

REPORT
BRIEF



Similar Ideas, Different Priorities

Women and Men's Distinct Approaches to Leadership

Supplement to the 2018 RESEARCH REPORT | TOMORROW'S LEADERS TODAY



As part of our commitment to providing the latest research and insights to the market, GP Strategies® surveyed leaders across the globe in spring 2018 to find out what skills they need to be successful today and what they anticipate needing in the future.

*The aggregate results are available in the report, *Tomorrow's Leaders Today: What Leaders Need Right Now, and in the Future, to Be Successful*. This report brief, *Similar Ideas, Different Priorities: Women and Men's Distinct Approaches to Leadership*, explores divergences in how men and women report their experiences in leadership and what, if any, implications this may have for how organizations understand, develop, and evaluate leaders overall.*



Many studies explore the value of gender¹ diversity, how to measure it, and strategies to increase and sustain it. In research around diversity and inclusion there is a tendency to celebrate in broad strokes the benefits that diversity and inclusion bring to organizations. Researchers pay less attention to the nuances of how the differences are experienced and benefits realized. So, while we can all agree that the business case for gender diversity has been proven² and that there are many strategies out there to achieve it, our natural next question is, What do we do when we have it?

Similar Actions, Different Priorities

Let's begin with the critical question, Are there differences between men and women leaders' outlooks on leadership? Well, yes and no. While that response may seem equivocal, it actually represents a pattern in the data. That data showed that when taken as a whole, both men and women had a similar understanding in most categories explored.



All LEADERS Believe:

“Communicating effectively at all levels is the number one action they need to take to be a successful leader now and in the future”

That clear direction is the most important need for employee success”

The difference lies in how men and women leaders prioritized these skills and actions. For example, when asked, What are the most critical leadership skills for the future? all respondents, male and female, agreed that communication, collaboration, and coaching, were the most critical skills. However, more women than men selected collaboration as their first-choice skill. When analyzing the results along the lines of priorities, two themes emerged as differences between men and women leaders.

How to Get There vs. the Results

The first finding is that women leaders tend to focus on the “how,” identifying specific behaviors and actions to achieve results. Men leaders more often prioritized the “what,” selecting the results or outcomes over the methods.

Internal vs. External Factors

The second finding is that the men tend to select options more related to the influence of external or environmental factors, while women selected options that were more related to influencing people/people-centeredness and internal factors.

¹This research and most studies referenced here discuss gender in two categories: men and women. We recognize that gender binary misses the additional layers of nuance in experience for transgender, non-binary, and gender-fluid individuals. Exploring the leadership experiences of all genders as well as the intersectional identities that interplay with gender (e.g., race, nationality, ability, etc.) is a recommended area for additional research.

²Hunt, Vivian, Dennis Layton, and Sara Prince. Diversity Matters. McKinsey & Company, 2015.

THEME 1: What vs. How

More men selected coaching and developing the team and communicating effectively as the first priorities for action a leader must take to be successful. More women chose managing a diverse workforce and giving specific relevant feedback as the top action items for leadership. This indicates that both groups regard developing others and communicating as priorities, but men and women may differ in their execution.

We can categorize the two skills men selected as the “what”; the two skills women selected can be categorized as the “how.” Communicating effectively and developing others are both outcomes. In both situations, leaders can take various pathways to achieve those results (although coaching is also a pathway toward development). Giving specific and relevant feedback is a particular action that leaders can take toward both developing others and communicating clearly and effectively. Additionally, effectively managing diversity on teams (knowing and leveraging diverse attributes and skills) assists leaders in both successful development and communication efforts.



The WHAT



Communicating effectively



Coaching & developing the team



Inspiring high performance



Creating an environment for innovation

The HOW



Giving feedback



Managing diversity



Driving accountability



Creating a safe-to-speak work environment

This difference in emphasis may possibly reflect the varied experiences men and women have in the workplace overall. For example, women tend to build less-trusting relationships with their managers, leading to fewer opportunities for quality feedback.³ Thus, if giving and receiving specific feedback was missing in their experience with leaders, some women may now choose to prioritize this in their roles as leaders.

That varied experience may also have prompted another difference in this prioritization data. In the same category of the most critical skills for leaders today, the greatest number of women chose managing a diverse workforce as their number one priority. This response demonstrates a proclivity toward action and process. Managing diversity was eighth on the priority list for men. An easy assumption is that men don't care as much about diversity or that they aren't as invested in it, perhaps because of their dominant position in most workplaces. But another data point undercuts that assumption and paints a more nuanced picture.



What is the most CRITICAL action for LEADERS?

MEN chose:



Coaching and developing the team



Communicating effectively at all levels

WOMEN chose:



Giving specific and relevant feedback



Managing a diverse workforce

³Giscombe, Katherine. Building Trust Between Managers and Diverse Women Direct Reports. New York: Catalyst, 2011.

