



# Understanding the Battle of the Sexes

By Hannah Lee, Director of Marketing and Communications

## ABSTRACT

We drew data from 100 Barrett Values Centre Leadership Values Assessments, a 360-degree leadership development tool, to examine the perceived differences among leaders based on their personal entropy (degree of dysfunction). We recently revisited that data to compare the overall results by gender. In this study, we looked at the top values, strengths, and areas for improvement that were chosen most frequently by leaders' assessors. Note that strengths and areas for improvement are submitted as free responses. We found significant differences among male and female leaders that follow gender stereotypes.

## THE DATA

To carry out this research, we examined the results of 100 Leadership Assessments conducted during a two-year time period in 19 countries. The assessment is a values-based, 360-degree leadership development tool that examines and compares a leader's perception of his or her operating style with the perception of their superiors, peers, and subordinates (assessors). The 100 assessment results were divided by gender, with 81 males and 19 females among the group.

At the end of this article, there are three tables that show the top values, top strengths, and top areas of improvement as chosen by assessors for each gender.

The countries represented in this study include Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Czech Republic, France, Germany, India, The Netherlands, Norway, Peru, Poland, South Africa, Sweden, Trinidad & Tobago, Turkey, UK, USA, and Venezuela.

## COMPARISON OF TOP VALUES

The most common value associated with both male and female leaders is *commitment*. Furthermore, male and female leaders share 12 out of 16 of their top values. However, among the values that are different, there are significant distinctions among the genders.

Male leaders are seen to focus on successfully reaching their objectives, with *goals orientation*, and *achievement*. They are recognized for using their experience to do so, and they make space for others by being *accessible*.

Female leaders are seen as promoting strong working relationships with others through *open communication*, *teamwork*, and *cooperation*.

These differences among male and female leaders align with common characterizations of masculine or feminine behavior conditioned by differences in treatment and expectations during upbringing. "According to social role theory, behavioral gender differences are caused by socialization where at a young age, males are

encouraged and rewarded for being outgoing, and achievement oriented. Conversely, females are taught to be emotionally oriented, and reserved in their interactions with others.”<sup>1</sup>

However, there is a greater tendency for female leaders to be seen as *controlling* and *demanding*, with these potentially limiting values being recognized in 32% of women and only 20% of men. These traits seem to contradict the collaborative approach noted above. Female leaders also have a propensity to overwork, with long hours.

The contradiction among the values of female leaders is further blurred when considering the dichotomy of expectations around gender roles for female leaders. In some circles, it is believed that women must act like men by exhibiting traditionally masculine traits to get ahead. However, “women have been socialized to believe that they will experience more positive outcomes regarding their accomplishments when they are seen by others as non-competitive, [so] they downplay their accomplishments in the presence of others to avoid being judged unfeminine. In contrast, men consistently self-promote their successes, in order to present a successful self-image to others.”<sup>2</sup>

## COMPARISON OF STRENGTHS

Male and female leaders share 8 of the top 15 displayed strengths among our research pool. Similar to the top values, female leaders continue to be perceived as demonstrating a more people-centered approach with the strength’s *teamwork*, *caring*, and *listener/receptivity*.

Female leaders’ strengths also seem to convey a strong theme around follow-through in the areas of *solutions-orientation*, *delivery*, *hard work*, and *reliability*. Furthermore, women are more likely than men to be recognized as having *drive and determination*. “[Women] tend to have a greater need to get things done than male leaders and are less likely to hesitate or focus on the small details.”<sup>3</sup> This desire to get things done may account for the *long hours* recognized among female leaders’ top values, and perhaps also the increased perception of *controlling* and *demanding*.

