

Leading Roles

What Coaches of Women Need to Know

Traditional notions of leadership are largely derived from a male context, but organizations are having to face the fact that the number of women in managerial roles has increased significantly. These women leaders require leadership development techniques that address their particular needs. For executive coaches, this means they must understand the gender differences that may affect the coaching of high-level women managers and the development needs of these managers.

Much of the language of leadership today reflects thousands of years of history. It is couched in masculine terms, and classical theories of leadership tend to favor traditional male experiences. Organizations, however, are bumping up against a new reality: according to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2003 women held half of the managerial jobs in the United States. This increase is not unique to this country; statistics show that women managers are growing in numbers in many other countries around the world.

With the huge increase in the numbers of women in managerial roles and the barriers to access

declining significantly, leadership development techniques must address the particular needs of women leaders in addition to those of men. Executive coaching is one effective means of developing both male and female leaders.

For coaching to be most effective, it is critical that coaches understand that organizations are not gender neutral. In this article we look at gender differences that may affect the coaching of high-level women managers and the development needs of these managers.

A basic assumption of coaching is that it is important to understand the coachee's environment, in particular the leadership and organiza-



by Marian N. Ruderman and Patricia J. Ohlott

tional issues faced by the coachee. Without this knowledge, a coach is handicapped in helping the client figure out reasonable goals and courses of action. In the case of women clients, this means understanding that even the most progressive modern organizations have been created by and for men, and thus tend to have systems, policies, norms, and structures that favor the male life experience. Behaviors and values regarded as the norm at work tend to favor traits and characteristics traditionally associated with maleness and to undervalue traits and characteristics traditionally associated with femininity. Coaches should be aware of the many ways that women leaders may encounter a gendered environment. For example:

- Standards of success are measured in male terms.
- Women are isolated from formal networks.
- Wage and salary structures are different for work that is tradition-

ally male and work that is traditionally female.

- Different norms determine the acceptability of male managers' behaviors and female managers' behaviors.
- Different norms apply to the demonstration of vulnerability.
- Ongoing discrimination exists for women in managerial roles.

UNDERVALUED SKILLS

One implication of a gendered environment has to do with the description of standards of success in male terms. In most organizations today, traditionally male work such as the creation and marketing of goods is highly valued. Measures of success in organizations tend to be captured in terms of dollars, percentage returns on investments, units sold, and so on. Dominance, aggression, and competitiveness are reinforced and rewarded. Traditionally female work such as maintaining relationships, developing others, creating community, and managing tension tends to be undervalued.

Characteristics such as team consciousness, persuasiveness, and good communication skills are considered desirable, but many organizations don't reward them in the same way they reward forcefulness and aggression. Recognition tends to go to team leaders, not to the individuals who develop team players, resolve conflict, or generate commitment. Collaborative skills, historically associated with women, tend to be undervalued in organizational reward systems and distributions of power. There has been some change in recent years with the emphasis on emotional intelligence and the introduction of skills relating to emotional competence into the managerial lexicon; however, a bias against valuing the typical skills of women remains. Organizations tend to reward the individual rainmaker to a

greater degree than they value those who settle disputes or collaborate well with others.

The significance for coaching is that women may be in situations in which their organizations overemphasize male standards of behavior and devalue traditional female standards. Coaches need to be aware of the problems implicit in the tendency to undervalue the relational work in which a woman leader may engage. In helping women managers figure out what will be effective in their environments, it is important for coaches to understand the degree to which the organization has a gendered weighting of various skills and competencies.

Another outcome of the gendered environment is that women can be isolated and excluded from formal networks. In most organizations, males hold the key positions of power and authority. According to a survey conducted in 2000 by Catalyst, a research and advisory organization that works with businesses to advance women, men held 92.7 percent of the line officer jobs in the United States. A natural result of this is that women have to struggle to be seen as relevant, capable, and visible. And according to a 2004 Catalyst survey, 46 percent of women managers cited exclusion from informal networks as a barrier to career advancement, compared with 18 percent of men managers. Furthermore, women lack female role models for being powerful and political in a business setting.

There are also different norms regarding the demonstration of strong emotion. A woman who loses composure may be seen as weak and will lose credibility. A man who loses composure may be seen as sensitive. The point is that society offers different evaluations of the same behavior depending on whether the actor is male or female.

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Thus one of a coach's important jobs is to help the woman leader understand how she may be perceived in her specific organizational context and to determine how to best manage those impressions.