When asked, Which skills are critical for leadership in the future? a greater percentage of men selected inclusiveness as their number one priority. Inclusiveness is an outcome of successful management of diverse workforces. Men and women both acknowledge the importance of diversity and inclusion, but women are more focused on the actions involved and men are more focused on the outcome from those efforts.

A third example that demonstrates the difference in how men and women leaders are prioritizing skills and abilities is in their preferences toward their own leadership development. More women selected driving accountability as the first priority and creating a safe-to-speak work environment as topics necessary to improve their skills. More men selected inspiring high performance and creating an environment for innovation as preferred topics. Here again, we see that women tend to focus on specific skills and actions (the “how”), while men tend to concentrate on the outcomes (the “what”). Ironically, in both examples, the very “how” methods that women selected are closely correlated to the “what” outcomes that men selected. Accountability is correlated with high performance, and a safe-to-speak work environment is a precursor for an innovative one.



What are the PRIORITIES for Leadership Development?

MEN chose:



Inspiring high performance



Creating an environment for innovation

WOMEN chose:



Driving accountability

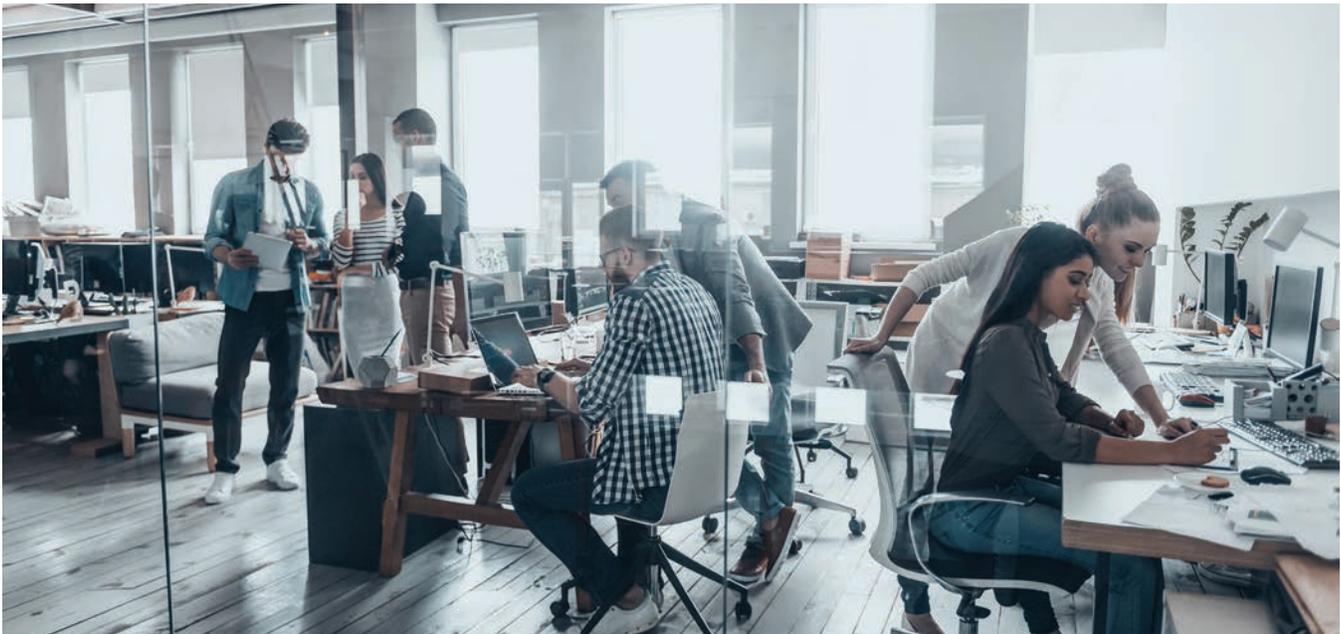


Creating a safe-to-speak work environment

THEME 2: People Centeredness vs. External Factors

A second theme that emerged from the research is women's tendency toward prioritizing responses that focus on people, while men tended toward prioritizing responses around external factors. This is best exemplified in their responses to the question, Which workplace shifts will most impact how you lead?

First choices for women were how people work, changing workforce demographics, and consumer-buying behavior. Each choice reflects a focus on stakeholders and how those people will drive the future through their behaviors. The most popular first choices for men were massive amounts of data, disappearing industry, and the political regulatory climate. All these choices point to the future being about the ability to respond or adapt to external factors. It's the things (laws, policy, data, etc.) that determine how workplaces progress rather than the people. While industry and role in the organization have certainly influenced the response for all, these results also seem reflective of different mindsets or points of reference for men and women.



Which workplace shifts will most IMPACT how you LEAD?

