

## A changing perspective – Teamwork, women

*Idit Matot*

*Department of Anesthesiology & CCM & Pain, Tel Aviv University Medical Center, Israel*

Until recently, women were not allowed into schools or universities. Actually, there are no records of when the first women started to work, but up until the last few decades, next to no women held any kind of power in corporate life. In the natural course of human evolution, the established superiority of men in leadership positions is gradually balanced by the integration of women in the same positions. So with the beginning of the new millennium, a new era is coming where “history” is replaced or integrated with “her-story”. Understanding that differences do exist between women and men in leadership conduct is a key to avoid irritation and frustration from one’s behaviour. One may also find that appreciating the differences helps utilize everyone’s skills and contributions a little bit better.

Regardless of how much accomplished / gifted/ skilful, and intelligent women are, most women are not comfortable with either direct confrontation or situations where their triumph means someone else’s defeat. For years, women living in male dominated societies have learned the value of appearing more passive than they really were. Women have learned to allow men (their husbands, lovers, customers, bosses) to *think* they were in charge by pretending to go along with the men, but in fact at the end to get it “the women way”. They have done it by using their natural strengths; by negotiating, showing empathy, cultivating an enchanting style (“There are not ugly women, just lazy ones”), mixing their smartness with humour (not to look too competitive), not pushing but rather acting with patience, getting other members (family, work, friends) at their side, and more. Additionally, because of their inferior position in humanity, women have learned two of

the most crucial rules in having a winning strategy: 1. To adapt and be creative. 2. To make decisions not driven by *ego*.

These women’s natural resources dictate their leadership approach and team work. In a team work with an objective to be accomplished, women will at most times start with having deep understanding of the people they will be dealing with and the environment. Women, more than men, will not go the “autocratic” way, but rather after understanding *their own* strength and weaknesses in executing the required mission, will put together a team, and assign a mission to each team member. Generalizations are far from being accurate, however, as in many instances, teamwork led by women means that there is no “I” but rather “we”. A good example is a study carried out by Berdahl, business professor at University of Toronto, Joseph L. Rotman School of Management, and Anderson, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, that examined the leadership behaviour of 169 students enrolled in an organizational behaviour course. Students were divided into three types of groups: mostly men; equal numbers of men and women; and predominantly women. Each work team chose an organization to study, presented a proposal and wrote a project paper. The researchers found that all the teams that were predominantly male or female both started off with leadership concentrated in one person. Over time, however, teams with mostly women became more egalitarian, ensuring equal opportunity for all participants; those with mostly men continued taking direction from one person. They also found that the groups with centralized leadership received poorer grades. The students also answered a questionnaire about their prefer-

ences for egalitarian or hierarchical structures in groups. Women tended to prefer egalitarian norms in work groups as opposed to men who favoured more hierarchical structures in groups.

Women leaders prefer that all the people/team players share responsibilities. Everyone usually works together on a more collaborative level and things are generally not as strict or rigid. Things generally flow, and people work harmoniously, helping one another and filling in wherever necessary. In teams led by men each player on the team has specific talents or things that they are good at and together as a team they make up a whole. There generally is no switching around from one position to another and each person's duties are specific and exact and that person/team player can be counted on to do their specific duty to their best. With all this in mind, ideas brought by the expert will generally not be welcomed if they do not conform to the leader's strategy.

Physicians in particular are trained to take charge, and assume a role of leadership in many settings. Physicians are trained to assume responsibility for decisions. Thus, for physicians to learn to share leadership in an inter-professional team setting is a challenge. The culture of physician training has focused on action and outcome more than on relationships. Traditionally, the physician-patient/department chair physicians (in the department) relationship tends to be authoritar-

ian. More so, the history of professional cultures has traditionally fostered an hierarchical power structure, with the department chair in control. Two world-wide processes might change the way leadership is practiced: 1. The sharp increase in the number of females in the M.D workforce. 2. The emergence of bioethics that has brought issues of patient autonomy to the foreground for physicians, promoting a less dictatorial behaviour but rather adopting a behaviour that takes consideration of the views of patients, families and other team members into account. This environmental change, which is now implemented in the educational syllabus of medical schools across the world, will also enforce a more open approach to teamwork, and reduce the gaps between how men and women and execute teamwork.

## References

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