

# When women lead, workplaces should listen

**The most valuable lessons of women's leadership programs are those that show organizations where to improve.**

*by Natacha Catalino and Kirstan Marnane*

**For years,** female executives have come away from women-only leadership programs empowered to do—and ask for—more, valuing the opportunity to examine their strengths and shortcomings in the psychological safety of their peers and to use the experience as a springboard for personal development.

But organizations are leaving unexamined the most powerful lessons these programs offer.

The oft-overlooked benefit of women-only leadership programs is that they hold up a mirror to the organization. When women scrutinize their own leadership traits and experiences, they reveal important information about the day-to-day environment in which they operate. If a company is receptive, the content of the sessions can help gauge how well the organization promotes effective leadership behavior and can offer a portal into where the company succeeds, as well as where it fails to foster an environment in which everyone can bring their best self to work. In short, companies can use such programs not only to improve the skills of the participants but also to assess—and ultimately improve—the workplace itself.

We've come to these conclusions through a decade's worth of experience in a particular women's leadership program—McKinsey's Remarkable Women Program, which has helped develop female leaders from Warsaw to Washington, DC, to Singapore to Stockholm. Remarkable Women sessions generally include participants from multiple organizations, but many companies send more than one woman, and we believe that the lessons we've learned are equally relevant for organizations running their own in-house programs.

In this article, we describe what hundreds of program sessions and 150 interviews with participants have taught us. Not only do women and men experience work differently; not only is it the system—rather than women—that needs fixing; but there are three critical actions organizations need to take: they must broaden their leadership models, stimulate dissent, and encourage more effective introspection across the board.

## Broadening the leadership model

Most women we interviewed said their organization defined leadership clearly and that it was the traditional, stereotypically masculine style exemplified by the majority of their senior-most male and some female colleagues that was considered the benchmark. In many companies, the commonly held perception was that nothing else counted. A smaller number said that their organization voiced an appreciation of other leadership characteristics, such as listening and collaboration, but negated that message by promoting primarily on the basis of more traditional types of leadership behavior, such as authoritative decision making, control, and corrective action.

These dynamics are problematic for organizations, not just for women. McKinsey research into the leadership behaviors that are most effective for addressing future challenges concludes that the traditional behaviors of control, corrective action, and individualistic decision making are the *least* critical for future success.<sup>1</sup> Much more important are intellectual stimulation (which men and women apply in equal measure), and five other traits (inspiration, participative decision making, setting expectations and rewards, people development, and role modeling) applied more frequently by women (exhibit).

The narrowness of many companies' leadership models was evident in the experiences of multiple program participants. Consider the following examples:

- Anne, a senior leader of a public-sector organization, had long suffered imposter syndrome because her leadership style did not match the traits her company signaled that it valued. Only when she attended a leadership program did she recognize the value of her clear vision, her collaborative style, and her ability to listen. "I realized [leadership] doesn't need to be brutal," she told us.
- Jake, a participant in a mixed-gender leadership program, asked whether we could teach him a more traditionally masculine style of leadership. "It's great that my caring style and good listening have got me this far," he noted, "but can you help me develop a more directive and strong approach?" This, he added, was what he needed to progress to the next level. When we asked why, Jake explained that all of his role models at his company, mainly men and a few women, exhibited such traits.
- Three senior female officers from the strategic services of one country's military believed that their strengths in listening, making connections, and building relationships were standing in the way of their promotion, because all the evidence that these women could see showed that the military had rewarded only the more traditional strengths.

As these examples suggest, many organizations inadvertently embrace a narrow set of traditional leadership traits. Progress toward a more relevant definition of leadership is possible when senior leaders devote themselves to it—but the number of priorities competing for limited management time and attention make true commitment a scarce commodity. Crucially, it also requires an often-uncomfortable

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<sup>1</sup> See "Women Matter: Ten years of insights on gender diversity," October 2017, McKinsey.com.

Exhibit

## Survey results suggest that women, more frequently than men, exhibit leadership traits that are highly applicable to future global challenges.

