

BLUEPRINTS FOR SUCCESS

FutureWorks Consulting, LLC works with human structures and systems in organizations much the same way that architects design and build the structure of a building and its mechanical systems. We help clients build organizations that will thrive in the competitive 21st century. Contact us to see how we can help you achieve your "minds eye" of the future at your company.

Women's Leadership: a Difference of Style

By Diana Larsen and Sharon Buckmaster

In our work with organizations, we have frequently noted differences in style between men and women as leaders. To satisfy our curiosity about this phenomenon, we completed interviews with 25 women leaders, most in senior executive positions, across many industries. The results of our findings are being used to create an innovative women's leadership program, the non-profit Women's Center for Applied Leadership. An analysis of their insights showed the following major themes:

Who Said It Can't be Done?

Many women talked about how they enjoy taking up a challenge, particularly when others have deemed that challenge impossible or potentially career-limiting. Through leadership challenges, women learned that they were tougher and stronger than they had ever believed. "Trial by fire," "Stepping up to the challenge," and a quote from Mark Twain, "Do what is right; it will please some people and astonish the rest!" are all quotes that speak to the confidence and courage women have found as they have taken on very difficult and complex assignments that were shunned by their male colleagues.

As the women developed more self-confidence, they were, in some cases, able to move into new areas where their skills were not yet proven. Said one, "What I value is the ability to be totally free of the fear of failure. I know I have the guts to put myself on the line, with no concern for what people may think. It's worth the risk."

Effective Team Leadership

Pulling together teams of diverse people and talents is important to the success of women leaders. Most of these same women mentioned assembling/leading teams of people to accomplish key tasks and the personal and professional satisfaction that came with successfully meeting the challenge.

One of our interview respondents is particularly proud of achieving success for the new American edition of

an established European women's magazine. She took the risk to move from a position as Managing Editor at a well-established, high profile magazine to take the job as Editor in Chief of the new start-up publication. In doing so, she stepped up to the challenge of a multicultural, highly creative executive staff (1/2 American, 1/2 European). This woman leader described the extraordinary process of building a well-functioning executive team from a "schizophrenic, dichotomous group." In two years, the magazine went from zero to 3 million in circulation. She managed the team through high expectations of herself and others, learning to have patience with these creative people to get the most out of them and to persevere. Nurturing them as needed, she made sure the work was fun.

Another woman, former chief executive of a utility, was faced with the reality that its nuclear power plant was about to go on the Nuclear Regulatory Committee's "Troubled Plant" list. Since she came from the staff side of the business, she had little expertise in running a nuclear power plant. She had to learn fast and put together the right team to begin the process of change. Assigning technical tasks to those who were more qualified, she took on the role of Liaison to the NRC. After 18 months, the NRC notified the utility they were "no longer concerned" about the plant because of the leadership and management they saw there. Through her team, she had restored credibility and integrity to her organization. She describes this challenging team experience as satisfying because they attained "positive results based on very fast team learning", for which she was the catalyst.

Personal Awareness

Several women cited self-knowledge as the cornerstone of their abilities to lead others. Many of the women we interviewed said that the personal growth work they have done has been a major contributor to the development and nurturing of healthy adult relationships at work as well as in their personal lives. Those healthy relationships help to support and sustain their capacity to live in the isolation of leadership and making the tough decisions leadership requires. One woman described an intensive, long-term workshop that allowed her to learn at a deep level about power

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and group dynamics, and finding her personal voice. Other women spoke of the value of a therapeutic relationship. Mentors and coaches also provide valuable feedback.

Trusting My Gut

Trusting and acting on one's instincts and intuition was key to most women leaders, including those leading large organizations. Easily dismissed as "women's intuition," these women developed a strong reliance on their perception of a given situation and the capacity for building the most likely scenarios and outcomes.

Heart and Meaning

Women leaders are often successful because they look for and find heart and meaning in their relationships and work. One theme that reoccurred in various ways in the vast majority of interviews is women's desire to have wholeness and authenticity in their lives. One woman said that the essence of leadership for her is "...paying attention to what has heart and meaning."

In talking about the power that comes from being able to tell one's truth and be present, someone asked, "What if we created a workplace where we all did that?" For her, success means running a company where the senior management team, after several years of hard work, has built a level of trust that allows members to acknowledge openly to each other where they are stuck and where they need support from the others. "...the success was that we had created a workplace with that level of trust."

Life First, Work Next

Successful leaders (and organizations) recognize that the whole person comes to work each day and must be addressed holistically. Another woman talked about success being the satisfaction of knowing that you have made a difference, not about achieving status. Said one, "I don't define wealth as stuff, but it is knowledge and how you use it to benefit your community. Our lives should be about service, not accumulating stuff. Each day presents an opportunity to make a difference..."

Another woman noted that leaders need to find their own kinds of "wells of replenishment" and ways to balance their lives. And in what surely what must be considered timeless advice, one interviewee summed it up by saying, "Every woman should have at least three people who would make you chicken soup at any hour of the day or night." How could anyone disagree with that?

Having a sense of play and of laughter was noted by several as an important ingredient of bringing their "whole self" to their leadership role. One woman remarked that leaders need to restore the ability of

employees to take time off, to "...experience life away from their cell phones and laptops..."

In all these ways, women tend to approach leadership from a different perspective that leads to using a style that may be unfamiliar to those who are used to a male model. However, in our interviews, we found women who were highly effective leaders getting excellent results for their organizations. The talent pool of potential leaders in your organization may contain just such excellent leaders-in-the-making, if you can only learn to recognize and value the difference in style.

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