

# Workshop "Female Leadership"

## GAIA's Ambassadors Network



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Fugro



### Introduction

What are the secrets of successful leaders who lead their teams to high performance? How can you stay authentic as a female leader and be seen as successful? Why do so many organisations hesitate to promote women in senior leadership positions? These and other questions were discussed in the workshop "Female Leadership", organised by GAIA's Ambassadors Network (GAN). The workshop, attended by 35 women in technical disciplines at the GAN (and related) organisations, was led by Esther Mollema and hosted by Fugro in Leidschendam.

### Road to excellent Female Leadership

Esther Mollema, organisational advisor and specialist in "Female Leadership" took us on a journey this afternoon, in a very interactive and enthusiastic way. Esther started by explaining the "business case" for female leadership: Thorough research has shown that organisations have better (financial) results when they work with diverse teams. Besides that, they are more flexible, more creative and thus for example less vulnerable to crisis. The questions that Esther announced to address: What are successful leaders, and what are successful organisations? If we need more diversity in leadership, why doesn't it happen? And how can you be a successful leader yourself?

### High performance managers: Soft on people and fast on decisions

Excellent leaders - all leaders, not just formal managers - combine being soft (on the people) and fast (on the decisions), and show this behaviour consistently. In Esther's view, many

leaders are either compassionate towards their people, or are fast decision makers. To be truly excellent, you need to combine both. Excellent leaders are role models for their people, focus on results and are effective. They also deal actively with low performers; by actually helping and agreeing with people to improve – within a defined period – and otherwise really finding another place for them. One important aspect of excellent leadership is to critically reflect on your own leadership - every day.

Research on "leadership performance drivers" by McKinsey has shown that, in general, men apply more individual decision making, and control or corrective actions. Women on the other hand, apply slightly more inspiration and participate decision making, and apply more people development, expectations and rewards, and role models. This would make women, in theory, excellent leaders... but what happens in organisations?

### High performance organisations: Diversity and dialogue at every level

Again Esther quoted the results of extensive research to determine the factors that characterise true excellence in companies. Many organisations are based on old "army" guidelines (e.g. territorial, superiority, control and authority) that form the basis of the unwritten rules in the organisations. Truly excellent companies, however, all have a robust dialogue at every level of the organization, and all have diversity - and thus different ideas, questions and solutions - at every level. And those with 3 or more women on the Board perform significantly better in terms of return on investment.

Esther Mollema's work takes her to a large number of boards of directors. She started to notice the likeness between members – they are in the same age bracket, they are all white, they dress the same, come from similar social and academic backgrounds (yet, if she asked any of these directors why they were chosen for the job, the answer never was “because I am like them”). So, if there is such a clear business case for diversity in general, and for female leadership in particular, why doesn't it happen?

### **Our decisions and judgements: Not as rational as we think**

If you thought decisions were made on a rational basis... think again! Through a number of examples and anecdotes, Esther Mollema showed us how our intuition and prejudices fool us: we do not fully control what we think. One example was a movie where we had to count the number of times a ball was passed between a team of basketball players. The part of the audience that kept focused on this task - and indeed counted the right number - did not see the gorilla that mingled with the players at some point. Esther explained: Though our eyes saw the gorilla, we didn't consciously register the image because it didn't match our preconception of what was fitting: What fits the picture, or confirms our assumptions, is accepted – what doesn't, is not. So, we're all biased! Also, decisions are usually made in a split second, highly based on intuition and experience. Facts and logical argumentation are used then to support a decision that has already been made...

### **Mindbugs: How we are all biased**

So, intuition and experience are key in decision making. To understand why it is so difficult to change occupational behaviour, the concept of *mindbugs* was introduced. Mindbugs are beliefs or "implicit associations" that people have, prejudices if you want, that hamper proper judgement. A shocking example was research showing that the recruiters of companies “aggressively seeking diversity” were literally unable to see the difference between moderate and excellent

qualifications on resumes if there was a (fake) 'black' name on it. Instead they preferred the resume with a 'white' name.

Another mindbug, proven by research in the US by Catalyst, is that despite the numerous business contributions of women leaders, men are still largely seen as the leaders by default. It's what researchers call the “think-leader-think-male” mindset. On the contrary, women are often perceived as going either against the norms of leadership (by being "nice but too soft") or against those of femininity (by being "competent but bitchy"). These extreme perceptions on female leadership make it impossible for women to live up to everybody's expectations.

