

The Huffington Post



Peggy Drexler

Meet the Boss

Posted: August 18, 2009 06:49 AM

These are tough times for the alpha-male business leader.

There is much introspection these days about what went so disastrously wrong with the global financial system. While the causes remain under investigation and suspects are still being interrogated, one thing is clear. Whatever happened: men did it. If not 100 percent, then very, very close. Name one woman prominently on the perp-list.

Even as the smoke still hangs over the wreckage of a financial system run amok, many are asking an interesting question about leadership: can women do better?

In a recent *Time* magazine article, "The Pink Recovery," writer Christopher Caldwell opens with: "Men are paying a higher price in this recession than women. Perhaps that's fair." Maleness, he said, has "become a synonym for insufficient attention to risk."

An interesting example of the perils of tough-guy leadership is Robert Nardelli, formerly of GE. From there, he jumped to Home Depot, and is now a short-timer at Chrysler, set to leave when the company emerges from bankruptcy.

Just as Nardelli earned a reputation as a consummate "numbers guy", he also became legendary for his autocratic style and impatience with inconvenient diversions like employee morale, collaborative decisions and stakeholder communications. A defining event in his leadership was the infamous 30-minute annual meeting, where shareholders were given one minute to talk before the microphone was electronically cut off.

By the end of his tenure, he had alienated not only shareholders, but employees, managers, customers and -- finally -- the Board.

An extreme example, maybe. But certainly symptomatic of a management philosophy that views leadership as a blunt instrument.

Are women really different? Or are there so few able to wield power from the top that we don't yet have a representative sample?

Recent research points to different answers.

One of the most extensive studies of its kind is *The DNA of Women Leaders* by the consulting firm Caliper and Aurora, a gender-management software firm. It extensively studied 60 women business leaders, looking at personality factors and motivations, and matched them against a data base of men.

It found distinct differences.

Their results say that women are highly persuasive -- using those skills to create buy-in and motivation. They have a team-oriented style of problem solving and decision making. They tend to take failure and rejection more personally than men, but also tend to bounce back with a determination to prove their critics wrong. In general, women are empathetic, flexible and excel at interpersonal skills.

Men, the study found, are not lacking in those traits. But in women, they are more highly developed, and a much bigger part of the work day.

Gender comparisons are tricky and riddled with exceptions. But this new kind of leadership is really more about approach and awareness than it is about chromosomes.

For one prominent example, Barack Obama's style certainly has many of the characteristics that the Caliper study associated with women. My guess is that every time Obama smilingly reaches out for consensus, Dick Cheney is somewhere rolling his eyes and thinking: "What a wimp."

And just as certainly, there are many women who display a hard edge.

Carly Fiorina strode into Hewlett Packard with a swagger, and left with a bloody nose. Admiral Louise Wilmot retired in 1994 as the Navy's highest ranking woman. "Life," she said, "is made up of a hierarchy of people ... many of whom have earned positions of authority over us. There is nothing wrong with this arrangement. When did organizational management take on the trappings of a baby shower?"

Exceptions duly noted -- this just in -- women and men are different. And so, it appears, are their management styles.

Tough-guy management powered this economy, then came very close to driving it, at high speed, straight into a wall. Crisis, above all, calls for confidence, which will never spring from fear. It comes from a shared belief that there are good things at the end of the struggle; that there are valid, personal reasons to believe.

If a female management style is right for creating the confidence and shared determination that companies need to climb back to growth -- and studies indicate that it is -- then, more than any time in the history of commerce, we need to put that style to work.