

SHE'S THE BOSS

RISE OF WOMEN LEADERS



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Table of Contents

Preface

Acknowledgments

1. Women in Leadership: Challenges & Opportunities
2. Women Lead Differently: 12 Habits of Successful Women Leaders
3. The Subtle Art of Saying ‘No’;
4. Women Leadership Model: Critical Skills for Successful Women Leaders
5. Vision: The Heart of Leadership
6. Vulnerability: Developing Deeper Human Connections
7. The Art of Caring Leadership: Leading with Heart
8. Intuition: Leading with Instinct
9. Empathy: A Female Leader’s Greatest Superpower
10. Collaboration: Power of the Pack
11. Work-Life Harmony: Is a Cycle, Not an Achievement
12. Assertion: The Perception as a Leader
13. The Confidence Code: Secrets to Confidence for Every Woman leader
14. The Power of Resilience: A Must for Women Leaders
15. decision Making & Problem-Solving: Women Leader’s Way
16. Networking & Brand Building: The Armour of Women Leaders
17. The Way Forward-Adapt: Tips from Successful Women Leaders

About the Author

1.

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Challenges & Opportunities

Lalitha was born in a conservative Tamilian family. After graduation with honours, she entered the job market as a probationary officer in a large public sector bank. Gradually, she moved up the career ladder rather slowly to become second-in-command to the zonal head at Chennai.

When she was stepping into different leadership positions, she had a hard time finding women role models that she could connect to. She also faced hardships in getting noticed for promotions, while others were moving up and getting choice assignments. She worked still harder, delivering results far superior to her male counterparts, but no avail. There was something wrong with her hypothesis that hard work pays, and results speak louder than words.

She quickly realized that moving up in the organizational hierarchy was not necessarily based only on merit; It was based more on visibility and building relationships with key decision-makers. Unfortunately, at that time, it was not her forte.

The opportunity for her upward movement came as a surprise when her firebrand boss sought a transfer for health reasons and the top management decided to put her in the driving seat as the zonal manager of a large outfit.

As the reality began to sink in, she realized that she had no prior exposure to leading large teams. Right from her college days, she had no aspirations to be a lead player. All these years, her mother had always harped on her to be a nice and obedient girl and help everyone else in realizing his or her dreams.

Now Lalitha had to make a tough decision-how was she going to show up as a leader to her core team and everybody else in her zone. Was she going to emulate her ex-boss and transform into a dominant and commanding style- instructing and seeking compliance? Or was she going to practice another style that might work better and where she might feel more genuine and authentic?

Lalitha soon realized that she could not practice the dominant leadership style, which her ex-boss had successfully practised because (a) it would not show her who she was and (b) she lacked that authoritative voice and army background of her ex-boss. The only option left for her was to seek the support of her team to run the zone.

So, the next day while addressing the top executive committee, she sought the collaboration of the team by saying, "I need your support. I have never managed the zone as the leader; however, I know many of you have rich experiences in your domains and were part of a strong leadership team running the zone successfully till now." She went ahead and shared her compelling vision of Rupees one lakh crores business in the next three years and shared her concept of how it could be achieved through a collaborative approach. She also set clear expectations and accountability for each member of the executive team. While she was driving the entire process, she was maintaining her poise and confidence in each member of her team.

Do you think she lost her credibility and authority at that moment? Even she had never dreamed that being vulnerable would generate that big an impact. What happened next was nothing short of a miracle.

One-by-one departmental heads started coming forward and taking roles and responsibilities commensurate with their domain and expertise. After that day, whenever they came for review meetings, they would come with their vision, strategies, and action plans for their departments as well as for the zone. Instead of looking for zonal managers' instructions about what and how of doing things, they were now taking responsibility for their competitive strategies, execution and monitoring the results. In short, everyone had stepped up the level of commitment and started working as a well-fueled war machine.

What I learnt from this zonal manager during a mentoring session was that by empowering people to take responsibility, she had created an environment where collaboration and creativity replaced the earlier command and compliance culture. She had imposed her trust in the team members to be resourceful and accountable and they were falling over each other to prove themselves worthy of her confidence. The more she trusted, the more outcome they delivered. By being vulnerable and seeking help, she had connected with them at the human level rather than the task level. From that moment onwards, they were committed to helping her by being contributing members of her elite team. The experienced executives were seen enthusiastically guiding other team members and discussing action blueprints for the zone.

