

Build the best team by embracing gender equality

By [Helene Smuts](#)

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Some of the defining characteristics of a woman are the very qualities that we look for in great leaders - empathy, collaboration and problem solving. These are qualities that women, if they aren't born with them, cultivate throughout their lives.



Helene Smuts, founder of Credo Growth

Yet, surprisingly, women hold significantly fewer high-profile leadership positions. Women make up only [20% of directors](#) who serve on the boards of listed companies, and of the country's 40 largest listed companies, [only one has a female CEO](#).

These statistics are even more surprising, because McKinsey's [Delivering Through Diversity](#) report has found a positive link between diversity (gender equality and mixed cultures among leadership) and financial performance.

Instead, companies invest significant time and money in training their predominantly male executives to develop skills that 50% of their workforce already employ – just by being female. This is not to say men don't have great leadership qualities, but rather that a diverse team, representative of both genders, is far more valuable than the alternative.

Natural leadership

The value that women bring to leadership roles exists in many forms. In today's world we really need inclusive and collaborative leadership. Women naturally find it easier to show empathy and do this through active listening and a real sense of understanding when someone is struggling.

Through their body language, women appear to show less dominance and aggression. Women also tend to be more open and vulnerable – characteristics that are fundamental ingredients in building trust. Women have the tendency to allow an environment where people can ask questions, make mistakes and learn from it, offer better or different ideas and challenge the status quo. All of these are present in a psychologically safe work environment – a term identified by Amy Edmondson, which speaks to the belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes.

Due to the many roles that women fill – professionals, caregivers and partners – they tend to be naturally good problem solvers. As anyone who has raised a toddler will know, crises often happen and mothers need to think on their feet. This skill is transferable to the workplace, along with the adaptability and flexibility women often develop in the family context.

Another important quality that women bring to leadership roles is a sense of team work and collaboration. This is in part because the empathy that women are easily able to access makes them more likely to ensure everyone feels included, but it's also because women are more likely to have to build a strong support network for them to climb the corporate ladder.

Stepping into her power

But leading as a woman is about much more than taking up an executive position at work. It's about stepping into your power in whatever role you find yourself in – be it in the workplace, at home with your family, or in social situations.

Invest in your personal development in the form of coaching, mentoring and understanding your personality style. This will help you understand why you respond the way you do, and how to create a space for other personality styles. After all, you can't step into your power if you're not willing to do the work.

But in the meantime, there are a few easy-to-implement tricks to help women develop their leadership skills:

- Don't apologise for having an opinion. Women often give their opinion and then apologise for it. This way we are just inviting others to not think highly of your opinion. Don't break yourself down during a moment of confidence.
- Find a mentor. This will challenge your thinking and ensure you have a support structure. Look for someone who is willing to give you feedback. And then accept the feedback gracefully and use it as a development tool.
- Play the game. If you're involved in a decision-making meeting, strategise how you're going to approach the meeting to present your opinion. Don't shy away from difficult discussions or change the topic to avoid conflict.

Having women in leadership positions is simply about equality – it's about having the best of both worlds. Different genders bring different qualities, and all of them are important in leading high-performing teams.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Helene Smuts, founder of Credo Growth

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