

Why Women Make Superior Leaders

A Male Leadership Expert's Perspective on Organizational Success



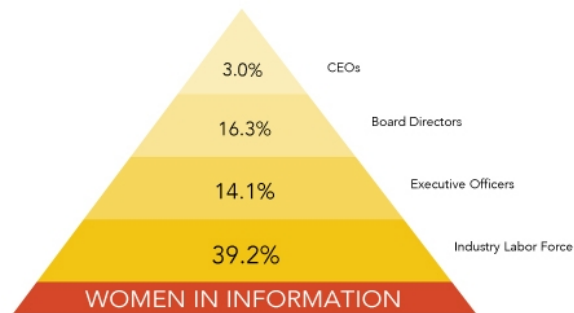
If someone asked you why women should be leaders, what would you say? If you responded, "Because they're long overdue," they might agree, but your argument would be unconvincing. If you answered, "Because women can lead as well as men," you'd also fail, because research shows that women must actually *outperform* men to be considered equal as leaders. If we're unable to effectively respond to this question, how do we hope to reduce the power gap between leaders who happen to be male and those who are female?

Over 39% of Fortune 1000 companies' workforce are women, but only 3% are CEO's, 14% executives and 16% board members (1). Even though 50% of US citizens are female, less than 20% make up Congress, and we've yet to see a woman VP or President. The list goes on in terms of power and pay differences, even though more women than men have graduated from college the last several years. Yet a recent study evaluating over 7000 leaders on effectiveness showed that women consistently outperformed men in 12 of the 15 roles measured. Jack Zenger concluded, "It is a well-known fact that women are underrepresented at senior levels of management. Yet the data suggests that by adding more women, the overall effectiveness of the leadership team would go up." (2)

After 30 years of studying organizational leadership, I'm **convinced of one thing: the world desperately needs more women leaders. I'm just as convinced that if women do not occupy more leadership roles in the future, we're doomed.** I've learned a lot about leadership since finishing my doctorate in the field in 1994. I've collected over 700 books on the topic, written 100 articles, a dozen books, and over 150 hours of training curricula. I am currently a Lecturer of Management at the Naval Postgraduate School, given the opportunity to teach some of the best and brightest up-and-coming military leaders in the world. But as I survey where organizations and society are headed, my fear is that we won't see sufficient numbers of females leading us into the future. This is not a male-authored article on feminism or equality, but rather a lifelong student of leadership noting that the gender strengths of women are needed as organizations and society evolve.



UNITED STATES



Sources

Catalyst, Women CEOs of the Fortune 1000 (June 10, 2014) and additional Catalyst research and analysis.
Rachel Soares, Mark J. Bartkiewicz, Liz Mulligan-Ferry, Emily Fendler, and Elijah Wai Chun Kun, 2013 Catalyst Census: Fortune 500 Women Board Directors (Catalyst, 2013).
Rachel Soares, Mark J. Bartkiewicz, Liz Mulligan-Ferry, Emily Fendler, and Elijah Wai Chun Kun, 2013 Catalyst Census: Fortune 500 Women Executive Officers and Top Earners (Catalyst, 2013).
Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey Table 18: Employed Persons by Detailed Industry, Sex, Race, and Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity, 2013 (2014).

Being married to a woman leader for over 30 years, I'm familiar with the challenges women face. At 25, Nancy went on staff with leadership guru John Maxwell, a great mentor and leader himself. But over the years, she's experienced an array of subtle and overt struggles with chauvinistic organizations and

environs. I recognize how women wrestle with being heard and taken seriously and thus gaining influence. But the tipping point of my conversion came after being invited to participate on a Navy research project regarding the integration of women into SEALs special forces. That research combined with my previous work of designing organizational training curricula for preteens and adolescents convinced me that we must focus our attention on young female leaders if the world is truly going to become a better place.



Women are uniquely gifted to lead in the 21st century. If we fail to understand and tap these unique gender strengths, organizations will grow increasingly sluggish and society as we know it will decay. Here are four primary reasons to promote women as leaders, not only for their sake, but for the sake of organizations and society at large.

Social experts: Women, in general, possess stronger relational strengths than men. The number of social interactions and relational connections they develop are significantly higher.

