

THE MATRIARCH OR THE WICKED WITCH – LEADING AS A WOMAN



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It is trite that women are a historically disenfranchised group and have made strides through the liberation movement, the black feminism movement, the suffrage movement and many other movements to attain equality of opportunity with their male counterparts. What has not changed is the patriarchal world that women exist in. They are brought up with preconceived notions of what males and females ought to do, what traits are considered male and which ones are considered female. This affects how women are treated and even how they perceive themselves as leaders.

Viewed from the vantage point of the patriarchal notions, leadership is ordinarily associated with masculine energy. The alpha culture that developed from alpha masculinity, prioritizes rationality and logic which is somewhat mathematical, dominance, high individualism, shuns emotions and encourages competition. It requires women in leadership roles to consciously or unconsciously strip themselves of their femininity and wear masculinity to be taken seriously. You are damned if you do and damned if you don't. Being feminine might lend a perception of weakness but in adopting masculinity, women risk being too aggressive or bossy – first strike – the witch!

The alpha culture principally lends itself to directive leadership where direction and authority predominantly lies with the leader. This type of leadership is naturally viewed as normal when exercised by men. While directive leadership is appropriate in volatile and uncertain times, it is not always the best choice of leadership in every other scenario. Sometimes there is a need for democratic leadership to ensure that all voices are heard and other times there is a need for supportive leadership to ensure that there is a positive work environment.

By virtue of being more collaborative, more perspicacious in reading non-verbal cues, being both logical and intuitive, women tend to be more of democratic leaders and supportive leaders. This might be also because of the more nurturing feminine nature/nurture that women have. To some extent, women may even be expected to adopt a supportive style of leadership. But where the moment calls for directive leadership, a woman may be seen as too ambitious or dictatorial – second strike – the wicked witch!

Social dispositions make us to view leadership as an inherently masculine energy where anything that threatens this disposition is viewed with suspicion even by other women. This social disposition has us thinking that men are better leaders, such that there is a psychological defence against the notion that a woman is good at leadership – she is judged more harshly. Think about some of the negative traits that are associated with women such as jealousy and gossip. When men exhibit jealousy, the phraseology is intimidation, as if they are incapable of such a treacherous and highly “female emotion”. When men

gossip, the diction is changed to be that they had a discussion or some form of locker-room talk. Sometimes when men gossip, they are viewed as feminine, buttressing the psychological defence against certain traits being associated with a specific gender – no matter how apparent they are. When it comes to leadership, in spite of her success either at a personal level or at group level, a woman may still be viewed as a poster child of affirmative action (watering down and dismissing the fact that she worked as hard as her male counterparts), she could be perceived as having obtained her position in unscrupulous ways. All these are the psychological defences that we put on to counter the cognitive dissonance that our preconceived notions have created through socialization.

The alpha culture created by the notion that associates leadership with masculinity dictates that showing emotions is a sign of weakness; intuition is a non-starter for decision making and that only logic should be the basis for decision-making. It shuns collaboration because individualism makes you appear self-sufficient. Basically, in order to survive the alpha culture, women end up being chameleons and double-agents – third strike – the two-timing witch!

These notions are also highly harmful to men. Theodore Barrett, the Deputy White House Press Secretary, showed up at a press conference just after his wife died because he “had a job to do”. Naturally, this elicited shock and sympathy from journalists. Was it necessary for him to shut down his emotions? did his presence at a time when he needed his family and vice versa, demonstrate that he was a great leader? The answer to both questions is a resounding no! If a woman was in Theodore's position, she could have probably been viewed with a lot of suspicion and an immediate inquiry into her hand in the death of her spouse would have ensued.

The foregoing begs the question, is there space for femininity in leadership? There are great female leaders who did not adhere to the masculinization of leadership. They led from their authentic, feminine disposition. Angela Merkel, who was a Chancellor of Germany from 2005 to 2021, is seen as a mother-figure, a leader who maintained good relationships, and gracefully dished criticism. Her success in leadership is undeniable: she shaped European Union policies and advocated for social reforms and climate change. We can agree that there are public policy problems which cannot be resolved a masculine disposition.

What made Queen Elizabeth I, a great success was her love for God, love for her nation and subjects as well as her honesty. These qualities placed her head and shoulders above some of the leaders who came before her and failed. She developed the English trade, brought political stability, won and led the war against Spain Armada. Of course, during her time, leadership by women was viewed as nauseating. John Knox who wrote

"The first blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women" viewed it as a thing most repugnant to nature, that women rule and govern over men. Despite this melancholic piece of literature against women, Queen Elizabeth I remains one of the greatest leaders in history. I doubt it has much to do with her gender, but much to do with being herself; authentic, charismatic, resilient and to some extent refusing to give in to the expectations of what it meant to be a woman, much to the chagrin of John Knox.

These women were leaders on their own merit and have made tremendous strides, leaving behind a legacy of their leadership that transcends gender but speaks to their traits of insightfulness, charisma, persistence and resilience. The success of their leadership is the point, and they needn't prove any other point.

We can learn from these women, that inasmuch as the masculinization of leadership exists, accepting that emotion is intrinsic to our being and that collaboration as well as intuition have probably been at the core of our survival as women qua nurturers, we can free ourselves from the burden of the alpha culture. Our strength as female leaders come from creative collective collaboration, blending both logic and intuition to be able to reach not only excellence but strategic brilliance. Our emotional openness and vulnerability is what creates supportive leadership that values mental health and a positive environment for all, as opposed to "leaving emotions at the door" which turns us into sub-humans. Afterall, John Maxwell in his 21 laws of leadership, teaches that leaders touch a heart before they ask for a hand.

As much as the alpha culture rejects these precepts, it needs them to create a healthy environment for all. Posterity views the authenticity of women leaders who do not conform to masculinization of leadership as true matriarchs. This is not in the sense of competition with the patriarchs but in accepting the power that they hold in the essence of their femininity. What successful female leaders have taught us is that it is a misnomer that leadership is masculine.

It is not dependent on gender though the unique features of gender may influence its success. Nancy Rathburn was instructive when she said "a strong woman understands that the gifts such as logic, decisiveness and strength is just as feminine as intuition and emotional connection. She values and uses all her gifts". Nancy's words are an embodiment of the matriarch who is not trying to turn into a man to fit the narratives of the alpha culture. It echoes the sentiments that leadership is not a gendered trait; it is a human one. The path to authentic leadership lies not in suppression, but in the integration of our full selves.

Biography

Olebile Daphney Muzila is a Partner at Bookbinder Business law, one of the leading law firms in Botswana. She is a commercial litigation attorney with over 10 years' experience. Her practice of law adds class to chaos. Beyond litigating, she has provided strategic oversight and leadership as a board member of organisations in diverse sectors. She is an orator, author, entrepreneur and a professional troublemaker i.e. she disrupts injustices and challenges institutional dogma that is antiquated. She holds a Bachelor of Laws and Master of Laws from the University of Botswana. Daphney is currently reading for her Master of Sciences in Finance, Accounting & Taxation at the International University of Applied Sciences. She lives by the precept that what propels success is discipline, the malleability to learn, unlearn, and relearn. She believes in spreading kindness and giving grace.