But that was not all Lalitha did differently. She also interacted with key players on a one-on-one basis and tried to understand their perception of challenges and opportunities provided by a fast-changing competitive scenario. She opened lines of communication with all her executives and provided feedback and guidance. At the same time, she encouraged them to take independent decisions, keeping her in the loop.

The results were surprising not only for the CEO of the bank but also for all other zones. At the annual review meeting at Bengaluru, while Lalitha was receiving the 'Best Zone Trophy', everyone was applauding and complimenting her for such amazing results. What they did not know was that her success was due to the collaborative efforts of a dozen dedicated executives behind the scene, who delivered more than their one hundred per cent and synergized to achieve her vision.

This learning experience taught me that women have a choice on how they show up in their leadership style.

Outdated masculine styles of command, control and authority do not seem to be a promising approach to meet the challenges of globalization, smart and techno-savvy organizations and the young workforce entering the organizations of the 21st century. Millennials have become a majority in the workforce, and they are looking for flat structure, more authority, purpose, and flexibility in their organizations. In this Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) environment, businesses need creativity and innovation to stay competitive. These skills flourish in a collaborative

culture where people are encouraged to contribute, innovate, and drive the organization.

A “Tough on the issue, soft on the person” approach seems to be the right recipe for Indian business leaders. So, organizations and business schools need to redefine their leadership approach to include both masculines as well as feminine parts of role holder. For women leaders, now you have a choice. You can be true to your real self and still do a good job as a leader. No more Lalitha’s dilemma! You do not have to pretend to be someone you are not. You could be as or even more effective than your male counterparts when you practice this women leadership model.

Emerging women leaders are looking for powerful yet authentic women role models to show them the way. They are looking for such models in politics, the corporate world, start-ups, and NGOs and not finding them. Instead, they find women leaders who are either threatened by their rise or compete with them for promotions and choice assignments. This more masculine style of competing with fellow women leaders is outdated and less authentic for today’s women leaders.

If women leaders have to break the glass ceiling, they must practice a unique women leadership model combining both masculine and feminine qualities described in the next chapters and support fellow women way more.

Unique Challenges & Opportunities

Although women make 40 per cent of the global workforce, they hold only 24 per cent of senior management roles around the world—a figure that has not changed significantly over the past decade.

There are plenty of reasons to strive for gender diversity in companies—customer empathy, taking advantage of talent and basic fairness, to name a few. New research by Ernest & Young and Peterson Institute for International Economics clearly shows that increasing the percentage of women in leadership positions from 0 to 30 per cent is associated with a 15 per cent jump in profits. The bigger the talent pool, the more make it to the top. And once at the top, women lift the bottom line.

A landmark McKinsey Global Institute report also observes that \$12 trillion could be added to global GDP by 2025 if the gender gap is narrowed in leadership positions. Given the higher returns that gender diversity is expected to bring, it is better to invest now since winners will pull further ahead and laggards will fall further behind.

Researchers have pointed out an array of reasons, from explicit discrimination for the promotion process, that quietly favours men, to lack of support after marriage, but a strange observation is that women themselves are not coming forward for senior leadership roles through promotions, transfers and high-profile assignments.

My experience of researching more than two thousand upwards moving women executives and organizing many women leadership programs for the United Nations Global Compact has convinced me that by learning critical leadership skills to fill the leadership gap and getting mentoring services, these amazing female leaders can break the glass ceiling and move to the top leadership roles.

Women Make Better Leaders

Studies like the 2014 survey of 3000 managers by Professor Oyvind L. Martinsen and the 2012 survey of 7000 business executives by Zenger Folkman have indicated that women make better leaders than men. They were found to be excelling not only on nurturing competencies but also on other leadership competencies like taking initiatives and driving for results.

Women are particularly good at people management. They are better than men at transformational leadership in which they mentor and transform employees, encourage them to develop their full potential and allow them to contribute their views; in other words, by becoming democratic rather than autocratic leaders. They are more likely to use rewards for good performance; by contrast, men are more likely to be laissez-faire leaders, waiting for problems to become more serious before intervening and focusing on employees' mistakes. These styles no more promote effective leadership, while transformational and reward styles do.

It is a well-researched fact that during the Covid-19 pandemic, female heads of states were far more effective than male ones. Globally women

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