



# Gender and Leadership

By: Dr Norris W Dalton

For approximately two decades there has been an accelerating interest by academia relating to the influences of gender on leadership and leadership development.

According to Carl Jung, both males and females possess degrees of masculinity and femininity. While this is dependent on cultural upbringing; in most males, masculine traits are dominant while the same can be said for the dominance of female traits in most females.

To this end, a person's gender is primarily a reflection of their cultural upbringing including such influences as home-life, church-life, community-life, peer-group influences, and role-model influences, as opposed to their innate 'maleness or femaleness'.

In 1980 Professor Joanna Rohrbaugh at Harvard Medical School published a ground-breaking book: 'Women: Psychology's Puzzle'. The book represented the first attempt to assess the scientific basis of the feminist challenge to male psychology's perception of women – the stereotypes which determine the place of women in society. As such, any issues related to leadership and leadership development – regardless of organisational context – must take cognisance of these distinctions.

For example, the renowned 'glass ceiling' and 'darkened glass ceiling', which are presumed to exist in certain organisational contexts should not be viewed as a fixed immutable barrier to be overcome at all costs. Instead, they should be perceived as a fluid, dynamic, ever-changing gateway determined by the unique abilities of the aspiring leader's adjustment to the unique context within which he or she operates. This also determines whether a masculine or feminine style of leadership is more appropriate to a specific situation.

Previously, when males and females were compared, men were found to have more favourable characteristics. And whatever they did, felt and thought became the norm for everyone – irrespective of gender. Traits such as aggression, independence, achievement-orientation were considered to be masculine – and hence desirable and healthy.

However, a woman cannot progress in the business world when she is defined and evaluated in male terms. Today, women are increasingly working outside the home, in roles that are traditionally considered to be less feminine. Conversely, many men are taking up roles that have been traditionally reserved for women such as nurses, secretaries and household help.

Today, women are offered greater flexibility in terms of what they are expected to do, think and feel when it comes to the professional, social and home environments. Achievement and femininity are no longer seen as incompatible.

There has thus been a significant shift from examining individual personality factors as a barrier to female achievement. Instead, external barriers such as the 'Corporate Strait Jacket' are considered.

Put simply, a woman's anatomy is no longer her destiny. Men are changing their views and perceptions of the female stereotype. They are becoming more flexible in their attitudes.

Full gender and sexual equality is dictated by the pace of basic social and economic changes – which can often appear to be slow and laborious.

Nevertheless, pressure from the Women's Movements the likes of 'Female Solidarity', has had a tremendous impact in recent years – leading to changes in laws governing women's rights in terms of rape, divorce and wife-beating, as well as those of the Equal Rights Amendments. These changes are irrevocable and here to stay, and will proceed at an accelerated pace throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century within the business world.

Few people are born as 'authentic leaders' in that they have an inherent will-to-lead. Leadership does not manifest itself in a vacuum, but in a specific context as the result of a dynamic, interactive social process involving the leader and the group of potential followers.

The context is essentially a group of discordant 'wills' in a specific environment, each of which has been culturally conditioned with regard to their beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, behaviours and gender. Thus the context of leadership is not sex, gender or power-neutral (as pointed out by Professor Joyce Fletcher, *The Paradox of Post-heroic Leadership* (2003)).

If the circumstances or situation calls for the emergence of leadership among a tough, male-dominated group of potential followers requiring decisive action, then it is probable that a male with strong masculine qualities would be the most suitable type of leader.

However, if the circumstances or situations call for the emergence of leadership among a largely male-dominated group of



potential followers, but requires much consensual decision-making and persuasive dialogue to rally support, then it is probable that a male with developed feminine qualities or a female, would be the most acceptable type of leader.

That said, the circumstances or situation could call for the emergence of leadership among a female-dominated group of potential followers, requiring decisive action, then it is probable that a female with strong masculine qualities would be the most suitable type of leader.

In circumstances or situations calling for the emergence of leadership among a largely female-dominated group of potential followers, that require nurturing and supportive dialogue to rally support, it is probable that a female with well-developed feminine (co-operative) qualities, would be the most acceptable type of leader.

Of course, these four different contexts are merely illustrative, and one can imagine deviations from these guidelines as a result of unique personalities and particular circumstances. However, the point is that leadership cannot follow a 'one-size-fits-all' approach – there are an infinite number of contexts requiring both male and female leaders to be considered.

Since the context represents a deeply-embedded set of attitudes, beliefs and perceptions regarding expected sex/gender behaviours – there are various pitfalls or paradoxes awaiting the unwary leader.

These considerations have a direct bearing on the introduction of New Leadership Models (non-hierarchical, networking, empowering, enabling, learning and organisational) in organisations which have a long tradition of command-and-control types of leadership.

Such organisations tend to attract people who are comfortable with this corporate view of leadership and will not easily adapt to a flatter, more fluid relational types of organisational structure since this would go against their cultural conditioning.

This is possibly the main reason why the new leadership models, in spite of much rhetoric, are not being implemented successfully in most organisations. The embedded 'Corporate Strait Jacket' is too well entrenched to be easily changed.

Gender identity and expected behavioural patterns are well established through thousands of years of evolution, and will thus require strong social forces (such as the women's movement) to be changed.

The CRF staff and team are well aware of the gender sensitivity of leadership and strive to ensure that it is fairly reflected in selecting leaders for inclusion in this publication.

The South African Institute of Management (SAIM), founded in 1958 by self-made businessman Harold Morcombe, fully endorses the work of CRF and is honoured to contribute this perspective on Leading Managers. ■



**Dr Norris W Dalton** is the CEO of the South African Institute of Management (SAIM). SAIM is a not-for-profit organisation focused on the promotion and development of 'competent' managers at all levels of management, namely supervisory/first-line, middle-level, and senior managers. Applications are invited from suitable candidates to become members of the SAIM at Associate, Affiliate, Full Member, Fellow and/or Corporate levels.