

Women leaders: 'Brave' is the word

Traditional notions of femininity and expectations of how leaders should talk and behave are the twin challenges

By TANVI GAUTAM

I DID not grow up with princess parties or a visit to Disneyland when I was three. Therefore, becoming a princess was not on my aspiration list. Nor did I ever identify with the ball gown, tiara figures. Then I saw the movie *Brave*. Merida, the key character was more real to me than any other princess I had ever seen. She climbed mountains, her hair was unruly, she was fiercely spirited and, best of all, unlike most other princesses her story stood on her own terms without any need of rescue by anyone.

So you can imagine my surprise on seeing the "makeover" of Merida to look more lady-like and "princessy" (if such a word does exist) for her coronation. Standing alongside Cinderella and others, she looked nothing like what she was in the movie.

Had the once brave, free-spirited heroine succumbed to the stereotypical demands of the princess market? While Disney may not have intended to create this impression, it has certainly started a conversation.

It made me think about the stereotypes and demands we make of our women leaders.

Recall Hillary Clinton on her presidential campaign trail. She had a power wardrobe, pearls and makeup along with perfectly styled hair. Then fast forward to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. She adopted a makeup-free and pulled-back-hair look. When asked why she had adopted this look (or rather lack of it) she said: "I feel so relieved to be at the stage I'm at in my life right now... and, if others want to worry about it, I let them do the worrying for a change. Because, you know, if I want to wear my glasses I'm wearing my glasses. If I want to wear my hair back I'm pulling my hair back."

Mrs Clinton could get away with it given her stage and stature. For the rest of us who are not secretaries of state - yet - we need to examine the issue more closely. And the issue goes beyond makeup or dress. It is about the expectations that are made around the acceptable prototypes of women and leadership.

Facing the double bind

Women aspiring to a leadership role may face a double bind. The first challenge comes from traditional notions of femininity that women are expected to conform to. The second challenge comes from traditional expectations of how leaders should talk and behave. The two when combined create special challenges for women aspiring to leadership roles.

What expectations does society have of women leaders? In my recent podcast with Dr Astrid Tuminez (one of the co-authors on the report on women and leadership in Asia), she recounted how, at a conference in China, the men kept mentioning that women leaders, no matter how successful, must be "soft and beautiful". The counter request for "handsome and well groomed men" was dismissed as banter.

The unconscious biases around what defines a successful woman leader must be examined. When women veer away from these stereotypes of femininity, they may be seen as too aggressive, when they conform to it, they may be seen as too weak and so the perpetual pressure to maintain the balance remains.

The cultural piece makes this more complicated. Asian notions of relatedness, networks and collectivism demand a certain deference in relationships and what is "not said" may be more important than what "is said".



Stage and stature: Mrs Clinton speaking after receiving the Distinguished Leadership Award recently. Those aspiring to be like her have to deal with the expectations made around the acceptable prototypes of women and leadership. PHOTO: REUTERS

However, many firms judge leadership capabilities in women by their ability to speak up, push ideas and fight for them. Women may not make the cut of the high potential list, no matter how strong they are, because the standards of leadership being used in the firm run contrary to the cultural socialisation of women.

This is true even of the West but more so in Asia where harmony is emphasised over conflict and a more subtle approach to making a point is appreciated. Consequently, while expecting women leaders to speak up is not

wrong, judging merit primarily by such criteria is. Firms miss out on a large talent pool by defining "potential" and leadership in such narrow terms.

Navigating the challenges

So where does this leave women? How do they navigate the landscape that makes multiple and sometimes conflicting demands on them? Should they conform to or break away from the standards they are being asked to meet? While there is no single correct answer to this question, there are some frameworks

which can be adapted in varying degrees to support women on their leadership journey:

◆ First, cultivating a high degree of emotional quotient and cultural intelligence can be critical. These skills enable us to be aware and sensitive to expectations without having to conform to them. They also allow us to manage the expectations more effectively without accepting them. For instance, recognising "when" to push forward an agenda and when to lean back in an interaction can make the critical difference in getting the necessary buy-in as a leader.

Knowing when to rely on formal power

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— Hillary Clinton

and when to seek informal networks of support requires cultural intelligence and political savvy. While this is good advice across gender lines, women may need to leverage it more often to make headway into roles they are not traditionally associated with. Consequently, when at SMU we run the women and leadership programme, we place heavy emphasis on developing these skills to bolster the success of women leaders.

◆ Second, being authentic to one's own style and identity is crucial. Regardless of gender, no leader can really succeed if they are not authentic to themselves. A leader will neither inspire confidence nor feel comfortable in leading the team if their authentic self and projected self do not coincide. It is imperative that aspiring women leaders know and nurture their authentic leadership brand as they set their sights on top positions. Mindless adoption of stylistic elements of male leadership is not a sustainable model in the long term. Authenticity demands that you define and follow the path that is true to you - not one laid out by others.

◆ Third, cultivating an attitude and mindset of resilience will help success in the long term. Women often try and meet multiple expectations simultaneously and set extremely high standards of performance for themselves. While this, in itself may be laudable, it is not realistic or sustainable. Sometimes, we will fail to meet expectations of others and at other times we may miss our own target. However, as Winston Churchill famously said, success is not final and failure is not fatal, it is the courage to continue that counts.

It is often seen that those who never faced failures make the worst leaders. So balancing expectations is optimal, but failing to meet some is not the end of the world as long as we learn from it.

As for Princess Merida from *Brave*, the new images of her with doe-shaped eyes and silky, volumised hair are being removed because of an online petition and public uproar. Who knows? Perhaps the next princess might even be social-media savvy and a CEO of a large corporation. I will wait for that movie to be released in my lifetime.

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