

## Leadership - Being a Woman What Difference Does It Make?

*September 2010 - Research Paper #2 in the Women in Leadership Research Project Series1*

It makes all the difference in the world when it comes to seeking leadership positions or career advancements. Sometimes those differences are a springboard to success and other times they are a stone weight around your ankle.

Consultants Sally Helgesen and Julie Johnson believe that women's unique way of perceiving and understanding the world is a strategic skill that companies fail to capitalize on. They say "companies fail to understand, or find any alignment with, what they call 'the female vision.' Too many women bail out in or near senior positions because they decide it just isn't worth it –women's deepest values conflict with what mainstream organizations want."<sup>2</sup>

As part of the Women in Leadership Research Project<sup>1</sup>, we surveyed and talked to women leaders across North America about their stories of leadership success and setbacks. The purpose of this study was to gather data and information on women as leaders - not comparing women to men. We wanted to ask them about their experiences. Does it make a difference being a woman? Has being a woman affected your career goals? Can women perform the same roles as men? Do women really see the world differently?

Should you choose to swim with the current or against it; get into the Boys Club or make your own club? Here's what the women leaders we talked to had to say.

### Key Findings

#### UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES

Unique opportunities are available to female leaders. Female leaders recognized and capitalized on important leadership opportunities and used them as "springboards to success". There is some indication that the earlier these opportunities present themselves, the better.

Your first job can be "fate-sealing" if you're a woman. Carter and Silva found that **first** job manager-direct report relationships are critical for a woman because if her manager does not coach, mentor and develop her well, she is set-back, maybe permanently.<sup>3</sup>

The women we spoke to said that some industries are male dominated and you have to decide to leave the industry or adapt and work through it.

## **EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE**

Our study found that female leaders capitalize on their high emotional intelligence. Empathy and nurturing behaviors have helped them to gain trust and buy-in, motivate and develop their teams, as well as excel in client-focused and sales roles.

This strategic skill set of women is underutilized by the corporate world, according to Helgeson and Johnson. Women tend to be concerned with relationships and the social fabric, which traditionally isn't part of the corporate culture. As organizations grow more web-like, more dependent upon relationships and the nurturance of talent, the EQ of women will pay off and lead to more unique opportunities for them.<sup>4</sup>

## **ADVERSITY INSPIRING SUCCESS**

Female leaders have flourished in the face of adversity. Feeling they “have something to prove” motivates and challenges female leaders to succeed. They have an inner drive to challenge any gender-related expectations and biases. Women we studied said, “*I often went out of my way to be better at my job than my male counterparts – this made me a better manager and leader,*” and “*Being a female helped me become a better leader.*”

# **SIX CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN**

## **1. THE BOYS CLUB AND TRADITION**

Women in our study said that it is hard to be accepted into the Boys Club. Certain industries, locations and cultures are traditionally male dominated, such as publishing, investing, radio, training, southern cultures, and Korean culture. Women spoke about being left out of conversations and not included in the office joke circle. In some cases, men seemed unaware of their harassing and unwelcoming behaviour. “*I was a skirt among pants,*” said one study respondent.

## **2. SEXISM AND DISCRIMINATION**

Many female leaders have personally experienced gender discrimination during their careers. They believe they have been paid less than their male counterparts and did not have equal access to senior-level positions. Women we talked to said:

*“There is a reluctance to promote women at the top”*

*“I have not worked in an organization where woman at higher levels have been promoted and supported.”*

*“In many ways the men still expect women to bring them their coffee and schedule their meetings.”*

Their sentiments are echoed in the Harvard Business Review, *Women in Management: Delusions of Progress* where researchers Carter and Silva write that gender gap still exists in career satisfaction and salary and women lag behind men in every single career stage.<sup>5</sup>