You can see this in everyday life, by the way they converse with each other in cafes, waiting in line at the store, and measuring the length of their communications. Leaders are social architects. These soft-skills, requiring social-emotional intelligence, are typically found in greater abundance among socially astute individuals. The task-driven orientation of factories and production organizations lend themselves to male strengths. But as organizations become more multi-layered and process-driven, other skill sets are needed. The growing complexity of multi-national and cross-cultural communication means leaders must rely more on intuition, not just literal message content. High-contrast environs, where communication must be read nonverbally, lend themselves to the social strengths that women commonly possess.

Multi-dimensional: Women, in general, respond favorably to multi-tasking. We can see this in everyday life, in terms of how women commonly run the household, oversee child supervision, and work corporately. This ability to respond to a variety of potentially conflicting needs reflects what is required as organizations grow in complexity. While current CEO/President roles in organizations obligate multi-tasking, these conditions will increase and trickle down, such that those better able to tap both sides of the brain and “spin-plates” will offer superior leadership at all levels within an organization. This neurological disposition in women facilitates the busyness of business, without the overload that leads to poor decision making, frayed relations, and burnout.

Centric catalysts: Sally Helgesen noted in her book “The Female Advantage” that male-oriented organizations tend to be top-down, placing the leader in the highest box of the flow chart. Women, on the other hand, tend to lead from the middle, much like the hub of a wheel, with spokes emanating outward. This less hierarchical paradigm is more compatible with a world that functions increasingly democratically, with shared information and educated members. Centric-led versus top-down organizations catalyze idea sharing and communication, and tend to leave the leader less prone to the isolation that comes from the intimidation of position. This web-like leading style befits the flatter, more decentralized structure of organizations today that are likely to increase in the future.



Boundary spanning: This organizational behavior term refers to a team's willingness to go beyond its own borders. Because of the growing global village and sheer complexity of accomplishing goals, we must work with others outside of our team. The stereotypical scenario of the man never asking for directions represents the limitations of boundary spanning for males. Asking for help, reaching beyond our immediate turf, and integrating others is what is needed in the future. Women possess the strength of connecting with those outside of their immediate sphere of influence. Whether you're managing a Little League team in Scottsdale, Arizona or supervising an international project for a Fortune 500 company, the ability to connect with those outside of your immediate team is a strength that women bring to organizational culture. While this strength is relational in manner, it is unique in that it focuses on the ability to gain the expertise and leverage the network of those outside of one's own work group. Women are strategically poised to span boundaries as leaders, a skill that's required for both international as well as cross-team functions in today's and tomorrow's organizational complexities.

Carpe Diem

So how can female leaders take advantage of the current and emerging environment where their strengths will be embraced?

Seize opportunities: Research shows that women often receive fewer promotions because they do not go after new experiences to demonstrate their abilities. They seem less likely to embrace new opportunities than men because they feel the need to be confident that they'll be able to handle the new challenge (90-100% sure), whereas men take it on with a much lower threshold (50-60% sure). The result is that men accept the project and promotion and for the most part, benefit from seizing the moment. Since women are slightly more risk-averse than men, they pass up opportunities that can elevate them in the organization and demonstrate their strengths and abilities. If you see a project or promotion that interests you, but don't feel confident that you can succeed at it, take it anyway. Chances are the fact it interests you shows that you have much of what it takes to succeed, and the actual experience will afford the opportunity for you to learn what you lack and to make up the difference.



Create coalitions: There is strength in numbers. A team outperforms an individual in most situations. Therefore, women benefit from the power of a "tribe." Team builders are more in demand today than ever before and will continue to be in the future. Whether it's a formal work team focusing on a project or an informal team you put together for breakfast, lunch, or happy hour socializing, gaining lateral allies gives you OPI (other people's influence). Lone Rangers get squashed, especially when you're a Lone Female Leader, so who can you reach out to (male and female) for the purpose of creating both social- and task-oriented teams? Take a portion of your daily routine to keep in touch with your coalition members. Make it a part of your weekly agenda. Even though it may appear more social and less formal, these informal networks empower those who are known and liked.

