Relevance of Women as Managerial Leaders in the context of Environmental Turbulence

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Abstract

A confluence of changing values, emerging workplace trends and environmental turbulence have contributed to the perception that women's leadership styles, skills and orientations are more suited to the needs of contemporary organizations. A large number of research studies have thrown light on the special contributions that women make when they assume positions of power and influence in organizations. This research paper presents four fundamental positions or perspectives from which the issue of promoting women in management can be viewed. It also presents an overview of the changing ideas about the relevance of women's leadership capabilities and competencies. A review of the research on women as managerial leaders has highlighted the fact that organizations can reap a competitive advantage by developing the talent and potential of women and supporting their progress into top level management positions. It is felt that the unique traits and leadership orientations of women gain special significance in the context of today's turbulent environment where creative and collaborative strategies alone can effectively counter global challenges.

Keywords: Environmental Turbulence, Managerial Leaders, women's leadership

I. Introduction

Evolving trends in contemporary organizations have led to an increasing recognition that women's leadership styles and capabilities can provide a competitive edge in the current scenario. Changes in society and in organizations are believed to require new styles of leadership which are viewed as more congruent with women's orientations (Fondas, 1997). Organizations are emphasising the need for more flexibility and rapid reactions, associated with new production and information technology, and faster market changes. Communication, teamwork, cooperation and the creation of meaning are issues that are being increasingly recognised as significant in leadership. The traditional norm of the stereotypically masculine manager, viz: rational, aggressive, competitive, etc, is currently less favoured, and organizations appear to be actively searching for new values such as team orientation, interpersonal skills, empathy, intuition, etc, a trend which augurs well for women managers.

This research paper presents an overview of the different arguments and rationales for the interest in promoting women as managerial leaders. It discusses the changing views in leadership in the current business

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scenario. It also examines how the attitudes, competencies, orientations and leadership styles of women are suitable for occupying positions of power and influence in an increasingly turbulent environment.

Women in Management - Four Positions

There are four fundamental stances on the subject of women managers that can be found in the research community and also in the area of organizational policy. Alvesson and Billings (1997) stress that these positions or perspectives should not be seen as paradigms but as lines of argumentation.

The equal opportunities position

The low proportion of women managers is seen by many as a reflection of fundamental inequalities in society as a whole. From this perspective, women are viewed as being subject to discrimination both in a general career context and specifically with regard to the possibility of attaining managerial positions.

This approach argues that men and women possessing comparable educational and other qualifications should be treated on par both in the case of recruitment and in the case of career advancement opportunities. The Equal Opportunities argument is basically of a political and moral nature and is rooted in the conviction that everyone should have a fair chance, irrespective of characteristics like gender, race and so on.

The meritocratic position

The meritocratic argument concerns itself with facilitating the full utilization of the qualified human resources, thereby increasing effectiveness and efficiency. This approach recognizes that better retention and development of high-potential women can help organizations to increase their overall global competitiveness. The meritocratic perspective thus adopts a managerial rather than a moral or ethical approach to the question of advancing women in management.

The meritocratic approach recognizes the drawbacks of underutilizing resources, mainly on competitive grounds for profit motive. It recommends that organizations treat women on par with men, not because of moral obligations or pressures from outside interest groups but in order to more effectively utilize valuable human resources, increase their total pool of talent and widen the range of abilities and skills available in organizations.

The special contribution position

This approach suggests that due to significant differences compared with men in terms of experience, values, ways of behaving, thinking, etc, women have the potential for making new and important contributions to the field of management. This can be referred to as the special contribution argument or the "female advantage"(Helgesen, 1990).

Women are believed to prefer a people-oriented and democratic style, to make the social structure less hierarchical and to change the workplace climate so that values like cooperation, affiliation, intimacy and nurturance become more significant. They are considered to have a different attitude to power compared with men. The presence of women in organizations has the positive effect of promoting self-disclosure, addressing the weaknesses of the work unit, establishing contact, building networks, monitoring problems, and thus facilitating learning and development (Fletcher, 1994). Women are also perceived to play a significant role in

resolving conflicts and in preventing potential conflicts from surfacing (Kolb, 1992). This perspective stresses the need for building on the specific qualities and orientations of women as the primary vehicle for the attainment of leadership positions.

