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TOO FEMININE OR NOT FEMININE ENOUGH? HOW TO LEVERAGE YOUR DIFFERENCE AS A WOMAN LEADER

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Why are there so few women at the top and why do they feel they need to give up their authenticity as a woman leader to get there? And how can ambitious women develop their leadership career while staying authentic? Often it is thought to be the result of unwillingness or blatant discrimination on the side of organisations. Actually, the reasons - and thus the solution - lay elsewhere. Authenticity - which comes down to leveraging difference - is the key to career success as a woman leader. This blog explains how a psychodynamic approach to leadership development can help to be authentic.

One key obstacle for women to be identified and selected for senior roles is ["leadership cloning"](#). Leadership development generally works as follows: organisations observe successful leaders, find out what competencies they have in common and teach young leaders these common features. On a regular basis, [progress is tracked by for example a 360° tool](#) to see how these leaders are perceived by their colleagues in order to measure whether they demonstrate these common features in practice. While this has proven to be generally effective, organisations fail to realise that these observations are based on examples of men having successfully climbed the ranks in generally male dominated leadership populations. Hence leadership development comes down to cloning successful male leaders. Given that women arrive at leadership success in somewhat different ways, this model does not really fit them. Does that mean that 360° instruments are unsuitable to develop women leaders? Quite on the contrary, as long as it involves interpreting feedback differently.

Take for example Sally, a Principal Consultant nominated to participate in the selection process for partner in a professional services firm. Having passed the first round thanks to her fantastic track record in business development, the selection committee expressed doubts about whether to invite her for the next step. They could not picture Sally representing the firm in front of a client.

Few women have made it thus far to partner in this firm. Those who have, mimicked their highly self-confident and self-promoting "alpha" male colleagues at the cost of not being well perceived in the organisation. Sally's humble and careful demeanour was easily mistaken for being insecure. She was both unable and unwilling to play the game of "doing-like-the-boys" to realize her ambition for promotion.

Sally decided to hire an external coach. The coach motivated Sally to work on leveraging her difference. At the behest of the coach, Sally collected feedback from colleagues as well as clients. Ahead of the next selection round, Sally made sure that the members of the committee were made aware of what her unique style of doing business was. When she again stood before the senior partners of the firm, except for matters concerning business strategy, she did not try to meet the expectations of the panel to fit the mould. Rather, she personalised her presentation, making it clear what her difference was - particularly towards clients - and how this difference had already and would continue to bring success to the firm. She used some client testimonials that demonstrated how her calm, unobtrusive yet tenacious approach was highly appreciated and had prompted clients to shift additional and lucrative contracts to Sally and her team. Sally was successfully promoted partner.

Sally's example shows that leadership cloning leads to an inaccurate perception that women are "missing something" and that they need to have "special" and "for women only" training to make them "fit" for leadership: [The underlying belief being that women must pattern their leadership behaviour on the behaviour of men](#). Sally was able to overcome this obstacle. Hers is one of a still rather small number of success stories of women making it to the top of contemporary organisations without losing their authenticity. Apart from the personal dramas resulting from the foiled ambitions of numerous women, this phenomenon represents on the one hand a considerable amount of money and effort that gets wasted on developing women for leadership positions they never attain. On the other hand, it prevents organisations from tapping into 100% of the available talent pool to staff their senior leadership roles.

As leadership development practitioners, we have learned that leadership in the twenty-first century requires authenticity. We are faced with individualisation, the end of the job for life and [the rise of new generations more interested in self-actualization and meaning than in traditional careers](#). As a result, followers now follow the person rather than the role of the leader. This puts women leaders - in the words of gender scholar Alice Eagly - in [a double bind](#). Since they are expected to be feminine, women who display too much "male" behaviour (such as toughness, decisiveness, and assertiveness) are not well received by their peers at the top because of being "not feminine enough" and appearing inauthentic. Yet women who display too little of such behaviour are perceived as not suited for the top job: "too feminine". In the words of one of my coaching clients: "You feel invisible boundaries on what is too 'feminine' and what is too 'bitchy.' It's a dance one is aware of all the time. They come to you in clear vibes if you are any good as a manager." Thus, as long as women are in a minority, they are perceived as woman first, and leader second.

As an ambitious woman leader, having embarked on a leadership career while at the same time needing to stay authentic, how do you get out of this double bind? Wait for organisations to change their leadership development and come up with a truly gender-neutral system? This is likely to make you miss the boat. The solution is rather in finding a way to become successful in the existing system. Being an authentic leader means recognising that you are individually different and using it to your advantage.

So, it all starts with [self-awareness](#). Not only of your strengths, weaknesses, motivations, feelings, preferences and ambitions but also of how your gender determines your thoughts, feelings, behaviour and reactions vis-à-vis others, notably men. And how others see and react to you - because of your gender.

