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Dear Reader,

Last month's issue ("Threatening Leaders") brought some interesting reactions from readers. The comments we received all had something in common: the question "What about the Alpha Females?" So I realized we owed our readers a reaction. After some research, I've discovered that the topic was much more complex than it seemed. Then came this letter, which we are including in this issue with permission of the author. To talk about an "Alpha Female" is to classify women with a male category – which is not uncommon, but nevertheless may not be the best way to go. So get ready to discover how a successful woman thinks about herself.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy
Editor

Quote of the Month

<i>"Success is all in the mind"</i>



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Alpha Females

By Anne C.

In your last issue, you showed how alpha males are defined by their success, leading position, high performance expectation toward them and others. You describe them as having plenty of vision and drive, they are pushers and data-driven, action-oriented and get the results they strive for. They don't go unnoticed when entering a room, and can have an inhibiting effect upon the initiative and development of potential in others in their environment.

As I was reading the article, I couldn't help but doing some introspection, as I felt that several of those

characteristics were my own attributes. I can think of myself as a successful executive woman, definitely results oriented, and with high expectations towards myself and others. I have received feedback about my smart perspectives and I have been rewarded for several intelligent decisions. I have to add, I also have received feedback about my presence being intimidating for men and for some women. And while this is not written in the 360° feedback forms, I know some think I'm bossy, while others think I'm too manly.

So what am I? Am I an Alpha Female? Am I bossy or am I assertive and bright?

I have always been intrigued by this question, as I'm carving daily my own identity. I once read that the alpha female is based on the male model, and she is to be found in the boardrooms, "impersonating his bullying and overriding ambition", but that there are very few alpha females of this order, since most women have had the alpha-male qualities "conditioned out of them and have been steered towards nurturing roles rather than world domination". I can see snapshots of scenes where I had to make my point with assertiveness in a meeting where my male colleagues were looking at me from the side. I wouldn't have been listened to if I didn't have that assertiveness, that powerful unemotional stance. And I know that I was judged for it – I was not behaving like a woman (should behave). And yet- my points were accepted and proven successful...

It is true, alpha women are not popular. Novelist Fay Weldon says they are "too focused on success to get married", and they terrify men. There are not many trying to be like them, while there are a lot of men behaving the same way, competing with each other and trying to reach the top. And if movies are a mirror of social perceptions, I noticed that in Hollywood films any female character with alpha-male attributes is a monster, an anti-heroine (Glenn Close in "Fatal Attraction", Lynda Fiorentino in "The Last Seduction"). ***Who Wants to be an Alpha Female?***

Most women are demure when praised for their achievements. Research shows that such behavior varies according to social context: Women more openly seek and compete for affirmation when they are with other women, but behave differently when competing with men. The underlying problem has to do with cultural ideals of femininity. Women face the reality that to appear feminine, they must provide or relinquish scarce resources to others--and recognition is a scarce resource. Although women have more opportunities than ever before, they still come under social scrutiny that makes hard choices--such as when and whether to start a family or advance in the workplace--even harder. There are no easy solutions, but there are ways women can hold fast to their dreams. They must band together, learn to blow their own horns, and structure their lives in a way that promotes recognition.

That is not the dream I am after – it is rather the nightmare haunting me when I get those looks from my male colleagues, or when I get the feedback reports. I don't want to be a man or a monster; I want to be successful in what I'm good at.

Recently I learned about a survey where white middle class students were asked to choose from a list of adjectives, which best described women and which men. The attributes to define femininity were all related to providing something for another person (i.e. yielding, cheerful, sensitive to others' needs, understanding, etc) while those that defined masculinity were related to strength, self reliance, defending one's beliefs, leadership abilities, etc.) The adjectives imply that it is key for a man to assert himself over others. Nothing wrong with doing it.

I think of my performance appraisals and how appreciated it is when I am supportive of my subordinates, when I'm a good team player. Actually, I put special attention to groom these attributes. I haven't figured out what to do with my own ambitions to be self reliant, independent, analytical, defending my beliefs, showing leadership abilities....

Source: Anna Fels, Do Women Lack Ambition?, HBR April 2004

I've read that something happens with women and ambition, that there are dramatic differences between men and women in their attitudes toward ambition and in how they create and realize (or abandon) their goals. Going back in time, I was a kid with ambitions. So was my brother, and so was my little sister, the three of us grew up dreaming big dreams for ourselves; he wanted to be a president, my sister wanted to be an astronaut and I wanted to be a diplomat. Then came college and after that, it was our turn to decide. My brother pursued his dream, going into politics. He may be a president one day. I dropped the idea of being a diplomat because I couldn't see myself dragging a husband and kids through different countries every so many years. I found a promising corporate job, that didn't interfere with my partner's career. My sister chose to raise a family. In the eyes of our parents, my brother did what was expected, my sister did what was right and I did what was nice (not necessarily right). Things only got worse the day my partner had a career opportunity that he couldn't neglect, and it meant that we had to move to Asia. He moved, I didn't. I climbed a few steps in my self reliance and earned a promotion at work, and I lost a few points in the eyes of my relatives and some friends, who started doubting my ability to build a family. So did I.

I carried many years the guilt of acting selfishly. Then one day I found this statement in an article, which felt so good that I copied it and have it on my desk. *"It is difficult for women to confront and address the unspoken mandate that they subordinate needs for recognition to those of others—particularly men. The expectation is so deeply rooted in the culture's ideals of femininity that it is largely unconscious."*

It is not only about having a family. At work itself, I am aware that when I speak up as much as men, if I am unemotional or if I compete for visibility, my femininity is questioned. But then also, if I show emotions, I'm "just hysterical". I am working on a short list of what emotions don't jeopardize my image and perception of good judgment.

I don't have solved my identity dilemma yet. Maybe we are wrong in looking for the qualities of alpha males in alpha females. There could be a different model of female leadership. Looking to nature, elephant society for example is a matriarchy, led by the biggest, strongest, perceived as wise and kind, keen on keeping the group together. May be I'm becoming an elephant.



We've found the study the author refers here quoted in the HBR 04/04 article "Do Women Lack Ambition?" by Anna

Fels. "The most famous and widely applied psychological measure of femininity (as well as of masculinity and androgyny) is the revised Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI). The test includes 60 descriptive adjectives—20 masculine traits, 20 feminine traits, and 20 neutral traits—that subjects use to rate themselves. These traits were originally chosen from 200 personality characteristics by 100 male and female undergraduates at Stanford University in the 1970s. The students, mostly white and middle-class, were asked to rank the desirability of these traits for men and women in American society. The traits chosen to define femininity in the BSRI are: yielding, loyal, cheerful, compassionate, shy, sympathetic, affectionate, sensitive to the needs of others, flatterable, understanding, eager to soothe hurt feelings, soft-spoken, warm, tender, gullible, childlike, does not use harsh language, loves children, gentle, and (somewhat redundantly) femininity.

In contrast, the BSRI adjectives that describe masculinity are: "self-reliant, strong personality, forceful, independent, analytical, defends one's beliefs, athletic, assertive, has leadership abilities, willing to take risks, makes decisions easily, dominant, willing to take a stand, aggressive, acts as a leader, individualistic, competitive, ambitious. ☺"



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