



Do female leaders really cooperate with other women?

'THERE IS A SPECIAL PLACE IN HELL FOR WOMEN WHO DON'T HELP OTHER WOMEN', FORMER US SECRETARY OF STATE MADELEINE ALBRIGHT ONCE SAID. DR GISÈLE SZCZYGLAK, CEO AND FOUNDER OF WLC PARTNERS ASKS IF AND WHY THIS IS THE CASE, AND SUGGESTS THAT PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES ARE ONE SOLUTION

It is often said that within professional networks and women's groups, women in top positions do not help other women break through the glass ceiling. Is this a fact, an individual opinion, an isolated case or a rumour? We could start by considering pioneering female leaders. When women began to get promoted and to gain more senior positions within organisations, they had little support. The rules were made by men and opportunities for women were scarce. They had to adopt a stereotypical masculine manner when conducting business and leading. They had to be tougher than men to prove themselves and succeed. Pioneering women who over-compensate to conform to male leadership behaviour are sometimes not perceived by other women as being as helpful and empathetic as they should be. On one hand women often say: 'I don't want to be like her. The way this female leader is behaving in the work arena isn't who I am'. On the other hand the same women say, 'but I would like to reach a senior leadership position too!' Generally speaking, women are aware of the lack of female role models in top management and senior positions. Women's expectations of female leaders are very high and they think that cooperation between women should prevail over competitiveness. The reality, however, is somewhat different. What matters most within organisations is the business game and competitiveness. Pioneering

women in top positions have had to really fight to reach the top, regardless of the gender of the people they came up against. They strive to be exemplar leaders and might be tougher with other women because they don't want it said that they have favoured women over men. They want first and foremost to be seen as excellent leaders – and not regarded as female leaders. Many women leaders want

‘[A] collaborative approach, which allows women to share expertise, experience and offer advice, is highly constructive in the quest for women to help other women to advance in their careers.’

to hold on to their position and do not want to share the status they have with other women and men. Not only do women have to face natural competitiveness in the workplace and competitiveness linked to their gender (women versus men), but also there is a third type of competitiveness: women against women. This manifests itself as a lack of cooperation to help other women to achieve. It could stem from upbringing and education – the way little girls learn to manage conflict. They take it too personally and too many emotions

are attached. Women are not educated to consider other women as partners in the way that men do. Men think along the lines of: 'you do me a favour and I will do you a favour'. This could be referred to as 'a boy band culture'. Conversely, in an attempt to get ahead, women tend to work alone and not ask for favours from other women. They tend to be less opportunistic and do not adapt the same strategy when advancing in their careers. In their private lives, women are known to be collaborative. This, however, does not apply in the workplace. It is only fairly recently that women have begun to make communities in the professional arena. The successful emergence of so many professional networks for women demonstrates the great need for strong communication and collaboration among women. These communities operate as think tanks and address topics such as change management, leadership models, governance and the work/life balance, and are of benefit to both men and women. This collaborative approach, which allows women to share expertise, experience and offer advice, is highly constructive in the quest for women to help other women to advance in their careers. Women's networks also employ collective intelligence and empowerment strategies to engage more effectively with men, and to bring about a positive change in culture and to help eliminate gender competitiveness within the workplace. ■