

Women and leadership: celebrating the differences

Brains, hormones and evolution account for differing leadership styles

It is 2005 and I've finally come to the realization that as a female leader, I am not equal to my male peers. I am different.

According to the International Labor Organization and Statistics Canada, only 34 per cent of women are in leadership roles in Canada and the U.S. combined, and women are still earning about 76 cents on the dollar compared to their male counterparts. Yet a recent survey on www.catalyst.com revealed that 55 per cent of women and 57 per cent of men want to be CEOs.

So why is there still the glass ceiling? Brains, hormones and the impact of evolution explain some of the reasons why women leaders still lag behind their peers.

The brain: the impact on focus and vision

Through the use of PET and MRI scans, researchers found that men and women use different parts of the brain when conducting various tasks. These differences in brain structure could explain why some male leaders can remain focused on a vision to get the results they want. Yet men can be also be perceived as single-minded – to a fault.

On the other hand, many women leaders have the ability to multi-task efficiently, knowing what the goals are and what must be done to accomplish results.



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feelings have been taken into consideration before acting.

Evolution: the impact on where we go from here

However their multi-pronged approach can be perceived as scattered. If men are judging women's promotions (which they often are), could women be unfairly losing out for appearing disorganized, when in reality they are multi-tasking and accomplishing a lot?

Hormones: impact on feelings and working with others

Hormones also affect leadership style. Men produce more testosterone, which in historic times provided the necessary assertiveness to compete, negotiate and often win.

Women, on the other hand, primarily produce a lot of estrogen, the hormone associated with the need to nurture and raise children.

Most leaders are judged on their results and approach. Evolution has set up some cultural expectations that are difficult to escape in the boardroom. If a man attempts

to be a nurturer, he is often quickly put back into his place. If a woman becomes too aggressive, she is deemed overbearing, and can alienate the very team she needs to get things done.

Trying to be equal on this level won't work for either gender. We know where evolution has taken us, but where will we end up?

My only hope is that women will capitalize on their unique leadership abilities – women have "hidden" leadership talents that we

haven't quite capitalized on yet. In order for true progress and equality in the workplace to take effect, women and men need to understand, accept and honour these differing approaches – to learn that our methods are just different. ■

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