

# Do Men and Women Lead Differently?

Different leadership styles suggest  
that talent managers should refocus their  
development strategies.

ANALYSIS BY KENNETH NOWACK





**O**f all the business skills consistently under the microscope, leadership appears to be the most scrutinized. Countless books and articles have been written on what makes a great leader, with top executives, psychologists, professional athletes and so-called professional development coaches chiming in on the discussion.

Under even heavier scrutiny may be the role of gender in leadership. Even though more women are entering the workforce and advancing up the organizational ladder, many studies still show them to be underrepresented as leaders.

A 2014 Harvard Business School survey of MBA graduates found, for instance, that women were significantly less likely than men to have direct reports, to hold positions in senior management and to have opportunities for career growth and professional development. What's more, the survey showed men and women appear to have different definitions on what constitutes both professional and personal success.

In a 2014 *Harvard Business Review* article, Harvard University professor Boris Groysberg compared definitions of personal and professional "success" by gender based on interviews with almost 4,000 executives worldwide. He found that women relative to men attributed more meaning to individual achievement (46 percent vs. 24 per-

cent, respectively); obtained more respect from others (25 percent vs. 7 percent); had more passion for work activities (21 percent vs. 5 percent); and made more of a difference (33 percent vs. 21 percent).

Similarly, evidence suggests women may make better leaders than their male counterparts by naturally creating a trusting organizational climate where employees at all levels can flourish. However, a 2014 Gallup survey showed that most employees still prefer a male boss to a female boss.

Any evidence that a "female advantage" in leadership exists may be in part attributed to the growing body of research suggesting that women are more likely than men to adopt and deploy empowering, participative and collaborative leadership styles — and these behavioral styles may have a strong neurobiological basis.

The more important issue to examine is not whether women are more effective as leaders, but when and why there may be gender differences in perceived leadership style and effectiveness.

It is well established that the effectiveness of leadership practices are directly associated with the financial success of organizations as well as employee retention and well-being. Results from another 2014 Gallup survey suggests the overall contri-

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tribution toward employee engagement, commitment and job satisfaction that is directly attributed to leadership practices might be as high as 70 percent.

Research has also shown that negative social interactions with bosses or co-workers cause the stress hormone cortisol to remain elevated about 50 percent longer relative to nonsocial stressors. Longitudinal studies have shown that working for a bad boss is actually an independent risk factor for coronary heart disease — controlling for other known factors — as well as being a strong predictor of illness-related absenteeism.

Indeed, interpersonal competence and social skills of leaders are main contributors to trusting, collaborative and high-performing teams. So how might neuroscience help explain observed gender differences in both interpersonal style and leadership effectiveness?

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## Gender Differences in Leadership

Since the 1950s, hundreds of studies have explored and confirmed that there are small, noticeable differences in leadership styles between male and female managers.

For example, research by professor Alice Eagly at Northwestern University supports the observations that on average female leaders are more participative, collaborative, transformational and democratic and use less transactional, authoritative and “command-control” styles. Participative styles per se might not confer a leadership advantage, this research suggests, although any advantages appear to be dependent on the context and avoiding the overuse of this particular style.

A 2014 Gallup study found that employees who work for a female manager are more engaged on average than those who work for a male manager. Women who reported to female managers had the highest level of engagement, at 35 percent; men who reported to other men reported the lowest, at 25 percent.

In 2014, Florida International University’s Samantha Paus-tian-Underdahl compiled the most comprehensive review of gender-based leadership differences. The three biggest findings, based on more than 95 published studies, were:

- When self-ratings of effectiveness were considered, men rated themselves significantly higher than women except in senior-level positions.
- When ratings of others were considered — with direct reports or peers — in middle and senior leadership positions, women were rated significantly higher than men.
- In terms of industries, women were rated significantly more effective overall in business and men in government.

These findings parallel our own 360-degree feedback results at Envisia Learning Inc. in a study of 801 male managers and 417 female managers (Editor’s note: The author is the president of the firm). We also found that men rated themselves significantly more effective than women in specific competencies such as listening, oral presentation, team building, conflict, delegation, decision-making and problem solving.

