



# Gender Differences in Managerial Behavior: The Ongoing Debate

## I. The Debate

Do men and women have distinct leadership styles? Do they approach management differently? Two perspectives have dominated the ongoing debate on gender differences in organizational leadership and management behavior. Psychological theories emphasize the different outlook, attitudes, and values inculcated in men and women during their development and socialization. In contrast, situational theories argue that gender differences are few, and largely an artifact of differences in opportunity, power, and lack of representation in business and organizational settings. To date, the evidence from research studies has been mixed: some studies provide support for the psychological perspective, others for the situational, and yet others advocate a combination of the two. Matters have been further complicated by the fact that studies conducted within different paradigms are often not comparable. It is difficult to determine, for example, whether the results of in-depth interviews with a small number of executives are consistent with large scale surveys of men and women in diverse managerial jobs. Thus, the debate continues.

## II. The Psychological Perspective

The psychological perspective suggests that women, on average, differ from men in their approach to managerial jobs. These differences are believed to stem from the different experiences the sexes have growing up. In the process of sex-role socialization boys and girls are involved in different kinds of activities and rewarded for different kinds of behaviors. For example, girls' play tends to be less competitive than boys' play. Consequently, as adults, men and women evince different behaviors and preferences. Advocates of this perspective argue that the central tendency is for women to demonstrate greater affiliation, attachment, cooperation, and nurturance, while men will tend to demonstrate more independent, instrumentally-oriented, and competitive behaviors.

Until recently, effective management was presumed to require the "male" orientation: a tough-minded approach to problems and a willingness to set aside personal and emotional considerations in the interest of task accomplishment. It was assumed that men and women were inherently different, and the difference gave men an advantage in the business world, with women more suitable for support roles. Those women who succeeded in ascending the corporate hierarchy adopted the "male" model of successful managerial behavior.

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*Research Associate Kristin Daly prepared this note under the supervision of Professor Herminia Ibarra as the basis for class discussion.*

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Today, an increasing number of people favor a pluralistic view of managerial talents and contributions, which emphasizes the value of women's "different voice." Proponents of this view suggest a spectrum of dissimilar but complementary managerial styles and argue that women need not reject "female" characteristics to be successful.<sup>1</sup> Further, they argue that traditionally "feminine" qualities such as nurturing and collaboration represent the kinds of leadership and management skills needed today. Among the managerially relevant differences that have been identified are approaches to organizing, leadership and communication:

- **Organizing.** In one study, men and women managers reported very different approaches to organizing their workgroups. The women tended to favor "centrarchies," i.e., webs of inclusion, with themselves at the center of a network rather than at the top of a hierarchy. They viewed themselves at the center of a web of relationships, facilitating the dissemination of information and focusing on building effective teams and groups. The men, by contrast, were more likely to see themselves at the top of a pyramid or hierarchy, with a distinct chain of command and established rules for getting things done within the organization.<sup>2</sup>
- **Leadership.** Another study suggested that women tend to be "transformational" leaders while men tend to be "transactional" leaders. The men were more likely to have an "exchange of rewards for services" view of their relationships with subordinates; the women were more likely to operate by persuading subordinates to transform their own self-interest into the interest of the group and concern for a broader goal. The women in this study were also more likely than the men to encourage participation and to share power and information. The men, in contrast, were more likely to report "command and control" managerial styles.<sup>3</sup>
- **Communication.** Recent research suggests that men and women tend to communicate differently. Women appear to use communication as a means to develop or reinforce a relationship, by establishing a common ground, to a greater extent than men. Men, on average more than women, were found to use communication to transmit factual information and to establish or signal their place in the power structure. When men were speaking in a group, for example, they tended to compete to capture the floor, while women tended to take turns speaking.<sup>4</sup>

### III. The Situational Perspective

The situational perspective argues that when men and women are in a similar situations, operating under analogous expectations, they tend to behave in similar ways. Proponents of this view offer a very different interpretation of the findings of the psychological perspective. They argue that, presumed differences in the behaviors and attitudes of men and women are better explained by differences in power, status and opportunity.

A variety of statistics supports the argument that the effects of gender cannot be isolated or studied independently of context. For example, in 1992 women represented 3% of corporate officers

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<sup>1</sup>J. Grant, "Women As Managers: What They Can Offer to Organizations," *Organizational Dynamics*, Winter 1988, pp. 56-63.