Network strategically: The irony is that while women possess a unique strength in socializing and relationship, the research shows that men are more strategic in how they ply their social wares. In other words, they go after friendships that can leverage their careers, either by opening doors of opportunities, riding coattails, or offering wisdom. Most jobs are obtained through who we know, not online job boards. You learn from what you do, but you get an opportunity to do those things based on who you know. Strategic networking is different from creating a coalition in that it focuses more on individuals and power and influence. Ask a person you respect to mentor or sponsor you. Learn from them. Do you get invited to the meeting before the meeting? Do you see people gathering in a room and you wonder, why wasn't I

invited to that? If not, chances are you've not done your work on the political side of strategic networking. Granted, some of this may be challenging if it takes place on the golf course, local pub, or after work hours, but figure out who you need to use your relational abilities with and who might help you learn and move up the ladder.

ID and Develop Young Leaders*: Perhaps the most powerful tool you have as a woman leader is to raise up other leaders. Think higher math. Talent adds to an organization; leading followers multiplies, but leading leaders produces exponential payoff. Most of the women leaders I've met seem preoccupied with their own responsibilities as well as juggling social roles (wife, mother), leaving little bandwidth to invest in next-gen female leaders. This is unfortunate, because no one understands the unique challenges of leading as a woman than another woman. Maintaining margin for opportunities to mentor and train preteens, teens, and 20-somethings is an important give-back that most women leaders overlook, because they're so focused on organizational responsibilities and spinning plates of family, friends, and private time. "What I Wish I'd Known About Leadership" is a narrative book we wrote, focusing on an experienced leader sharing wisdom with a protégé. Women leaders need to assess girls/teens with an aptitude for leading, because focusing on next-gen leaders is the best strategy for creating a critical mass of women leaders. Following is the rationale.

Why Young?



Accumulated experience: According to a blog published by Harvard Business Review, a survey of over 17,000 managers denoted that the first formal leadership training takes place at 42 years of age.⁽³⁾ That's decades past the time when character is still malleable and cognitions are elevated, while still unencumbered by bad habits and negative experiences created over time. In addition, imagine the effect of compounding years of leading and 100s of training opportunities. Malcolm Gladwell, in his book "Outliers," explains the research behind those who achieve greatly and the amount of practice sessions that take place prior. If we wait until 40 or even 30 to begin serious leadership training, we've lost other strategic windows of developmental opportunity, not to mention needing to unlearn bad habits.

There are youth programs that supposedly develop leaders, but why aren't they producing the quantity and quality of leaders needed today? What about ASB (student government), Girl Scouts, National Charity League, Interact, Rotaract, 4-H, and any number of wonderful organizations that claim to offer leadership training? The problem is that nearly all of the preteen, teen, and early adult training programs called leadership that we've reviewed actually have little to do with specific leadership skills. If you compared and contrasted high-end executive training programs with youth "leadership" programs, you'd find few similarities. The latter involve good citizenship—beneficial for everyone—but they don't distinguish what leaders specifically *do*. Self-esteem, confidence, character, and service are all wonderful qualities. We want them in our leaders, but they do not distinguish what makes leaders different from others.

Leadership is the process of helping people accomplish together what they couldn't as individuals. Leaders are those who get leadership going. Most cultures don't consider leadership an adolescent behavior. Kids hear "Someday you'll be a leader." Few women have experienced executive-caliber leadership training, and fewer still have learned how to deliver it to others. The result is that what so many think is leadership training is really little more than opportunities for personal growth and

occasional venues for leading (without specific instruction), coaching, and feedback. The idea that “everyone can be a leader” reflects a definition that leading is being a responsible, self-actualized individual. While we want leaders to emulate good-citizen qualities, these qualities do not distinguish how to get people to follow you. There is a difference between being a leader and leading people.

Women nurturers: Walk into any elementary school and you’ll see a vast majority of women teachers. The reason is that women, in general, are the nurturers in families and society. That natural bond between females and other young females offers significant potential for women leaders to mentor young women leaders. No one can mentor women leaders like other women leaders. To begin with, the sexual awkwardness of men serving as sponsors and mentors of dynamic female proteges lends itself to all sorts of challenges. But just as important is that women who are leaders understand what it is to be young, female, and influentially oriented. While leaders can develop other leaders to a point, men possess sufficient differences to limit effective mentoring of women. Just as speaking the same language is important to effective teaching, gender language differences make it difficult for opposite sexes to sufficiently mentor one another.



