

Some thoughts on female leadership in male-dominated fields

Mary Ann Mason
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The English reputedly have a tough test for leadership - "Who among you would kill the tiger if attacked?" Was San Francisco Police Chief Heather Fong's announced April departure prompted by a belief that she would not kill the tiger? Was she being punished, as some believe, for employing a more feminine style of leadership - one of more cooperation, less confrontation?

On the other hand, if a woman displays the qualities of a tiger killer, she may be dismissed for being too masculine. This paradox was the subject of a landmark 1989 Supreme Court case, *Price Waterhouse vs. Hopkins*, which decided this kind of evaluation was discrimination. Ann Hopkins was turned down for a promotion to partnership on a split decision of all male partners who evaluated her performance. A number of these evaluations sharply criticized her interpersonal skills and specifically called her too abrasive. Several of the evaluations on both sides made comments implying that Hopkins "was or had been acting masculine," and one partner advised her that "she could improve her chances for partnership by walking, talking, and dressing more femininely."

As the only female dean at UC Berkeley for several years, I sat in on countless meetings where men held the floor. One day a female colleague made a presentation to a meeting of the deans and received a cursory, bordering on rude, response. Afterward, she asked me how she could have been more effective.

"Speak lowly and slowly, but smile frequently," I replied.

This advice (which did help her next presentation) was based on my observation that women must adhere to a narrow band of behavior in order to be effective in mostly male settings. Women who speak too fast, or in too shrill a tone, are overlooked. Women who act in a highly assertive manner, which might be acceptable for men, are attended to, but

not invited back. Women must be friendly, but they cannot be too friendly or a sexual connotation may be inferred.

After meetings, women are frequently marginalized when they are left out of job-related social networking. Jock talk and all-night boozing are reputedly what make the wheels of industry turn and, allegedly, men feel more comfortable in the company of other men. A survey of women in corporate leadership positions by Catalyst, an organization that works toward the advancement of women, found that 41 percent of respondents cited "exclusion from informal networks" as a barrier to their overall advancement. Navigating this male-dominated world can be disorienting and stressful. It is not surprising that there are not many women at the top. More than 20 years ago, the Wall Street Journal coined the phrase "glass ceiling" to describe the apparent barriers that prevent women from reaching the highest leadership positions. In 1995, the government's Glass Ceiling Commission reported that women had 45.7 percent of America's jobs and received more than half of university master's degrees. Yet 95 percent of senior managers were men, and female managers' earnings were on average a scant 68 percent of their male counterparts'. A decade later, women account for 46.5 percent of America's workforce and represent less than 8 percent of its top managers (although at large Fortune 500 companies the figure is slightly higher). Female managers' earnings now average 72 percent of their male colleagues' wages. Since 1998, the figures have stagnated. Overall, the trajectory is not promising.

Running a large organization like the San Francisco Police Department may be as perilous as tiger hunting. Doesn't it make sense that a group working cooperatively can more effectively kill the tiger and live to tell about it?

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/02/20/EDVQ160QUV.DTL>

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