<sup>2</sup>S. Helgesen, *The Female Advantage* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

<sup>3</sup>J. Rosener, "Ways Women Lead," *Harvard Business Review*, November-December 1990, pp. 119-125.

<sup>4</sup>D. Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand* (New York: William Morrow, 1990).

in *Fortune* 500 companies, and in 1990 almost 60% of working women were employed in sales, administrative support and services, with women making up the majority of service employees, particularly in low-paying, dead end positions.<sup>5</sup> Further, men and women enter different industries and occupations and generally perform different tasks within broad occupational categories. Within firms, patterns of sex-segregation are also marked with women predominantly located in staff functions such as human resources and public relations.<sup>6</sup> This societal pattern implies that, in general, women lack institutional power. As a result, they are more likely to use traditionally “female qualities,” such as collaboration, to get things done.<sup>7</sup>

The critical study that launched the situational perspective was Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s study of a corporate bureaucracy. She found that three factors are pivotal in influencing managerial behavior:

- **Opportunity** is the ability to grow and achieve within a firm, and the access to routes within the company to make this possible. Kanter found that regardless of gender, managers who were “stuck” or “plateaued” behaved very differently from those who were moving up, with the “stuck” less likely to take risks or exhibit a high level of commitment to their firms. Because women tended to be overrepresented in low opportunity jobs, they did indeed behave differently than men on high opportunity career tracks. Thus, the expectation that women *in general* were less committed to their jobs and more risk averse than men was easily perpetuated.
- **Power** is defined by the access to resources, information, and political support that is associated with a particular work role. Kanter argued that “powerlessness corrupts.” Power increases an individual’s visibility and effectiveness within the organization, thus leading to greater power; a lack of power led managers to develop other, non task-related priorities, including favoring interpersonal relationships over task requirements. Again, because most women held low power jobs, the view that women favor relationships at the expense of task-related demands was frequently reinforced.
- **Numbers** pertains to the proportion of people in a company who are similar or different along characteristics including gender, race, and ethnicity. Regardless of what group it is, the mere fact of being in the numerical minority produces common dynamics and unique pressures, including stereotyping. People in the minority are more likely to be viewed as representatives of their group when they underperform and as exceptions to the rule when they do well. Again, because managerial women were often in the position of being the “only woman,” or one of a very few, they were more likely to be seen as group representatives rather than as individuals.

Since Kanter’s study, a variety of investigations has provided support for one or more of her three pivotal factors. Among them are the following:

- In a managerial study, nearly 1,000 men and 1,000 women were matched according to age, rank in their organization, organizational type, and number of

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<sup>5</sup>R.M. Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

<sup>6</sup>A.M. Morrison and M. A. Von Glinow, “Women and Minorities in Management,” *American Psychologist*, Vol. 45, No. 2. (1990), pp. 200-208.

<sup>7</sup>N.A. Nichols, “Whatever Happened to Rosie the Riveter?” *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 1993, pp. 54-62.

people supervised. They were compared on five dimensions: managerial philosophy, motivation, participative practices, interpersonal competence, and managerial style. An average of 2.6 subordinates also rated these managers on their practices. The authors concluded that “women, in general, do not differ from men, in general, in the ways they administer the management process.”<sup>8</sup>

- A review of studies conducted in the 1980s concluded that there was little “hard” evidence for the “male” task-orientation or for the “female” relationship-orientation. These studies also failed to provide evidence of gender differences in motivational factors. There was evidence, however, that men and women managers tend to differ in their choice of influence strategies: Men appeared to be more likely than women to exercise influence based on the power of their position and tended to rely on promises and threats significantly more than women; women, by contrast, seem to be more likely to use sources of influence based on personal relationships and to rely on indirect influence strategies.<sup>9</sup>
- An investigation of 89 workgroups varying in their sex composition from 0 to 100% female found that women had the most undesirable social experiences when they were in the numerical minority. They reported isolation from informal interactions, experienced job dissatisfaction, and were subject to greater stereotyping by group members. The results also suggested that men’s experiences, when they were in the numerical minority, were not as severe as those of the women when they were in the minority. Women holding superior positions in predominantly male work groups experienced the most undesirable outcomes of any group.<sup>10</sup>

