

Has Gender Anything To Do With Management Style?

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Statistics about the labor force in the Arab World show a near absence of women at managerial levels in both the public and private sectors. What are some of the gender issues that may have contributed to this situation, despite the unquestionable improvement of Arab women's educational level and their increasing participation in the labor force during the past two decades?

As reported in the Western Asia Platform for Action for the Fourth World Conference on Women, Arab women's enrollment in schools has dramatically increased as a result of the oil boom of the 1970s and the commitment of a considerable number of Arab countries to advancing the welfare of all their citizens. However, pronounced gender differences still exist in many of these countries. For those countries which achieved equal rates of education, such as Lebanon, women still tend to enroll in stereotyped women's courses which limit their abilities to fully integrate into all sectors of the labor market.

Social, economic and political changes, such as migration, wars and conflict, have led to an increase of the female work force. Increased educa-

tion levels, government policies for recruitment in the public sector, and equal opportunity have created favorable grounds for women's integration in the public work force. However, even though advancement in education and equal employment opportunities for men and women are being proclaimed by most of the Arab countries today, one can see (as the Lebanese example shows) that more women are appointed in the public sector at the supervisory level (third level, 114 women out of a total of 1414), while only a small number of them can make it to the managerial and/or executive levels (second level, 16 women out of a total of 242, and a percentage of only 3.3% for the first level).

I recently came across a study carried out in 1973 about American women executives ("The

Managerial Woman," by Margaret Henning and Anne Jardin). It pointed to several critical gender issues in management style and career approach which impede the advancement of women on the organizational ladder. It will be instructive to review some socially-ingrained behaviors of women which can lead to a lack of the self-confidence and assertiveness which are essential assets for any managerial role. These behaviors are similar to the behavioral trends seen today among Arab women; we need to acknowledge them in order to develop effective tools which will enable Arab women to take advantage of and gain access to the equal opportunities formally offered to men and women in the public sector.

The following will focus on attitudes and behaviors of men and women of a comparable level of education who could be eligible for a managerial position. A brief gender-desegregated analysis of girls' and boys' behavior at an early age reveals the root of the issue. We will look at three elements: career approach, teamwork and risk-taking, which are among the determinant factors to women's ascension of any organizational ladder.

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Women & Management

Career

Early on, a boy is made to understand that he will need to support himself and eventually a family, too. This has great impact on the professional life and career he will be choosing. Men decide early on a career plan by which they will undertake a series of jobs leading them upward to ever higher positions. They consistently maintain a vision of where they want to be and accordingly, they build a strategy to reach their goals within their professional environment, employing alliances, negotiations and strategic use of informal networks. Their professional success is carefully designed and situated within a specific social and professional context.

At a young age, a little girl is made to understand that she is expected to find somebody to support her. The necessity of a successful professional life is not perceived as a life goal. Many young women take up a job without the certainty that they will still be working after marriage. Priority is given, from the beginning, to her personal life before her professional life. The decision to pursue a career is usually a late decision in women's professional life, often resulting from external factors, most commonly, an unexpected change in marital status as a consequence of death or divorce, less commonly as a result of encouragement from a superior or relative. Also, when engaged in a career path, women see their career advancement as tied to individual self-improvement and exceptional performance,

and thus they expect immediate personal growth and satisfaction.

Teamwork

Through games and sports, boys learn at an early age to win and lose as a team; they learn that they need to be eleven to make a football game whether they like each other or not. A team is a place to learn, to build strength, to manage resources and reach an objective together. The same pattern of teamwork they learned during their youth is often reconstituted in their work environment. Men bring those skills to their jobs in management and exercise their ability to use the strengths and weaknesses of the group to minimize conflicts, maximize performance, and thus reach the organization's goals.

Girls are typically discouraged from participation in team sports. Girls' sports and games ask for personal skills, perfection of performance and endurance. For those women who have a chance to practice a sport, it is usually swimming, dance or gymnastics. Unlike boys, girls learn to compete on a one-to-one, rather than on a team, basis. They often practice and exercise to achieve a personal level of perfection; they usually do not play to win. Women at work usually strive for excellence through individual exceptional performance and time investment. They would rather do a job on their own to maintain a high quality level than risk leaving it to a less capable subordinate.

This difference of behavior points to the critical step between the

managerial and the supervisory levels that women often fail to take. In management jobs, plans and goals need to be defined with a broad vision and understanding of the organization, groups' interaction and human resources. The managerial tasks essentially involve coordination and supervision of different functional areas in order to ensure that the organization objectives are being met.

In a supervisory job, one has to apply specific technical knowledge and experience to the solution of primary routine tasks. Career paths leading ultimately to the most senior levels of management critically depend on the important ability to move from a specialized supervisory role to the broader role of a manager.

Risk-taking

The majority of men see risk as loss or gain, winning or losing. The majority of women see risk only in a negative way: it is loss, danger, ruin. Men see risk as affecting the future. Women see it as a threat to everything they have achieved in the past. What can we learn from these remarks? Beyond obtaining a formal educational background and acquiring the technical skills one can learn at school or on a job, the majority of women have not yet developed a whole set of informal values and behaviors which underlie the managerial functions of any organization. We should not, of course, overlook the fact that existing public and private organizations are primarily man-made and thus reflect male culture. It is therefore easier for a

man to walk in to a position with his cultural/behavioral orientations affirmed and pursue his career goals than for a woman to make her way up while she does not necessarily know all the rules of the game.

These observations should not lead us to the conclusion that women need only to learn to behave like men to succeed, nor that we should strive to change the culture of existing organizations. Fighting those two battles would not lead us very far. First, there is no reason for women to adopt a male culture. Second, how can one individual change an entire organizational culture? Creating a solid female majority at all levels of the organization might help, but such a development would not automatically lead to a dramatic change in or-

ganizational culture. Perhaps we should think about the steps women need to take in order to move successfully in a new territory. The authors of the aforementioned book offered a wonderful metaphor: what must one do to prepare for an extended stay in a foreign country? One would certainly try to learn the language, the social values, what is considered polite and what is considered offensive, and how one can gain friends; one would want to find out about the important organizations, their functions and how can one travel through a new and unfamiliar country.

If we follow the same line of thought, perhaps we need to explore more carefully the existing organizational culture and managerial behavior in Arab countries from a

gender perspective. We need to conduct intensive research on successful Arab women managers: How did they do it? How did they cope with the male-dominated organizational environment? Do successful women have anything in common, e.g., educational background, personality type, socioeconomic status, etc.?

The findings of this proposed research could serve as a basis for training modules to develop and strengthen women's leadership skills and assertiveness at different levels of the work arena in order to empower women and enable them to travel more swiftly on a career path toward clearer goals, and to assist them in developing a strategy to reach higher managerial or executive positions in their organizations.

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Dr. Leila Nimeh, Dean of the Beirut Campus of the Lebanese American University, chairs a panel during the conference on Arab Women and Management. With Dean Nimeh on the panel are (from left to right) Najwa Malak Ghazali, Nidal Ashqar, Hamida Muhammad Ali, and May Menassah.