

HILLARY CLINTON AND THE DOUBLE BIND:

HOPE FOR A MORE BALANCED KIND OF LEADERSHIP?

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The Women'sVision Foundation, based in Denver, Colorado, focuses on empowering women to succeed in the corporate executive suite. The Foundation's Leadership Principles and its leadership development programs emphasize both masculine and feminine strengths. The Women'sVision Foundation is apolitical; its members represent the entire political spectrum.

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Hillary Clinton's campaign to be the Democratic nominee for president brought focus to an issue that, if addressed, could lead to a profound and positive shift in the practice of leadership. On the surface, this issue is about the phenomenon of the "double bind"—which devalues women when they behave in ways seen as too feminine *and* ways seen as too masculine. Below the surface is the more critical point about what the "double bind" stymies. The double bind disables women from doing what men are doing with increasing effectiveness, practicing a form of leadership that blends both masculine and feminine strengths. This balanced kind of leadership is exactly what is demanded in the world today.

Hillary Clinton uses masculine as well as feminine approaches. She has been censured for both. Women business leaders live with double binds every day and long to be free from them. Their companies and the world in general will be better off when they are, when both men and women are valued for operating with both masculine and feminine strengths.

The Clinton campaign put the spotlight on double binds. This may raise curiosity about other questions. Where did double binds come from? What is "feminine" leadership, what are its strengths, and how do double binds get in the way of fully leveraging those strengths? Why should leaders understand, value and utilize feminine as well as masculine approaches? Greater understanding of answers to these questions may help dissolve double binds so that women and men can lead in the way demanded in today's world.

DOUBLE BINDS

In the history of our culture there have been more men than women leaders; it is not surprising, therefore, that the concept of “leadership” brings to mind a predominantly masculine image. The author’s work in the area of gender in the workplaces uses the metaphor of a “gender continuum,” running from extremely masculine to extremely feminine. The broad acceptance of an image of leadership that is skewed to the masculine end of this continuum gives rise to double binds: when women operate at the feminine end of the continuum, they are not seen as powerful, or as leaders at all. When women operate closer to the masculine end, however, this breaks cultural norms and makes men *and* women uncomfortable.

If Hillary Clinton acknowledged that she was hurt or showed warmth, her critics were unimpressed or skeptical. If she showed anger or “toughness,” she was referred to in ways (“ambitious,” “hard“ or with the “B word”) in which no man exhibiting identical behavior would be described. She was judged for behaviors at both ends of the continuum and criticized for the very same behaviors that draw no criticism (or even draw praise) when displayed by her male competitors.

Women who have climbed or tried to climb the corporate ladder will tell you that they must be watchful of their “style.” They must adjust their style depending on whether they are working with men, women or a mix of both. This is not a bad thing. Women are not being inauthentic—so long as they adjust consciously. But it is a balancing act that men simply don’t have to be concerned with. Men are expected to be aggressive, competitive and direct. They are often praised and rewarded when they exhibit traits at the opposite end of the gender continuum: making time for family, showing feelings, demonstrating caring, sharing credit or taking a back seat. They do not experience double binds and are valued for the effective use of feminine as well as masculine approaches (though most wouldn’t be comfortable labeling strengths as “feminine”).

WHAT ARE FEMININE LEADERSHIP STRENGTHS?

It is generally accepted today that there is a “feminine” (as distinct from “masculine”) way of behaving and leading. And there is more and more research indicating that those differences are hard-wired, including research on the female vs. male brain and the impact of hormones on an array of values and behaviors. Obviously all women don’t have the same leadership style. Like yin and yang, we all have some balance of masculine and feminine within us. What we call

“feminine” is merely predictive of how women are more *likely* to act vs. how men are more *likely* to behave.

Boiling down what the experts say on this subject, the fundamental differences are these: At the feminine end of the continuum, connections matter more than individual accomplishments while at the masculine end this priority is reversed. The masculine view of the world is of a hierarchy where status matters greatly and one is either “one up” or “one down.” Those operating at the feminine end are more likely to value relationships and connections and concern themselves less with status or competing to be “one up.” The feminine mode of expression is to minimize and hold back, while the masculine is to step forward and seek attention. Masculine thinking is more linear while the feminine variety has been called “web thinking.”

These basic distinctions show up in the workplace and on the campaign trail in areas including structure, power, relationships, influence and conflict. People at the feminine end of the gender continuum are more likely to create and thrive within structures—organizations, meetings, even work spaces—that reflect a flat power structure and the value of connections. Those at the other end are more likely to create and be comfortable in hierarchical structures. At one end, power is seen as infinite and therefore to be shared, while at the other power is seen as more finite and key to holding or improving one’s position.

At the feminine end, relationships are viewed as personal connections; at the masculine end, they are based on the other’s role or position. “Feminine” decision process focuses on *how* to get the result while the masculine focus is more exclusively on the endgame. Leaders with a feminine style are more likely to influence through persuasion and inclusion than through giving orders. They are more likely to talk in understatement and questions than through bold declaratory statements. They handle conflict more indirectly than directly and prefer collaboration to competition.

THE NEED FOR BALANCED LEADERSHIP-MASCULINE AND FEMININE

All of these behaviors, masculine and feminine, have pluses and minuses depending on the situation. A good leader must sometimes be ambitious, take credit, be competitive, give orders, be direct and talk assertively (all behaviors at the masculine end of the continuum). An effective leader must also sometimes hold back from center stage, share power, collaborate, persuade and be concerned with process as well as the goal. A true leader must have the wisdom to know which part of the gender continuum works best when.

The need to value and utilize more of the gender continuum in the business world is driven by *who* populates the workforce. In today's workforce, there are more and more women. And there are post-Boomers, members of Generation X and Y.

Women already constitute over 47% of the workforce and the number of women in the workplace is growing faster than the number of men. Women will be a larger and larger portion of the educated labor pool. Women are currently earning 59% of undergraduate degrees, and the number of women earning graduate and professional degrees is growing significantly faster than the number for men. In order to attract, engage and retain these women, it stands to reason that leaders must value—and know how to leverage—behavior at the feminine end of the gender continuum.

Business executives are challenged by new sets of values and needs presented by post-Boomer workers. To generalize, both Gen X'rs and Millennials prefer a more flat, inclusive work structure to the traditional hierarchy. They seek closer personal relationships and community in the workplace. They demand flexibility and define themselves by more than their jobs alone. In these generations, boys and girls have competed more often as peers, and they have grown up seeing and following women as well as men leaders. The definition of leadership for these generations is much less skewed toward the masculine. One could say they operate along and value more of the gender continuum.

Today's workforce presents a compelling business case for a more balanced kind of leadership and workplaces that value more of the gender continuum. The workplace is a microcosm of the larger world. In all areas of life, people want to operate and be valued for operating in a more balanced and whole way.

The presidential campaign and the press have brought focus to the issue of the double binds faced by women. Reflective watchers of the campaign for the Democratic nominations, one hopes, noticed those double binds that were applied to Mrs. Clinton but not the other candidates. Awareness of double binds is the beginning of hope for their demise. Then we can hope for a time when men *and* women can operate along the full gender continuum. Women will be beneficiaries, but so will business and the world in general.