

Three Myths Surrounding Women's Leadership

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Employers are constantly looking for ways to improve their employees' leadership skills. Studies indicate that men and women have different leadership styles but a good leader is a good leader regardless of gender. Men and women often approach leadership differently, which can cause confusion in the workplace. Preconceived ideas about what makes a good leader only add to the confusion. These common myths are examples of why women aren't always embraced as leaders.

Myth #1: Good leaders, regardless of gender, will lead in a particular way.

This might be true if men and women were the same. But let's face it; men and women are different in many ways. I'm generalizing here, and there are exceptions to every rule, but men and women know they are different from each other, although some would like to believe otherwise.

So what are the differences? The "nature vs. nurture" controversy notwithstanding, most adults have figured out that women and men are socialized differently. Regardless of how hard parents have tried to raise boys and girls the same, their efforts simply haven't resulted in identical behavior. So if men and women are different from each other, it makes sense that they also lead differently. Providing good leadership involves using one's personal strengths to lead others toward a goal. When considering women's traditional roles, such as child rearing, women have not only been leading others for centuries, they've also been producing future leaders!

Myth #2: Women lack the focus needed to be a good leader.

It's been said that to be good leaders, women should avert their focus on everything else to concentrate more on their work. Often raised to be responsible for many things and many people, women tend to be excellent multi-taskers. They focus on their work, but do so in smaller pieces of time. In today's rapidly changing business world, the ability to juggle many things at once is beneficial as a leader. Besides, leadership is about leading people. Women have been socialized to pay attention to people and help them reach their full potential. They've had lifelong training for being leaders of people.

Myth #3: Today, there's nothing holding women back from becoming the leaders they want to be.

I've heard this often. We want to believe this is true because admitting obstacles still exist tells us we have much work to do. In truth, there are many things holding women back from leadership positions today. We've all heard the numbers that only six of the

Fortune 500 CEO's are women, women still earn only 73 cents to every dollar men make, and at the current rate gender parity on Fortune 500 boards will not be attained until the year 2064. These are truths that women must face daily. While these ongoing challenges persist, perhaps the biggest stumbling block to women's advancement to leadership positions is women themselves. Yes, women may indeed hold the key to perpetuating their own difficulties!

How can that be? Remember that women have been socialized to care for everyone else. If there's time and energy left over, only then do they feel they can do something for themselves. It's difficult to advance a career if you're constantly focused on everyone else and get little support from family and society. I've often heard women proclaim, "I need a wife!" and perhaps it would be helpful to get the kind of support they've historically given to others.

Another way women sabotage themselves is in the standards they establish for their own gender. Women can be other women's worst enemies. They can be competitive and do things that make it difficult for other women to accomplish their goals. I've heard as many women as men state that women aren't cut out for leadership positions because they're not tough enough, can't make difficult decisions, or don't have the drive and dedication needed to be at the top. Of course, women who aspire to greater leadership positions know this isn't true, but it becomes more difficult to persevere when peers offer little support or are openly hostile.

Perhaps the most frequent way that women sabotage themselves is by lacking self-confidence. It's difficult to have confidence in yourself when it seems that much of the world thinks you're not capable of leadership. Women also seem to be experts at surrounding themselves with people who either aren't good for them or at least enervate them to the point where nothing is left.

Although women may not have caused gender inequity, they certainly have been a factor in perpetuating it. That doesn't mean it can't be changed. Women can use the strengths they've traditionally possessed to effect those changes. To begin, they need to get out of their own way and take a good look at themselves and their lives, both personally and professionally, determine what their values are, set goals, and design a plan to carry out activities that fit with their own values. They should do everything possible to surround themselves with people who support and believe in them and their abilities. Women must support other women in their desire to achieve and make every effort to improve their own self-esteem and self-confidence. Once they're on that path, they will begin to achieve the accomplishments they desire in their careers and lives. Only then will women put the obstacles and myths behind them and become the leaders they know they can be.