

Breaking Glass

Women and men: changing leadership by Nancy Kline

What are the early effects of gender conditioning? Nancy Kline argues that they are central to an understanding of the role of women and men in the workplace. She also suggests that participating in a symposium may help women and men to begin the process of transforming the workplace into a thinking environment.

'As a little boy I was told to be tough and to win. When I cried, my dad hit me. The lads laughed at me when I said I was afraid; they called me a girl, they called me a wimp. When I finally learned how to fight, they cheered.'

'As a little girl I was told not to make a fuss. I saw men making the big decisions. The girls at school talked about boys and losing weight. I was told to make something of myself but not to be better at it than men. I helped my mother fix meals, clean house and care for my baby brother after her long day at work. I don't think anyone ever asked me what I thought or what I wanted. I learned how to please people, especially men. I would do just about anything to keep them happy.'

Ask any man or woman what they learned as children about their own gender and they may well tell you some version of this. This is gender conditioning, or sexism. It is largely responsible for the 'glass ceilings' which women encounter later in their working lives and for the fact that today only 8 per cent of the top decision makers of our world are women.

When a managing director was asked recently what he thought held the glass ceiling in place, he replied 'Sexism'. Others were quiet.

He went on to say:

'Sexism is the attitude in men that they are better than women and the agreement in women to believe it. Until that changes, we will just keep polishing, not breaking through, that ceiling. Anybody got any ideas about how to tackle this?'

This prompted one executive's attempt to address seriously the issue of women and leadership.

The Hansard Report formally confirms his analysis. It says that barriers to gender equality are general and pervasive and include:

- outmoded attitudes towards women
- direct and indirect discrimination

The reason we must attack the glass ceiling at the level of gender stereotyping is that these attitudes drive the thinking behind the actions that discriminate against women. Sexist conditioning is the main reason why progress for women is very limited and very slow.

Men's and women's cultures

Gender culture, that set of attitudes and behaviour that boys and girls are often encouraged to adopt, may be both good and harmful. For example, traditional male conditioning often says that leaders must:

- control
- criticise
- complete
- command
- be right

Women, however, are often believed to be weak leaders because they have been taught to:

- collaborate
- encourage
- create
- resolve
- question

These assumptions may well fuel decisions not to promote women to senior levels, not to restructure the workplace to suit women's needs, and not to trust women with the most important decision-making jobs. They may even lead to restrictive workplaces, poor services and an imbalanced or aggressive environment. If the attributes women have acquired are devalued, women may adopt more aggressive, traditionally 'male' approaches in order to get to the top. These messages ultimately limit everyone, not just the women colliding with the glass ceiling.

However, women's and men's cultures do contain some very good things. When the conditioning is swept aside, some very human

behaviour may be found which both genders should reclaim as their own.

Many women have done just that. Over the past twenty years they have reclaimed for themselves the best in men's culture.

Women have, for example:

- become more assertive
- begun to speak out boldly
- skilled themselves in areas such engineering, politics, economics
- engaged confidently in debate
- helped to write and administer public policy

Likewise, there are many valuable attributes for men to reclaim from the best of women's culture, such as how to:

- be more of a listener
- ask courageous questions
- feel more intuitively
- collaborate creatively
- abandon aggressive approaches in favour of negotiation

Men who have disclaimed women's culture are likely to have done so because they have been conditioned not to be seen to be behaving like women. Men have been taught to avoid being seen as 'effeminate' or 'not manly enough'. It seems that women may aspire to be like men, but men must never aspire to be like women.

Top executives calling for change

Some senior people are now recognising the pitfalls in this situation. They have accepted that tackling the commonly-cited barriers to women's advancement, such as poor childcare provision, inflexible work-time patterns, status loss during career and maternity breaks, exclusion from 'old boys' clubs, and discrimination in short-listing for top positions, is not enough. We must remove the sexist assumptions behind the barriers, the very thinking that created the barriers in the first place.

If we do not, we will find ourselves, twenty years from now, with men still dominating the top positions in society and women still frustrated at the bottom – and women's culture will still be a leadership taboo.

