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Leadership and the double-bind dilemma

In this chapter I'm focusing on leadership and the challenges and opportunities for women in today's business world. Having covered how our propensity to stereotype women as care givers affects women when they become mothers, I would like to now look at how this plays out in a leadership context. By using three case studies of women that I have coached, I seek to highlight the problem of thinking simplistically in terms of a feminine leadership style and a masculine leadership style. I hope to demonstrate that it's not helpful to solely associate women with a caring, nurturing style and men with a commanding, decisive style. I do, however, conclude that there might be some merit in considering the 'outsider mentality' that women experience and how this might be helpful in developing a more versatile, agile leadership style; one that's well suited to today's volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous times. To conclude, I outline the coaching model I use with all of my coaching clients and highlight the points where an appreciation of the context in which women operate is essential to orient the focus of the coaching.

Let me introduce you to Suzy.

Box 3.1 SUZY'S STORY

Suzy didn't come up through advertising the conventional way. In the UK 25 years ago, ad agencies were largely run by white men, with a preponderance of graduates from top universities, many from Oxford and Cambridge. Suzy's gender wasn't the only thing that marked her out – she had gone into advertising straight from school and so wasn't a graduate. Although this gave her many more years of commercial experience over her peers, it also helped to feed her 'imposter syndrome' – a feeling that she didn't quite measure up. She was also very aware that the prevailing leadership style in the agency where she progressed up to a fairly senior level was an 'alpha' style. Even those women who were her peers and bosses conformed to this style and Suzy, now a mum of two children, couldn't join in the evening drinks down the pub, even if she had wanted to. Suzy often marvelled at the arrant macho power-play games that her male bosses exhibited, and which seemed to work. The most powerful person, usually a man, would win the argument. But

she knew these weren't games she was either equipped or interested in joining. Becoming a mother had many positive effects on her decision-making and focus, but these were outweighed by the negative perception of not being as 'always available' as her peers who had made the decision to prioritise career over home. Although Suzy got some recognition for her great people skills and her hard work, she was getting passed over for the big jobs and when a job she felt qualified for went to another woman who seemed to fit the macho culture better she decided to take a risk and join a smaller agency where she was the CEO and where she set the tone and culture. I stayed in touch with Suzy during this transition and although she continues to self-question and work extraordinarily hard to combat her inner critic, she has found her leadership voice and is blossoming in a role where she feels she can be herself.

Suzy's story goes to the very heart of the issue about women's legitimacy in the role of leader and the pressures to conform to a certain type of leadership. As far back as the 1970s, the tendency to 'think manager, think man' (Schein, 1973) was recognised as a problem, and yet today gender stereotypes still present barriers for women being seen as leaders. In a 2020 *Forbes* article at the start of the pandemic, Dr Abbie Griffith Oliver, then an assistant professor at Georgia State University, described how she replicated an experiment every year in her class where she asks her students to think of a leader and only 5 per cent of her students, regardless of gender, distinguish a woman and 'it's typically Mother Teresa' (Anderson, 2020).

Let me now attempt to summarise a huge body of research into gendered perceptions of leadership with the following, which I think gets to the heart of the issue. Leadership is associated with what are labelled in the research as **agentic** qualities such as dominance, having a strong opinion, being highly competitive with a real focus on winning and 'taking charge'. Qualities most often associated with men. Women are associated with more **communal**, affiliative qualities and are seen as 'taking care'. This phenomenon, which you could call the 'Mother Teresa effect', has a significant impact on how women, and their suitability for leadership, are viewed.

