

# Are Women Better Suited to Project Leadership than Men?

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## Abstract

Research into leadership styles suggests that we are moving towards a more 'Transformational' style which emphasis emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. Meanwhile, some studies have found that women have an advantage over men when it comes to the emotional aspects of leadership. Does this mean that women are naturally good at transformational leadership? If so, then my next question is "why are women still under-represented in project leadership?"

It would be easy to give knee-jerk answers to these questions, but before you all jump in with your comments and opinions (which are definitely welcome), let's survey the evidence and see what it tells us?

## The Evidence

The leadership literature has undergone a journey from the more traditional Transactional styles of leadership to a more Transformational style of leadership which incorporates: Authentic Leadership and Emotionally Intelligent Leadership. This style of Leadership is relatively new and emphasizes motivation and engagement along with the creation of a shared vision. There is also an emphasis on Individualized Consideration and providing a role model for high ethical behaviour which encourages respect and trust. There is a growing body of research evidence suggesting that this type of leadership is very effective in modern day organisations. Eagly (2007) reports a meta-analysis by Judge et al (2004) which examined of 87 studies testing the relationships between leadership styles and measures of leaders' effectiveness. They found that Transformational Leadership was associated with greater effectiveness.

Project leadership appears to be undergoing a similar, parallel journey to leadership in general, where there is a move away from traditional project management with a focus on planning and controls, towards an increasing recognition of the value that behavioural sciences can add and an acknowledgement of the fact that people factors are critical for the success of projects. This has resulted in a shift towards a more emotionally intelligent perspective (Briner 1992)

This shift in the focus of project management suggests that a more transformational style of leadership is required, which can harness the energy/motivation of project teams/stakeholders and unite them behind a common vision. This is particularly true of those projects that involve significant change for the end users or members of an organisation. These kinds of projects require even more of the Emotional Intelligence aspect of Transformational Leadership in order to recognise and effectively manage the range of complex emotions that organisational change provokes.

## THERE IS RESEARCH WHICH SUGGESTS THAT WOMEN ARE BETTER THAN MEN AT TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The research into leadership is varied but there are some studies which suggest that women have an advantage over men with regard to certain aspects of leadership and that Transformational Leadership plays better to women's strengths/behaviours and therefore gives them an advantage over men.

Research carried out Cartwright and Gale's (1995) UK studies found that women have significantly more of a team management style than do men and the researchers described this style as being characterized by a high regard for people and a high regard for task. They also found women were more visionary.

Eagly et al (2003) carried out a meta-analysis of 45 studies of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles and they found that female leaders were more transformational than male leaders. Although the differences found between male and female leaders were small, they were significant and therefore encouraging for female leadership.

Lee & Sweeney (2001), found gender differences in project teams, with women seeming to be better in dealing with teams and having better communication skills than males.

A study reported by Caliper (2014) used a personality profile to explore leadership. They found that women leaders demonstrated a transformational style of leadership. Caliper found that the women leaders studied, were intellectually stimulating, encouraged employees to take ownership of company goals, and provided inspirational motivation

These are some of the existing studies that have explored leadership styles in women and there is also research suggesting that there are no gender differences in

leadership and that leadership effectiveness occurs as a result of a combination of: personality factors, experience, contingency factors, organisational culture etc. This suggests that the issue of whether male or females are better at leadership may turn out to be something of a red herring e.g. Evans (2013) commented that “ it’s far from clear how gender impacts on our capability and performance at work”.

It may just be the case that women have a preference for the more transformational styles of leadership. The older traditional leadership models valued ‘Agentic’ masculine characteristics e.g. competition, confidence, aggression, self-direction. Women’ skills were stereotypically viewed as more ‘Communal’ in nature e.g. such as kindness, concern for others etc. This means that men appeared to match the role of leader better than women, which probably accounts for their greater success in obtaining high level posts. Women who tried to demonstrate the ‘Agentic’ skills required for more traditional leadership were viewed less favourably. Interestingly, transformational leadership has some elements which are traditionally viewed as more female in nature e.g. building supportive relationships (individualised consideration) which means that this leadership style may be more appealing to women as it is in keeping with stereotypes about female skills and therefore allows women to behave in a more congruent way.

It would seem then that there is now a good match between the type of leadership that women demonstrate well and the leadership requirements of modern day organisations/project teams so women should be very much in demand as project leaders. Sadly, the statistics suggest that this is not the case and that women remain under-represented in project leadership. In 2008, The (PMI) “Pulse of the Professional Survey” indicated that only 32 percent of project management professionals were. Women. This suggests that project management is still a male-dominated profession with significantly fewer women than men in the area of project leadership.

