



## WOMEN LEADERS

### THE GENDER TRAP

By Professor Ginka Toegel and Jean-Louis Barsoux – February 2013

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Some female executives assume they need to act like men to get ahead. But according to recent research, the situation is far more of a balancing act between the widely accepted expectations for leaders and specific gender expectations for women. Consequently, women have to be conscious of which leadership traits they cultivate and which ones they suppress in order to achieve success.

### **The Double Standard**

Women tend to feel obliged to play up classic male characteristics that are closely linked to the standard image of leadership. What are considered typical male behaviors – assertiveness, competitiveness, and task focus – underpin mainstream expectations of leaders. The problem for women who strive for these leadership behaviors, is that they are rarely judged in the same way. Even if their behavior is less extreme than their male colleagues, they may still be viewed in a negative light simply because the threshold of “acceptable” behavior is often lower for women.

For example, Jill Barad, former CEO of Mattel, was harshly judged for alienating “the very individuals charged with helping her grow the company.” Commenting on her tough leadership style, Disney/ABC Cable Networks President, Geraldine Laybourne, remarked, “Have they met Ted Turner or Michael Eisner? Compared to most CEOs, she is not abrasive. But maybe compared to their wives she is.” Often a woman who adopts an assertive, command-and-control style is vulnerable to being labeled a “bitch”. As Penelope Trunk, a columnist for *Business 2.0* magazine notes, “There is no male counterpart to this term, because men who exhibit such traits are promoted.”

### **Short on Authenticity**

At other times, women feel the need to tone down their more expressive qualities by smiling less or dropping the pitch of their voice. However, this puts them at risk of violating gender stereotypes, which traditionally expect women to be gentle and nurturing, and instead they appear phony. Hillary Clinton, for example, was criticized as someone “who calculates almost everything, including her accent and laugh,” causing controversy over her authenticity. Often, women executives who are not confident with portraying the “boss” may be inclined to suppress their softer characteristics. Such was the struggle for Niki Leondakis, COO of Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants, who tried to emulate the tough-minded approach of her male colleagues until she realized, “I was holding back on some of my leadership and was trying to be somebody I wasn’t.”

Research also reveals that women feel compelled to hide their competitive instincts, even amongst each other. In one exercise, where gender-specific groups were given an open assignment, the all-female groups concocted grand schemes to save the world whereas the male groups often used their collective wisdom to resolve issues important to their careers. This experiment revealed the pressure that is placed on women to think collectively and selflessly, even in a “safe environment” without men.

Unfortunately, the challenge is not just men’s perceptions, but also women’s perceptions of themselves and their female counterparts, creating self-imposed barriers that leave them dangling between two opposing sets of expectations. If their behavior confirms the gender stereotype, it lacks credibility and appears incompatible with the traditional view of leadership. However, if it matches the traditional example, it lacks authenticity. It is a lose-lose situation.

### **Recommendations for Women**

How can women avoid the gender trap in the workplace and within themselves?

#### **Blending the Two**

Research suggests that most successful women executives use a blend of masculine and feminine behaviors. However, the key to managing this tension is self-awareness – understanding one’s self and one’s leadership style. Only then, can women hope to find the right balance. Indra Nooyi, Pepsi’s CEO, demonstrates this balance in action as a straightforward boss with a tough reputation who has managed to also be “communal” and nurturing, making her demanding leadership style more palatable.

#### **A Delicate Balance**

While a blend of the two styles is ideal, certain situations clearly demand more of one type of

behavior, and it is important to know when to make the switch. For example, to a greater extent than men, women leaders may need to adapt their behavior depending on whether they are dealing upward or downward. With bosses, they need to show that they can confront problems and make tough decisions, while also showing that they are supportive and approachable with their employees. Such duality can be difficult to reconcile with authenticity and women sometimes spend many years finding the right balance.

### **Silencing the Inner Critic**

Indeed, stereotypes affect not only the perceptions of others, but also the perceptions of one's self. For example, the tendency for women to underestimate their own leadership capabilities is surprisingly widespread. Such self-limiting behavior by women may reflect a more deep-seated fear of rejection. In addition, women more frequently refrain from asking for what they deserve, fearing that using politics to meet their needs and asserting their rights will be viewed as selfish behavior.

### **Recommendations for Men**

The gender trap concerns men as well, who often need to be more aware of the unconscious barriers they impose on women. In particular, they need to be more mindful of their prejudices toward female leaders and work to dispel their perceptions.

### **Avoid stereotypes**

Research has shown that information is often received in a more positive manner from women when gender is not disclosed. Hence, stereotyping interferes with one's ability to maintain neutrality and refrain from biases and needs to be monitored and addressed.

### **Be careful with attributions**

Numerous behaviors or attitudes are given a positive slant when attached to men and negative when associated with women. Therefore, men need to be careful with the attributions they make regarding the same behaviors, whether from a man or a woman.

### **No End in Sight**

Despite our thinking that gender differences erode in more progressive societies, research strongly suggests that societal development actually accentuates the differences between men and women. This means that if men and women are indeed becoming increasingly different, then addressing and managing those differences become ever more important.

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