

Positive Work Place Attributes for Women Managers: Views from Male Executive Officers of Limpopo Province in South Africa

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Abstract

The paper seeks to dispel the myth that women do not perform well as managers in the corporate world or work place. It is a fact that boys and girls in most societies are socialized differently in their early lives and this is played out in the work place later in their lives, where men always want to be in charge or dominate. Although women managers are likely to be undermined by both male and female staff members, their contribution in the workplace exceeds by far people's expectations if viewed objectively. The labels and negative attributions ascribed to women as being weak rather than feminine always results in people not appreciating their positive contribution as managers. It is critical to view women as different from men for their femininity and communication style. This paper however, focuses on the best that women can offer in the work place so that women in managerial positions are valued as opposed to being perceived as not fit to manage organizations. The views shared by experienced male Chief Executive Officers from the Limpopo government offices regarding the performance of women managers are elaborated.

Keywords: myth, dispel, women, men, manager, workplace, attribute, Chief Executive Officer/Director.

1. Introduction and background

1.1. Definition of keywords

Myth refers to a false belief that people hold about certain things.

Dispel means to dismiss certain wrong understanding about something

Manager is a person who manages a company or an organization, he she can be referred to as a director, administrator or supervisor

Workplace is a place of work

Attribute refers to a personality trait, behaviour, quality or characteristics.

1.2. Background

Women the world over are some how not treated equally with men. There is a myth that they are not capable of performing certain tasks properly even if they can. African women in particular are regarded as servants to their husbands and their place is supposed to be in the home were they look after families, children and other extended family members. In the worst scenario cases they end up being abused by certain cultural laws imposed on them. The observation made shows that women are not entrusted with leadership positions; they can be deputies where the situation calls for a woman.

During the fight against the apartheid government in South Africa women like Lilian Ngoyi, Sisulu, Gxowa and others marched to the Union Building to protest against the carrying of the 'dompass' (identity documents meant for black people only). Lilian Ngoyi pitched the song Nkosi Sikeleli Africa at the protest and it is today the National Anthem of South Africa.

This indicates that women are strong and capable leaders even in the political arena because of their meaningful involvement during the liberation of South Africa. Nelson Mandela the South African struggle icon, in his Rivonia trial speech, indicated that he was prepared to die for a non-sexist and non democratic country. It is pleasing that today the South African constitution accords equal status to both men and women, they earn the same salary and perform the same jobs.

Today in South Africa there is about 45% representation of women in parliament. Four out of nine Premiers who are leading the Provinces, are women. According to the (The White Paper on Affirmative Action in the Public Service of 1998:74) programmes for women should have at least 30% decision making positions in the public sector and public enterprises must be occupied by women. Training programmes in both sectors targeting women at various levels should be established. Although South African women are under-represented at Board and management level, there is good progress towards achieving gender equity in the workplace. The Government and state-owned enterprises are showing the way and the private sector is following suit.

According to the surveys, the representativity of South African women board members shifted to 10,7% from last year's 7,1%. In the category of women executive managers, 19,8%, has been achieved up from last year's 14,7%. This is better than all the other countries included in the survey: the United States, Canada and Australia.

Gender inequality is a worldwide phenomenon. On a global scale, South Africa has the third highest proportion of companies with women in senior management, according to the Grant Thornton International Business Owners Survey of 2004. The survey also positions South Africa as the eighth-best globally in the proportion of women in senior management posts. International Marketing Council Chair Wendy Luhabe boasts that the growing number of women in South Africa's political structures and public and private sectors has overtaken many parts of the developed world in just 10 years.

Although women are accorded the opportunity of being in the managerial positions, there are cultural and social barriers which hinder them from being seen as able managers as compared to their male counterparts. Women are expected to be house wives who look after their homes, children husbands and other family members. They are expected to fulfil these duties with little or without help from other family members, especially males. Most women in management positions are liable to encounter a range of special difficulties rooted in the cultural values. These include attitudes favouring long working hours to the detriment of home commitments to beliefs about proper managerial behaviours involving delegation, participation and the inclination to play organisational politics (Mohlala 2002:11).

Male subordinates tend to resent being held accountable to a woman and they consciously or unconsciously try to create a bad impression about a woman's leadership style, defy, by pass their authority and give them a passive treatment. The stereotype that men and women have different managerial styles, and the managerial style of men is better suited to the pursuit of corporate excellence, has been a troubling barrier to the advancement of women in management.