However, all groups rated women significantly higher than men on overall leadership competence.

### The ‘O-factor’

Other studies have documented that women under stress exhibit a unique response alongside the classic “fight and flight” reaction. Naturally, women under stress react by protecting themselves and their young through nurturing behaviors and facilitating alliances in a larger social group.

Social psychologist Shelley Taylor at the University of California, Los Angeles, refers to this as the “tend and befriend” response. It appears that women under pressure are biologically predisposed to be more emotionally expressive, empathetic, involvement-oriented and social than males. This behavioral response, Taylor’s research shows, appears to be largely associated with a hormone called oxytocin.

Oxytocin is an evolutionarily ancient molecule that is a key part of the mammalian attachment system supporting care for offspring. It increases significantly in women when they go into labor and breastfeed a child. In humans, oxytocin receptors are abundant in the heart, vagus nerve and brain regions associated with both emotions and social behavior.

Studies using oxytocin infusion have shown it enhances the ability to infer others’ emotions and intentions from facial expressions. It also facilitates empathy, trust and pro-social behavior. In general, oxytocin is a rapid brain signaling chemical, turning on when we are shown trust and shutting down during periods of very high stress or extreme competition in both genders.

In more than 12 years of both lab and field research, Paul Zak, founding director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies and professor at Claremont Graduate University, has explored the role of oxytocin in interpersonal relationships. His findings support the observation that women tend to release more oxytocin than men, thus they directly contribute more empathy, cooperation and trust in interpersonal interactions.

These hormonal differences might help explain the observed tendency for women to deploy more participative leadership behaviors relative to their male counterparts and naturally use transformational practices that emphasize teamwork, cooperation, networking and interpersonal support.

Research by Carnegie Mellon University professor Anita Williams Woolley showed that work teams with the highest IQs or most extroverts weren’t the best performers when it came to working face-to-face or online without the ability to see teammates. Teams with more women outperformed teams with more men, which corroborated the fact that women on average scored higher on a test measuring complex emotions in others.

## Talent Managers Take Action

To be competitive today, talent managers need to move to a new generation of policies, rewards, benefits and practices to more fully realize the talents, skills and ambitions of their women leaders.

Some suggestions might include:

- Provide more formal mentoring of women. Research shows that in the U.S., women receive less mentoring than men — even though those who receive mentoring report more job satisfaction, higher pay and have more interpersonal competence compared with those who don’t.
- Teach all leaders to develop better performance and career coaching skills. Most employees today will change jobs every 4.6 years, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. This figure is fewer than three years for millennials, who are projected to make up more than half of the workforce by 2020.
- Provide direct and indirect support for women to come back to the organization when they choose to leave for pregnancy or other family responsibilities.
- Create high-potential women leadership programs to help identify and deploy their signature strengths and increase diversity within the organization.

- Encourage structured and challenging job assignments, provide executive coaching opportunities and increase accessibility for women to senior leadership.
- Encourage women to clarify both personal and professional definitions of success and reinforce opportunities for women to psychologically detach from work once they leave during the week.

## What to Keep in Mind

Gender differences in both leadership style and effectiveness are important to understand, as they are dependent on a number of complex individual, team and organizational factors. At least three conclusions appear most important for talent managers.

First, women still have not risen to as many

senior-level positions as men, despite their abundance in the workforce. Second, to manage in today's complex, rapidly changing and global environment, leaders need to behave in ways that ensure that employees are fully engaged and involved given today's entrepreneurial mindset.

Finally, it appears that neurobiological differences between genders might actually confer a leadership advantage to women that is necessary for just what organizations need today. **tm**

**Kenneth M. Nowack** is a psychologist and president of management consulting and publishing firm Envisia Learning Inc. He is also president of LifeHub Inc., a wellness and health promotion company, and president and co-founder of Ofactor Inc. To comment, email [editor@talentmgt.com](mailto:editor@talentmgt.com).

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