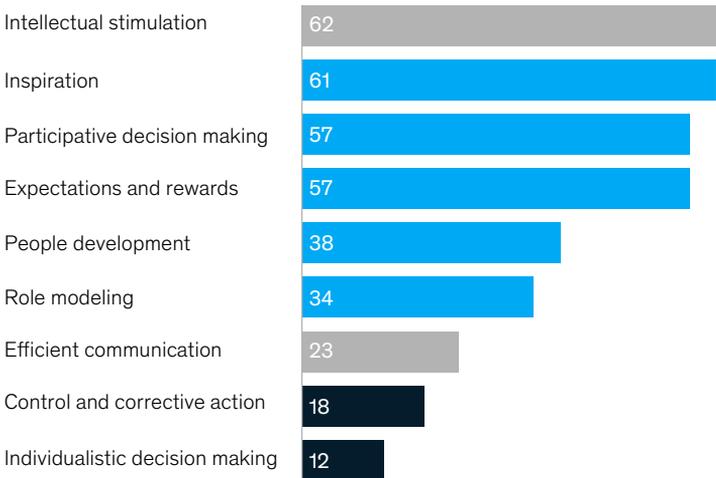
Relative importance of nine leadership traits to addressing future challenges, % of top executives identifying behavior,<sup>1</sup> %

Frequency of the behavior observed in each gender

■ Women apply more<sup>2</sup>

■ Men apply more

■ Women and men apply equally



<sup>1</sup>Respondents could choose up to 4 types of behavior.

<sup>2</sup>Includes "apply more" and "apply slightly more"; the types of behavior the survey suggests that women should apply slightly more are inspiration and participative decision making.

Source: *Women Matter: Time to accelerate—Ten years of insights into gender diversity*, October 2017, McKinsey.com

mind-set shift from top leaders and particularly from frontline managers, who may lack the emotional intelligence or willingness to truly engage. In our experience, the odds of progress increase when both groups engage with women's leadership programs as they are taking place or by asking participants after the program has finished what they learned about their work environment. Those conversations can be invaluable for highlighting antiquated leadership traits that the company may overemphasize, clarifying and strengthening the organization's values, and identifying ways to promote a broad range of leadership traits.

When our three military members told their institution that it had been conveying a narrow view of leadership, senior officers realized the importance of their less traditional leadership traits. As part of an effort to foster skills such as listening and relationship building in all ranks and disciplines, including combat, the military decided to incorporate them into training for new colonels and generals. It also launched an internal women's leadership program. Meanwhile, the three women were promoted and five years later still serve in the military, encouraging others, men and women alike, to lead differently.

## Encouraging dissent

Another disconnect we have observed is between the frequency with which women in leadership programs cite problem areas (such as unfair talent reviews, ineffective sponsorship programs, and casual, omnipresent biases), and the low levels of awareness that their organizations seem to have about such issues. How can this be, particularly when many of these challenges would be advantageous and relatively cheap to fix?

Our experience has made abundantly clear to us that women are hesitant, or even unwilling, to point out to their employer the barriers they face at work.

For example, when the 25 most senior women at one Eurasian financial-services company gathered for a women-only leadership program, each one mentioned the strained relationship between herself and her sponsor. One woman went further into detail, speaking of the tension between the cultural unacceptability of dining alone with an older male sponsor and her wish to take part in the company's initiative. The rest, all of whom had been paired with more senior male sponsors, acknowledged that they had been shying away from the initiative for similar reasons. But none of them had been willing to raise the issue with their employer.

Beverly, a corporate lawyer, also had reason for reticence. In her first performance evaluation after maternity leave, she was penalized for having too few client billable hours, even though her clients had been handed to two colleagues in her absence. Fearing that she would be seen as unreasonably sensitive if she pointed this out, Beverly accepted the status quo as set out by her boss.

Several issues keep women from raising concerns. They are aware that they face a double standard, and they want to avoid being unfairly characterized as weak or as complainers. They also know that not all employers will react positively and that they could face pushback or punishment.

Even the most enlightened employers can become better at recognizing the barriers and trade-offs that women face in reporting problems. Reassuring employees that they won't be penalized for speaking up is just a start. Leaders also must demonstrate, through visible actions, that women's views will be respected and appropriately acted upon, while deeply ingraining in the corporate culture a sense that everyone must contribute, in large ways and small, to building a more inclusive system.

By listening to women more closely, organizations can build momentum toward getting the best out of everyone. For example, when Beverly discussed her situation with other women in a leadership program, all of them voiced outrage. That validation from peers working at a range of organizations gave Beverly the confidence to raise the issue at work. Her employer was equally outraged and quickly took corrective action, making clear across the organization how parental leave should be handled.