Among the top strengths unique to male leaders, a theme around forward-thinking emerges with *continuous improvement/innovation*, *strategic thinking/direction/vision*, and *developing people*. INSEAD’s executive education program conducted a study using thousands of results from 360° assessments. They found: “As a group, women outshone men in most of the leadership dimensions measured. There was one exception, and it was a big one: Women scored lower on ‘envisioning’ – the ability to recognize new opportunities and trends in the environment and develop a new strategic direction for an enterprise.”<sup>4</sup> Based on the differences in these strengths, it may be that women leaders are too busy ‘doing’ rather than planning and preparing for the future.

## COMPARISON OF AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Seven areas for improvement are shared among male and female leaders.

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<sup>1</sup> Budworth, Marie-Helene and Sara L. Mann, “Becoming a Leader: The Challenge of Modesty for Women,” *Journal of Management Development*, 2010, pg. 181.

<sup>2</sup> Budworth, pg. 179.

<sup>3</sup> “The Qualities That Distinguish Women Leaders,” Caliper White Paper, [http://www.calipercorp.com/articlespapers\\_text/pp\\_women.asp](http://www.calipercorp.com/articlespapers_text/pp_women.asp)

<sup>4</sup> Ibarra, Herminia and Otilia Oboduru, “Women and The Vision Thing,” *Harvard Business Review*, January 2009

Among the differences, there is a sense that women appear to hold themselves back, as seen by requests for increased *visibility in the organization, confidence in their own abilities, and decisiveness*. Again, this appears to be tied to gender roles. “Since they are expected to be feminine, women who display too much ‘male’ behavior (such as toughness, decisiveness, and assertiveness) are not well received by their peers at the top. Yet women who display too little of that behavior are perceived as not suited for the top job.”<sup>5</sup> Some researchers believe that this unwillingness of female leaders to tout their own achievements or abilities may hurt them in climbing the corporate ladder even further.

If we interpret the above as a request for women to become more masculine in their behavior, a theme among the areas for improvement for male leaders could be construed as a request to embrace a more feminine approach by showing concern for others with *cross-departmental working, feedback, patience, and building trust*.

Female leaders also are seen to over-extend and be too hard on themselves and others, with emphasis on *long hours, demanding, organization/time management, and stress management*. And, despite their strengths and top values which point to promoting a collaborative working style, female leaders are not adequately handing things over to relieve some of this burden, as they are more likely than men to need to work on *delegating and empowering*. These areas for improvement may be tied to the drive among female leaders to get things done, as mentioned in the strengths. Female leaders, still in the minority, may feel a stronger need to prove themselves.

## CONCLUSION

Women now make up just shy of half of the workforce.<sup>6</sup> Record numbers of women are attending business school. However, despite the progress made over the years to chip away at the glass ceiling, women only account for 6% of CEOs.<sup>7</sup>

Researchers surmise that women who do find themselves in leadership roles tend to be unjustly measured in their abilities due to the continued presence of gender differences. “Current models of leadership and leadership development cannot be applied to males and females in the same way. The research in organizational settings should focus on understanding the ways of ‘becoming’ and ‘being’ for males and females in order to identify strategies for each gender in terms of understanding what it means to be a successful manager from each perspective.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, there is growing acknowledgment that the more relationship-centered approach commonly displayed by women may be a more effective way to manage others.

Additionally, researchers believe that embracing gender differences among leaders may be the path to success for many organizations. “Companies that are able to harness the strengths of both sexes may be said to be gender ‘bilingual’ rather than gender neutral. Organizations with gender diversity at the top are more successful than others and will find their way out of the current economic crisis into sustainable profitability.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Vanderbroeck, Paul, “The Trap that Keep Women From Reaching The Top and How to Avoid Them,” *Journal of Management Development*, 2010, pg. 766

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.catalyst.org/research/women-in-the-workforce-global/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.kornferry.com/insights/articles/women-in-leadership-2019-statistics>

<sup>8</sup> Budworth, pg. 183.

<sup>9</sup> Vanderbroeck, pg. 768

Our investigation of leadership behaviors based on gender concludes that, while there are similarities among male and female leaders, the differences demonstrated are significant and appear to be tied to biology and the socialization males and females receive during upbringing. As a result, it seems paramount to support leaders of both genders in ways that legitimately take into account both their similarities and their differences.