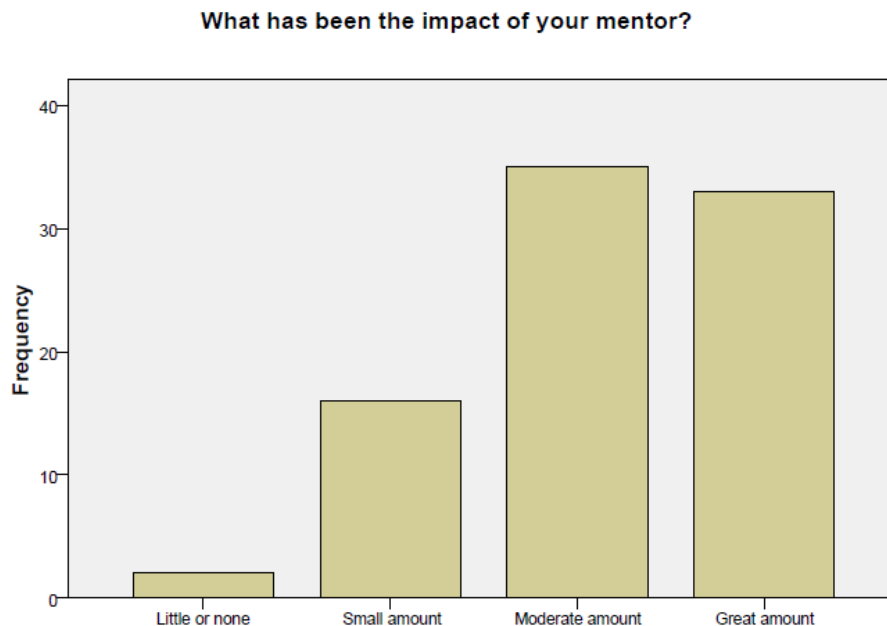
### 3. WORK AND FAMILY CONFLICT

Female leaders struggled to balance family with career. Caring for children, parents, or extended family impacts their ability to succeed and move ahead in their careers. Some leaders left the workforce for a number of years and faced major obstacles upon their return. Two leaders indicated that having a stay-at-home spouse was necessary for them to succeed in their careers.

We learned in Research Paper #1 (Women Leaders – Choice or Chance?) that not all women are motivated by salary or career advancement, and make choices that lead to more balance and fulfillment in their lives. Helgesen and Johnson point out that companies tend to motivate by asking employees to make daily sacrifices to get ahead or be promoted, but women measure job satisfaction in terms of the texture of their everyday experience rather than a stepping stone to a future job.<sup>6</sup>

### 4. LIMITED ACCESS TO FEMALE MENTORS

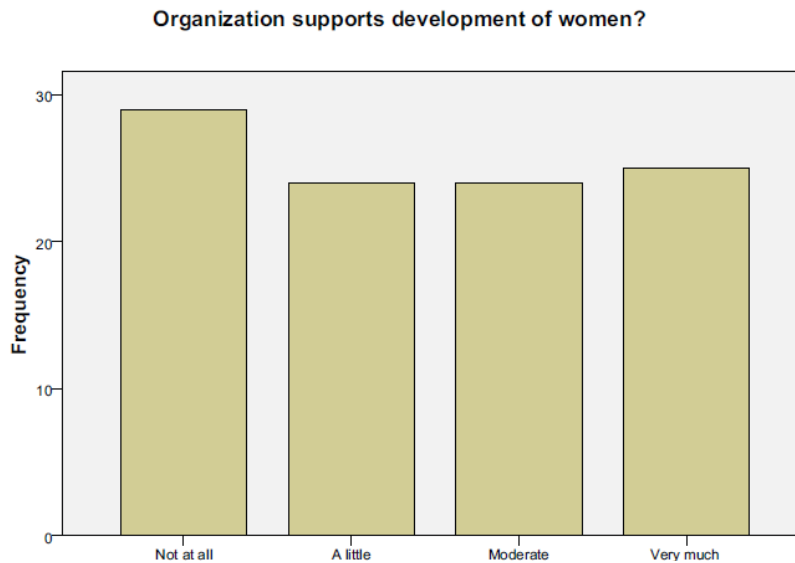
The majority of women in our study had a mentor and felt that the mentor had a moderate to great impact on them.



However, many leaders reported difficulty in achieving high-quality relationships with female mentors and colleagues. This made it more difficult for them to succeed. In some cases, there were simply not any high-level female colleagues. In other instances, females were not interested in mentoring them or actively shut them out.

Research conducted by Ibarra, Carter, and Silva found that men are more likely to get mentors who are in a position to sponsor them for promotion and women are often assigned lower-level mentors who may not have much influence. Furthermore, women feel “mentored to death.” While mentoring can be favourable and lead to personal growth, not all mentoring leads to leadership development of women, as the next point explains.<sup>7</sup>

## 5. ENTRY TO INNER CIRCLE



Female leaders have difficulty gaining equal access to the top strategic players in organizations. They feel that as women, it is much more difficult to get a “seat at the table”. Respondents made comments such as:

*“You are not part of the inner circle – they golf together.”*

*“You’re just not ‘in the house’”.*

*“There are still boy’s clubs to a certain extent and the men are not apt to give women leadership positions.”*

The number of women having a mentor and feeling that there was a positive impact (as explained in #4 above) is in contrast to the following graph showing the extent that women believe their organization really supports the development of women.