Agentic vs communal styles

There's no doubt that Suzy's leadership style wasn't experienced as conforming to the agentic, socially dominant, hero model when she was in the original ad agency. Suzy demonstrates a much more collaborative, interpersonally sensitive orientation and often favours a more 'communal' style of leadership. She believed that the agency would actually benefit from a more collaborative, less competitive approach and possibly erred on this side partially to act as a counterpoint. Indeed, she received praise for 'being different' in this respect. And yet, when a more senior position came up for which Suzy was eminently

qualified, another woman was hired from outside for the role. Suzy rated her very highly but the principal difference she noticed was that the new hire did fit into the macho culture. She didn't have children either and so was able to join the men down the pub after work. What was notable for me as Suzy's coach was the extent to which this not only dented Suzy's confidence, but it demoralised her. While working with Suzy to 'befriend her inner critic' as a way to quell the self-doubt that the promotion of this woman had on her and to have her believe that she wasn't at fault, what became increasingly apparent was that the wind had gone out of her sails.

Impact on confidence

I see this a lot with women I coach, particularly after coming back from maternity leave, who feel overlooked but start to blame themselves, usually for not being as 24/7 available as they had previously been prior to having family commitments. Suzy's morale got so low that she confided that she had started to look for pastures new. I find that when someone has lost their confidence it's a good idea to go for some interviews. Having the chance to talk through your successes is edifying and boosts confidence. Sure enough, Suzy's confidence did seem to grow after each interview as she could tell that her brand of leading seemed to be playing well to a different audience.

Danger in binary thinking

What was noticeable to me, when I caught up with her again a year after she had settled in her new role, was that with increasing confidence, Suzy was not only able to lean into her affiliative style, but she was also balancing this with a more challenging approach. Suzy's case shows the danger of pigeon-holing people in either a supportive box or a challenging box because with coaching we can adapt our style to suit the circumstances. Although research does show that most women display more communal qualities and men more agentic qualities, it's worth bearing in mind that it's not binary. And we are not restricted to one box. Indeed, later I'll get onto the topic of style versatility, but first I would like to introduce you to Milly.

Box 3.2 MILLY'S STORY

Milly is an Australian lawyer who has no trouble speaking her mind. I met her when she was a senior associate in a London law firm looking to make partner. Her business development skills were second to none. Being a rainmaker in a law firm is a fairly unusual quality. Lawyers are not trained to sell. Many want to be recognised for the quality of the work, not their ability to schmooze

clients. Milly could do both. She was extremely client-focused and knew how to get things done at pace to deliver for the clients. She was a whirlwind of activity and having a baby hadn't affected this at all nor had it dimmed her ambition, although a few conversations with her mentor when she was off on maternity leave did worry her. It was no doubt well-meant advice, about making sure she didn't take too much time off on maternity leave and that when she came back to work to not make it obvious she had a child. Milly thought that having a child had hugely added to her life skills making her more empathic, and yet here she was being advised to play it down. What was ironic was that although her written appraisals were glowing about how 'she is simply brilliant at getting things done' and she 'has a rare talent for business development', she was also given advice about her management style and ambition. She was seen as too 'self-promoting'. Also, 'her competitive drive could turn people off, particularly when she challenged authority'. Helping Milly to reconcile these pieces of feedback was the coaching challenge.

Milly, unlike Suzy, did not conform to the communal, collaborative, team orientation profile often associated with women. On the contrary, by her own admission and in her own words she was 'decisive, assertive, self-confident, competitive and challenging'. Qualities she saw in abundance in the partners above her in the firm. The gender split of partners in city law firms tends to hover around the 20 per cent women/80 per cent men mark. So, in other words, city law firm partners are mainly men who, by and large, do get promoted on the basis of many of the qualities that Milly was being marked down for.

Double-bind dilemma

In the coaching sessions we focused on how she reconciled these contradictory pieces of advice: play down that she was a mother and therefore might be associated with nurturing qualities and play down that she was ambitious and might be associated with agentic qualities. I introduced her to the concept of the 'double-bind dilemma'. The double-bind dilemma is basically '*you're damned if you do and damned if you don't*' (Catalyst, 2007). Because the prevailing notion of women is that they are assumed to be kind, and '*motivated by stronger needs for nurturance, affiliation and succourance*' (Williams and Best, 1990), when a woman does not conform to this, she's looked at askance. As Sheryl Sandberg identified way back in her book *Lean In* (2014), a real problem for women who aspire to the top is that as they get more successful, they get less popular. This is particularly galling when their male counterparts have an entirely different experience. It works the other way. As they get more successful, they get more popular! The double bind is that if a woman shows strong agentic qualities usually associated with leadership, male leadership, she picks up negative comments about not being affiliative enough. However, if she doesn't show these agentic qualities she may be advised to 'toughen up' and may get overlooked as in Suzy's case.

