

Ida O. Abbott, *Management Solutions*, Issue 34, Fall 2012

Authenticity is crucial for all leaders, but for women it presents a particular dilemma. While it is no longer rare or surprising to see women leaders, the image and traits associated with leadership are masculine. The dominant model of a leader in our culture is a man. The model is softening slightly as we see more women in prominent leadership roles, but the masculine norm remains firmly entrenched in our minds and expectations. Women who act “like men” contradict their basic natures, but women who act “like women” violate our expectations for what a leader should be like. So what’s a woman to do? How can a woman be an authentic leader when the expectations for leadership create this conflict?

By recognizing and overcoming these contradictions, women can develop authentic styles that transcend notions of femininity and masculinity. After all, gender is not a reliable predictor of leadership skill or success. Good leaders use both “feminine” and “masculine” styles and the best leaders use a wide variety of styles and techniques. Moreover, as the world continues to change, a leadership model based on any gender-specific style will be inadequate. Instead, flexibility, adaptability and versatility will be the hallmarks of great leaders. In this regard, women have an advantage; to succeed in a masculine environment, they have already acquired those skills.

The Conflict for Women Leaders: Who am I supposed to be? Who am I?

Gender-based leadership conflict creates difficulties for women in many ways. Women in leadership are feminine beings in masculine roles and in the legal profession, within a masculine environment. The attributes and behaviors that are deemed assets for male leaders are considered unnatural and unattractive in women. A man who is assertive and takes control is admired; a woman who acts the same way is called a bitch. Extensive research has established that women are judged as either likeable or competent, but not both.ⁱ When they act in ways that appear feminine (e.g., collaborative, supportive) they may be liked but they are not respected as competent leaders. When their behavior is more masculine (e.g., autonomous, authoritative), they may be seen as competent but they are not liked. Even when women are rated higher than men in specific leadership competencies, they are rated lower in leadership potential.ⁱⁱ

Women respond to this environment in many ways. Some women:

- Use a masculine style. For example, they may become overbearing and autocratic to prove they can be tough.
- Downplay their femininity. They are “all business” and conceal their “softer” side.
- Avoid self-promotion because it seems too much like bragging, which is considered unfeminine.
- Are restrained when negotiating on their own behalf, even though they are superb negotiators for their clients.
- Resist networking because it seems too much like “using people” for your own ends.
- Avoid wielding power when they have it - or fail to recognize the power they have.
- Avoid situations where their leadership style might be visible (e.g., decision making, delegating work).

These responses may make women feel comfortable in a difficult work environment, but they can derail a promising career. Most of these responses are not just expedient; they are inauthentic. They do not necessarily reflect who a woman is naturally, but represent coping behaviors that are less risky and easier to use. But they also lead to lack of trust and credibility among colleagues.

Because women are not sure how they “should” behave as leaders, they become preoccupied about how they appear to others rather than concentrating on their own values and what they want to accomplish. Consequently they focus too much on meeting others’ expectations and on creating the “right” leadership image for others. This saps them of energy, creates constant frustration, and detracts from their purpose as leaders.

What is Authenticity?

Authenticity can be best understood as acting in accordance with your core values and sense of purpose. When you understand what is most important to you and what you want to accomplish, you can be more effective in accomplishing your own and collective goals. To be authentic, you must act consistently with your personal values, but to get results as a leader, you must adapt your style and approach to the situations and people at hand.

Most people think of authenticity as “being yourself,” but as shown above, this is not easy for women to do. (Many men also struggle with authenticity, but the path is narrower and more treacherous for women.) Moreover, authenticity is about more than simply being your “natural” self. Many people have natural propensities that may be counterproductive, either in general or in leadership roles. Someone who is naturally authoritarian or withdrawn may be an excellent lawyer but a terrible or ineffective leader.

Further, authentic does not mean unchanging. To the contrary, leadership must be dynamic and adaptable because situations a leader has to deal with are constantly shifting. This does not mean changing who you are, but rather becoming the best “you” you can be by using your interpersonal skills to adapt to new conditions as they arise. There are times to be competitive and times where accommodation will be a more effective strategy. You do not have to change your values or your character; you simply make purposeful choices about your behavior and select the approach that is most likely to succeed.

