their own oppression. They let their mates off easily, holding steadfastly to the sense of power that comes from doing it all and doing it well.

“I like choosing what to cook for everyone,” one British executive said. “I like making the lunches and organising the birthday parties.

“Does doing it all de-skill my husband? Well, yes. I guess it does.”

Creating peace – a woman’s most important work

Nowhere are women leaders more essential than in countries devastated by war.

Studies from the World Economic Forum and the Harvard-based non-profit organisation, The Initiative for Inclusive Security, show that women are better at creating and keeping the peace in post-conflict societies because they are, generally, less violent than their male counterparts.

Head of The Initiative for Inclusive Security Swanee Hunt tells *Newsweek* of how she asked former Foreign minister Haris Silajdzic during the Bosnian War whether he thought there would have been a war if half of the people around the table at the very beginning had been women.

His candid answer was: “No. Women think long and hard before they send their children out to kill other people’s children.”

It is important to remember that creating peace does not always have to take place on a macro level.

Dr Christiane Northrup, one of the pioneers of the mind-body-health movement and author of the book, *Women’s Bodies, Women’s Wisdom: Creating Physical and Emotional Health and*

Healing, worked for many years in a male-dominated medical practice.

But then she reached a point where she realised that what she had been doing, although fundamental, did not constitute a woman’s most important work.

“Now I realise,” she says, “that the primary work of world peace is creating peace in the home, creating a safe place for children, creating comfort. Creating a zone of peace – that’s my primary work.

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“Doing operations, pulling people back from the jaws of death – all of that is grandiose, and you can get into a real rescue fantasy doing that, I’ve done that. But that won’t change the conditions of life on this planet. Only teaching women how to create a demilitarised peace zone in their own lives will help, even if it’s only five minutes a day.”

Learn to speak up

I am constantly surprised by the accomplished women in my own workshops whose greatest leadership challenge is finding the courage to speak up at a board meeting.

Harvard Business School Professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter says the only difference between the men and women in her MBA classes is that the men are far more inclined to take airtime in class.

What holds many women back, she says, is a fear of speaking up. They are far more inclined

to engage in a kind of self-censorship unless they feel they have something really valuable to say.

A simple way to change organisations – with a little help from your friends

As Carol Gilligan shows in her classic study of moral development, *In a Different Voice* (Harvard University Press), women are more likely to see the world in terms of nets or webs of connectedness; men in terms of ladders and hierarchies where people compete.

There is even a health benefit for women around forming community.

In a landmark study at the University of California, scientists now believe that women respond to stress with a cascade of brain chemicals, which causes them to “tend and befriend”.

It is a more complex response than the fight or flight response that occurs in men.

If we want to change our organisations, the fastest way to do so is to create conversations around the topics that matter most to us. It is a natural way to capitalise on our ease with conversation and forming a community.

As Meg Wheatley says in her book, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* (Berret-Koehler Publishers), “Whenever I read about a new humanitarian relief effort – some of which have earned the Nobel Peace Prize – it’s always a story about the power of conversation. Somewhere in the description of how it all began is the phrase: ‘Some friends and I started talking...’”

There has never been a better time for women to lead. We need to do so by stepping up to the platform, raising tough conversations and accepting that one of our most powerful roles in reshaping society is to recognise that our leadership contribution can go beyond the organisations we head up or work for. Only then, as Gandhi said, can we “be the change we want to see in the world”.

Because it is not only about transforming the workplace. The real challenge for women’s leadership is to ask the right questions.

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