

# INSIGHTS INTO WOMEN'S MINDS:

## NAVIGATING THE WORKPLACE WITH POWER AND PURPOSE

By Brandi McIlvenny Clarke

When I was tasked with crafting an article for International Women's Day, I felt both liberated and daunted by the opportunity to explore any topic. So I consulted with some respected industry peers to understand the challenges women face in the workplace today, and one recurring theme stood out—being authentic while being judged based on gender norms and leadership stereotypes. Women often have to balance societal expectations with their own emotions, fearing they'll be seen as either too bold or not bold enough—and in many cases, they're told as much. It's disheartening that we're still discussing this paradoxical dilemma of women and leadership, a topic that has persisted for decades.

In the realm of leadership, we've long clung to a certain image: the assertive, decisive leader who exudes confidence and effortlessly takes charge. It's a stereotype deeply ingrained in our collective psyche, a model against which many aspiring leaders measure themselves. But as society evolves and our understanding of leadership grows, it's becoming increasingly clear that this archetype doesn't quite capture the full spectrum of leadership potential, especially when it comes to women taking the helm—and mark these very words, we are!

Imagine a diverse group of women leaders, each with her own unique background, personality, and approach to leadership. Some may exude assertiveness and take charge with confidence (a 'pitbull'), while others lead with empathy and collaboration (a 'pushover'). There's no one-size-fits-all formula for leadership success among women, just as there isn't for men. Despite this diversity, women must navigate a bevy of expectations and biases, continuously juggling conflicting demands and judgments, and feeling restricted within the confines of a metaphorical leadership box.



On one hand, women are expected to embody nurturing qualities, to be empathetic and compassionate leaders who prioritize the well-being of their teams. On the other hand, they're also expected to be assertive and decisive, to command respect and authority in the boardroom. It's a delicate balancing act, one that often leaves women feeling frustrated and suffocated—our frequency laying low.

While men are celebrated for showing empathy and sensitivity, women can be perceived as too emotional or soft if they exhibit similar traits. It's a double standard that puts women at a disadvantage, forcing them to navigate the workplace with caution lest they be labeled as "weak" or "unfit" for leadership roles...enter the glass cliff.

Despite these challenges, women continue to redefine what it means to be a leader, breaking down barriers and paving the way for future generations. They bring a unique blend of qualities to the table—empathy, resilience, adaptability—that are invaluable in today's rapidly changing world. Women leaders aren't just passionate and creative but also super resourceful and great at problem-solving. They're the ones who drive progress and innovation by thinking outside the box and tackling challenges head-on. But here's the thing: you have to give them the space to do it. Sure, some will take it without hesitation, but it shouldn't be such a hassle to include them.

So, you may be asking: What steps can companies take to support and empower female leaders? Initially, they can challenge conventional leadership norms and foster an inclusive culture that values diverse leadership styles. This entails offering mentorship opportunities, encouraging open dialogue, and promoting work-life balance. Companies should also address unconscious biases and ensure equal opportunities for advancement, guaranteeing women have a seat at decision-making tables.

While some of these practices may seem commonplace and already implemented within your organization, it's essential not to assume uniformity across all companies. In some instances, despite outward claims, organizations may falter in their support for female leaders. Thus, seeking input from female leaders is crucial. Embrace their perspectives, remain receptive to their insights, and approach discussions with empathy and openness.

By redefining our leadership expectations and fostering environments conducive to female success, we unlock their full potential, paving the way for a more equitable future. It's imperative to commit wholeheartedly to creating spaces where every woman can thrive, free from the burden of unjust expectations. And let's not forget, forming a committee of women and expecting them to shoulder additional research and duties beyond their current roles isn't sufficient.

The essence lies in breaking down barriers, challenging biases, and discarding antiquated ideals. Let's engage in self-reflection, ask difficult questions, and gain a profound understanding of what our leaders truly need to excel. Through these endeavours, we not only pave a path to success for ourselves but also uplift our organizations and communities.

I encourage you to embark on this journey with open hearts and minds, recognizing that efforts today will undoubtedly yield a brighter tomorrow for all. And remember, empowering women to have a seat at the table doesn't diminish anyone else's portion of the pie.

