

Research: Canadian Christian Women in Leadership

This research was compiled from a national survey of Christian Women in Leadership. The survey was taken in 2001 in partnership with the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and NextLEVEL Leadership.

What Christian women leaders “look like”:

There are as many “types and styles” of Christian women leaders as there are types of male Christian leaders and many, if not most, leadership characteristics look the same. Our research, however, shows that some female leaders may be overlooked for even simple reasons like the following...

- In a group setting women leaders are often listening rather than talking. This does not mean they do not have an opinion but rather that they see conversation as an opportunity to learn and develop relationships.
- Taking notes at meetings does not equal “I want to be the secretary.” It means, “I am paying attention and taking this conversation seriously.”
- Nodding one’s head at meetings does not mean, “I agree with everyone and everything they are saying,” but rather, “I am listening and encouraging you to keep talking until I understand better.”

Gender and Diversity Specialist, Barbara Annis, in her book *Same Words Different Language: How men and women misunderstand each other at work and what to do about it* states that traditional organizational models are written from mindsets that make sense to men but not necessarily many women. Basing her work on research done at McMaster University in brain functioning, she claims that women use both sides of the brain for most tasks; i.e. when processing language, spatial ability or visual images. She believes women see things differently, remember things differently, solve problems differently, listen differently, make decisions differently, prioritize differently and work differently in teams. There are literally thousands of ramifications of this - from the different ways men and women bond to the types of insights they are apt to have.

This research – while still controversial in some circles – demonstrates the value of diversity (gender, generational, cultural) in leadership teams so that various perspectives are considered and various strengths engaged.

Jean Baker Miller in *Toward a New Psychology of Women* presents the following psychological strengths (sometimes previously seen as leadership weaknesses) of women: Vulnerability, Connectedness, Nurturing, Cooperation and Creativity; and Northouse in *Leadership: Theory and Practice* describes how women leaders are thriving because of, not in spite of, these traits in the current leadership culture.

Peter Drucker answers the question, “What kind of leadership will thrive in the future?” with attributes closely linked to Miller’s psychological strengths of women: ability to listen and learn from others; ability to validate a worker’s life outside the organization; ability to establish powerful and fruitful relationships and reconcile competing points of view; ability to help people identify, articulate, and satisfy their own changing needs; ability to access information found inside and outside the organization; talent for consensus building.

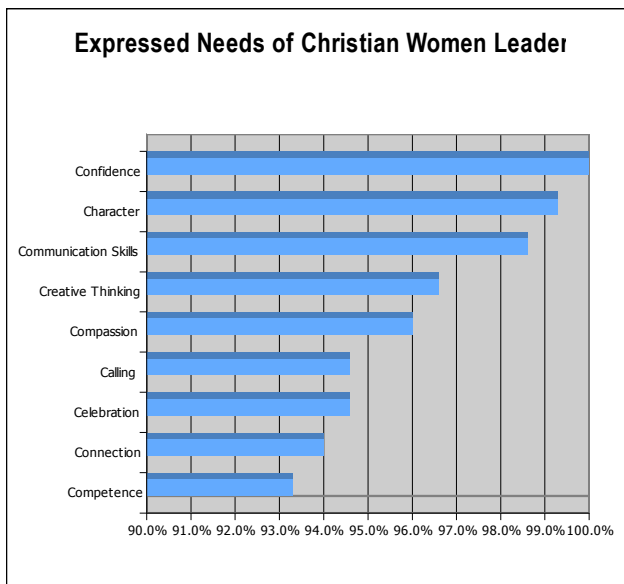
In Janet Hagberg’s *Real Power: Stages of Power in Organizations* more women are identified as getting trapped in stage 2 (Power by Association with Others) , more men (and organizations) in stage 3 (Power by Status) and more women are apt to move to stages 4 (Power by Values) and 5 (Power by Purpose). The needs and mindsets of people in these stages are so different that leaders and organizations operating from a stage 3 mindset will find it difficult to keep stage 4,5 and 6 (Power by Wisdom) leaders. *Our observation is that many stage 4 and 5 women leaders (and men no doubt) are leaving secular and Christian organizations and churches for this exact reason.*

Needs of Christian women leaders:

In a survey of Christian women leaders (at all levels of leadership, ages, and years of experience – please note about 80% of respondents were in “ministry leadership” as differentiated from marketplace ministry leadership) undertaken in the year 2000, 90.5% said they personally felt the need for leadership development and support, 95% said they felt there was a need for this in their geographic area, 93% said they would like to be part of a Canada wide network of women in leadership.

