

Organizational Change: Gender Differences in Leadership Styles - Assumptions people make



Leader A is in charge of a critical change effort. This person is known for a sharp focus on setting goals and showing results; high expectations; and a tendency to express impatience. This leader's employees find it difficult to express their perspective or call attention to potential conflict for fear the leader will be displeased and upset. As a result, issues do not surface quickly enough as

people lack sufficient opportunity to discuss with the leader what is on their minds.

Leader B is highly attuned to the people in the organization and wants them to feel satisfied and valued. This person focuses on building positive work environments and processes to engage people. This leader may not fully see where people need to improve their effectiveness, and has difficulty providing candid feedback and setting clear expectations. People's sensitivities, concerns, and happiness are primary to this person, and this leader values being respected as a sensitive and superb leader of people.

As you were reading the above descriptions, what gender did you think each leader was? Why?

In our culture there is a widespread view that women, by nature, bring both people skills and a strong people orientation to their leadership. My research shows this assumption is not true.

The expertise and mindsets of women and men leaders are individual to the person and independent of gender. Our cultural assumption about women has a significant impact on employees' expectations of women leaders, and employees can have different expectations of women leaders than of men leaders. During change, particularly disruptive change, these expectations may become more dominant.

Change brings uncertainty, ambiguity, and turmoil, and employees naturally have feelings about what is happening. Their feelings influence how they think about the change and how they perform the work.

It is critical that leaders understand what is needed of them (by employees and by the organization) to lead the particular change they are involved in. Some leaders are focused on the concrete and tangible and will move targets and information forward, but they are ineffective at engaging employees to understand and embrace the change and at supporting them in moving the change forward. Other leaders are focused on engaging with people, but are weak at setting boundaries or meeting outcomes and goals. The leader's focus has a significant impact on their employees and on the success of the change.

Employee expectations

Employees often expect women leaders to be people focused and to understand their feelings and needs. When employees do not support an organizational change, they can focus too much on their feelings and expect their female leader to be a "nurturing mother" who protects them from the organizational changes they do not want. Employees do not expect men leaders to be as people focused or as protective.

When women leaders are strongly results or data focused and are perceived as being less receptive to employees' thoughts and feelings, employees can fight the change and be critical of the leader. Leaders often interpret this behavior as resistance to the change and will push harder in their area of focus in order to move the work of change forward. Leader A, in the opening of this article, is an example of this leadership style. The result is often that employees' feelings and concerns grow stronger. Because these may not be openly expressed to the leader, employee resistance increases. The leader can be perceived as ineffective in leading change and in leading people.

The emotional need to be taken care of does not appear to be as strong when the leader is a man who focuses on results or data. Perhaps this is because we expect that a man in the authority role of leading an organization will be results and action oriented.

With male leaders, employees may hide their emotions and needs and think it is not appropriate to voice personal concerns. These unspoken concerns might then be expressed indirectly as rational arguments about why things should not change. But employees' underlying feelings will affect their attitudes and behaviors and, ultimately, the work itself. When feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear are not expressed and not constructively engaged with by leaders, the result is an unhealthy work environment that affects the necessary outcomes.

Some women and men leaders are primarily people oriented. If these leaders focus too much on employee needs and feelings about the change, the change may not move forward quickly enough or at all. Some employees interpret their leader's understanding and empathy as a sign that the employee is not expected to change anything or perhaps only needs to make minimal adjustments.

What does this mean for leaders?

In my consultations with senior and executive leaders I regularly see that effective engagement with people is where many leaders struggle. This is also where a leader's effectiveness in leading change is tested. Too often, what does not receive necessary attention – and may not even be valued – is the human side of change. And the human side of change is a dynamic force that is constantly playing out in the emotions of employees and leaders, and is affecting the work outcomes.

Effective change requires that leaders – male and female – focus on results, data and information, and people. A balance of focus and skills is essential.

Leaders must have the necessary expertise in managing results and data and information. It is equally important they also have the capacity to listen, understand and empathize with the concerns and perspectives of others, build teams that align people and perspectives, create environments in which people think and problem-solve together, and be open and approachable regardless of the issues. Often, many of these qualities need to be developed; they are not innate or natural to either gender.

An honest self-assessment is necessary. As a leader, you will need to ask others for feedback about your leadership and embrace what they tell you. Then you'll need to actively develop those capacities.

Take a few minutes of quiet thinking

- If you focus most strongly on data and information, what is the impact on your people? Is your focus advancing the work or is there pushback? Are you having the important open and honest conversations with people about how they perceive what is going on and its impact on them? Are you asking questions that stimulate thinking and new ways of looking at issues?

- If you have a strong results orientation, what is happening to the emotions in your employees and how is that playing out in the work and moving the change forward? How are they responding to you as a leader, and how are they responding to you as a person (for example, do they respect your ideas but dislike your style of leading the change)?
- If you have a strong people orientation, do employees interpret your caring as an implied promise that you will protect them from fully embracing the change? How are you responding to their needs and concerns and feelings? Are you overly protective of peoples' feelings and needs, thereby affecting the progress and outcome of the change? Are you trying to give people what they want but that runs counter to the changes you are responsible for leading?

Resources

A follow-up article with a more detailed discussion of the leader who is overly protective of people will be posted at www.evikahle.com. It will describe how leading change in this way can be detrimental for the organization or the change, the impact it has on employees and the leader, and why it is critical to balance this focus with a results and information focus. This article will discuss possible intentions and motivations on the part of the leader for being protective, and how employees contribute to the leader feeling the need to be protective. You can also find several related articles on leading change at www.evikahle.com under the "Organizational Change and Development" category.

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