## **6. AUTHENTICITY**

Female leaders indicated that women need to be authentic to succeed. They feel women can and should express their individuality at work, making comments such as:

*“Women who adopt personas are unsuccessful in the long run.”*

*“I figured out pretty early on I would make a crappy cowboy, so I had to be myself and let the chips fall as they may.”*

*“If you try to be someone else you’re not believable and that’s not sustainable.”*

*“Being something you’re not is a battle you cannot win.”*

*“It’s unhealthy to be monitoring and controlling your personality.”*

Easier said than done! Kelly Patterson-McGrath (President and CEO, Patterson-McGrath & Associates) says *“A lot of the successful woman that I connected with keep coming back to me with one thing – as a leader, especially a woman, you have to first and foremost be self-confident... this tends to come easier for men.”*

### **THINKING OUT LOUD: SOME FINAL THOUGHTS**

Rebekka Gordon, Ph.D. of our research team says that "overall, research indicates there are more significant differences between perceptions of male and female leadership than actual observed differences." However, those perceptions (whether accurate or not) create both opportunities and challenges for women in the workplace.

It seems that women may define success differently than men; prefer to employ a different skill set than men; and find a different path to leadership than men. But, as Paul Bernthal, Ph.D. points out, “It’s the unwillingness of others to accept these (differences in) behaviors that interferes with success and the availability of opportunities for women.”

*Comments and questions? Contact: [kelly@leadforwomen.com](mailto:kelly@leadforwomen.com)*

### **Endnotes**

1 The Women in Leadership Research Project 2008/09 was conducted by Patterson McGrath and Associates in collaboration with Paul Bernthal, Ph.D., and Rebekka Gordon, Ph.D., SPHR. Data was collected from over 150 women who completed an on-line questionnaire and from 47 women who participated in a personal interview. As well, an extensive literature review on other current research about women and leadership was completed. For more information please contact [kelly@leadforwomen.com](mailto:kelly@leadforwomen.com)

### **Survey Snapshot**

This is a condensed and simplified overview of the data collected.

- 150 women completed the on-line questionnaire and 47 women were interviewed
- All were in leadership positions, across North America, and majority have spent 8 or fewer years in their current position.

- Majority have university or advanced degrees and are married
- At least fifteen different functional areas or sectors were represented by women in leadership or self-employed positions, mainly employed for national or multinational organizations
- Majority have had a mentor and that mentor has had a "moderate" to "a great deal" of impact on them

2 Helgesen, Sally and Johnson, Julie. (August 4, 2010). The Female Vision: Defining Women's Strategic Strengths, Issue 73-05. Retrieved September 10, 2010 from <http://changethis.com/manifesto/show/73.05.FemaleVision>

3 Carter, Nancy and Silva, Christine. (March 1, 2010). Harvard Business Review. "Women in Management: Delusions of Progress." Retrieved September 10, 2010 from <http://hbr.org/2010/03/women-in-management-delusions-of-progress/ar/pr>

4 Helgeson and Johnson.

5 Carter and Silva.

6 Helgeson and Johnson.

7 Ibarra, Herminia, Carter, Nancy and Silva, Christine. (September 1, 2010). Harvard Business Review. "Why Men Still Get More Promotions Than Women." Retrieved September 13, 2010 from <http://hbr.org/2010/09/why-men-still-get-more-promotions-than-women/ar/pr>

## **Celebrating Incredible Women Leaders**

### **ALISON JOY YOUNGMAN (1948-2009)**

Given up for adoption in England at just 6 weeks of age, who would guess that baby Edna would become Alison Youngman, also known as the "maestro of multitasking", the bigger than life phenomenon, a high-profile lawyer, tireless volunteer for breast cancer research and above all else – an extraordinary role model? Imagine her day-to-day struggles as she broke ground in the domain of competitive, male-dominated, corporate law, all the while leading, mentoring and giving a helping hand to others, especially women, who hoped to follow her path.

It was an astute businessman, Fraser Elliott, who immediately recognized Alison's work ethic and capabilities, looking beyond her status and gender. With his encouragement, she attended Osgoode Hall as a mature student and graduated the same year she became a mother. By the time she was expecting her second child, she was adamant that women should not have to ask (or beg) permission to leave the law partnership due to pregnancy. Her perseverance led to a maternity leave policy.

Alison's toughest battle was lung cancer that claimed her life in 2009, but it did not slow her lifelong purpose to mentor, lead by example, or encourage friends and family.

**Patterson McGrath & Associates – [www.leadforwomen.com](http://www.leadforwomen.com)**

If you would like to read more about Alison Youngman's outstanding accomplishments or those of other women leaders, see GlobeLife at [globeandmail.com](http://globeandmail.com)