### **Diversity starts with exploring our biases**

There are two important lessons for ourselves that Esther brought across: On the one hand, it's crucial to really think hard what mindbugs and implicit associations you have yourself, as they hamper independent and honest judgment of situations, people and talent. On the other hand, for our own career development it's important to realize how other people's perception of us is at least as important as who we really are.

As an exercise, the audience was asked to write down a number of mindbugs they themselves may have, or people around them, and discuss these in groups. Examples were: "people who speak up are better workers", "women do not want to do research but instead focus on people-centred jobs like project management", "people who work less than 5 days a week have no ambition" and "all women on the top act like men". The tricky thing about mindbugs is that we do not see them and most often do not know they are there.

### **Networking towards our game ambitions**

After discussing the mindbugs, we moved to the topic of ambition or, more specifically: "the mastery of a special skill and gaining recognition for it". If these two are unbalanced, you are perceived by others as having no ambition. A real caveat for women, who are typically socialized to be modest, work hard,

and wait rather than to ask for rewards. But as Esther wanted us to clearly realize: If you do not determine your own future, you will be allocated one". So help yourself getting recognition for your skills - and help others to get it - so that eventually the people with the best skills will win, not the ones that only know to get the recognition.

We were then asked to write down our "game ambition" as 5 ambitions that you have: Jobs, skills, or roles that we may want at some point in the future. We were told to see it as a game – Work with multiple ambitions, so they are flexible. They don't need to be exactly what you want to achieve, but at least they give you the right direction. The key now is to express these ambitions to other people, so that they can help you achieving these.

The next assignment therefore was to list all the people in our own organization that we knew, and that worked at a higher level. We then had to assign letters depicting whether the people A) know me, B) also know my capabilities, or C) also know what I want. After realizing how many (or few!) people actually know what you want, everyone had to make the decision to inform at least 3 more people about this in the next few weeks, and see what effect that would have.

#### **Making it work: Key take-aways for yourself**

- If you want to be part of a group you will sometimes need to "fit in" (in terms of clothing, behaviour, etc). Do just enough to be part of the group, say 5%, and stay yourself the other 95%.
- Understand what you want, and what your strong points are. Know what fits you, and what doesn't. Don't be afraid to ask for advice on things you are not good at.
- Find out what your ambitions are (see "game ambition" above) and let people, who can help you to get there, know about it.
- Four moments to have most success for yourself with least effort: In a meeting, when presenting, at a review meeting, and at social events.
- Take time to reflect on yourself and your leadership style, spend 10 minutes every day to reflect and learn.

#### **Further reading**

1. Esther Mollema has worked in the field of management and executive development for 15 years. She coached top multinationals in Female Leadership Development and diversity awareness. She is founder and director of Direction: <http://www.femaleleadership.nl/> and <http://www.leiderschapontwikkelen.nl/>
2. McKinsey has conducted research about gender diversity in top management and corporate performance. These insights have led to four Women Matter reports on <http://www.mckinsey.com/locations/paris/home/womenmatter.asp>
3. An important inspiration for Esther on the issue of mindbugs is Mahzarin Banaji, professor of experimental psychology at Harvard. With others she maintains an online research project, the Implicit Association Test, designed to uncover Mindbugs. See also <http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~banaji/>
4. An interesting Catalyst report "The Double-Bind Dilemma for Women in Leadership: Damned if You Do, Doomed if You Don't" can be downloaded from <http://www.catalyst.org/publication/83/the-double-bind-dilemma-for-women-in-leadership-damned-if-you-do-doomed-if-you-dont>
5. An author who has worked on and written about the necessity for women in particular to direct their ambition is Anna Fels. See e.g. an article on the ambition of women at <http://www.womensmedia.com/balance/92-ambition-in-women.html>

#### **GAIA & GAIA's Ambassadors Network**

GAIA is the Dutch network for female geoscientists. GAIA's Ambassadors Network (GAN) is comprised of the directors of 10 organisations employing female geoscientists: KNMI, TNO, Deltares, Shell, VU, UU, TUDelft, Fugro, Grontmij, and RWS-Waterdienst. The objective of GAN is to improve the career development of women working in technical disciplines within these organisations. All GAN activities are organised by volunteers from GAIA, currently: Ellen Brinksma, Fraukje Brouwer, Edith Hafkenscheid, and Mirjam van Kan. See also: <http://www.vrouwen.net/gaia/> and <https://public.deltares.nl/display/GAIA/>.