MEN chose:

- “ Massive amounts of data
- Disappearing industry
- The political regulatory climate ”

WOMEN chose:

- “ How people work
- Changing workforce demographics
- Consumer-buying behavior ”

This dynamic was also present in what men and women believed they needed to be “future ready.” More women overall selected a more supportive organizational culture/environment and prioritized it as most important, whereas more men overall selected new knowledge as a need. More than any other factor, the people in an organization, and its leaders in particular, shape the culture. When women state here that they are seeking a more supportive organization, they are effectively communicating the desire for people in the organization to be more supportive and to have the policies, systems, and process to follow suit. With this response, women respondents focus on what they can directly influence around them. Men’s preference toward new knowledge to prepare for the future assumes that what’s necessary is out in the world and is attainable through acquisition rather than through influence. The emphasis is again not on people or something internal but on something external and possessable.



MEN chose the following as most necessary to be future ready:

“ New knowledge ”



WOMEN chose:

“ A more supportive organizational culture/environment ”

Implications

The few differences uncovered here do have implications for leadership development and evaluation in particular. Leadership programs that focus on skill building without clarity around the outcomes attained when applying the skills miss the mark. The reverse is also true; outcomes without pathways can leave leaders guessing. Both the “what” and the “how” are needed. That balance should also be reflected in how leaders are evaluated. Organizational cultures that focus too heavily on rewarding and promoting the “what” over the “how” or on the internal over the external can upset the balance and lose out on the value diversity brings.

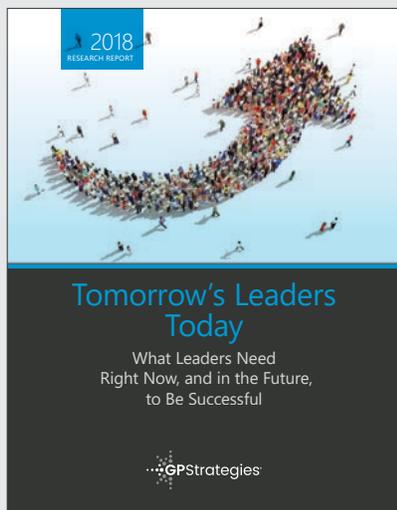
Summary

This research brief set out to explore potential differences in how men and women leaders approach leadership. Differences are to be expected. Men and women have distinct experiences in most workplaces. One possible interpretation of juxtaposing the “what” and the “how” is to acknowledge that women may focus more on people and organizational issues because they are more often challenged by people and organizational issues. They are faced with working through the day-to-day trials of navigating inequitable workplaces and thus inevitably focus more attention on how to address those challenges. Men may have more opportunity to consider external factors and remain future focused because they aren’t confronted with those same gender-based challenges.

An alternate, or perhaps additional, interpretation of this same dynamic is that historic constraints around gender roles are showing up in the workplace. There is a traditional social expectation for men to be outcomes driven and to focus on external vision especially in leadership roles. Similar pressures exist for women to manage the execution of day-to-day tasks and caretake for the people around them.⁴ These expectations may have constrained the range of responses leaders felt socially authorized to select and may ultimately constrain the potential for both groups to thrive in their leadership roles. Creating an inclusive environment that encourages all to bring their whole selves can help ease some of these pressures.

We must not forget that there were far more similarities in how women and men responded overall than there were differences. Understanding our commonalities while embracing our differences without overstating either is a skill worth mastering, both now and for the future.

⁴Cullinan, Renee. “In Collaborative Cultures, Women Carry More of the Weight.” Harvard Business Review, July 24, 2018.



For more insights on what actions, skills, and mindset leaders need most to be successful today and in the future, download a copy of the **2018 Research Report: Tomorrow's Leaders Today**.



DOWNLOAD Research Report
gpstrategies.com/research/tomorrows-leaders-today

This report was conducted in the spring of 2018 and is based on responses collected from approximately 1,500 leaders, across multiple industries, from global, international, and national organizations.

ABOUT GP STRATEGIES

Founded in 1966, GP Strategies delivers performance improvement programs that strategically align with your unique business objectives and differentiate your global workforce, leaders, and salespeople to ensure business excellence. Our sole focus is performance improvement, and everything we do, from technical and compliance training to process improvement and human capital technology integration, is focused on helping your organization deliver meaningful results.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samira Abdul-Karim

Samira is an organizational psychologist and consultant based out of New York City. She takes a human-centered approach to organizational development with the overarching goal being to increase productivity and workplace satisfaction among employees and employers. Her thoughtful interventions leave team members and clients feeling empowered and connected.

Samira has a true passion for diversity and inclusion, creating sustainable change in organizations, and developing adult learners. She has always had an interest in the study of people and cultures. She has lived and worked in different countries around the world and focuses on taking a culturally relevant perspective to organizational and leadership development. She has extensive experience in the higher education and non-profit industries with a particular focus on global institutions. Her skills include instructional design, team intervention, program development, and facilitation.

Samira holds an M.A. in Social-Organizational Psychology from Columbia University, and B.A. in Anthropology from Wesleyan University.



gpstrategies.com
1.888.843.4784
info@gpstrategies.com

GP Strategies World Headquarters
70 Corporate Center | 11000 Broken Land Parkway, Suite 300
Columbia, MD 21044 USA