Coaches should also be sensitive to the ongoing prejudice and discrimination women face in managerial roles. Although there has been considerable advancement in this area, women managers still mention prejudice as an organizational barrier. A 2004 study by Catalyst found that 46 percent of women managers saw gender-based stereotypes holding them back, whereas only 5 percent of men managers felt a similar restriction. Many prejudices are passed on as prevalent stereotypes implying that women are unsuited for senior management. Studies of stereotypes have found that when managers are asked to describe women in general, men in general, and successful managers, the descriptions of men in general and successful managers are markedly similar. Both men in general and managers are described as forceful, having leadership ability, aggressive, desirous of responsibility, and able to get the job done. Women in general are characterized as deficient in these qualities. Stereotypes can get in the way when leadership potential is evaluated or staffing assignments are made on the basis of merit or ability. Prejudice can prevent supervisors and peers from seeing others as they really are. In the face of uncertainty, decision makers filling top positions are likely to select individuals with whom they feel more comfortable, and thus they choose same-gender candidates.

Coaches should be aware that this climate exists in many organizations. This is particularly important when it comes to evaluating data about the coachee provided by others. The coach and coachee need

to consider whether the data are colored by bias.

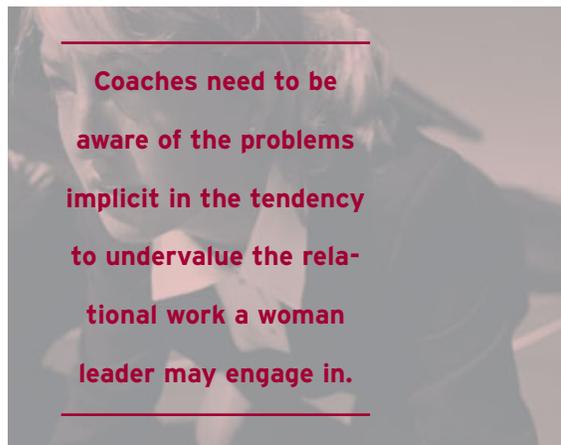
These realities are important because they delineate the ways an organizational environment can be different for women and men. To be effective, it is important that the coach understand the coachee's environment, her challenges, and her perspectives. Coaches should carefully appraise the way gender dynamics play out in the coachee's particular situation. In certain circumstances it may be appropriate for the coach to say, "This is not your problem, but the problem of the organization." In this situation the coach needs to consider how to address this important point with the organization. Coaches also need to examine their own assumptions and biases and strategize with the coachee on the best way to handle the situation.

There is no clear road map for being a successful woman leader. This is positive in that it allows multiple paths to effectiveness. The downside is that the signposts on the road to success display considerable ambiguity, which can keep capable women from bringing their talents fully to bear on organizational challenges.

Gender roles in the more private sphere of home life are in flux as well. Women are still expected to be primary caregivers (although more and more men are taking on this responsibility). Women receive competing messages from society: it's okay to become a manager, but don't forget to take care of the children, the elderly, and the sick. These competing expectations make for a certain craziness in the environment that women leaders must deal with.

Organizations and society create complexities for women leaders that they do not create for men in comparable positions. Organizational and social dynamics are just as

likely to arise from stereotypes, misperceptions, prejudice, and discrimination as from any real differences between women and men in skills, behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. To be effective, a coach may need to ask a lot of questions about what the female coachee sees going on not only in her organization but also in her life and the impact of



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working and living in these complex environments.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

Other than the obvious biological and physical differences, are there other gender differences a coach should be aware of when coaching a woman leader? Knowledge of potential gender differences can help coaches decide whether to consider altering their coaching behaviors according to each coachee's gender. It can also help coaches better understand the issues that women managers raise, as well as identify appropriate strategies for addressing them.

Studies showing differences between men and women abound in both the popular and scientific press, but there is little to no

research that directly examines the relationships between gender and executive coaching. The news media tend to ignore the most common research result, one showing no real gender distinctions, and instead play up any minor differences that may be found. In reality, men and women are much more alike than they are different. However, there are some complicating factors coaches may want to be aware of in their work with women leaders.



