

**Are you serious about becoming a leader?
Then...forget the 'la-la advice' and build your battle skills reserves**

By Executive Coach, Corporate Psychologist, MA, Ph.D. Merete Wedell-Wedellsborg

The demand for female leaders is at an unprecedented high. Every head hunter dreams of finding the next female top leader, board chairperson or the next female General in the Armed Forces.

The time has come to understand that the talk about “women in managerial positions” gradually focuses on more than career, position, success, and equal opportunity. Now the discussion tends to be on how women can and especially *want to* use management to create change, and what this entails.

The question is whether your ambition is just to join the CEO level or whether you are serious about leadership? This is the difference between wanting a career in management – and using management as a tool to create results, changes, and breakthroughs.

There is plenty of useful advice on how to nurture women’s careers, but if you’re serious about management, more is required. In my experience, women tend to struggle with three specific themes that may stand in their way of doing serious management. First and foremost, they need to find the courage to stand alone and break away from certain aspects of community and harmony. Secondly, they must build up their own personal capacity to fight for their beliefs, and not just generously share their resources, even though everyone loves them for doing so. Thirdly, they occasionally have to go against the current management trends and do something “non-authentic” in order to break out of their set patterns and grow as human beings and managers.

For many years I worked in male dominated environments, for instance the Danish Defense Force, the Danish police, and banking. A couple of years ago, my clients began to focus on the ways in which we could support female leaders whose career paths take them to top-level management and board work. The interest was sparked by the fact that equal gender opportunity is on the UN’s 2017 list of global goals for sustainable development.

Lala-advice and patience will get us nowhere

The result was an impulse to work methodically and to look into current research. However, the research results were disappointing. The conclusions did neither have bite, edge, nor drive, and seemed fickle. The research results and the articles were characterized by clichés such as “learn to prioritize, make sure you delegate, marry the right partner...” After 25 years of good advice and plenty of research, the results continue to be disheartening. Even though the road, in principle, is paved for the women, obviously the results are less than impressive in top-level management and board work. However, there is every good reason to move women into leadership positions, because research also demonstrates that groups with equal distribution of men and women perform better and more efficiently.

Initiatives like Gender Diversity Roundtable Denmark launched by the Boston Consulting Group and the UN Women's Nordic Office will hopefully lead to new departures. In my line of work this inspires adjustments and adaptations of the methods I apply in my daily coaching of female managers.

Efficiency is a requirement – trust and a sense of humor are part of the medicine

In terms of the personalities of career women, those who thrive in demanding jobs are characterized by decency and persistence. On the other hand, it makes no difference whether you are extrovert or introvert – what does matter is the ways in which you manage your emotions, and whether you are capable of reducing the anxiety which is part and parcel of a management job.

Many female managers experience that they must be all-round efficient. They feel that they need to perform flawlessly, meaning that they have to work long hours. To a great extent the work gives them a sense of identity and the experience that they belong in the workplace, which is obviously a plus. Still, some of the female leaders I coach expose themselves to challenges bordering on fairness. For this reason, I also discuss constructive and destructive defense mechanisms with these women. Denial is an example of a primitive defense mechanism, often seen in female top leaders. They cut down on sleep, exercise, and decent nutrition, thereby expressing a destructive defense mechanism. Some of these women tend to ignore the importance of getting enough sleep. A sense of humor and social support systems are central among the constructive defense mechanisms. The women I coach, who succeed in getting top management positions, can all name the colleagues with whom they can share a laugh and who have their backs in the workplace. It is a clever move to have a colleague at your own level with whom you “grow up” in the organization.

A recurring characteristic of female managers is that they are often surprised by the extent to which work and free time merge in top-level management. At this level, a work-life-balance rarely exists. The job is the passion, and the passion for the job is often such a significant part of the individual manager's mission in life, that you for instance, exercise, cook, and do teambuilding with your colleagues, and perhaps even their spouses, thereby building very close friendships with colleagues at management-level. Some of the most mature management groups I come across in my work know each other so well that they've seen each other through difficult times in their lives, such as a divorce or other crises, and this also makes them stronger. In other words, if you as a woman want to go to top management level, it is important to spend time building trust.

Build “battle skills reserves”

In all demanding jobs you need to have extra reserves, places where you can stock up on resources, when you feel depleted. Such reserves harness the sources for battle skills. Most of us strengthen our battle skills through sleep, reflection, camaraderie with good colleagues, support and network, physical training, role models, and spending time with loved ones. Not surprisingly, sleep deprivation, lack of control of challenges, meaninglessness, rumors and gossip, conflicts at home, disease in the family, and team members who do not deliver drain our energy.

However, a well-stocked battle skills reserve also supplies you with the ability to visualize the end of a process and the imminent goal. In this example, I'm not just talking about beautiful visualizations or impressive PowerPoint slides, but about an image of closure after a victory, which you can almost "taste" and feel. In my experience, the most skillful and astute politicians excel at precisely this point. I always ask my female clients to visualize their preferred closure of a given negotiation. Being able to imagine what one would say and do, when all the elements of an agreement come together, is a very efficient tool to build performative momentum.