The alternative values position

This approach emphasises the differences between typical 'male' and 'female' values, and also points out conflicts between the two. It assumes that women differ from men in terms of interests, priorities and basic attitudes to life. According to this perspective, women have been socialized to be nurturing, to serve others, to be emotional, while men have been socialized to be competitive, aggressive, dominating and risk-taking.The cultural norms and values characterizing the socialization of women and men would appear to belong to two different spheres. Many writers see women as bearers of a rationality different from that of men. This rationality is sometimes conceptualised as another morality (French, 1986). This approach also brings out the possibility of conflict between the female psychological and value orientations with the male-dominated organizational practices. This could be a source of frustration to women who enter the masculine world of corporate management. This perspective argues that fundamental changes in organizations are needed if more women are to fit into higher organizational positions(Ferguson, 1984). This approach further suggests that women who enter the male-dominated management sphere should claim their individuality and difference, without trying to adapt to the dominating values and standards. This would help them to impact the prevalent structure of deeply embedded values and to act as change agents in organizations (Marshall, 1987).

Changing Ideas on Leadership -- Rationale for Adopting a Proactive Approach to Women's Career Advancement

Changing values and economic imperatives have caused a significant change in the perception of leadership skills, styles and practices needed to meet the demands of today's age of interdependent global enterprise. Those business concerns that clearly understand the rules of doing business in a world economy will prosper; those that do not will perish. Global competition is forcing executives to recognize that if they and their organizations are to survive, let alone prosper, they will have to learn to manage and to think very differently (Mitroff, 1987).

Alimo-Metcalfe (1994) discusses the changing concepts of leadership in the context of the radical alteration of present day workplaces. The old bureaucratic organizational structures that emphasize chain of command and hierarchy, and have little scope for cross-specialism or cross-functional boundaries are being replaced by slimmer, flatter, decentralized, creative structures with a focus on innovation and fast-paced information exchange, and which are more responsive to new challenges and demands. These new organizations will require very different leaders from those who controlled the structures of the past. The traditional model of the manager as the "heroic leader" or as the "expert" with all the answers, exploiting power by use of status and authority, and demanding unquestioning obedience and conformity will give way to the concept of the "post-heroic", transformational leader who leads by exciting enthusiasm and communicating vision. Such a leader influences subordinates by establishing a high level of personal credibility and encouraging openness, consultation and collaboration. The transformational leader recognises the need for revitalizing the organisation and moving from old habits to new.

Naisbitt and Aburdene (1986) describe the "reinvented corporation" as an environment for nurturing personal growth, a place in which top-down authoritarianism is yielding to a networking style, and where everyone is a resource for everyone else.

Aktouf (1992) asserts that the need to abandon management based on authority has resulted in a trend towards flattened organizations and "centrarchies" versus hierarchies. Managerial practices that permit the development of the employee's desire to belong and to use their intelligence to serve the organization are currently favoured.

Pierce and Dunham (1978) found that formalization and centralization (organizational structures traditionally preferred by men) were negatively associated with employee descriptions of the amount of autonomy, identity, feedback and variety in their jobs. In contrast, employees in flat organizational hierarchies report more satisfaction with their responsibilities than employees in tall hierarchies.

Burgoyne (1991) proposes that to succeed in times of change, the organization must create a culture which supports risk-taking and encourages reflection, analysis and learning from mistakes. A learning organization is one that continually transforms itself in a process reciprocally linked to the survival of its members.

Rose (1990) argues that as flexible networks replace hierarchical organizations, workers will be encouraged to make decisions on their own. Team learning will replace orders from the top. National perspectives will give way to global thinking. The role of creativity and intuition in decision-making will be highlighted. Values like love and caring will be considered as legitimate motivators. The need to augment the profit motive by mental and spiritual enhancement of participants will be recognized.

Case (1994) suggests that based on current organizational realities, the information economy, global competition, deregulation, the heavy legal context in which business must operate, and the demands of the team approach, female values of inclusion and connection are emerging as valued leadership qualities. The current trend toward training managers to be consultative rather than directive, open rather than controlled, and egalitarian rather than dominant in their interpersonal relations with workers also appears to call for female values like collaboration and co-operation.