Style of influencing – push and pull

I'm sure you can see the confusion for Milly. Was she really being too ambitious? Did she need to adjust her style of influence? I decided to use a very old model of influencing style conceived by Sheppard and Moscow (it has been updated and no doubt improved over time, but I still favour the original) (see Harney, 2021). It's essentially a wheel of influencing which divides behaviours into push and pull and makes the point that to be influential you need to mix your style between being able to assert crisply and be clear in your expectations (push) and being able to ask open-ended questions and good listening skills (pull). It's a model that works really well with all of my clients irrespective of gender. I have noticed that the majority of clients I coach are more on the push side. As executive coaching still remains the preserve of people further up an organisation, I believe that the prevailing leadership style in organisations does favour a push style. There was definitely merit in Milly developing more pull, i.e. slowing down a bit, canvassing more internal support, but only once she understood the gendered landscape that she was operating in and had a good feel for the double-bind dilemma. In other words, she needed to be reassured that the feeling of unfairness she was experiencing was completely valid before working on developing a more affiliative style of leadership.

Equally, Suzy needed to be reassured that her sense of failure at not conforming to the agentic style around her was also part and parcel of the same double-bind dilemma with which women have to contend. Confusing and sometimes contradictory feedback, such as Milly received, can be internalised by women and this can result in them not only leaving the company they are in but even the profession. Law firms are notorious for the exit rate of women. This is where coaches need to be fully au fait with the double-bind dilemma, lest they accidentally collude with the system and try to 'fix the women'. Highlighting for Milly the double standard unconsciously at work here was key to reducing the sense of shame I picked up she was feeling. She found it humiliating that she was viewed as 'self-promoting'. This struck me as ironic given how often when coaching women the very thing they are criticised for is not promoting themselves enough!

Code switching

A lot of the coaching assignments I take on revolve around leadership style. My work is imbued with a sense that the world would be a better place if we could recognise that although command and control has its place in a crisis, the complexity of the world we live in requires a different leadership style – one that engenders engagement and values difference rather than one that focuses on conformity. In Chapter 9 I will elaborate on this style of leadership, which is inclusive leadership. Here I would like to simply make the point that diversity is essential when it comes to corporate success. It is inextricably linked to innovation, which is the engine for growth.

Matthew Syed in his book *Rebel Ideas* (2021) shows the importance of using a pull style of influence to unlock innovative thinking. He highlights the benefit of having an 'outsider mentality'. As evidence, he points to the number of Fortune 500 companies that were founded or co-founded by immigrants. In December 2017, 43 per cent of companies rising to 57 per cent in the top 35 Fortune 500 companies were founded or co-founded by immigrants. Given that only 13 per cent of the US population are immigrants this is highly significant. Why might that be? Syed describes how 'deep familiarity with the status quo makes it psychologically difficult to deconstruct or disrupt it' (p. 141). It also makes immigrants more comfortable with risk-taking and they are likely to develop resilience and a way of looking around a problem rather than accepting it as an immutable truth.

Might we hypothesise from this that women at the top of organisations, still very much in the minority, might also have an outsider mentality? The outsider mentality Syed alludes to requires what I would describe as 'code switching' – being able to drop one set of assumptions and values and pick up on a different set. Might we also ascribe this versatility to tune into one culture and then another to women too?

Let me introduce you now to Athena.

