

Why Organizations Thrive With Feminine Leadership

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I just came back from delivering a keynote at the Women's Leadership Academy Summit for The American College of Financial Services. Over 100 women spent three days honing their leadership competencies, eager to perform better in their current role with an eye towards the future and how they could impact positive change. There was a palpable energy in the air as these women devoured this professional education and development opportunity to own their place as leaders.

With the imminent arrival of the talent war, where companies will compete for the best of the best, it's an exciting time for women to make an impact as leaders in all career fields. So why do organizations thrive with women at the helm?

The Ketchum Leadership Communication Monitor, a survey of over 6,000 respondents across 13 countries examined the link between effective leadership and effective communication. They looked at a range of leadership characteristics and found that women scored highest on the traits that people value most. The survey does not indicate that only women are good leaders. Men can exhibit these same characteristics. But the historical "great leader" that is macho, infallible, omnipotent, know-it-all leader has been replaced by a new type of leader, a servant leader who exists to make others a lot better.

Female leaders offer transparency, collaboration, genuine dialogue, clear values and the alignment of words and deeds, which are cherished by employees and stakeholders, according to the Ketchum survey.

We know that leadership affects the bottom line of an organization. The Ketchum survey indicates that 61 percent of consumers stop purchasing or purchase less of a company's product or services as a result of poor leadership perceptions.

In the poignant words of former Ogilvy & Mather CEO, Charlotte Beers: "It's not what you say, it's what they hear" — which echoes the sentiment that perception drives reality. The Ketchum report also indicated that leadership communication influences the bottom line with 74 percent who believe it's very important to great leadership. Yet only 29 percent feel leaders communicate effectively, with a 45-point gap between expectation and delivery.

Whether you are a current leader or aspiring to grow into a leadership role, it's important to know why women are effective as leaders and bring value to their organizations. Here is a breakdown of the competencies of feminine leadership that make women credible and successful. Men can learn from this as well.

Coachability:

Women are hungry to learn and they walk the walk when it comes to lifelong professional development. They seek out coaches, mentors and sponsors and look for ways to grow and evolve, checking their ego at the door. A leadership role is earned and must be constantly cultivated, and women know this requires continuous training and development. Many women

leaders are negotiating executive coaching into new salary packages to ensure their professional edge with a coach.

Communication:

According to the Ketchum survey, credible leadership equals open communication, plus decisive action and personal presence. Women engage in authentic verbal communication, eye contact and recognize employees by name. Authenticity is key for engagement, professional presence and a well-respected leader.

Empathy:

Long thought of as a soft skill, emotional intelligence is now essential for leadership effectiveness and empathy is at the top of the list. This competency positively relates to performance amongst employees and the ability to understand and ask what others are feeling. Authentic empathy builds trust and respect and engages buy-in from employees.

Vision:

This is the ability to be a disruptive innovator — put ideas into action and inspire your colleagues and customers. Visionary leaders focus in the values, ideas and activities they are passionate about and are not deterred by challenge or change. They rally the talented employees within their organization and inspire others who are equally committed and engaged.

Team Builders:

The best teams are made up of diverse talents, ideas and skills, which unleash innovation, palpable enthusiasm and energy. Women are active listeners, which promotes an inclusive, team building leadership style of problem solving and decision-making. Not every idea will be implemented but active listening promotes validation and gives others a voice, which is essential for employee engagement.

Persuasive:

Women leaders read situations accurately and take in information from all sides. Women tend to persuade by focusing in on an objection or concern and weigh it appropriately and then address it head on. They are assertive, not aggressive, and willing to take a risk and to be accountable.

While the rising tide of feminine leadership bodes well for women in the workforce, men can also learn from these competency lessons. The traits of women leaders are not exclusive to the female gender. Some male leaders could benefit from more empathy, flexibility, active listening and communication finessing.

It's an exciting time for existing and emerging leaders from corporate and non-profit to the government sector and beyond. We have a blueprint for success determined by those who are served by leaders and the customers and constituents who hold them accountable. As a leader, you have the power to create a culture you would want to work in.