

THE NEW NORMAL REQUIRES NEW LEADERSHIP – FEMALE LEADERS AS FRONTRUNNERS FOR A STRENGTH-ORIENTED ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

In the course of the rapidly increasing virtualization and current uncertainty, existing management models are changing. In times of Covid-19, the change is witnessed especially through the media, as politicians are being taken under the loop and critically assessed for their crisis management efforts. New leadership skills such as emotional intelligence, solidarity and closeness are required. Countries like New Zealand, Germany, Taiwan, Finland or Iceland are being praised worldwide for their effective and successful crisis management. But what do these countries all have in common? Female political leaders at the top.

The secret weapon in times of crisis and uncertainty

No, the successful management of this crisis by female leaders does not necessarily mean that women are better leaders. However, what we can learn from female leadership is the importance of having leaders with strong emotional intelligence and able to lead and communicate decisively but with empathy.

Contrary to popular gender stereotypes, emotional intelligence and other soft skills should not be gender-based and are in fact determining factors for successful leadership. Clear communication, transparent work and consistent presence create trust within society. Decisions based on solidarity are more easily accepted and enforced by the community. These insights are also of utmost importance to the executive level of companies.

We interviewed three successful women and learned how they operate in their management positions. Christiane Noll, France Dequibec and Ipek Ozsuer share insights on how women, as well as organizations in general can lead successful teams.

Counteracting prejudices

In the business world, female managers are still often belittled when compared to their male colleagues for possessing precisely the qualities that come into play during times like these. Empathy and mindfulness are unfortunately still often considered a weakness in the business environment. This results in one of the greatest misinterpretations: That women will only be successful if they adapt to their male colleagues - and the male-dominated leadership model. Our interviewees strongly recommend counteracting this believe. Especially now, in times of uncertainty, women should use their feminine qualities more confidently than ever, be authentic and courageous in order to gain trust and respect. „ Do not give up your values, your ethics.“, advises Ms. Dequibec, Managing Director at Female Executive Search. „Let your work speak on your behalf,“ adds Ms. Ozsuer, CIO and Head of Digital Transformation at Bayer: „you need to trust your qualities... It's not about your physical look, it's about your personality and what you do.“ Women should first learn to lead themselves and speak for themselves before they are truly able to lead others successfully. Likewise, Ms. Noll, Country Manager of Avanade, Austria states: „You don't have to wear suits in order to lead.“ If you wear your favorite skirt to the next meeting and feel all male eyes on you when you enter the room, don't even question whether you are taken seriously at all. Own it.

Do not let the lack of flexibility due to e.g. reduced temporary work models or responsibility towards your children, restrict you. Change your perspective instead: "It doesn't mean that what you deliver is not good enough," says Ms. Ozsuer with conviction. Ms. Noll illustrates this importance directly: "You have to stand up, speak your mind, own up to it." It is up to you to take the floor, take on new tasks and proactively demand a leadership role in the team. Women have already proven to be

successful through an empathetic leadership style. By learning to trust themselves and their potential, women can lead through confidence as well.

Building on individual strengths for joint success

The gender-specific debate on management styles makes it clear that stereotypical attributions for women and men prevail in companies. Each dimension of a leadership style can at times be interpreted as a strength and also a weakness. Ms. Noll acknowledges this: "Empathy is often a strength of women. It can however also become a burden in decision-making, turning it into a weakness as well. I see the optimal combination in bringing together the strengths from different worlds. The leadership team of man and woman is a very beautiful combination."

Addressing gender-specific challenges in your company in everyday working life and offering tailored initiatives for women and men is the first step in the right direction. Special trainings, seminars, and communication measures addressing topics like stereotypes, prejudices, and the balance between work and family life are tailored initiatives companies can offer. This approach should be extended across the team in order to foster and harness the strengths of every single individual.

Show the benefits generated by individual strengths, interdisciplinary teams and new perspectives, to create a mindset supportive of diversity across all levels.

Because once diversity is embedded, the gender debate is no longer an issue. Therefore, every team must aim at inclusion.

Regardless of age or gender, it is through diversity that different views come together to create new perspectives to be integrated. As Ms. Ozsuer elaborates: "Every individual brings diversity. And it's not only about the gender, it's about the culture and races, the experiences and their personality." Ms. Dequilbec sums it up: „ A significant competitive advantage can be achieved if an integrative corporate culture is proactively developed."

Our tips for an inclusive organizational culture

Now more than ever, leaders experience the importance of close collaborating teams even in unfamiliar situations or virtual working environments to collectively strive towards common goals. Embracing diversity and standing up for it is one of our most important tasks. Now more than ever, it is essential to build and leverage on the strengths of each leader and team member.

- **Build up trust and solidarity:**
Through regular, open and transparent communication you create a solid relationship based on trust within your team even in challenging times.
- **Foster individuality:**
Inspire and strengthen your team to courageously share individual skills and competencies. Transform your weaknesses into strengths - set an example by stepping out of your comfort zone.
- **Establish collaborative development:**
Enable the use of coaching, mentoring or reverse mentoring formats within the team. Team members can advise and learn from each other and develop strategies together.

We would like to thank our interview partners and role models for female leaders:

- Christiane Noll, Country Manager (**Avanade Austria**)
- France Dequilbec, Managing Director (**Female Executive Search by CEO Worldwide**)
- Ipek Ozsuer, CIO and Head of Digital Transformation (**Bayer**)

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