Women and a thinking environment

Every action we take is only as good as the thinking behind it. So, when our thinking is flawed, the action we take is flawed. The companies, organisations and governments we create, which reflect that questionable thinking behind them, will be flawed as well.

Managers and leaders need to know how to create the conditions under which people think best, so we should train managers and leaders in the skills of a thinking environment. Among other things, this will require that they understand what gender conditioning is, how it begins in childhood, how it is re-inforced during adolescence, and how in adulthood it prevents us from creating thinking environments.

When leaders understand these ideas, they will then be able to turn their meetings and organisations into more conscious places – into thinking environments. Women in such organisations will be able to rise to the top much more quickly and will be able to improve the way people work and lead others.

Women and Men: Changing Leadership Symposium

One way of tackling this issue has been to convene small groups of top women and men to learn how to root out gender conditioning and, by doing so, to change their organisations into thinking environments.

The *Women and Men: Changing Leadership Symposium* is one such forum. In this symposium, men and women who come from top positions in industry, commerce, government and social services re-learn the three most important components of a thinking environment:

- Listening
- Appreciating
- Questioning

Listening

For at least the first two hours, participants take turns listening to each other without interrupting, judging or advising each other. They listen in the full groups and also in pairs called thinking partnerships.

There is no competition allowed. There are no pre-set right answers. There is only genuine respect for each other, interest in each other's ideas and encouragement to continue thinking on the cutting edge of the question.

Appreciating

Also during this time participants learn to observe the good qualities in each other and the strengths in each other's thinking. Then they describe those qualities clearly. This is known as the Ten-to-One Ratio of Appreciation to Criticism. This ratio helps people to solve problems and to address complex issues more successfully than when the atmosphere or behaviour is highly critical or competitive.

Questioning

Participants learn to listen for the assumptions they are making which are blocking their ability to think clearly and independently. They learn the art of making incisive questions, the kind of questions that remove limiting assumptions with laser-keen accuracy so that the person can think boldly again.

Recently a participant wanted to consider this question:

'If you knew that women's rise in leadership would be good for you as a man, what would you want to do first to promote it?'

And another considered this:

'If you could trust yourself to remember your value at the moment when men dismiss you, what would you be aspiring to next?'

If I'm honest...

Following this the participants will be better able to listen well, to appreciate each other's thinking and to ask incisive questions. They can then address productively the issues of gender conditioning. They explore the gender messages they received as children, the good they learned from them, the pain associated with them, what effect those messages had on their career choices and advancement, and which of the messages they still believe and impose on others.

These comments made recently are not uncommon:

'If I am honest I'd say I think that women are a liability in leadership because, just after you have invested huge amounts in

their training and advancement, they will get pregnant. I then have to finance and deal with their maternity leave.'

'I still think men shouldn't cry and that they certainly shouldn't bring their feelings into work.'

'I think that women can't be trusted when the chips are down and that they can't think decisively about major issues. They are good at support but not really at leadership.'

'I still look to men for approval and am nearly dysfunctional when men are unhappy with me.'

'I am afraid to say what I really think publicly for fear of being ridiculed for being a woman.'

'I guess I am afraid to let my little boy play with dolls or take dancing lessons; he might grow up to be too much like a girl.'

'I mostly look for men for the top jobs and assume there are no qualified women out there if they haven't applied.'

The big question

Finally they think about these questions:

'How would the very structures and goals of work change if they were to be free of gender conditioning?'

'What would change in our government and in your organisation if it were to more favourably disposed towards mothers?'

'How will men benefit from women's leadership?'

After the symposium, participants often return to work with a commitment to establish a thinking partnership with a colleague and to set up regular thinking times as part of their executive regime. Many have begun to take steps to change their entire organisation into a thinking environment.

Some say that, with these changes, the glass ceiling may soon disappear because the benefits of collaboration and equality are becoming obvious. Consider this question which was put to the men and women at the end of a leader's symposium:

'As women progress towards the top of your organisation, what would you say to women and what would you say to men?'

One male chief executive said:

'I would say to women, "Don't do it the way men have done it; do it your way."'

'And I would say to men, "Don't be afraid of this change, it's good for us all."