Porter and Mckibbin (1988), in a study on university, corporation, and graduate perspectives on management education, also stressed the need for managers to develop their people skills around lateral relationships, participative decision-making, interpersonal skills, and leadership skills. Also required were an increased sensitivity to the impact of globalisation, the external regulatory environment, and broadened managerial education to help managers understand the impact of decisions on other organizational factors.

Bradford and Cohen (1984) point to the role of Manager as "Developer"- a person who asks how problems can be solved in a way that develops commitment and capability of staff. The increasing acceptance of this style favours women managers who are considered better able to integrate logic and rationality with care, concern, and intuition.

Boyatzis (1982) studied characteristics of managers that were related to effective and superior performance. Of the 19 abilities he identified, 12 focused on people skills concerning aspects of leadership, human resources management, or focusing on others.

Walton (1985) argues that various innovations and interventions being used in companies like participative management, quality of work life programs, employee involvement, etc, can be considered to reflect the shift from a strategy based on imposing control to one based on eliciting commitment. Under such new policies and conditions, stereotypically female values and skills, such as regard for other's needs and working co-operatively are gaining recognition as desirable managerial traits.

According to Calas and Smircich (1993), the present style of domestic and global leadership is increasingly incorporating approaches traditionally labelled as feminine. They argue that the economic exigencies of global competition are making feminine characteristics admirable in both men and women.

A study jointly sponsored by Ashridge Management College and the Foundation for Management Education sought to identify companies in the UK, other European countries and North America, which were cited as examples of innovative or excellent practices. These companies were characterised by decentralised or flatter structures, using multi-skilled project teams to work on complex tasks. There was an emphasis on openness and trust, informal communication, less reliance on paper and structure, absence of hierarchy and open access to managers and staff throughout the organization. They laid stress on participative management, belief in the potential of the individual and commitment to supporting and nurturing growth and development as of the staff. The study highlighted that developing people's capabilities was the key to survival for modern organizations, and that one of the key skills for managers in the future will be people management skills - the capacity to form and develop people (Barnham, Fraser and Heath,1988).

The book "In Search of Excellence" by Thomas J. Peters and Rob A. Waterman, Jr, emphasizes productivity through people, to be accomplished through an appreciation of individual effort, recognition, nurturing and the encouragement of creativity. Surprisingly, though these qualities were devalued when seen as feminine qualities, they are now lauded when reframed as indicators of managerial excellence.

From a study of 12 very senior executives in a number of successful corporations, Isenberg (1984) concluded that the thinking processes of top executives involve not only a series of rational decisions, but is an interactive process combining both intuition and rationality. All emphasize that implementation of strategy requires a focus on organizational and interpersonal processes as much as it involves analysis of hard data.

Such studies challenge the belief that for successful managers, rationality and task orientation are more important than intuition and relationship building. Further, these studies suggest that the hitherto devalued qualities frequently seen resulting from female socialization may in effect be quite functional in the business world.

Women as Managerial Leaders

Alimo-Metcalfe (1995) states that women, by adopting transformational leadership styles are not simply cloning the masculine models of leadership and management that have created a prevalence of unhealthy organizations, with overstressed, demoralised, and disempowered staff. Instead, they are bringing with them the qualities of warmth, consideration for others, nurturance of self-esteem and integrity.

She points to growing evidence that the modern style of leadership required for organizations, which embodies vision, individual consideration, strengthening of individual's involvement in decision making, and nurturance of growth and self-esteem, is more likely to be found in women.

Grant (1988) suggests that women have a different attitude to power compared with men. They view power not so much in terms of domination and control, but as a capacity stemming from and directed towards the entire community.

Marshall (1984) found that women managers had a distinctive management style which displayed more understanding and sympathy for others and their relationship–oriented style was due to their having access to more varied "softer" techniques in personal relationships.

