Gender Based Leadership Styles in the Healthcare Field

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Introduction

The differences between leadership styles have long been studied in various professions all over the world. It has long been a topic of interest for organizations in order to recognize what kinds of leaders will benefit the organization the most. The history behind leadership styles and theory started to develop in the early 1800’s. Leadership was defined in ways that reflected a trend towards male dominance in society which reflects traditional views of leadership. Historically, men were always considered to be leaders while women were considered more as home makers and care givers. This trend carried over into various areas such as politics and organizations. Leadership theory was first defined around which kinds of male characteristics would be needed for success as a leader because in those times, females comprised less than five percent of management positions. Also, the character traits associated with women in those times such as caring and nurturing were attributed with the abilities of a leader. This social bias toward the male as leader influenced societies around the world.

Eventually, those that researched leadership theory started rejecting this traditional approach and started to theorize that traits alone were not enough to characterize effective leadership. They started to focus on behavior-based styles such as democratic, autocratic, and laissez faire. As these theories grew, researchers in the 1990’s also started to look at gender differences in leadership. While this research started to raise awareness of women as managers, it did very little to deter the traditional belief that male characteristics were needed to be an effective leader.

Even with all the progress our society has made towards trying to bridge the gap between gender inequities in the business world, there is still a huge gap between the numbers of male verses female organizational leaders. This paper will focus on the differences between male and
female leadership styles in healthcare and the gender disparities that exist in the healthcare industry.

**Common Male Leadership Traits**

As with many other career paths, the male dominated leadership styles still follow the traditional thought about what makes an effective leader. These traits are most commonly associated with men as the “ideal” leadership traits. Men are most commonly associated with traits such as being task-oriented, autocratic, transactional oriented, aggressive, assertive, and competitive. While these are traits that can be found in women, they are most commonly associated as being common among male leaders. Many believe still believe that a good leader is at the top of the organizational hierarchy, is decisive in leading their people, assigns tasks with close supervision, and create organizational environments that are more competitive in nature as opposed to collaborative. Transactional leaders have tendencies toward watching employee performance, correcting and disciplining when necessary, and then rewarding employees only when organizational goals or objectives are met. This style has the drawback that many times it is dominated by micromanagement and employees that are motivated by fear and are rarely recognized for being valuable parts of an organization. While this can still yield results, many times it leads to organizations that are highly bureaucratic and inflexible and unwilling to change as industry needs dictate. The healthcare field is littered with this type of management style. Men dominate as healthcare managers and administrators and from my experience are characterized be the traits explained earlier. This is not to characterize all healthcare leaders that way or even in a negative light. Many are very good at achieving results within their organizations. But the lack of a prevalence of other leadership traits begs the question that other styles would or could be more effective.
Common Female Leadership Traits

While female leaders can have many of the traits that are commonly associated with men, there are more common traits associated with female leaders. These traits over time have been found, through research, to be associated with effective leadership. Women demonstrate behaviors that demonstrate cooperation or agreement with others in an organization and tend to be more democratic as opposed to autocratic. Women are more commonly referred to as being more caring, nurturing, communicative, friendly, expressive, pleasant, and socially sensitive. Historically, these character traits have not been associated with effective leadership. In fact, many in traditional business believe that they are associated with weak leaders that are not capable of making tough decisions. While men are associated with a transactional leadership style, studies have shown that women are more commonly associated with transformational leadership. It is because of their commonly associated characteristic traits that they naturally fall into the transformational leadership style. Transformational leadership is associated with shared influence and collaboration among stakeholders in the organization as opposed to the power and authority more associated with the transactional style where a leader is at the top of the organizational hierarchy. Some research has shown that transformational leaders are more successful and produce better organizational and financial results than transactional leaders. In the health care field these traits have served women well. Women as caregivers that are caring, nurturing, and socially sensitive have demonstrated leadership that has impacted healthcare through the ages. Women such as Florence Nightingale and Margaret Sanger overcame the traditional negative stereotypes and barriers. However, as healthcare became a business, the traditionally dominated male leadership took over within these organizations and while women comprised the majority of healthcare workers, few rose to the top of the leadership chain. The
question remains of why, even in light of research that shows women favor leadership styles that have proven to be equally effective as men, do they still continue to be less represented among healthcare leadership and leadership in all businesses in general?

**Gender Disparity**

The 2010 census data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) shows that of 7,805,000 healthcare and technical workers, 74.3% are female. The data statistics from the BLS show that for all types of businesses only 25.5% hold CEO positions nationally and those in the health care field is at roughly 12%. This data also reports that women in comparatively similar positions earn 18% less when all other things are equal except for gender. Some reasons for this imbalance between genders in healthcare leadership may be due to management and leadership that favors the traditional male leadership traits, a lack of appreciation for diversity in organizational culture including gender, barriers that impede the ambition of women leaders and discourages future leaders, and lack of an institutional mission and focus on alleviating gender inequality. The healthcare industry has also been historically bureaucratic and hierarchical like so many other businesses that created their business models like the early industrial age factories. That coupled with the way this traditional leadership belief, has led healthcare administrators to still view females in the healthcare profession as most suited to nurses and other care-giver occupations within the healthcare system. This will likely continue to create an imbalance of opportunities for female leaders in healthcare even when they have the same as or superior qualifications as their male counterparts.

**Conclusion**

It is clear that a gender imbalance exists in the healthcare industry and has existed for the last thirty years. This is not likely to change unless practitioners and leaders within the healthcare
system make a focused effort to make changes. These changes must occur at a cultural level within the system. Much lip service has been paid about recognizing that this is a problem among healthcare workers, but no cultural change has actually taken place. Healthcare organizations must make it a priority to recognize that both male and female leaders have characteristic traits that benefit their organizations. In today’s healthcare environment, it is becoming even more important to have leaders that also embody a transformational leadership style that encourages better communication and collaboration with those in the organization and supports and promotes those leaders that show effective leadership skills that lead to achievement of organizational mission, vision and strategic initiatives.
References