Ethically moldable: Leaders must deal in power. A powerless leader is an oxymoron. The problem is that power tempts us to do things we normally would not, resulting in selfish ambition and any number of corrupt behaviors, often hurting people and bankrupting organizations. Moral psychologists suggest that our character is primarily established by early- to mid-teens. While we can change after that point, it comes with difficulty and much intentional effort. Therefore, if we want ethical leaders, we need to get to them long before their MBA course in ethics. While ethical parenting is important, ethical leadership training is even more imperative, because leaders must deal in shades of gray and benefit from understanding how their decisions impact a team and organizational outcomes. Thus, identifying leaders at a very young age and recruiting them into an ethical leadership training program intensifies the chances of raising effective and ethical leaders.



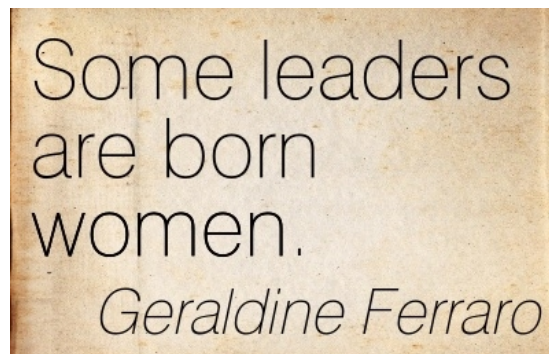
Critical mass: Growing leaders is in some ways similar to growing food. Throughout history and until 200 years ago, we cultivated gardens in small lots. Then, thanks to the technology of tractors and small equipment, we increased our productivity. The average farm grew from an acre or two to several hundred acres. But a few decades ago, we evolved from farms to ag business, creating virtual food factories of 1000s of acres. For the most part, leadership development is precariously perched between the garden and farm eras. But this approach will require centuries for us to significantly grow more female leaders.

If we hope to create a critical mass of women leaders, we must create a training pedagogy that can systematically identify and develop hundreds of thousands of young female leaders, through the use of powerful, accelerated learning methods. A training curricula called SheLead, using project-based learning with feedback and coaching was recently developed to

address that gap. Designed after executive-caliber training, the program stimulates significant growth among the top 10-20% with leadership aptitude, from ages 10 and up.

The world desperately needs more and better women leaders because the organizations of the future will require the unique gender strengths that women possess. The authors of *The Athena Doctrine* noted in their research that if male leaders want to be effective in the future, they'll need to adopt many of these traits considered feminine. Once again, research points toward female strengths being in greater demand among leaders, now as well as in the future. (4)

Finally, there really is a female advantage in leadership; perhaps there always was, but we just didn't recognize it. Hopefully we'll develop sufficient quantities of women leaders to fill the needs. But unless we begin doing things differently, that won't happen. **If you want to improve the world, focus on women leaders. If you want to improve women leaders, focus on them while they're young.**



Bio: Alan E. Nelson, Ed.D. teaches at USC Marshall School of Business, the Naval Postgraduate School and is considered a global expert in young leader development. He is the author of "Bringing Out the Leader in Your Daughter," "Leading as a Young Woman" (both with Nancy Nelson) and SheLead, the first executive caliber leadership training curricula designed specifically for women to use with girls and young women, ages 10-23. For more info on this program, go to www.LeadYoungTraining.com. Dr. Nelson lives in Thousand Oaks, CA and is establishing a community-based program to identify and develop 10-18 year olds, gifted in organizational leadership, called LeadYoung Institute.

*In our work with young leaders around the world over the last eight years, we've learned how to estimate leadership aptitude among 3- to 23-year-olds. For a free Social Influence Survey that adults take on children and teens, go to www.LeadYoungTraining.com and click on the free assessment tab at the top. Those clicking the "Parent" button will receive the results on the child/teen.

1. www.catalyst.org (Retrieved September 19, 2014)
2. "A Study in Leadership" by Zenger/Folkman, 2012.
3. HBR Blog Network, "We wait too long to train leaders," Jack Zenger, Dec. 17, 2012.
4. *The Athena Doctrine* by John Gerzema & Michael D'Antonio, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013