Rosener (1990) conducted a survey of prominent global women leaders which revealed that women leaders encourage subordinates to transform their self-interest to correspond with organizational goals and interests. This approach is referred to as 'transformational leadership', which has been found to relate strongly to organisational morale, team cohesion, commitment, and team and organisational measures of success (Bass & Avolio, 1992)

In Astin and Leland's (1991) cross-generational study of social change involving 77 women leaders, they found that all demonstrated a leadership style based on empowerment and collective action to initiate and sustain change. By working closely with others and empowering them to act on their own, they demonstrated how collaborative, non-hierarchical forms of leadership help to promote new thinking and new ideas. Virtually all the women in the study conceived of leadership as a process of 'working with people and through people'. The results of the study also suggest that women possess more flexibility, intuition, and a greater ability to be empathetic, and create a more productive work climate.

Rosener (1990) conducted a survey of the International Women's Forum, whose membership consists of prominent women leaders across the world. Rosener suggests that these women constitute a second generation of executive women who are succeeding because of - not in spite of - certain characteristics generally considered to be feminine and inappropriate in leaders.

This survey revealed that women leaders encourage subordinates to transform their self-interest to correspond with organizational goals and interests. Their influence strategies lay stress on interpersonal skill rather than structural authority. They preferred to use an interactive leadership style that encourages participation, the sharing of power and information, and the creation of situations that contributed to people feeling good about themselves. This approach of women leaders is often referred to as 'transformational leadership'. This is in contrast to men's preferred style of management, described as 'transactional leadership', which is concerned with exchanging rewards and punishment for performance. Women's approach to leadership can be considered to have its roots in their socialization experiences, and can be the result of transference of behaviours seen as socially acceptable for women to the workplace. Women leaders appear to demonstrate a tendency for utilizing their unique socialization as a survival strategy in the workplace, transforming behaviours that were once construed as liabilities to assets.

A study conducted by Bass, Avolio, and Atwater (1993) asked subordinates to rate their managers on a leadership style measure which compared female and male managers in terms of transformational and transactional leadership styles. It was found that women displayed more transformational behaviour than men.

Such findings are particularly significant, since in research conducted in a wide variety of organizations, the use of the transformational style of leadership has resulted in staff who show the highest

effort, performance, and job satisfaction. Transformational style has also been found to relate strongly to organisational morale, team cohesion, commitment, and team and organisational measures of success (Bass & Avolio, 1992).

In the view of Johnson (1990), women leadership is often associated with enhanced negotiating skills, a talent for consensus building, and a more balanced world view.

Helgasen (1990), in her book, "The Female Advantage", suggests that women have superior management instincts and their interpersonal skills such as supportiveness, attentiveness, and collaboration enhance morale and productivity in work settings.

According to Hayward (2005a,p.15&16), the previously unacknowledged 'soft' skills like communication and teambuilding that women possess are now seen as vital within many companies when it comes to strengthening relationships within the company. Women think about how to boost morale and encourage better workplace relations. Another view point which emerges from this study is that the key difference in the male and female approach to management is that men are much more into command and control-style management whereas women are much more into relationship-style management. Again, in Hayward (2005b) Val Williams, an executive coach from America claims that in this age of corporate downsizing and managing with fewer resources, the traditional leadership model of *'power'* has become less effective and is now being replaced by a model of *'strength'*. According to her, the distinction between strength and power can make the difference between success and failure in our new environment. She is quoted as saying:

Strength is internal whereas power is external. Strength is what you have inside, not what any outside agency promoted you to. Strength is not dependent on any position: the concept of strength implies not what you can do to others; but what you can create from your own resources. Where power sometimes motivates people through fear, strength leads people through inspiration.

Aburdene and Naisbitt (1992) suggest that women are transforming the different arenas by building a new social order or paradigm that will eventually replace the old order.

II. Conclusion

Changes in society and in organizations are believed to require new styles of leadership which are viewed as more congruent with women's orientations(Fondas, 1997) There is a growing recognition that advantage should be taken of the possibility that women can contribute something unique and different from what is assumed to be the typical masculine attributes, talents and skills. Research on women's managerial styles has also highlighted their propensity to adopt a connective style of leadership which stresses on networking and shared responsibility and encourages members to connect to others and their goals. The unique traits, attitudes and behavioural orientation of women can be considered to be extremely relevant in the context of today's rapidly changing, turbulent environment where creative and collaborative strategies alone can solve global crises and challenges. A review of the research on women's leadership styles and attitudes have

highlighted the fact that business organizations can reap a competitive advantage by developing the capability of women to assume top level leadership positions.

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