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## Opinion

# Do men and women differ in leadership styles?



Generally, society associates successful leadership with stereotypical 'masculine' traits like assertiveness and dominance. In the 1970's, Virginia Schein came up with the phrase 'think manager, think male' – but does this still ring true in today's society, asks **Jodi Savage**

I vividly remember a great 'Ban Bossy' campaign a couple of years ago, to deflect the message that a powerful woman should be defined as bossy. It starred Victoria Beckham who stated: 'It is thought-provoking that a man in charge may be described as commanding, however a woman in the same situation may be called bossy'. In my opinion this still exists in the current workplace and, indeed, in society.

But, on the flip side, when a man shows his softer side or is perhaps visibly upset by something he may be seen as 'girly'.

But, what defines masculine and feminine leadership styles? There has

been much research into the difference in leadership traits across the two genders. Traditionally typically male leaders are described as strong, strategic and confident and women as nurturing, empathetic and loyal (1). Apparently men are more independent and women more social. Men are better at strategic leading and women better at multi-tasking and prioritising (2). All of these skills and qualities are essential for a successful management team and a blend of these, and other attributes, make for a stronger team. So, if women and men really do have different leadership styles then surely this makes a compelling case for a more gender balanced workforce – particularly in the senior team?

When I look around the, predominantly male, senior team at Wabtec I see a wide range of leadership styles. Can I see more of difference between the styles of these individuals? Absolutely. Can I see a difference



between the men and women? Honestly, no.

### Look beyond gender

In the rail sector, where females represent just 16 per cent of the total workforce and only 0.6 per cent of senior positions (Women in Rail report, 2015), do senior females, or those aspiring to be, feel the need to behave in a more masculine way

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in order to be successful? Almost all of their peers and seniors are likely to be male so it would be easy to associate success with being a man. Looking at the strengths and qualities of those above us can be a great self-development exercise. But it's important that we look beyond the gender for the true values which makes these people successful.

The rail industry has some brilliant senior figures – Karen Boswell, MD at Hitachi Rail UK; Zena Dent, projects and technical director at Porterbrook; Clare Burles, people director at Virgin. These women all have very different leadership styles but their shared quality, in my opinion, is their integrity. They know what they're talking about, they are confident and loyal. These women are fantastic role-models. We have some really brilliant male role-models too and it's important that we have a real mixture of senior figures to inspire and develop the future leaders of the rail industry.

What we need to ensure is that we increase the number of women in leadership roles, so our workforce can look up to a balanced senior team. It is through this that we can change the unconscious perception that seniority bears a male face. This will take time,



given the current gender split. While we tackle our skills gap, the mentoring process will help to expose our people to the different shapes and sizes of leadership. We have come a long way from the professional landscape of Schein's 70's, let's work together to ensure that rail benefits from the wealth of great leaders in the industry, both male and female.

Jodi Savage is sales account manager at Wabtec Rail and a board member of Women in Rail

1. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/cutting-edge-leadership/201003/do-men-and-women-lead-differently-whos-better>.
2. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/sebastianbailey/2014/07/23/who-makes-a-better-leader-a-man-or-a-woman/#3161b1599676>

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