Styles of Influence

Conventional thinking about gender differences in leadership styles is mostly wrong, according to a new study that finds men and women have some similarities in style. The study also found some differences in the effectiveness of various leadership tactics, so HR leaders should be on the lookout to help strengthen emerging leaders.

By Katie Kuehner-Hebert

Human resource executives in charge of developing future leaders within their organizations should take notice of a study that demonstrates that men and women leaders have more in common than they might have thought.

Still, there are some differences between the sexes that HR executives should be on the lookout to help strengthen the skills of budding leaders, according to the study.

Last week, New York-based OnPoint Consulting released the results of a two-year study of the "influence skills" of 223 leaders (116 men and 107 women) in organizations across the country, to examine the extent to which there are gender differences.

The firm conducts research on such skills because it contends that a leader's success often depends on his or her ability to gain the support and cooperation of co-workers who frequently have competing priorities or conflicting goals.

Jennifer Forgie, a managing partner at OnPoint, says the point of the study was to find out whether age-old stereotypes about purported differences between men and women leaders were really accurate.

"The conventional thinking was that female leaders tend to have more of a focus on relationships and have a more participatory style, whereas men tend to focus more on results, and the tasks at hand," Forgie says. "Some of our findings were consistent with conventional thinking about male and female leaders, and some were somewhat surprising."

Based on the executives studied, OnPoint found that two influence tactics, "rational persuasion" and "collaboration," were used to the same extent by both men and women. OnPoint used a "360-degree feedback" questionnaire to collect data about the leaders. Questionnaires were sent to the executives as well as their bosses, direct reports and colleagues, over a two-year period from 2008 to 2010.

Rational persuasion involves providing logical arguments and factual evidence to show that a request or proposal is feasible and relevant for important task objectives. This typically includes explaining why a requested task is necessary, explaining why a proposed change or project would be cost effective, and providing evidence that a proposed activity would be successful.

In the study, rational persuasion was the most frequently used tactic by both men and women when influencing bosses, colleagues and direct reports, and there was no significant difference between men and women in the use of this tactic.

"This is a highly effective tactic, because people tend to respond well to factual evidence when it is given in an appropriate way," Forgie says. "But I also think it can easily be overdone, almost like a 'data dump.' It's best used in combination with other approaches."

Both men and women in the study also frequently used the same amount of collaboration as a tactic with bosses, colleagues and direct reports. That behavior involves offering to provide relevant resources or assistance if the person will carry out a request or implement a proposed change. Examples include offering to show a person how to do the requested task, offering to help a person do the task and offering to provide resources needed to do the task.

"These findings are somewhat surprising if you believe that men lead with a more task-oriented focus and women with a more interpersonal approach," Forgie says. "If this were the case, you'd expect to find that men use rational persuasion and women use collaboration more frequently. However, our study found no differences between men and women in the use of these two tactics."

Jay Jamrog, a senior vice president of research for i4cp (Institute for Corporate Productivity) in Seattle, says most HR
executives would expect a good deal of similarities between men and women leaders. However, it's worth noting that there could be differences when using influence tactics, so that mentors can spot skills that need to be strengthened in rising leaders.

"These results could help them identify the skills that people already have, as well as the gaps," says Jamrog, who is based in St. Petersburg, Fla. "They could then try to help them extinguish things that don't work, and give them the development tools so that they can close those gaps."

OnPoint's results can also be used when measuring how well emerging leaders are doing as they are promoted, Jamrog says.

The study did find some differences between men and women when using other leadership-related tactics.

Women tended to use "inspirational appeals" – describing a clear, inspiring vision, or making an inspiring presentation to arouse enthusiasm for a proposed activity or change – significantly more frequently than men with colleagues and direct reports. With bosses, however, men and women use inspirational appeals to the same extent.

"Inspirational appeals are generally less effective with bosses than they are with colleagues and direct reports, and it appears that both men and women recognize this," Forgie says. "Women, however, better leverage this tactic with their colleagues and direct reports, and men may not be taking full advantage of this tactic."

Women also use *consultation* significantly more frequently than men when influencing bosses and direct reports. Consultation involves asking for ideas to improve a preliminary plan or proposal, or encouraging the person to express any concerns about a proposed change or new initiative.

However, men tended to use consultation with colleagues to the same extent as women, the study concluded.

"Both men and women often rely on consultation when influencing colleagues," Forgie says. "However, men may be missing opportunities to use this tactic with their direct reports."

Women also use the tactics of *appraising, ingratiating,* and *legitimating* (legitimating is when a leader establishes she has the authority to make a request) more with colleagues and direct reports, while men use appraising – explaining how carrying out a request or supporting a proposal would benefit the person personally or would help to advance the person's career – more with their bosses.

Forgie says that women may have the edge over men with this tactic, because appraising is generally more effective with colleagues and direct reports than with bosses.

The study also found that men and women use the tactic of *pressure* – using demands, threats, warnings, or frequent check-ins – to the same degree.

"This is one of the least frequently used tactics among leaders, which is a good thing," Forgie says. "We know from our research that this particular approach most likely leads to resistance, when trying to get people to be committed."

Ilene Gochman, a senior consultant at New York-based Towers Watson, says that OnPoint's study is a great opportunity for making the case why everyone could benefit from training on how to influence others.

"It really helps to have a wide range of skills, so you can use the appropriate one depending on the situation – with peers, upwards and downwards," says Gochman, who works in the consultant firm's Chicago office.

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