Blog

Are Women Better Leaders During a Crisis?

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We've all heard the saying "behind every great man, there's a great woman"—but it seems that the business world has leaned a little too far on the "behind" aspect of that statement.

Despite global calls for equality and a drive toward breaking the glass ceiling, fewer than 30% of corporate leaders from the senior manager level and up are women. Globally, only 22 countries currently have a woman serving as head of state, while 119 countries have never had a woman leader at all.

But according to several research studies, women have proven time and time again to outperform men across a range of necessary skills, including problem-solving, collaboration and teamwork, relationship-building, and resilience.

So why isn't this correlating to representation in the workplace? The results show that women are just as capable—if not more so—than men when it comes to leading a team or company, particularly during a crisis. With an ever-growing focus on interpersonal skills and nontraditional traits when it comes to building successful teams, it just might be time to start rethinking our expectations on what exactly makes a great leader.

What Does COVID-19 Have to Do With Any of This?

If any period of recent history was going to test the mettle of female leaders around the world, the last year is certainly in the top 3.

While every nation has had to deal with its own targeted response to their country's coronavirus outbreaks, those led by women have fared significantly better than those led by men. In fact, a 2021 study found that male-led countries have seen nearly double the number of COVID-19 deaths as female-led countries.

How is this even possible? Numerous factors are at play here, but it's important to consider the general differences in how men and women respond to crisis and risk. And nothing's riskier than making decisions that could mean life or death for the people in your care. Of course you want to do everything you can to save the lives of as many citizens as possible, but what happens when that comes at an unprecedented economic cost?

For the leaders of countries like New Zealand, Germany, Denmark, and Finland, acting swiftly and decisively to contain the virus and prevent deaths through strict lockdowns was worth the economic standstill.

It's too soon to say what the long-term impact of this will be. But the research suggests that women leaders are significantly less risk-averse and make bolder decisions than men when the potential for loss or negativity is high. And when it comes to leadership skills, research by the *Harvard Business Review* provides an even stronger indication that, when faced with the unthinkable, women's quick thinking under pressure makes them more effective leaders.

Does Gender Even Matter?

Regardless of who you are, there are several attributes that everyone looks for in a fair and competent leader. Motivating the team, communicating plans and goals effectively, and making tough decisions are all crucial when it comes to success. And in *HBR*'s study spanning pre- and post-COVID life, women ranked higher in all but 1 category: technical or professional expertise.

It's important for us to consider gender expectations for a moment. We can't deny the progress that's already been made, but there's still a long way to go. In a study completed as recent as 2017, physical attractiveness was rated the trait most valued in women, whereas honesty and morality—closely followed by professional success—were most valued in men.

When it comes to empathy and kindness, 30% said that trait was important in women, compared to only 9% looking for the same in men. How many times have we heard complaints that women are "bossy," whereas a man in the same situation is considered "authoritative"? On paper, our views of what makes a good leader are clearly defined along gendered lines. But in reality, it's this empathy and kindness that translates into the tangible interpersonal skills that teams need to succeed.

Research by McKinsey & Co. has found this all to be true. A 2019 survey found that when assessing leadership traits deemed most important to address future challenges, women came out on top.

The data shows the undercurrents of change when it comes to what individuals need from their leaders, both in a crisis and from day to day. Traits that were once considered to be "soft skills" located firmly in the domain of female employees—like people development and setting expectations or rewards—have more recently been identified as key drivers in helping to retain talented employees and build success as a team.

Is it any wonder, then, that—in circumstances where these typically female behaviors are highly valued—women heads of state have weathered their storms more effectively?

The Impact of Women Leadership on Business

We've seen that women already possess all the attributes that make for great leadership. But the dismal reality is that businesses around the world are still reluctant to break away from gender stereotypes to put women in positions of authority.

The truth is, they're missing out on a world of potential. Research has found that women in leadership positions can:

- **Increase company profits and share performance:** A 2020 study found that profitability was nearly 50% higher when executive teams had greater gender diversity.
- **Improve venture capital acquisition success:** The World Economic Forum reports that when looking for venture capital, businesses with less diverse investment partners saw an 11.5% lower acquisition success rate.
- **Generate higher levels of creativity and productivity:** When it comes to exploring and developing new ideas, studies have found that gender-diverse teams have higher levels of divergent thinking and openness to experimentation.

The opportunities are out there for businesses committing to gender diversity—and the rewards are plentiful for those willing to reframe the expectations of their leadership team.

Women Leaders Really Do Make All the Difference

When it comes to crisis leadership, the evidence is clear—women's calm and carefully considered approach can be the make-or-break difference between successfully surviving the worst or struggling to stay afloat.

While we can't generalize to say that *all* women would make great leaders, the research shows that the most important traits for successful leadership are those typically found in female employees.

In times when decisions must be made quickly and risks need to be taken, it's certainly something to consider.

Kat Boogaard

Based in the great state of Wisconsin, Kat is a freelance writer focused on careers, productivity, and entrepreneurship. When she's not in front of her computer screen, she's either hiking with her 2 rescue mutts, baking up a new recipe, or squishing her adorable son. Learn more about her at katboogaard.com.

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