Box 3.3 ATHENA'S STORY

Athena worked her way up the banking world from the age of 16 and, perhaps to her surprise, was now one of the top leaders in a large US financial services firm, where she worked in the risk department, when I met her as her coach. Athena seemed to cover all the bases. She pushed herself and her team really hard and was well known for her high standards and her follow-ship. You couldn't help but be impressed by her ability to read what was coming down the line as well as her ability to be seen to tow the company line while still rowing her own boat. She was extremely data driven and examined issues from all angles. She had the knack of acquiescing to her bosses' demands while still making sure that risk was mitigated by ensuring her team engaged with multiple scenario planning. She noticed that her male colleagues rarely presented multiple options but tended more towards a system of advocacy where each jockeyed and pushed for their position so that what emerged was the strongest argument. Often the final decision was taken either by the most senior person in the room or the person with the loudest voice. This didn't sit comfortably with her as she wasn't at all convinced it resulted in the right decision, but early on she realised that this was the prevailing style and so she adapted to fit in. Her leaders wanted her to 'take a position' and despite it often having been the product of many hours of statistical analysis and the canvassing of many views she could see that presenting it crisply and owning it seemed to cut more water than using a more tentative, perhaps less dogmatic approach.

Athena didn't suffer from the double-bind dilemma. This was in part because she was canny in knowing where and when to use her more affiliative side and when to use her more socially dominant side. However, she also recognised that being an openly gay woman in a very male world was helpful. She had three children but her partner worked more flexibly and did the majority of the child-care, allowing her to match the anytime/anywhere demands of the job. She had moulded her life to fit into a system that was designed for men who had wives at home picking up the domestic load. Her male bosses didn't question her judgement any more than they did her male peers, which is a phenomenon that many women experience at a senior level – more critical scrutiny. She did fit in, but this came at some cost.

Sometime after I coached her, I learned that Athena had joined a non-profit and when I caught up with her to find out more, she surprised me by describing how much 'lighter' she felt in her new, all-women environment. Her friends frequently told her how much happier, more relaxed and fulfilled she seemed. She knew that the stresses of a regulation-heavy financial services world had been taking its toll and so leaving that behind was a big part of feeling 'lighter', but she also talked about the significant effort she had had to put in to 'covering' when she was operating at the most senior level. This had nothing to do with her sexuality, she had been out for a long time at work, but instead, she could feel she wasn't authentically part of this advocacy culture where the loudest voice, or the best argument won. In other words, she had to 'code switch' to fit in. But ultimately this wasn't fulfilling for her. She wanted to work in a more affiliative culture where ideas were worked on together more collaboratively; where it was ok to say that you don't know and where it was better understood that disagreement wasn't a threat to someone's ego; where tentative language was well received rather than assumed to be a reflection of insecurity. She moved to find a culture that fitted around her rather than stay in one that she had to fit into. It makes me wonder how many other late-stage career women might feel the same disillusionment with corporate cultures that remain entrenched in an outmoded way of leading?

So, are women better leaders?

There were a spate of articles in 2020 that pointed to how different political leaders handled Covid-19 and suggested that women seem to have handled it more successfully (see, for example, Zenger and Folkman, 2021). This line of argument might not be as helpful to women as you might think at first view.

I, for one, am delighted that some kind of analysis of the leadership styles of our political leaders is making headlines and I'm equally delighted that a case for more women leaders is being put forward. However, conflating the two might actually be harmful rather than helpful. By associating women with the stereotypical traits of nurturing and affiliation, we are reinforcing bias in the system not uprooting it. What women want is to be the leader they want to be. Men, sometimes less competent men, make it to the top because they can

display either agentic or communal behaviours and are given the benefit of the doubt either way.