Women managers are perceived as being less aggressive and independent than their male counterparts though typically possessing better interpersonal skills. Most men still hold a stereotype perception of women being dependent, passive, non-competitive, illogical, less competent and less objective. Other studies found that males tend to underestimate the importance of motivators for females. These include the desire for responsibility, advancement, challenging work and a voice in decision making.

Women subordinates pose a serious problem to their women managers because of the lower hierarchy jobs they are meant to perform. Women who blindly accept the traditional pink and blue syndrome may, like their male counterparts, resent the presence of a female superior. Some women subordinates feel it lowers their own status to have to take orders from another woman. In order to solve this problem women managers are supposed to bring the matter into the open and use the participative leadership style whenever possible and serve as a role model (Mmoko 2004:11)

However, according to the research finding by Momko (2004: 31) it was revealed that the attitudes of subordinates both males and females were positive, they were viewed as people suitable for the managerial position, they adhered to instruction and showed them respect regardless of their sex.

Men and women bring different strengths and competencies to the corporate table. As the proportion of women in high-level corporate positions increases, and as both men and women embrace their differences and harness their synergies, the creative potential of the gender partnership will explode. This paper however looks into whether women managers have positive attributes which they bring in the work place or not

2. Methodology

The researcher first interviewed one male experienced Chief Executive Officer from the Limpopo government for his views regarding the performance of women managers. After giving his views through writing, the researcher used the same views to interview two other male Executives about their views regarding the performance of women managers. She used purposeful sampling and the sample referred to as 'convenient samples'.

3. Research questions

The following are the questions posed to the three Executive Officers regarding the positive attributes for women managers in the work place:

- Are they honest and perform as promised?
- Do they stick to timelines?
- Do they multitask and are they also multi-skilled?
- Do they consult and are they dependent?
- Are they good listeners and positive thinkers?
- Are they warm, friendly and approachable?

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Honesty and performance

Women managers are regarded as reliable, honest and they perform as promised when it comes to what they know. They perform better than their male counterparts most of whom are not reliable and do not disclose their difficulties to their superiors. They give an impression that all is well when there is nothing forthcoming and when confronted with their lack of delivery they become aggressive or tell a lie. This corroborates with the observation the researcher made when comparing government departments headed by women with those run by males. In most cases women ministers tend to deliver faster than males because in most cases they are honest about what they do. There has been a perceptible improvement in the department of Home Affairs since a woman took over because she is open about the challenges that crop up and come up with implementable solutions. However, this cannot be used as a generalisation about all men.

4.2. Timeous delivery

As most women characteristics are informed by honesty, when they are given a task to perform they stick to time lines and do not procrastinate or apologise that they could not do what they were supposed to have done or achieved by a stipulated date. Women managers do not rest until they finish their tasks, they would rather take some work home whenever possible, so that they finish their work on time. It was indicated that male managers use delaying tactics, excuses and apologies for what they are supposed to have achieved. The officers indicated that they are rather happier to give a task which requires to be completed within a stringent time frame, to a female manager rather than a male. Their experience with women managers is that they take pride in having accomplished their tasks effectively and timeously. Maybe this is attributed to the fact that they want to prove a point that they can do what men can do and therefore are performing better than men in this aspect.

4.3. Multi-skilling, and multi-tasking

Naturally women are multi-skilled and are able to multitask as they can speak on the phone, surf the internet, check the diary and speak to other people at the same time. They do not pay attention to one particular thing at the time and they end up having achieved what they want to achieve. Most men prefer to attend to one task at a time, they cannot speak on the phone and attend to a colleague who is present in the office at the same time. Therefore they need more time to attend to issues which women can attend to in a short space of time. The officers also appreciated the special skill of multitasking which makes life simple and easy in the office. The skill prevents a lot of red tapes experienced by colleagues whenever they want to meet with their managers.