The best leaders use styles that match their objectives. Moreover, they have a broad repertoire of leadership styles from which to choose. When trying to generate ideas or get buy-in for a new initiative, a leader might use a participative approach that gathers input from many people in order to spark creativity and win support. But in a crisis or when time is short, a more directive approach can calm fears, get people to focus their attention on what has to be done, and spur them into action quickly. A leader who can handle both kinds of situations and achieve positive results is seen as both a consensus builder (rather than indecisive) and decisive (rather than autocratic). When you have many leadership styles you can put to good use, your impact as a leader will be far greater.

Building authenticity

The key to developing an authentic leadership identity is to find a spectrum of styles that feel right for you and help you get your work done. In order for a style to “feel right,” it needs to be consistent with your core values and further your ability to accomplish your work and career objectives. Your values are intensively personal; the things that drive people, their highest priorities, and what they believe in are different for every individual. So the first step in building an authentic leadership identity is to be clear about what your values are. Then you can make career and behavior choices that support those values. Being clear about your values also allows you to be creative in the choices you make. Your choices may take you out of your comfort zone and make you feel insecure. But they can still be authentic if they are in sync with the values you hold dear.

For example, you may dislike networking because it seems like using people, which conflicts with the value you place on respecting and helping others. But having a network of influential people is essential to your ability to be an effective leader. Rather than reject it altogether, you can develop your own approach to network building. One key is to recognize that relationships are *mutual*, i.e., you must give as well as get. When you have something to offer the other person, especially if you offer first, the relationship is more than treating the person as an instrument to an end. This is not “networking” as in “working a room.” It is network building as an investment in social capital - the relationships that enable you to achieve business objectives for yourself and the people you lead. It means being strategic: identifying specific contacts you need to meet in order to achieve your purpose (becoming a leader), establishing mutually beneficial relationships with them, and integrating relationship strengthening activities into daily practice.

Another element of authenticity is that you need to be clear about what you want to accomplish for the greater good. Leadership, after all, is about leading others. When faced with situations that are threatening or discomfiting, having a sense of purpose gives you a reason to move ahead anyway. Instead of worrying about how they appear to others, strong leaders devote their attention to what must be done to produce desired outcomes. Your commitment to that overarching purpose is ultimately what defines you as a leader, gives meaning to your work, and conveys your authenticity to others.

The good news is that leadership styles can be learned. Learning a leadership style is no different than learning other complex skills. It requires a clear vision of what you want to learn and plenty of practice. To develop leadership behaviors, begin by assessing the leadership styles you use most often. Think about a situation where you were especially effective and try to understand what made it so and what you can do to improve it even more. Then think of an encounter that was not as successful and analyze that the same way. If you see that a particular style is not working for you, try to determine what you do that may be undermining your efforts. “Observe yourself” by being conscious of your behavior and the reactions of others. Ask people you trust to observe you and give you feedback. Some leaders use a coach for this purpose.

In addition to the styles that are working for you, try out some new ones. Observe a leader you admire and choose one thing he or she does that that seems to be highly effective. Try out that approach when you have a chance (in a fairly low-risk situation if possible). Note how you feel, how others react to you, and whether it produces the results you want. Ask someone who was present for an assessment of what you did. Even better, ask someone in advance to observe and give you feedback. Again, a coach may be helpful.

Leadership development programs are especially valuable for helping women find effective ways to deal with the gender-related challenges of leadership. Women-focused leadership programs provide environments where women feel “safe” to experiment with different styles and decide which ones feel right and work well. Law firm women’s initiatives can provide training, practice opportunities and group support for women who strive to become leaders. Outside programs, like the Hastings Leadership Academy for Women (<http://attorneyretention.org/LAW/>) and courses put on by the ABA and National Association of Women Lawyers, provide other forums where women can learn leadership skills, styles and strategies.

Women lawyers rightfully place a high value on authentic leadership. They struggle with authenticity because they frequently face situations where expectations of them as women and as leaders are in conflict. Rather than fretting over how to meet others’ contradictory expectations or avoiding leadership altogether, women should expand their leadership skills, use styles that match objectives, and focus on their greater purpose as leaders.

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ⁱ Robin J. Ely, Herminia Ibarra and Deborah M. Kolb, “Taking Gender into Account: Theory and Design for Women’s Leadership Development Programs,” *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, Volume 10, Number 3, September 2011

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*