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Biological and Neurological Differences

At the physiological level of consideration, slight biological and neurological differences between men and women have been identified. How these differences play out in terms of behavior is arguable, as behavior is also significantly influenced by social norms and expectations, upbringing, and situational context. The major cognitive gender differences noted in the past, including the traditional ones of superior female verbal and male math abilities, have been declining significantly over the past several decades. Neurological studies have documented that men's and women's brains differ in the composition of the cerebral cortex, the part of the

brain that is responsible for voluntary movements, perceptions of sensory input, and complex functions such as language, reasoning, memory, and learning. Although men have a greater number of neurons in the cerebral cortex, women tend to have more neuropil, the tissue that fills the space between nerve cells and contains nerve cell processes that enable neurons to communicate with other nerve cells. Neither gender variation is superior to the other; however, they may cause differences in how the brain functions. At this point, researchers do not completely understand how the structural differences influence brain function. It's possible that male and female brains work at a similar capacity but simply process information differently. For coaches, what is important is to recognize that not everyone processes information the same way. For example, some coachees prefer to see information presented visually in graphs and charts, whereas others prefer to read comments or to hear the feedback verbally before beginning to make sense of it. One coach we interviewed observed that male coachees tend to compartmentalize the different roles in their lives and struggle to integrate the different pieces in order to grow. Female coachees tend to handle the integrative work more easily.

A landmark study at UCLA suggests that women respond to stress with a cascade of brain chemicals that causes them to make and maintain friendships with other women. Prior to the publication of these findings, scientists generally believed that stress in people triggered a hormonal response that prepared the body to either stand and fight or flee as fast as possible. The UCLA research suggests that women under stress have a larger behavioral repertoire, one far broader than fight or flight.

Interestingly, when the hormone oxytocin is released as part of the stress response in a woman, it buffers the fight-or-flight response and encourages her to tend children and gather with other women instead. Engaging in this *tend-or-befriend* behavior actually stimulates the release of more oxytocin, which further counters stress and produces a calming effect. Men do not experience this same calming response because men produce testosterone in high levels when they're under stress, and testosterone seems to reduce the effects of oxytocin, whereas estrogen seems to enhance them.

It is likely that because women tend to respond to stressful situations by seeking social contact, many women will bring discussions of stressful events and situations into the coaching relationship. An awareness of the fact that women may respond differently to stress than men do may aid the coach in helping women articulate some creative strategies for dealing with the stress. Furthermore, the fact that women under stress turn to their relationships for comfort and support reinforces the idea that coaching may be a particularly appropriate developmental technique for women. One coach we spoke with notes that although women have worked hard to open up gender roles and opportunities for their daughters, powerful social pressures still encourage girls to ask for help, whereas boys continue to be rewarded for figuring things out on their own. Thus, according to this coach, many women have "a long experience of finding that other people can be useful as a sounding board, an opportunity to talk out what they're thinking, to get another point of view, so they have experience of that as a useful approach to self-development," suggesting that women may be more attuned to the

potential benefits of a coaching relationship. It is important for the coach to work with the coachee to find the most effective ways for her of seeking help in her organization.

Psychological Differences

In the athletic arena, James F. Holbrook and J. Keith Barr, in their book *Contemporary Coaching: Issues and Trends* (Cooper, 1997), argue that although coaching females is not significantly different from coaching males, important gender differences occur in some psychological domains that may affect the coaching relationship. Holbrook and Barr found differences in the manner in which women respond to positive feedback and noted that females seem to value personal improvement over winning more than males do and that females regard team unity as a stronger motivating factor than males do. It's important to note that these differences had no relationship to the female athletes' skill levels, desire and willingness to work, capacity to learn, and mental toughness.

A 1997 report on sports and physical activity in girls' lives, by the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, concluded that there are more similarities than differences between the genders. However, the report also identified specific differences, and coaches of leaders should be mindful of them. The report found that compared with males, females in general are more internally motivated by self-improvement and by goals related to team success and appear more motivated by an external environment that is cooperative, caring, sharing, and team oriented. Female athletes want to win as much as male athletes do, but they may approach competition differently. The report elaborates that in some competitive circumstances, female athletes place

greater emphasis on fair play than males do. Furthermore, females have a tendency to blame themselves first for poor performance when their team loses. Under similar circumstances, males appear to be more self- or ego-oriented and tend to have a more win-at-any-cost approach to sports. Males are more likely to break rules to achieve their goals and to blame others—such as a referee or a coach—when they fail. The causes for these psychological differences are unknown. They could be gender related, but they could also be influenced by cultural or social norms and expectations.

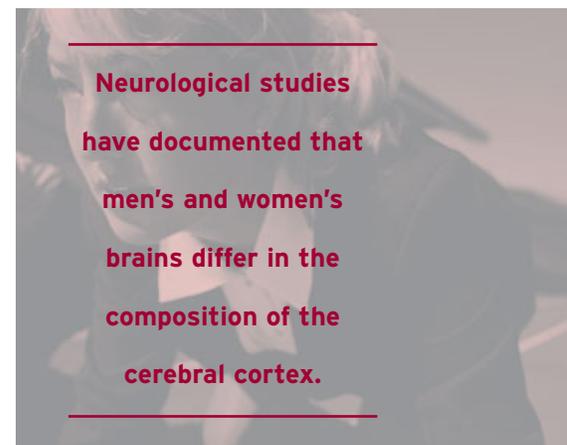
Understanding potential psychological differences by gender makes us aware that males and females may react to the same organizational event or situation differently. This knowledge can help a coach better understand the issues a woman leader is raising about what's going on in her organization.