The courage to make selective choices, to stand alone, and take risks

Grand courage – the kind that involves life-and-death, greatness and fall from grace, win or lose – we rarely need more than a few times in our lives. On the other hand, a manager will experience many situations, which call for a smaller degree of courage – with less risk, yet requiring a planned approach and deep breaths. It can be the courage to stand alone in a given situation, the courage to change a point of view, and also the courage to admit that there is a limit to your daring. I believe that women often mine the resources for top-level management positions by finding their internal courage. We tend to associate courage with heroic deeds and life-and-death situations. However, courage is to a great extent also about inspiring yourself or others to take a risk and make bold choices. The women I coach tell me that it takes courage to make selective choices, and to dare to stand alone. At this point, we might easily believe that courage is reserved for those who are willing to take risks. But this is not the case. Courage requires a deeper source for action and is often rooted in the values, which we have acquired throughout our adolescence and experience. However, speaking of courage, the most important aspect is whether you trust yourself (self-acceptance) and particularly your own judgment (daring to make decisions and stand by them – regardless of what others may think). Ask yourself: what can I vouch for? The ability to have the courage of your convictions is essential, as is having the nerve to follow a path – not because it is the easiest and most pleasant way to go, but because it represents the right solution – also when things are chaotic and difficult.

Women are good at expressing fear

As a manager it is important that you confront your fears, while still having the ability to act. Many believe it is difficult to face your fears. However, overcoming your fears is easier than you might think. Actions such as naming your fear and asking yourself what is the worst thing that can happen can be game changers. When I coach female managers these are some of my focal points.

Still, I cannot help including the men, because I feel, that women and men can learn from each other. This helps us understand each other and ourselves better. In fact, I believe that in this context the female managers have an edge. When I ask men what is holding them back, what they did not get a chance to say, why they did not join the discussion and engage with a certain conflict, then they often find it difficult to describe what is holding them back. However, women tend to be very well aware of this pattern. Their answers often point to:

- **Performance anxiety:** the fear of not living up to expectations easily leads to displacement activities and indecisiveness.
- **Reluctance to confront problems:** the fear of not being liked or of standing alone in a group can manifest itself in an exaggerated politeness culture and in an excessive regard for other people's feelings, to the extent that preserving harmony becomes more important than solving problems.
- **An urge to take control:** the fear of being exposed as ignorant, incompetent or weak may lead to excessive preparation and detailed planning.

Develop your ability to endure sustained anxiety levels

In a managerial job, you need to be able to resist the anxiety, which comes with the job. Anxiety will manifest to a smaller or greater extent, when we are challenged in terms of our self-confidence and sense of identity. Some personality structures are better at containing anxiety and are hence more equipped to invent constructive solutions, when facing increased anxiety. A personality with a strong ego and good ego functions will find it easier to deal with anxiety. In this context, it will be a plus, if a person with good ego strength also has a good sense of reality. Because she has a developed self-understanding, this type of person has the ability to take a realistic look at herself, and in so doing include the needs and emotions of others. On the emotional level, the personality with a strong ego will also be capable of reflecting on her emotions. Hence anxiety will have a difficult time accessing her personality.

An example of ego strength could be the ability to take the podium and speak in an assembly. Social psychologist Adam Galinsky from Kellogg has researched what techniques work well, when men and women give talks (his TED Talk "How to Speak Up" is highly recommended). One of Adam Galinsky's points is that when women and men present a point, women tend to appear less powerful and their opinions seem weaker than men's – except in one case. When the women advocate the causes of others, they become more assertive and their points resonate better. He calls it "The Mama Bear Effect". Adam Galinsky's advice as to how you train your ability to appear strong is, among other things, that women should allow themselves to be impassioned "Mama Bears", while also remembering to ask for other people's advice -- as opposed to appearing to know everything.

Train your ability to do something inauthentic

One of my female clients has a new position as a top-level manager. She told me that one of the most difficult aspects of entry into her new job concerned her own conception of being a top-level manager. She didn't see herself as such, and often wondered if she was in fact worth her salary.

In this context, Herminia Ibarra, who is Professor of Organizational Behavior at INSEAD, has an important point: every once in a while, you should act in NON-authentic ways in order to grow into a new role and a new identity. In other words, we should not be afraid to test ourselves in a way that feels unknown and new. In this way we also become able to stop up and focus on the mission to which we are dedicated. The more approaches we have, when we engage with projects, where we feel anxiety, the better we can handle anxiety constructively, and reflect on our cognitive as well as emotional responses.

In the context of dealing with anxiety, it can be interesting to watch political debates and register the rise of the anxiety level in the individual participant. The person may feel that the debate is reaching a climax, and that his or her own arguments are becoming increasingly clear. However, in actual fact, at this point the emotions begin to take over. This also involves anxiety and the formulations become long winded and repetitive, the body stoops, the expressions grow angry and uncooperative.

When the anxiety level is low, it is easier to act in inauthentic ways and take chances with new approaches. We might, for instance, experiment with new kinds of communication. Or we may nurture new networks and interests. Perhaps we even dare to take on a job, in which we feel we should do our very best in order to handle all the new tasks.

In the context of women's opportunity to develop a career, my experience is that anxiety is an overriding emotion. Feeling anxious about not being "good enough" is extremely limiting. "I don't know how to do that... I'm not good at that... I was never good at those things..." (the list of things women tell me they feel they cannot do is long). Hence in terms of reducing anxiety, my best advice to female managers is to do something that feels out of character and new to them. This might for instance be to ask your boss or colleague for advice instead of trying to pretend that you have an answer to everything. I experience a lot of female managers who are so busy demonstrating their professional excellence that they forget their natural ability to project warmth and empathy, when they face an audience. It is always a good idea to try a new tactical approach. In time, these women experience that the new behavior complements their character.

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