****While this original research is dated and in the process of being redone our ongoing work with women indicates the trends have changed little.**

When asked to rate if the following were important to very important to them as leaders they responded with the following percentages: (please note that these categories were chosen after they were mentioned consistently in focus group discussions)



Significantly, character was one of the few clusters that remained constant across age groups with many of the other categories decreasing as women moved into their 60's and 70's. It also remained constant across years of leadership experience except in those people with less than 1 year experience where it was rated as over 20% less important than in other years of experience categories.

Another noteworthy point is that business women rated all seven clusters (except connection and creative thinking) as less important than their "ministry"

counterparts.

When asked their perception of how they were "doing at their calling" only 20.1% said excellently, 40.9 % said very well, 33.6 % said adequately and 5.4 % said poorly.

When asked how they were "doing at character" 14.7% said excellent, 61.2% said very well, 23.8 % said adequately.

When asked how they were "doing at confidence" 10.8 % said excellently, 41.3 % said very well, and another 41.3% said adequately. A very similar breakout was found for communication.

Interestingly, only 5.3% felt they were doing excellently at connecting, 33.6% said they were doing very well, 47.7% said adequately and 13.4% admitted to believing they were doing this poorly.

Similarly, only 8.7% of women polled felt they had excellent competencies for their job, 43.3% felt they were doing very well, and almost half (42.3 and 5.4 % respectively) felt they were doing adequately or poorly.

We judge this to indicate significant confidence and affirmation issues for women. In focus group discussions and one on one interviews many women indicate that they do not receive adequate affirmation.

Compassion – excellent 16.7%, very well 69.3%, adequate 28%.

Creative thinking – excellent 14.7%, very well 30%, adequate 44%, poor 11.3% - making this another issue to flag for both perception and development.

Perhaps one of the most telling indicators in this research was the data that showed that almost half of women polled (48.7%) felt that they were adequate to poor at celebrating – which included things like being able to create a culture of joy, celebrating successes and keeping a sense of humor.

Also of note, the age group that consistently scored themselves as not doing as well in each cluster were women in their 30's with the exception of connection where they scored themselves highly.

Women in the youngest age range (20's) scored themselves highest on confidence and third lowest on competence (after women in their 50's and 60's).

Women identifying themselves as being in education or business consistently scored themselves higher on how they were doing in all clusters except compassion and communication than women who identified themselves as being in ministry positions.

Perceived needs: When asked what areas they would most like to work on the 7 clusters were chosen in the following order.

- Creative thinking and change management
- Communication
- Connection
- Confidence
- Competence
- Calling (tied)
- Character (tied)
- Celebration

The age group most likely to take part in educational events were women in their 40's followed by those in their 30's, 20's, and 50's (in that order). Women working in business and ministry leadership stated they were equally likely to take leadership training.

Another theme that came up frequently in focus group discussions was accountability. When asked how important accountability was to them polled 100% of women polled answered important to very important.

Interestingly only 11.4% of women said recognition was very important to them, 34.9% said it was important and the remaining 53.3% said it was somewhat to not important. These scores decreased significantly with number of years of leadership experience. *This may be a critical point for organizations wishing to keep women leaders to consider since recognition is one of the key*

ways organizations seek to motivate and keep leaders. Whether women leaders genuinely do not desire recognition or have been socialized to say they do not desire it, there are implications for the ways women are rewarded and acknowledged to be considered here.

Less than half the women polled (47.5%) belonged to some kind of support group for their leadership role while 85.2% agreed it was important to very important to them to have one. The age group of women most likely to be part of a support group were women in their 50s (followed by women in their 30's).

Windows of opportunity for leadership and leadership training:

- 18-25 years
- 40-55 years

Unlike male leaders who are often considered to prove themselves or even peak in their 30s and 40s women leaders often “bloom later” moving into their most significant levels of influence in their 40's, 50's and 60's.

Other research shows that leaders are most receptive to leadership development during the first two years of a new position. In our survey 100% of the women with 1 year or less of leadership experience indicated a need for leadership training, 94.4% of women with 1-5 years experience, 96.6% of women with 6-10 years experience and 85.5% of women with more than 10 years experience.