

# Business behaving badly as sex stereotypes rule in a man's workplace world

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**Hannah Piterman**

**Women need space to be themselves if they are to be good leaders.**

A RECENT glossy magazine carried a photo of an attractive female executive surrounded by a group of her all-male subordinates. Celebrating her managerial status, she said: "I've never made a conscious decision to choose men over women, but as I think more like a man, I connect with them more easily. I'm very independent and good at detaching emotionally when it comes to business."

These gender stereotypes and their implications on life in business was a major theme in my study, involving more than 100 in-depth interviews with executive men and women in large organisations. The study explored dynamics in the workplace that, while subtle, can be powerful in undermining opportunities for women seeking executive status. Law changes and some organisational policies have given women more protection from overt discrimination and provided opportunities, but they have not been able to tackle deeper barriers that are more difficult to unearth.

Some women have made it to the top. But, in the main, leadership positions have remained elusive. Women represent about 12% of ASX 200 executive managers. Women hold just 7% of top-earner positions. In a business climate that places a premium on rationality, the systematic exclusion and undervaluation of women is aberrant, and comes at a cost to economic performance.

The study finds evidence to support the view that leadership is a male enterprise. Masculine traits define the essence of leadership.

This mental model of leadership is deeply embedded in the minds of men and women.

Participants in the study described a business culture that is aggressive, competitive, and requiring a 24/7 commitment. A strong short-term profit orientation demands decisiveness, and adeptness at "hard" skills. Capacity for rationality, numerical competency, and expedient decision-making is highly valued.

These are simplistically perceived to be male traits.

While feminine traits, such as interpersonal communication and emotional intelligence, are increasingly recognised as adding value, they are not given the same kudos in organisational environments. Gender stereotyping that aligns men with hard skills and women with the soft skills encourages a view of women as innately lacking business acumen.

These perceptions of male and female characteristics and their relevance to successful business performance undermine a rational assessment of talent, resulting in recruitment and promotion decisions that are biased in favour of men. Women are trapped between an

impenetrable male paradigm and an unpalatable female stereotype. Their position as cultural outsiders from senior management inhibits their opportunity to fully participate in organisational leadership.

Business strategies to develop female talent have traditionally encouraged women to adapt and reform their behaviour to achieve a better cultural fit within a male-dominated environment. This approach gives women stilts to play on an uneven playing field, but doesn't flatten the field. The study finds that a high level of personal adaptation and compromise not only interferes with a woman's performance potential, but rarely provides a successful strategy.

Adopting "hard" and aggressive demeanours, talking sport, and suppressing authentic female characteristics denude women of who they are and indeed can set them up for failure. Attempts to accommodate the masculine model of authority can encourage suspicion, derision, and cultural isolation from men and women.

While the ability to adapt is a skill many successful leaders share, women need a greater space to be themselves if they are to be truly effective leaders. Women need more than just a seat at the executive table. They need to command respect and loyalty from their colleagues.

In our complex business environment, sustainable performance requires a value system that can harness unique talents, skills and ideas, irrespective of how they are packaged. It requires an environment where multiple perspectives can emerge and diversity can thrive. To this end, a greater acknowledgement of the different "look" of female authority is needed.

Achieving greater female presence in the senior echelons of business presents big challenges to leadership. At its heart lies a realignment of business values and practices, and in particular a greater understanding of, and sensitivity to, gender dynamics.

Optimising the performance and the value of half the potential executive workforce by embracing diversity requires challenging organisational culture at the deepest level and "naming the problem with no name".

A fundamental review of the corporate leadership paradigm is required to shift models of authority from a narrow, technical, short-termism that rewards some men and isolates most women. When women, behaving as women, achieve results, an organisation can begin to see the benefits of cultural change and new styles of leadership can gain currency.

Dr Hannah Piterman is a consultant to business and honorary associate professor at Monash University. Her study, *The Leadership Challenge: Women in Management*, was released yesterday.

Email: [hannahp@consultinghp.com.au](mailto:hannahp@consultinghp.com.au)

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