4.4. Consultation and dependency

Women are aware of their limitations and this causes most women management style to entail seeking help or to help, supporting one another, facilitating, providing comfort, meaning and rewarding good work. They also focus on interpersonal attention, that is caring about how people carry out their tasks (Hahn & Litwin 1995). They tend to consult their bosses too often whenever they are stuck and do not understand certain things. They also consult more than is required and for them it is trying to verify if they are still on the right track with regard to what they have to accomplish. Men only care about where they stand in relation to others and consultation for them seems to depict that they are not man enough to deal with work related challenges. Although consultation and dependency might be viewed as lack of confidence or being a nuisance, it helps to successfully accomplish the mission at hand. It is a way of seeing work as part of the whole where there is a need to discuss and review issues with colleagues. Men see work as a separate piece and they must complete their work without receiving help from others. Unlike committing mistakes, delaying the process and vain pride which does not expedite the delivery process in the work place it is always better to ask for assistance..

4.5 Positive thinking and good listening skills

Positive thinking allows one to utilise the power of mind to focus on the things that will bring one closer to ones' goals and objectives. Listening forms part of communication which is vital for the day to day running of an organization. Women managers were found to be good listeners who do not interrupt or conclude before hand what the communicator is trying to communicate. They do not only listen to their superiors, they also have the ability to listen to their subordinates. Good communication minimizes miscommunication, creates harmony, unproductive negative comments and unnecessary work related conflict. The femininity of women helps them view colleagues positively as complementary rather than potential competitors. However, it should be accepted that conflicts cannot be totally avoided at work. Women seem to view every person positively until proven otherwise and this kind of an attitude is essential for the good running of departments.

4.6 Warmth, friendliness and approach

It is easier to approach woman managers when ever there are issues to be dealt with because they are warm. They are not difficult as they always communicate or interact in order to connect and arrive at a good understanding. They care about keeping good relations rather than just communicate to pass information and give orders. They are always ready to listen and implement without reasoning and criticising others' view points. The positive emotional side of women helps creates a friendly environment where everybody becomes free to communicate their own views.

Although there are positive attributes which women bring to the work place, there are also certain negative attributes which need to be understood and dealt with properly

5. Challenges

5.1. Insecurity

The different socialization of girls and boys in the society where males grow up with the understanding that they must have the upper hand with everything has a negative impact on women. When women are given leadership positions, they lead with the understanding of the limitations placed on them by the society. Most women managers seem to feel insecure especially when leading men who challenge, confront and undermine them for the mere reason that they are women. When women are confronted with such situations they become highly emotional and tend to lose their focus. This causes certain corrupt men to manipulate them that is when sometimes issues of sexual harassment stem in. Organisations who hire women as their managers should understand that women are emotional beings and they need to operate in a secure environment. Alternatively, debriefing workshops or trainings should be organized to help both males and females understand that their gender influences leadership styles. Understanding how women behave and operate at certain times might help organizations not to label women as failures when it comes to managerial positions.

5.2. Maternity leave, time off

It is within the women's constitutional rights to bear children and take maternity leave. As compared to their male counterparts, when dealing with women managers you must always have contingency plans in mind.

When they go on four months leave you have to get someone to work on their behalf and at times it is not easy to find a replacement at that level. After the baby is born still there will be certain challenges of taking care of the baby and women tend to lose focus when the baby is new. They also tend to take afternoon time off for fear of losing the whole day, they often come and work a bit until after ten o'clock and thereafter request permission to leave. Their performance becomes poor because of these other problems that they are facing outside the work situation. However, understanding that such things might at times happen and giving them the support they need, can help them perform better.

5.3. Inflexibility

There are some women who become bullies, rigid, inflexible and controlling when they ascend to management positions. They copy how some men behave and this ruins everything because they are supposed to be themselves and lead as women are supposed to. Some shout scream and cry and usually do shift from what they believe is right or have decided upon even if it is wrong. All they think is that they are being undermined as most of the time they are aware of their limitations. At times this happens because they lack the ability to take decisions quickly. That is where some men take advantage and label them as incompetent.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Based on the findings of the views from the three male executives regarding the performance of women managers in the work place, a conclusion is drawn that women are capable of managing in the work place as much as they can manage at home. There is also a saying that educates a man you educate an individual, but when you educate a woman you educate a nation. A stereotype mentality of looking down upon women at work should be done away with and focus on the best that these women do.

- Women should be accorded an environment which brings out the best in them
- Men should educate themselves more about women managers in order to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings.
- Avoid being gender biased
- Listen carefully and appreciate the best that an individual brings into an organization
- Accept change and understand that women are here to stay and they are breaking the corporate glass ceiling.

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