

Finding the balance in leadership styles

To navigate the complexities of business today, leaders must be willing to include and transcend the strengths that got them there to embrace greater sense of purpose and humanity.

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Business today is becoming increasingly more fast-paced and complex.

In today's complex, uncertain and fast-paced business environment, it is tempting to simply react to the latest issue and manage what is. The best leaders, however, in addition to reacting to the current situation, are able to create something new. What often separates the best leaders is their ability to be visionary and creative, not just vigilant and reactive. Rather than react to situations and manage what is, visionary leaders—ones who bring a broader awareness and ability to show up with a sense of humanity—focus on creating what is not, but what should be, in service of a greater purpose. Sadly, a recent study* shows that 80 percent of executives today operate from a reactive state of mind.

To meet the numerous challenges of the increasingly complex business landscape, we must create opportunities to be nimble and fluid with our approach; this means going beyond predictive, analytical ways of working (flow charts and hypothesis-driven problem solving) and embracing more discovery and experimentation.

There is good news: We can train creative competencies, and, according to a recent study*, women tend to naturally operate from a more creative state of mind. They are more purposeful, system aware and relational in their leadership. Still, at most firms, women are expected to conform to the dominant patriarchal style, thereby limiting their range. Research led by Bart Wille of the University of Antwerp, which included 600 top-level executives (143 women) and 52,000 non-executives (17,643 women), shows women—as they get more senior—tend to conform and be rewarded to fit into this male-centric style of leadership.

For example, an executive was named president of her firm's fastest-growing business unit. After a recent merger, which involved a complicated IT transformation, several issues had arisen. A meeting to discuss these problems quickly grew contentious.

Rather than exchange in a debate that would likely not lead to a resolution, the executive took time after the meeting with her coach so she could better understand how to focus on the issues they were actually trying to solve. The coach helped her by asking her to replay the meeting. She reflected on the initial exchange and considered the IT lead's point of view and challenges. Through this process, she became aware of assumptions she was making, saw the bigger system at play and new perspectives that could be considered. She then identified a series of actions she and her team could experiment with in service of helping customers live better lives—the ultimate mission that guided the merger.

At the end of the session, the executive said to her coach, “I used to be so relational and that was my strength to engage teams; I am finding myself more reactive, directive, protecting and controlling. I do not like who I am becoming.”

Her experience isn't unique. But creative competencies can be developed and practiced by both women and men:

1. Pause to create space for reflection, listening and awareness.
2. Develop a vision rooted in purpose to create alignment on direction of where we are heading (not a known destination).
3. Radically reframe the questions we ask to open new perspectives, curiosity and discovery; even invite opposition to generate creative dialogue.
4. Embrace our ignorance, let go of our need to know the answer and listen for what information is emerging.
5. Experiment with a willingness to fail and learn.

In our research**, we identified the top nine leadership behaviours deemed most important for organizational performance in the future. Of these, women were rated as applying more in the creative areas of people development, authentic role-modelling, rewards and expectations, effective communications, and participative decision-making. Men only scored higher on applying reactive behaviours such as individual action and control and correct. Yet, the number of women in executive leadership roles is still eclipsed by men.

It's not just about only women leading but creating an environment where male counterparts are invited to embrace a more creative approach. This doesn't negate the need and relevancy of reactive approaches, but rather offers a balance to the type of leadership style that continues to dominate the business world.

Today's complex business world needs leaders—men and women—who operate with a creative structure of mind and who are able to lean into the chaos, inspire their teams, experiment with a willingness to fail, and deliver results in the face of adversity and constant change.

**Research from The Leadership Profile, published in [Scaling Leadership](#), William Adams and Robert Anderson, January 2019*

***Based on combined research from: 1) Bruce Avolio, Bernard Bass, researchers in behavioural psychology, on the frequency of leadership behaviours observed in companies; 2) Alice H Eagly, social psychologist and professor at North Western University, on gender differences; 3) McKinsey & Company's extensive study of leadership behaviours that correlates with organizational performance.*