



The Female Leadership Paradox

Mirella Visser

From manager to leader

At the start of our career most of us assume that a good performance will more or less automatically lead to promotion and interesting functions. Women more so than men seem to be raised with the belief that meritocracy prevails and that you will be rewarded fairly for your efforts and achievements. The fact that large numbers of highly competent women with consistent excellent performance do not reach positions of power indicates that other components of leadership alongside performance might determine one's career success.

Successful women on the Silk Road to the Top do not rely exclusively on their excellent performance (Performance) while discharging their responsibilities. They strategically use the other crucial components of leadership, which are the ability to build and exercise influence through networking (Power) and the creation of a professional image through effective self-promotion (Promotion). Successful female leaders know how to devote attention to these three components in their leadership journey from junior to middle to senior to top management positions.

The workings of the pattern of power, performance, and promotion are often discovered (too) late in a career, when one of the components has received insufficient attention and the career stops or deviates from its original track. Because building power networks and a

good reputation both take considerable effort and time, a shortage in one of these components is neither easily nor quickly repaired.

Focus on doing and details

In the beginning of our career at junior level we focus our attention on the correct execution of the tasks assigned to us in line with our job description (performance-related activities). We strive to carry out our tasks efficiently, with an eye for detail, in order to reach our goals. How well we perform these tasks defines how our performance will be judged by our superiors.

Competition for promotion from junior levels to more senior levels is based on performance. The first people to receive a promotion will tend to be the ones who outperformed others on their measurable targets. This initial experience seems to confirm for many the myth of meritocracy.

In the junior phase the aspects of power and promotion receive little attention. Networks primarily consist of personal contacts, such as friends and family, and provide social and emotional support. Self-promotion does not take place systematically or strategically and is aimed at promoting specific results in the job.

Focus on delegation

In the development phase from junior to middle manager the almost exclusive focus on the execution of tasks

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shifts gradually and partially towards the competencies associated with power and promotion. The ability to handle difficult issues, deliver exceptional performance when needed, and develop new ideas and sources (e.g. clients) becomes more important.

In this phase, you learn to work through others instead of completely relying on yourself to execute your tasks. This requires the development of delegation skills based on self-confidence as a leader and the ability to trust and empower others. In addition, you need to have access to necessary information about people and resources that can be used for the tasks at hand. Having access to formal and informal networks is a prerequisite for success. The relevant networks will primarily consist of contacts within your organization which the middle manager can use to locate and unlock internal resources. Being part of the internal and informal networks also ensures that difficulties in the execution of your tasks will be prevented and conflicts resolved quickly.

In this phase the third aspect of successful leadership – the ability to communicate consistently and professionally about your achievements (Promotion) – gains importance too. You start to proactively develop activities that promote both your personal successes and those of your team. Reputation and image building are mainly aimed at your own organization and ensure that people are aware of your work. The emphasis is not on creating an image per se, but on creating a reputation as a professional and excellent leader in your company.

A common pattern in the career development of women is that they remain concentrated on the execution of their tasks in middle-management functions. The tendency to 'dot all the i's and cross all the t's' may result in a low degree of delegation and, consequently, an increasing

pressure to perform. In this 'over-achievers' mode, women feel that they lack energy and time to devote to the other two essential competencies of power and promotion. In addition, they may underestimate the value of these components for their career advancement. The consequence may well be that career development falls behind while one is working even harder and putting in more hours than before.

Focus on directing

The transition to top management positions requires excellent skills in the areas of power and promotion. Their significance gradually shifts from an operational to a strategic level when you move from operational manager to business leader. They reinforce each other in the build-up of your 'political capital': your reputation to get things done and have a network of support and recognition. Sufficient political capital enables you to set the agenda and to influence the desires of others.

The progress from junior through middle and senior to top managerial level takes place over many years. Women who have the ambition to achieve a top position need to strategically build and expand their networks and promotion activities in order to reach their goal. It is crucial to consciously allocate sufficient time to the three different competencies and prevent the common mistake of getting stuck in perfectionism in performance.

Senior management means focusing on 'doing the right things' instead of 'doing things right', which is the focal point in junior managerial roles. This runs parallel with the difference between being a manager and being a leader. Instead of working harder, you learn to work smarter by building power networks and developing an excellent reputation.

'It is the greatest paradox of our times that women, who are excellent leaders, are still very underrepresented in leadership positions that shape our world'.

'Inclusive leadership is not telling 'them' that they should be more like us; it is about creating a new us.'

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