Communication Differences

Numerous articles and books suggest that differences in communication preferences and styles can create conflict between the sexes socially, professionally, and intimately. Yet success in organizations depends in large part on a willingness and ability to understand and be understood.

One of the basic communication differences between men and women concerns their reason for conversing and what they actually talk about. Jennifer Coates, author of *Women, Men, and Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Sex Differences in Language* (Longman, 1986), studied men-only and women-only discussion groups and found that when women talk to each other, they reveal a lot about their private lives. They also stick to one topic for a long time, let all speakers finish their sentences, and try to have everyone participate.

Conversely, men rarely talk about their personal relationships and feelings but rather compete to prove themselves better informed on a variety of topics. Time after time, research has shown that in meetings, conferences, and other organizational gatherings, men gain the floor more often and keep the floor for longer periods of time, regardless of their status in the organization. Men are more likely than women to interrupt other speakers, and they are



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more likely to interrupt women than men speakers. In addition, women are less likely to resist the interruption than men are.

In contrast, women strive to build connections and intimacy through their communications, and they seem to perform best in informal, collaborative ventures in which people jointly build ideas, operate on the same wavelength, and have significant conversational overlaps. Women's relational style of communication may put them at a disadvantage in the cutthroat business world. It has been suggested that women tend to use a less assertive style of speech—using tag questions (such as, "I really like this idea, don't you?"), disclaimers ("I may be wrong, but . . ."), and question statements ("Won't you create that

report?")—and even tend to inflect spoken statements so that they sound like questions even when they are not. Research has not confirmed that women and men differ in the frequency of their use of these forms. It's worth noting, however, that people perceive those who use such a deferential language style as having more personal warmth but less power.

DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

For coaches, an understanding of the physiological and psychological capabilities of women and how they



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differ from those of men is essential. To put that understanding into practice, however, coaches also need to know the development needs of women leaders.

To shed some light on the development issues confronting high-achieving women managers, CCL conducted a study of sixty-one women leaders from nonprofit, government, and Fortune 500 organizations in the United States. These women were participants in CCL's The Women's Leadership Program, a five-day, intensive development pro-

gram. One key component of the program is an extended session with a coach in which the women review their assessment data and work on career planning, goal setting, and development. The women in the study came from a variety of functional and organizational backgrounds and were at different stages in their careers; they ranged in age from twenty-six to fifty-eight, with the average being forty. Seventy-one percent were married or involved in a committed relationship, and half had children under the age of eighteen.

CCL interviewed each of the women three times: shortly after completion of the program, six months later, and one year later. In each session, CCL asked the women to talk about work or life issues with which they were currently struggling and about how they were responding, the progress they were making on their goals, obstacles they were encountering, and what strategies, if any, seemed to be working for them. To gain additional perspective, the women's career coaches were also interviewed.

From an analysis of the women's rich stories, CCL identified five prominent themes that guide the personal choices and trade-offs that women leaders typically confront. These themes are likely to come up during a coaching relationship with a woman and can help a coach understand the dilemmas a woman is grappling with at different points in her life.

Authenticity

The first of the five themes looks at the degree to which daily actions and behaviors are in concert with deeply held values and beliefs. A woman who is authentic has a good understanding of her priorities and emotions. Authenticity is important to development because adults learn best when they feel they can be authentic in their particular setting. It

is difficult to grow as a leader when you feel you must hide your true values, styles, and preferences. Women managers in CCL's study lamented that it was difficult to develop their own style in an organization that prescribes a particular style of leadership. Some women who worked for organizations with an authoritarian, command-and-control style of leadership found it particularly difficult when their personal nature was more collaborative. Many organizations measure effectiveness by individual achievements. These organizations undervalue a collaborative relational style, making women who engage in these behaviors feel they are behaving counter to standard practice. Women who regard collaboration as their primary leadership style have a hard time feeling both effective and authentic in traditional organizations.

Connection

In a general way, connection refers to the need to be close to other human beings: family, friends, community, and co-workers. Connection is important to the development of women leaders. In fact, some psychologists argue that an inner sense of connection is the central organizing force in women's development. Many of the women in CCL's study did not have the close relationships they desired, and sought to develop greater intimacy in their personal lives. Women continue to be isolated in their organizations and simply want to belong to a community of women with whom they can share experiences about similar challenges.