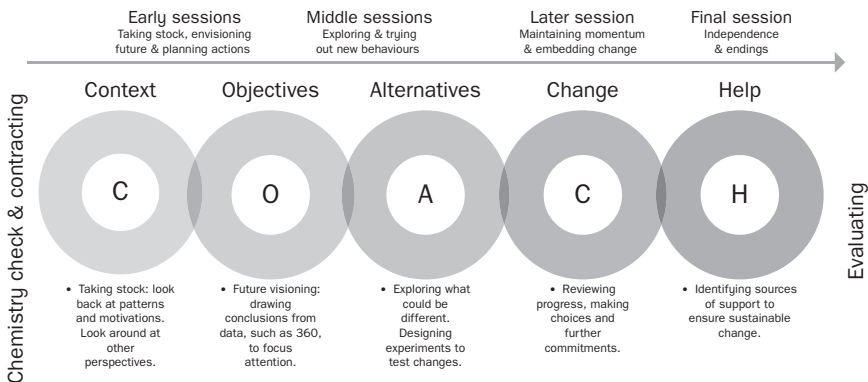
In drawing together the three case studies of Suzy, Milly and Athena, I hope to have illustrated the complexity of the barriers facing women in leadership positions. On the one hand you have Suzy and Milly, both of whom came up against the double-bind dilemma. And then you have Athena who, like successful immigrants, had learned the necessary agility to ‘code switch’ from one perspective to another allowing her to develop a versatile style which is well suited to our VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) times. Might women leaders, having developed this versatility of style, start to be recognised in order that they can become the role models for others coming through? Or might they give up on a system that seems to be changing too slowly and join other companies, like Suzy and Athena, where their style of leadership is valued and where they can flourish? Or will they start new companies where they can role model the change in culture they want to see?

What can coaches do?

The examples I’ve used in this chapter are women who were already in leadership positions and so much of the work I was doing with them as a coach was to walk alongside them as they navigated their path through different challenges. When I consider the methodology I used to help these women develop their leadership skills they do not differ from those that I deploy when coaching men. At ECC, we developed a model for coaching based on the GROW (goals, reality, objectives and way forward) model developed by Sir John Whitmore (1992), see Figure 3.1.

The GROW model seemed to us to introduce the goal setting too early. Our own model adds in context before we get down to the business of setting objectives. This allows us to help our coachee tell their story and consider multiple perspectives before zeroing in on their goals.

Figure 3.1 The COACH model



In coaching one must always be alive to the impact of the system in which the coachee is operating. However, I do feel that it's even more important when coaching women leaders, my reasoning being that too few women are leaders largely because the system needs fixing and so I'm alert for occasions where women are imbibing those faults and attributing them to their own shortfalls instead of recognising them for what they are.

When I think about how I coached Suzy, Milly and Athena I followed the ECC model of coaching which I use with all my coachees, irrespective of gender. However, particularly in the early stages of coaching, my questioning approach may reveal that I'm keeping a weather eye on the gender dynamic. Here I show how I might go about this.

Context

When it comes to the contracting session, I'm interested in how they lay out the challenges facing them. I like to ask, 'what brings me here to discuss coaching with you?' to elicit their objectives for the coaching and what they are looking to get out of it. I'm curious to get beneath the presenting issue for coaching and dig deeper to ascertain what's led them there. With women I'm interested in whether they draw attention to the gendered world in which they work. I think it's important to reinforce here that although the majority of my clients are in industries that are heavily male dominated, when I'm coaching at a senior level most of the women I coach are in the minority irrespective of the industry and so they are usually in the 'out-group'. But is that how they see it?

Are they describing their context in gendered terms? Are they referencing barriers to their progress that relate to the cultural context in which they are working? I look out for whether they are seeing their success and failures as entirely self-driven or whether they refer to extraneous factors impinging on their successes. Do they exemplify more agentic behaviours, or do they lean more to an affiliative style? When coaching leaders, I like to enquire what their vision of successful leadership looks like, who their role models are, and who inspires them.

I'm conscious of the stage of their career at which they have arrived. It's my experience that more junior women are less conscious of systemic bias and the older women get the more aware of it they become. But not all women. Those who have succeeded in the system often support it. I will elaborate on this later in the book when I discuss the concept of the 'broken bridge', i.e. the notion that women do not see the challenges facing them in the same light.