Becoming Aware of Your Authentic Self

As a matter of fact, a gender-neutral instrument that measures perception, would not add much value. The point being that as soon as you ask for perceptions, by definition you get biased responses: Biased by the frequency and length of interaction that you have with the respondents, their position in the hierarchy, differences in culture, recent positive or negative events, and, yes, gender. As a woman leader it is important to make sure that you work with an instrument that provides you with rich and detailed data. Next, it is helpful to debrief these perceptions with a professional who is knowledgeable about gender differences in the workplace. Which, incidentally, is not the same thing as a woman coach.

KDVI's [Global Executive Leadership Mirror](#) is a 360° instrument that can provide rich and detailed data. The more so, as it contains interesting features that are particularly helpful for woman leaders to get at the heart of perception: The Comments and the Perceived Performance Index. This is what distinguishes the GELM from other 360° evaluations, which may not be as effective for the development of women leaders. First, the instrument offers the possibility for respondents to offer free-text comments. Normally the leader invites colleagues to participate in the questionnaire. It would be advisable to specify in this message that you particularly value their comments in addition to answering the standard questions. The richer and more detailed the comments, the more insightful they are regarding how your gender influences the perception by your professional environment.

Often, women leaders whom I coach are surprised by comments like: "She could show more self-confidence." "She could be more ambitious". Whereas the person herself does feel very confident or ambitious. Such comments could indicate that the behaviour the person displays and the signals she is sending are not being understood in the way she intended. Every reason therefore to "change language".

It is worth looking out for comments that describe the person in terms like "friendly", "competent", "efficient", "perfectionist" or "hard worker". Particularly if other comments like "leader", "takes charge", "decision maker" or "assertive" are absent. In such a case it is worth exploring to what extent these comments reflect a reality or a typecasting as "the nice girl and good assistant". In other words, "I don't see leadership potential in this person."

Second, the GELM contains a Perceived Performance Index. This feature compares the answers to a series of questions oriented towards leadership performance (people and results). It thus presents a global assessment of perceived leadership performance by the leader and her respondents. This assessment, it should be stressed, is NOT based on a real performance evaluation or any measurement of results. It is what colleagues (and the leader herself) *think* of

what the leader brings to the organisation. It is what people say when they talk about the leader at the coffee machine. It therefore impacts her reputation, which, like it or not, does play a role in decisions who gets promoted and who not, just as it did with Sally.

Hence the importance of getting a true understanding what these perceptions actually mean. To get there, it is beneficial to dig below the surface to understand why you do things the way you do to them and why you interact with others in certain way: i.e. knowing your psychodynamic profile. Take for example narcissism. [Successful leaders have a healthy \(with the emphasis on healthy\) dosis of narcissism](#): it helps them to motivate people to like and follow them. [Recent research has shown that men tend to be more narcissistic than women. The more narcissistic a person, the more that person is likely to avoid taking an objective look at lower performance results](#). In other words, whereas men are likely to overestimate their performance, women on the contrary lean towards underestimation.

What if you are a stellar performer, and yet the perception of your performance is not so positive? Then you may ask yourself how and in what wordings you have informed others of your positive results. Could these others (men) - more narcissistic than you - have misunderstood your communication as less positive? Conversely, in case of high ratings, it is advisable finding out what benchmarks the respondents are using: do they mean "good performance for a leader" or "good performance for a *woman* leader"? In case of the GELM, it makes of course sense to cross-reference the results from the Perceived Performance index with verbal comments.

Finally, self-awareness means knowing what drives you. Digging into your personality and into your past and personal life helps you. Analysing your behaviours and feelings during key events from your past and present is an exercise worthwhile. The first organisations we experience (family, school, extra-curricular activities) provide us with patterns of behaviour that help and hinder our effectiveness as leaders. For a woman leader, currently dealing mostly with male peers and bosses, it can particularly helpful to look back at how you have interacted with men as peers and figures of authority during those formative years.

Being Authentic = Leveraging Difference

Women who are currently in their leadership careers will be faced with being part of a minority as soon as they reach senior levels. You cannot hide your difference at work. And if you try, by putting on a male persona, you lose your authenticity. Inauthenticity begets resistance. Increased self-awareness through the right feedback allows a woman leader to adapt her behaviour and communication to ensure that her leadership qualities are correctly perceived by the organisation: a leader in her true right rather than a woman leader. For a woman leader it is thus important to proactively get the feedback you need. (Which may be not the one you want or are used to.) Being different also means interpreting feedback differently to understand what is particularly relevant for you as a woman leader.



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Make sure you call a spade a spade: measurably positive results deserve to be recognised as such. Humility, like narcissism, is a helpful leadership quality, as long as it comes in healthy doses and does not descent into underestimation. Sally's male superiors easily mistook her humility for insecurity.

A psychodynamic approach to development increases your awareness about what makes you unique and different, notably with regard to your interaction with your male colleagues. Only with this insight, you will be able to use the difference to your advantage. And don't let people interpret what it means that you are different: tell them what it means. Own the narrative about your difference, just like Sally learned to do.