

Understanding the impact of the feminine leadership style

 By [Anja van Beek](#)

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In South Africa, we celebrate Women's Day to acknowledge the great women standing up for themselves and letting their voices be heard. 65 years later - we still need to have the courage to speak up when we are faced with situations not aligned to our values or situations where we need to set boundaries.



Even though women in leadership positions have come a long way, women still fear being labelled with the “b-word”, whether it is “bossy” or “bitchy”. The problem with another b-word – “being liked” - is that it can hold you back to make your stamp in the workplace and influence critical decisions.

According to UN Women:

“ Even with a record-breaking newhigh of women CEOs of Fortune 500 companies in 2020, **only 7.4% of companies on the list are run by women**, and women are less likely to be entrepreneurs and face more disadvantages starting businesses. ”

McKinsey is also stating that due to the challenges created by the COVID-19 crisis, as many as two million women are considering leaving the workforce: *“If these women feel forced to leave the workplace, we’ll end up with far fewer women in leadership—and far fewer women on track to be future leaders.”* This is a scary statistic.

How can women be true to themselves?

It starts with understanding what is important to you, what you value and appreciate. It further embraces the strengths that you are unique and recognises how you contribute to your team, family or community.

When women are true to who they are, they also have an opinion but more importantly, voicing it.

When you are in touch with your emotions – even though you may fear the consequences of being true to yourself - you still courageously share your views despite these fears.

I have worked with many women leaders in high-ranked positions, and here are the two tips I share with my women leader clients:

1. Artificial harmony – how to encourage radical openness in teams

Our brains are hard-wired for connection and one of our basic human needs is a need to belong. Social safety in the workplace encompasses the sense of being part of a team and knowing that you make a meaningful contribution to the team's success.

Unfortunately, I have seen that this need to belong sometimes overshadow a team members' true opinion and views and often results in people not speaking up. This brings me to the question: Do you encourage radical openness in your life? Do you, as a manager or leader, allow team members' true views in discussions to co-create better solutions?

A practical way to overcome this is to agree on simple rules for meetings, which in effect, will eliminate artificial harmony. For example, 'we agree to listen and give our full attention to one another without interrupting mid-sentence OR 'diverse views are important, and we will provide the opportunity for all views to be heard (even from the quieter team members)' OR 'we will allocate sufficient time to address the important agenda points.'

Different situations require different approaches

Leaders need to be able to sense what is required in any specific interaction or decision-making process. The Neurozone team distinguishes between a masculine and a feminine leadership style. The feminine style tends to lead by siding people together. In consciousness coaching, we define compassion as "to get what someone is going through whilst still expecting the best of them at that moment". How do we do this? By finding the balance between being firm, assertive and compassionate, adding a sense of warmth and grace in any interaction or decision-making process.

You don't have to be the leader to lead by example

Awareness is the secret sauce to radical openness. Become aware of what you are observing, thinking, feeling and wanting at that moment. If you practice your "being mindfully aware" muscle and openly share what you are observing, thinking, feeling and wanting with your team, it will contribute to the radical openness levels. Practising mindfulness will support your awareness in every interaction.

2. When last have you done something new for the first time?

In my career, I have seen many colleagues getting stuck. There is usually a direct link between this feeling and operating in a comfort zone, something like being on autopilot or worse, in survival mode.

From a personal perspective, ask yourself: "Am I living in survival or significance mode?" If you are operating from survival mode, you need to consider what habit/s you can change.

When I was a senior VP in a multinational tech organisation, I experienced that if I operate in survival mode, I need to do the basics right – get sufficient sleep, work out, eat balanced meals and make mindfulness practices a priority. Even today, as a coach where I design best practice guidelines for leaders, I am mindful that where I focus my attention and energy is critical to succeeding in stressful times.

When you take small steps to rectify destructive habits (eg. no exercise vs trying to walk daily) can make a big impact. Putting new habits in place is step one and more importantly, is being persistent and continuously make small tweaks as needed. So reset, refocus, readjust and restart as many times as you need to make that habit stick.

When you are open-minded to try something new, you are in action. It is not the size of the step you take that matters, it is that you are taking a step forward and embracing the mindset that small, consistent steps towards your ambition are better than no step at all.

Teams can also get stuck. Are you currently part of a team that is stuck? What options do you have to move the team forward? Here are three tips to unstuck your team:

- **Combine boundary spanning and collective intelligence.** By collaborating with other people (outside your immediate network), you can accelerate innovation and co-create solutions by connecting the dots that have not been done before. You will be surprised by the perspectives you may have overlooked.
- **Encourage your team to do the same,** particularly, with challenges that they have been experiencing for some time. Spanning boundaries ensure a diverse set of opinions and feedback. To make this work, it requires you to try it out, observe, learn, modify the plan and repeat the process.
- **Successful teams have rituals in place.** Rituals to welcome new team members, rituals to celebrate a target achievement or when a project has been successfully implemented. Have you considered creating a ritual around team mindfulness? Is it effective?

Yes, 2020 and also 2021 has experienced a radical shift in how workplaces operate and how people engage with one another but it is so easy to fall into “bad” habits. Female leaders have a critical role to play to spearhead this trajectory to lead teams to greatness.

ABOUT ANJA VAN BEEK

Anja van Beek is an independent leadership consultant, talent strategist and coach.
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