

Bob Gunn, Editor

No Hands Tied

BY ROBERT W. GUNN & BETSY RASKIN GULLICKSON

“Park your femininity at home; it’s not wanted here,” said Andrea’s supervisor—a woman—on Andrea’s first day on the job. Taking that admonition to heart for the 17 years she stayed at that company, Andrea felt that she was working with one hand tied behind her back.

Andrea’s anguish causes us to reflect. Both of us entered the workforce with the big wave of women in the 1970s. We’ve witnessed the social shift measured by a drumbeat of statistics, which *The Economist* notes in its April 12, 2006, issue on women in the workforce: About two-thirds of women now work outside the home, compared to one-third in 1950, and the proportion of women in the workforce has soared from about one-quarter to one-half.

Beyond those bare numbers lie more intriguing facts: Girls get better grades than boys; in most developed countries, more women than men now go to college; and women consistently achieve higher returns on their financial investments than men do. But the magazine also points to surveys that show that parents still prefer to have a boy. “It is time for parents to think again,” concludes *The Economist*. “Girls may



now be a better investment.”

Might women also be a better investment for organizations? Preliminary findings from research being led by Professor Lynda Gratton at the London Business School’s (LBS) Lehman Brothers Centre for Women in Business indicate that the most effective teams are led by women and have at least 30% female members. Second best are teams led by men but still composed of at least 30%

women. “We raise the question of whether there is a cost to companies of having senior teams largely made up of and led by men,” states the research summary posted to the LBS website in November 2006. “The cost could well be to organizations’ capacity to maintain and build knowledge, to share and combine that knowledge, and, most importantly, to innovate in their products and services.”

One goal of Gratton’s research is to test common assumptions about women as leaders and team members: “that women are more emotional and more able to cooperate with each other; are more relationship oriented and more able to create networks; are less competitive and more likely to create warm relationships with others; and are less task-oriented.”

The effort comes as many organizations are putting new value on relationship competencies, traditionally ascribed to women. We’ve recently been impressed, for example, by The Leadership Circle Profile, an assessment and development tool. Heading up its list of key competencies of what it calls “Creative Leadership” is the dimension of re-

lating, which is composed of “caring connection, fosters team play, collaborator, mentoring and developing, and interpersonal intelligence.” Relating, in a business context, has to do with helping others “be not small”—bringing out the best in oneself and others. Research shows that the better an individual is able to do this and balance it with “task behaviors,” the stronger his or her leadership is.

Notice the importance of *balance*. Gratton’s preliminary findings show that the strength of women isn’t only that their goals are more likely to be cooperative rather than competitive but that they also are able to balance both relationship and task orientation. “It could be said that women leaders tend to combine both ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ ways of working—their style is androgynous,” explains the summary. “It is less common for their male counterparts to combine both masculine and feminine ways of working.”

In other words, the key issue isn’t how many women an organization has or even how many women are in leadership positions—it’s whether an organization has balance. It may be that teams composed of 80% men or 80% women perform equally poorly no matter which gender is in charge. When Bob sees his teenaged son Remy with a group of boys, they can get pretty obnoxious quickly—they’re all about one-upmanship and establishing a hierarchy. We see different behaviors in an all-girl group, but the thinking appears just as reactive. So maybe the secret to effective leadership teams is gender diversity. Perhaps women bring out the best in men and vice versa.

More than that, perhaps what we’re seeing isn’t the tension of men vs. women but rather the interplay

between masculine and feminine power—and the need for a balance of both. One way to get perspective on the difference between them is to look at responses to stress. Research at UCLA has shown that women respond to stress with a cascade of brain chemicals, releasing oxytocin, which produces a calming effect that causes them to tend to their relationships to other women. Men under stress, however, produce testosterone in high levels, fueling the classic “fight or flight” response.

The Chinese have focused on the difference in masculine and feminine power since ancient times with the concepts of yin and yang, primal opposing but complementary forces. Yang is the brighter element, active and masculine. Yin, darker, is passive and feminine. But *both* are present in all things. They are interdependent, and each contains the seed of the other.

It’s easy to be attracted to the light and reward the active, thus promoting the masculine energy in our organizations. But there are consequences to denying the yin and of telling workers to “park your femininity at home.” It isn’t only that women’s voices are silenced, but, also, one figurative hand is tied behind the back of the entire organization.

As our colleague, Chris Wahl, observes, when feminine energy is undervalued:

- Invitations to hear the intuitive, softer angles don’t come forward as often.

- The whole business of “relating” loses validity. Even though many men are relaters, the value of that isn’t appreciated.

- Given that “relating” is so highly correlated with leadership, the leadership of an organization will be affected adversely.

- Poor leadership leads to lower productivity numbers, as research shows.

- The wholeness of people isn’t seen, acknowledged, or appreciated, and the small things that can make a big difference in motivation and loyalty don’t happen (e.g., the kids’ baseball team you coach wins a championship, yet no coworker asks about it).

- Self-awareness is an underground conversation.

That last issue may be the most important of all. Several of us at Accompli have experienced The Leadership Circle process. What we’ve seen is that the bell curve for females and males doesn’t show a distinction. What has been surprising is that high-scoring males and females have little awareness that their leadership capabilities are rare. In other words, they don’t know that they are operating at a higher level of consciousness than their peers! They are really surprised.

We’ve also noted that our two female colleagues scored overall effectiveness that is the best of our group—well into the 90% range, suggesting that they are highly aware leaders. Their scores are causing us to take a new look at our own habits in valuing the feminine and balancing it with the masculine—not just in our organization but in our own leadership and lives. ■

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