

Gender Matters: What Makes an Effective Leader?

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Over the past few years, the headlines that read “*the first female CEO of...*” have become more and more commonplace, with Accenture, Warner Bros. and Macquarie Bank among many appointing their first female CEOs recently. Currently, [33 of the Fortune 500 companies have female CEOs](#) at their helm. While that number is the highest it has ever been, it equates to only 6.6% of Fortune 500 CEOs. While organisations have made progress in improving female representation in leadership roles over the past few decades, change has been slow and there is still poor representation at more senior levels. According to the [Workplace Gender Equality Agency \(WGEA\)](#), only 17% of CEOs and 30% of key management positions are held by women. However, research by PwC and Deloitte has consistently shown that the inclusion of women at senior levels and gender parity has a strong positive impact on the organisation's success ^{1,2}.

Research has shown that men and women are equally effective at leadership^{3,4}, however they are likely to have different leadership styles⁵. This then begs the question: are different styles (or personality types that predict styles) being promoted and valued for men and women? Our research sought to answer this question.

In a previous blog, which you can read [here](#), we defined an effective leader as an individual who:

1. Consistently meets the requirements of their role as a leader
2. Builds and maintains high performing teams
3. Creates significant positive outcomes for the organisation
4. Is an exemplary leader within the organisation

Based on this, we thought it would be interesting to see which personality characteristics enabled - or hindered - effective leadership in men and women. We looked at 259 leaders (117 males and 142 females) from a diverse range of industries, sectors and leadership levels, who had both Hogan Personality Data and leadership effectiveness measured through additional items within the [Hogan 360](#). This gave us a complete view of leadership effectiveness as leaders were rated by their managers, peers and subordinates.

What we found

Male Leaders

When looking at personality factors that impacted perceptions of male leaders' effectiveness, we found the following:

- When looking at day-to-day personality ([HPI](#)), male leaders who had a strong preference for wide and varied social interaction (Sociability) were considered less effective.

¹ PWC (2013). *Mining for talent: A study of women on boards in the mining industry by WIM (UK) and PwC.*

² Deloitte (2016). *Research Summary. Toward Gender Parity: Women on Boards Initiative.*

³ Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995

⁴ Paustian-Underdahl, Walker, & Woehr, 2014

⁵ Appelbaum, Audet, & Miller, 2003

- For personality-based derailers ([HDS](#)), men were held back by tendencies towards being seen as dramatic and attention seeking when not at their best (Colourful).
- From a values perspective ([MVPI](#)), male leaders were hindered by strong values around highly visible work, individual recognition and public praise (Recognition).

This pattern of findings suggests that male leaders who are seen as too attention seeking may be seen by others as less effective leaders. It was also interesting to see that no particular characteristics were related to perceptions of *greater* effectiveness in men.

Female Leaders

The picture was much less clear for female leaders, with a wider range of behaviours predicting leadership effectiveness.

- In terms of day-to-day personality ([HPI](#)), female leaders who were seen as competitive and driven (Ambition), friendly, agreeable and tactful (Interpersonal Sensitivity) and conscientious and hardworking (Prudence) were seen as more effective.
- When it came to personality-based derailers ([HDS](#)), being seen as overtly emotional or volatile (Excitable) and overly cautious and fearful (Cautious) hindered their ability to be seen as effective.
- Looking at values ([MVPI](#)), a stronger focus on financial outcomes and the bottom line was associated with poorer perceptions of effectiveness.

This suggests that there is a lot more that female leaders need to demonstrate in order to be considered effective.

What are the implications?

While there have been strong efforts to create fair and equitable selection and development processes that minimise adverse impacts, our findings suggest that different behaviours and traits are being sought from men and women.

Our findings may also suggest that societal expectations and biases are still impacting people's perceptions of leaders and how their effectiveness is viewed. For instance, characteristics like overt emotionality (measured by Excitable in the HDS) have often been associated with women and as shown by the current study, are associated with more negative perceptions of effectiveness. However, similar characteristics in men do not result in more negative perceptions.

At the very least, businesses need to continue the focus on minimising bias and challenging perceptions of what makes an effective leader.

What can we as organisations do?

- Utilise robust metrics when assessing leaders and high potentials
- Apply validated personality success profiles consistently across genders
- Deidentify candidates in the selection process
- Include objective success data in the decision making process

About Peter Berry Consultancy (PBC)

PBC is a multidisciplinary global consulting firm with 30 years' experience in the delivery of solutions aimed at maximising the potential of individuals, teams, leaders and organisations. We undertake research to support our evidence-based solutions and have a network of partners and distributors globally.

PBC is the Australian distributor of Hogan Assessments and the authors of a range of diagnostics including the Hogan 360 suite, High Performing Team Assessment (HPTA), and co-authored the Hogan Safety Climate Survey.

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