In my first session with coachees I focus on the 'lifeline exercise' where my client tells me their story. I feel this is an area ripe for picking up clues as to the coachee's frame of reference, their understanding of what's made them successful and their insight into the challenges they have met. The purpose of the lifeline exercise is to establish what characterises a high and a low as defined by them. I help them to see patterns that have led to highs and lows, and I help them to figure out what they've learned from the lows. Irrespective of whether

my client is a man or a woman, I find the questions I ask tend to be the same. If I had to point to any gender differences in my experience of doing this, and I examined many of the completed lifelines from past coaching assignments to come to this conclusion, I found that more women name people in their lifelines than men do and more men don't include the personal line at all. But essentially my coaching technique does not differ depending on gender.

Objectives

At this stage in my executive coaching assignments, I involve the manager as well as other colleagues in a 360 review of how the person I'm coaching is doing. Often it involves an in-person three-way review with their manager. I'm super-vigilant in these three-ways for the dynamic between them. Does the manager favour an agentic style and my coachee an affiliative one? I'm fascinated by the interplay of gender between the parties involved in these meetings. I think it's crucial to be attuned to this dynamic and three-ways offer a great opportunity for seeing it play out. The 360 feedback is a potential minefield of systemic bias and also a golden opportunity for introducing the potential for double-bind dilemma that I referred to earlier. I find 360 feedback reviews have often resulted in the richest of conversations about prevailing cultures and their impact on the expected behaviour of the person I'm coaching.

Once we have completed the 360 review, we agree the objectives. Although these incorporate the manager's view because it's a critical part of the jigsaw, in that they are often representing the company view, it's vital that the individual's long-term goals and aspirations are explored first before we settle on their objectives. I find that women more often describe their goals in more relational terms than men do. Again, in my experience, I've noticed that their aspirations tend to be more holistic and their version of success tends to incorporate a wider context than men's do. Recent research (Sasson, 2021) supports this and makes the point that women in their study had more 'other-focused goals'. This may be changing, as I find myself coaching male leaders brought up in a different paradigm where there is more blurring between gender roles. The same study previously quoted also alludes to that shift and summarised it as: '[i]t seems that there could be some progressiveness over the years regarding gender roles in society. Women today set personal excellence goals like men; however, they do not give up the traditional roles and strive to excel in them as well.'

Only once we've looked further out and started to home in on what the person's purpose is do I then feel we can draw up some meaningful objectives for the coaching. I'll talk more about purpose in the next chapter.

In conclusion

I've known women leaders who have selected men as coaches to help them 'navigate the system' – the underlying logic being that if you need to be a man

to succeed then you need a man to show you how to behave in a more ‘masculine’ way. In other words, if you can’t beat them, join them. But that risks perpetuating the norm and doesn’t encourage women leaders to tap into their own leadership signature and purpose, which I believe will ultimately serve them better.

I believe that a clearer insight into the gendered landscape facing them will equip them to better act as role models for those women beneath them providing an inspiring picture of how women can lead authentically without covering, fitting in or, as it was described by one woman lawyer in our ‘Women in the City’ research (ECC, 2015), ‘outmanning the men’. Intervening early to encourage women to be the change they want to see is vital. If you don’t start there you are likely to collude with the system and merely reinforce women’s sense of not measuring up. For coaches, the mantra ‘Don’t fix the women’ must be paramount whether the coach is a man or a woman.

I’ve focused on this chapter on three women that were already leaders when I met them. In all cases they had already charted their course to leadership and all three of them remain in leadership positions today, but they are still in the minority with respect to gender. What about women earlier in their career? How do you intervene earlier to ensure more women become leaders in the first place and how can coaching help? To discuss becoming a leader, one has to consider identity and so in the next chapter I’m looking at how you formulate a leadership identity and the importance of purpose when it comes to helping women step into their leadership.

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