Beverly's experience is common, and one aspect of it is positive: nearly every woman we interviewed who did speak up encountered a receptive employer willing to take

corrective measures and felt that highlighting systemic institutional problems helped the women and men coming up the ranks behind her. The implication for senior executives is clear: embracing the openness encouraged by women's leadership programs benefits not only the women who participate in them but also the institutions themselves as they become more aware of common problems, including those that leaders may think they have already addressed. The organization also gains a sense of the frequency with which concerns go unvoiced and can encourage an environment in which individuals throughout the organization are comfortable dissenting constructively. This will have a broader effect than simply improving leadership and gender equality; it will enhance common communication, whether it's about building a better widget or how to operate safely.

## **Making space for more effective reflection**

We believe the persistence of problems such as biased leadership models and a reluctance to speak up stems in part from ineffective self-reflection by individuals, leaders, and organizations. Women don't call out the issue in those terms during leadership-development programs. But it is telling that it often takes stepping outside their own companies for participants in these programs to be able to engage in extended reflection and challenging, cooperative discussion.

There are clearly large "introspection gaps" in companies, despite the apparent increase in self-reflection brought on by #MeToo and the growing criticism of business's contribution to everything from climate change to income inequality.

We'd suggest these gaps are in part a function of the breakneck pace and competitive intensity that is so common in today's large companies: people don't discuss the need for more self-reflection, because they are moving so fast that they miss the chance. Becoming a more self-reflective organization is also a messier endeavor for senior executives than most of their other initiatives are. Instead of launching a program, receiving periodic updates, and assessing results to decide whether to continue or abandon it, true introspection requires a mind-set shift. For traditional command-and-control leaders, it may be difficult to change their own and others' long-held assumptions. Meanwhile, encouraging people to stand up for what they believe—even if doing so feels scary or causes the team discomfort or delay—takes patience, emotional intelligence, listening skills, and empathy.

While there are no easy answers, the experiences of participants in women's leadership programs, and of organizations that embrace the insights they generate, suggest some hallmarks of truly reflective leaders and organizations.

1. Reflective leaders and organizations don't ask employees to adopt leadership traits that are alien to them. Rather, they highlight traits that already work for each individual so that people can build on them. To start the introspection process, leaders should ask peers to share what they find effective about a colleague's leadership. This input not only is valuable for the person being evaluated but also allows the people who provide the feedback to reflect on diverse leadership traits. That, in turn, makes it more likely that the reviewer will name such traits, recognize

them in others, and encourage habits that are particularly effective. Such positive feedback loops can help wear down long-held assumptions about the primacy of antiquated leadership styles. Further progress comes when organizations promote nontraditional leaders. This heads off the appearance of inconsistency caused when people with traditional leadership styles still dominate the organization's top ranks—and causes everyone to reflect further on what makes for effective leadership.

2. Reflective leaders don't just sponsor women's leadership-development programs. They also seek participants' feedback on what they learned about how their organization's culture and systems help or hinder them. As Amy Edmondson, professor of leadership management at Harvard Business School, writes, psychological safety is created by leaders who ask for feedback and make it safe for people to answer. These leaders must keep asking, reflecting on what they hear, and then acting on it.
3. Reflective organizations reward those who speak up to help the company identify problems—and they don't underestimate the trust that this requires. By taking the exercise seriously and acting on the resulting insights, employers signal to the entire organization that they are serious about learning and changing and that they need help to do so. The rest of the organization needs to learn about the way cases are handled and problems rectified. This opens channels of communication between employees and leaders. It creates a culture of transparency and trust that goes far beyond women, fostering inclusion by showing everyone, particularly members of historically underrepresented groups, such as ethnic minorities, the LGBTQ community, and those with cognitive and physical differences, that the company is serious about change.

Reflective organizations are able to transform themselves into truly inclusive workplaces, taking full advantage of the significant benefits of diverse teams operating at their best. Women-only leadership programs help them get there. Those organizations and their leaders view these programs as far more than “self-help” for women. They see them as windows into overlooked parts of the company, providing a clearer view of the pitfalls and challenges that employees face. Stronger female leaders emerge from these leadership programs—and so do stronger companies. Q

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