## COMPARISON OF TOP VALUES CHOSEN BY ASSESSORS

Men		Women	
Value	Percentage of Leaders	Value	Percentage of Leaders
<b>commitment</b>	65%	<b>commitment</b>	79%
<b>ambitious</b>	47%	<b>positive attitude</b>	42%
<b>results orientation</b>	47%	<b>results orientation</b>	42%
<b>positive attitude</b>	45%	<b>accountability</b>	37%
goals orientation	42%	<b>ambitious</b>	37%
accessible	38%	<b>humor/fun</b>	37%
<b>accountability</b>	32%	<b>integrity</b>	37%
<b>enthusiasm</b>	28%	<b>controlling (L)</b>	32%
experience	28%	<b>demanding (L)</b>	32%
<b>humor/fun</b>	28%	<b>enthusiasm</b>	32%
achievement	26%	open communication	32%
<b>reliable</b>	22%	teamwork	32%
<b>integrity</b>	21%	cooperation	26%

<b>controlling (L)</b>	20%	<b>honesty</b>	26%
<b>demanding (L)</b>	20%	long hours (L)	26%
<b>honesty</b>	20%	<b>reliable</b>	26%

**COMPARISON OF STRENGTHS NOTED IN FREE RESPONSE DATA**

<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>	
<b>Strength</b>	<b>Percentage of Leaders</b>	<b>Strength</b>	<b>Percentage of Leaders</b>
<b>Knowledge</b>	47%	<b>Commitment</b>	58%
<b>Commitment</b>	46%	<b>Drive and determination</b>	53%
<b>Accessibility</b>	38%	<b>Experience</b>	37%
<b>Experience</b>	37%	<b>Knowledge</b>	37%
Results/achievement focus	36%	<b>Positive attitude</b>	37%
<b>Drive and determination</b>	35%	<b>Accessibility</b>	32%
<b>Communication skills</b>	28%	<b>Communication skills</b>	32%
Continuous improvement/ innovation	27%	Solutions-oriented	32%
Honesty	27%	Teamwork	32%
<b>Supportive</b>	27%	Caring	26%

Strategic thinking/direction/ vision	26%	Delivery	26%
<b>Positive attitude</b>	26%	Hard worker	26%
Developing people	23%	Listener/receptivity	26%
Enthusiasm	23%	Reliability	26%
Passion	23%	<b>Supportive</b>	26%

**COMPARISON OF AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT NOTED IN FREE RESPONSE DATA**

<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>	
<b>Area for Improvement</b>	<b>Percentage of Leaders</b>	<b>Area for Improvement</b>	<b>Percentage of Leaders</b>
<b>Listen and be open to others opinions</b>	43%	<b>Delegating and empowering</b>	42%
<b>Communicating ideas/ information/ direction</b>	32%	<b>Listen and be open to others opinions</b>	37%
<b>Delegating and empowering</b>	26%	<b>Direction for the organization (strategic, plans, priorities)</b>	32%
Developing people	25%	Visibility within the organization	32%
Clarity	21%	<b>Communicating ideas/ information/ direction</b>	26%

Cross-departmental working	21%	<b>Finish what you start/ taking on too much/over-promising</b>	26%
<b>Build internal community</b>	21%	Long hours	26%
<b>Finish what you start/ taking on too much/over-promising</b>	20%	Confidence in own abilities	21%
Feedback – more, consistent, balanced	20%	Decisiveness	16%
Patience	19%	Demanding	16%
<b>Rushing to conclusions/ reactive</b>	19%	Organization/time management	16%
Communication skills – target audience	17%	<b>Rushing to conclusions/ reactive</b>	16%
<b>Direction for the organization (strategic, plans, priorities)</b>	17%	Stress management	16%
Build trust	16%	<b>Build internal community</b>	16%