**The Role of Social Norms** Another stream of situational research focuses on social expectations or norms about appropriate behavior, which are often gender-based. It shows that behaviors that are accepted or viewed as desirable in men may be seen as inappropriate in women. Men and women are subtly rewarded for conformity to traditional behavioral expectations, and women in management are sanctioned for violating expectations of female-appropriate behavior. Studies have shown that:

- Women managers using “masculine” leadership styles were judged by both men and women as worse managers than male managers using the same leadership style.<sup>11</sup>
- The characteristics describing the typical “good manager” were similar to those used to describe the “typical man,” and different from those used to describe the “typical woman.” Women, however, were often evaluated on their qualities as both managers **and** women. This produced a double bind: they may be

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<sup>8</sup>S. Donnell and J. Hall, “Men and Women as Managers: A Significant Case of No Significant Difference.” *Organizational Dynamics*, Spring 1980, pp. 60-77.

<sup>9</sup> Powell, G. N. 1990. “One More Time: Do Female and Male Managers Differ?” *Academy of Management Executive*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 68-75.

<sup>10</sup>A.M. Konrad, S. Winter, and B.A. Gutek, “Diversity in Work Group Sex Composition: Implications for Majority and Minority Members,” *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*, Volume 10 (1992), pp. 115-140.

<sup>11</sup>V.E. O’Leary and J.R. Ickoviks, “Cracking the Glass Ceiling: Overcoming Isolation and Alienation.” In U. Sekeran and F. Leong (Eds.). *Womanpower: Managing in Times of Demographic Turbulence* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1992), pp. 7-30.

sanctioned for either “acting like men,” or conforming too closely to norms for female behavior, e.g., “not being assertive enough.”<sup>12</sup>

- A comparison of men and women managers who “plateaued” before reaching the executive ranks found that a “poor image” was a common factor for women but not for men. Senior executives used phrases like “too whiny,” “too cutesy,” “too feminine,” and “too strong” to describe these women.<sup>13</sup>

Some researchers have suggested that men and women have similar “behavioral repertoires,” but tailor their actions to the situation at hand as a function of social expectations. For example, gender differences tend to be more pronounced in group settings but much less so in individual assignments.<sup>14</sup>

#### IV. Implications

- **Valuing Differences.** The psychological perspective suggests that organizations have much to gain from expanding their definition of effective leadership and management to include those methods and orientations that are viewed as more typical of women. Adherents of this approach suggest that widening the range of acceptable styles and pathways to success will free people to lead in ways that play to their individual strengths and preferences. Traditionally defined “male” and “female” styles are viewed as complementary, and the ideal is for both men and women managers to expand their behavioral repertoires to include skills based on both orientations. By valuing a diversity of managerial styles, organizations will develop the strength and flexibility to survive in a highly competitive and increasingly diverse economic environment. Critics warn, however, that we may be unintentionally perpetuating behavioral expectations by over-valuing differences that stem from traditional views of appropriate male and female behavior.
- **Changing the Power Structure** The situational perspective suggests that “the job makes the person.” Adherents of this approach suggest that valuing diversity is only rhetoric until women have equal access to jobs with opportunity and power, as well as to the career paths that lead there. Instead of pointing to job titles such as vice president or percentages of men and women in aggregate categories, this perspective suggests the need for change in access to the power structure, including jobs with direct influence over company revenues and budgets; the ability to get jobs for others, including hiring employees and directing large supply and consulting contracts; and external contacts and connections, such as seats on powerful corporate boards and civic involvement. For individual women, the implication is the need to develop strategies to counter the subtle barriers to power prevalent today. While differences in preferred leadership styles are accepted, the central concern is building and exercising a broad range of sources of power. Critics of this theory maintain, however, that the movement of women into the upper echelons of power has been hampered by an unwillingness to recognize and accept deep-rooted gender differences.

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<sup>12</sup>M. Heilman, et al., “Has Anything Changed? Current Characterizations of Men, Women, and Managers,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 74, No. 6, (1989), pp. 935-942.

<sup>13</sup>A. Morrison, R.P. White, E. Van Velsor, and The Center for Creative Leadership, *Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Can Women Reach the Top of America's Largest Corporations?* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1987).

<sup>14</sup>K. Deaux, and B. Major, “Putting Gender into Context: An Interactive Model of Gender-Related Behavior,” *Psychological Review*, Vol. 94, No. 3 (1987), pp. 369-389.