

More women in leadership – slide over big shots!

By Rick Maier

Exciting things are happening to women in the workplace.

Carly Fiorina is having a phenomenal first year as CEO at Hewlett Packard. Girl gangs are going head to head with the good old boy networks. More Americans now work for women-owned companies than for all the Fortune 500 corporations put together.

I have had the great fortune to experience this development first hand. In 1987 my company (at the time) decided to start a national financial services division in Macon. It wasn't by design, but three of the five most qualified people available at that time to lead the effort were women. The other guy and I traveled around the country drumming up business while the women set up the operations.

Within a few months, it was apparent that things in the service center were quite unique. Women were hiring mostly women. There was a lot of training, meeting and communicating going on. Even though the office was bustling, there was a little more socializing than I was comfortable with, and decisions took a little longer than I thought necessary. There were frequent exceptions to policies involving customers and employees. The corporate office reluctantly tolerated our casual dress and flexible work rules. Fortunately, the other guy and I were too busy to interfere.

It didn't take long to understand the results. Customers loved the service. Employees raved about their jobs. Sales and profits skyrocketed. Everyone was working hard but having fun, and the corporation was very happy with our results.

The big question was whether our relatively inexperienced, unconventional management team could keep things together as the operation grew to \$ billions in assets and hundreds of employees. At corporate meetings and industry conventions we often felt intimidated by the big shots with all their experience and connections. But you know what? Within a few years many of our big shot competitors were no longer in business!

Even during this "go-go" period, our leader team had its share of disagreements over issues such as work-life rules, keeping score and embracing change. When I reflect back on that period and read about the experiences of other similar organizations, I now realize that many of those issues were related to gender differences.

The unconscious wisdom of our strategy was that we found ways to work together and play off the strengths of each other. We accommodated the individual customer and employee needs while remaining focused on efficiency and consistency.

More recently, my experience at Wesleyan College, where the president and three of the six vice presidents are women, proves to me once again that women have a unique and powerful style in leading a team or organization.

Changing with the times

It's dangerous to generalize, but it's important to recognize and appreciate the different patterns in how women and men approach things. Men like to fix things by taking risks and making quick decisions. But we need to express ourselves better, engage others in decisions, persuade instead of demand, and quit treating everything as if it's black or white. We need to be kinder, and less territorial.

Women build teamwork by being collaborative, diplomatic and trusting. But they need to cut to the chase quicker, and tackle the tough things first. They must learn that "no" is not necessarily the end of negotiations, and everything cannot be a win-win solution.

Here's how this all boils down for me. I am proud to be a guy, and wouldn't change my instinctively male approach to things even if I could. But there are plenty of things I can do to be less macho and more understanding of the needs of others. I have found that women can be just as effective leaders as men, and it's about time they got more opportunity. My own experiences cause me to favor working with a mix of men and women because we accomplish more together than guys can accomplish by themselves.

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