## SOME OF THE OBSTACLES THAT WOMEN FACE WITH REGARD TO PROJECT LEADERSHIP

One thing that the research does appear to be clear about, is that the experience of women with regard to leadership is different than that of men. This appears to be true not only of leadership in general but also of project leadership. Early research into leadership and women’s advancement talked about a ‘Glass Ceiling’ which set a limit on how high a women could expect to soar in the corporate world. Eagly (2012) suggests that the concept of the ‘Glass Ceiling’ is too simplistic as women face challenges at all levels of the organisation and not just at the top. Eagly talks about the pervasive stereotypes that exist regarding women’s abilities and the prejudices that mean women have to be better than men and work harder, if they want to get on.

### Male dominated sectors

A number of reasons have been suggested for the lack of women in project leadership which suggests that the 'Glass Ceiling' is not the only obstacle that women face. Historically, project managers were mainly in the construction and engineering industries, which were (and still are) male dominated areas. This is likely to have had an influence on the numbers of women recruited into these areas and the attractiveness of these areas to women.

### Attitudes of Male Managers

The research indicates that women do not feel that they are taken seriously and are not offered the same high quality opportunities as men that would allow them to demonstrate their ability. Women describe themselves as being hampered by stereotypical views of women's capabilities, particularly with regard to leadership. Henderson and Stackman (2010) found that both women project managers and team members, (compared to their male counterparts), were almost twice as likely to work on smaller, lower cost and more geographically dispersed projects.

Duong Thuong, T & Skitmore, M (2003) describe research from Powell and Butterfield (1994) showing that "at the top levels, promotion decisions involve subjective appraisals of candidates' fit with incumbent top managers, disadvantaging female candidates in male dominated organizations". This lack of fair selection in project leadership is also raised by Eagly (2007).

Female leaders emphasise that support from men is critical in attaining equality of leadership opportunities for both men and women. In an article by Alexis Petru (What Does Women's Leadership Mean in 2015?), Shannon Schuyler (principal and corporate responsibility leader for PWC) expressed the view that women's leadership is disruptive, agile and purpose-driven. She suggested that we need to see more women supporting other women and elevating one another in a two-way learning experience. Shannon also suggests that it is also increasingly important to include men in the conversation and not isolate or vilify them"

This sentiment was also echoed by Suzanne Fallender (Director of the Global Girls & Women Initiative for [Intel](#)). Suzanne comments: "To me, women's leadership means continuing to advocate for and invest in changes that support advancement of women within their organizations and industries, by addressing issues of unconscious bias and enlisting the support of both women and men in developing solutions.

### Lack of Suitable Role Models

Although there is some evidence that this is changing, women experience a lack of sufficient female role models/mentors. This may be impacting on women's expectations and also their ability to progress their careers.

### Networking

The research suggests that women find it harder to network in male dominated environments and therefore may miss out on making the sort of contacts that would enable them to raise their profile and get on the right radars.

It would seem then that women have the capability to be good project leaders but that they are still being held back. I would be really interested in people's real life experiences e.g. are you a woman who has achieved project leadership easily or a woman who has battled to achieve leadership? Are you a man who has seen women treated differently than their male counterparts? Share your thoughts with us!

### SOME ADDITIONAL READING FOR THOSE WHO ARE INTERESTED

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## About the Author



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**Sharon De Mascia** is the Director of Cognoscenti Business Psychologists Ltd. She is a chartered occupational psychologist and a chartered scientist. She is an expert in Wellbeing, Leadership and Change/Project Management. She has over 25 years' experience of delivering change/project management, wellbeing, leadership, entrepreneurship and other organizational initiatives across all sectors e.g. Santander, The BBC, Vita Group, The Highways Agency, NHS, Movember, and ATL etc.

Sharon is a published author and an executive coach as well as being a supervisor for the global MBA at Manchester Business School. Sharon is Prince2 qualified and is a guest lecturer at two Universities i.e. the Manchester Metropolitan University and the Liverpool John Moores University. She also teaches Project Leadership at the University of Reykjavik. She is a member of the British Psychological Society 'Health and Wellbeing group' and a committee member of the Association of Business Psychologists. She is also the Organizer for the CIPD 'Signet' group for Independent Consultants.

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