For women, it may be particularly complex to sort out the source of their isolation. The task of the coach is to help the woman leader figure out how much of her lack of connection is due to the fact that she may be the only woman at her level, and how much of her isolation is self-imposed as she distances herself from others, perhaps because of

her increasing focus on her career and her drive to be successful and effective. Once the sources of isolation are recognized, appropriate strategies for dealing with the problem can be identified.

Agency

This third theme, agency, is what psychologists refer to as the quality of acting assertively on one's own behalf—the desire to control one's own destiny. This is one of the strongest needs of high-achieving women. Traditional psychological models assert that agency and connection are fundamental human drives. Historically, agency has been associated with the qualities traditionally considered masculine, whereas connection has been associated with the qualities considered feminine. Leadership positions require both. For some women, their need to develop agency became apparent when they were stuck in a difficult situation and needed to take a risk or some other decisive action to resolve it. For others, it became an issue when they needed to negotiate in a political climate or act as an authority during challenging organizational times. Sometimes a woman employing the behaviors of agency (assertiveness, self-promotion, or the questioning of practices that do not meet needs) is seen as inappropriately aggressive. A man using the same behaviors, however, is seen as powerful. It can be a challenge to develop effective behaviors of agency when others in the organization do not view the behaviors in the light in which they were intended.

Wholeness

The fourth theme influencing the development of women leaders is the desire to feel complete and integrated as a full human being. Integrating various life roles is a driving force in the behavior of many high-achieving women. The

insensitivity of organizational life to personal needs makes this hard to achieve. Women strive to address the needs of multiple life roles to fulfill the desires of their personal and professional lives. Most organizations, however, are built on a male model dating to the 1950s that embodies the norm that the ideal worker gives work a higher priority than all other aspects of life. This prevailing norm makes it difficult for women professionals to address their other life needs.

Despite the many ways organizations deter women from having a whole life, wholeness is beneficial for both the organization and its individual employees. It has been demonstrated that there is a relationship between multiple roles and managerial performance—as commitment to nonwork roles increases, so does effectiveness in the managerial role. Furthermore, this is not the only positive outcome associated with a whole life. Studies have found that commitment to multiple roles is associated with psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and self-acceptance.

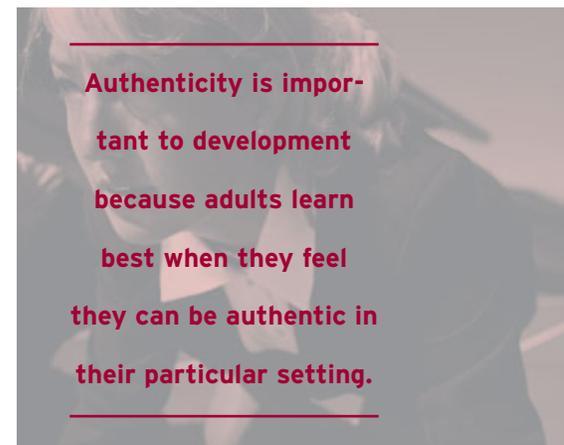
Self-Clarity

The fifth development need is the desire for self-clarity. The women leaders in CCL's study expressed a need to understand themselves in the context of the world in which they operate. They wanted to know more than just how others see their strengths and weaknesses; they wanted to see themselves in the context of the many ways organizations treat men and women differently. They struggled to understand how stereotypes and perceptions of women influenced how colleagues saw them.

The desire for self-understanding is important for both women and men. Self-clarity allows women to grow by enabling them to recognize their values so they can live authentically, improve their ability to con-

nect with others, enable their own agency, and make choices that produce feelings of wholeness.

Many women reported that it was difficult to develop self-clarity in an organization with a climate hostile toward women. Such an environment makes it hard for a woman to get an accurate picture of how others see her, because she will doubt the validity of her feedback. For example, when she receives negative feedback, she has to determine whether that feedback is an honest reflection of her performance or whether it is colored by the feedback giver's issues with women.



Authenticity is important to development because adults learn best when they feel they can be authentic in their particular setting.

Without trustworthy feedback, it is difficult to plan or to understand how to be more effective.

HELP THE INDIVIDUAL

Although we have identified a number of gender differences and development needs that may influence coaching, bear in mind that the variations among women are greater than the differences between the sexes. Coaches should treat everyone they coach as an individual. They should not assume that every female coachee has “women’s issues,” and should beware of their own expectations of and stereotypes about women. ♀

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