

# the X factor

Female project managers should focus less on fitting in and more on leading.

by Libby Ellis



When Pearl Maxwell, Ph.D., first entered the workforce, every day she put on a blue or gray suit and tied a small bow tie around her neck. It was the same uniform worn by any woman who wanted to be taken seriously in the corporate arena. And it was part of a daily ritual to fit in. In the 30 years since her career in project management began, Dr. Maxwell says she has seen more women rise to all levels in the workforce.

But the struggle continues.

“Every single time I lead project management training courses, there are women lined up at the end of each session to talk to me about issues they have specifically because they are female,” says Dr. Maxwell, senior consultant at Advanced Management Services Inc., Canton, Massachusetts, USA. “I’m hearing the same stories today that I heard 30 years ago. This should not be. We should have overcome these issues. We need to talk about it.”

And part of that discussion should focus on the need for women to stop trying to be “one of the guys” and start thinking like a genderless leader.

### LEARNING TO LEAD

Being a leader is intrinsic to being a project manager, and women have

learned to walk a fine line between appearing strong enough to lead without coming across as too aggressive. But there are still the lingering perceptions that women sacrifice credibility for likeability, that men approach projects with more authority, that women are more compassionate and that men are more demanding.

Such stereotypes about women’s leadership have stuck around for a reason, and women should be aware of some common pitfalls. To ensure control over conversations, they should never use disclaimers such as, “This might be a bad idea but ... .” Instead, women should speak concisely and clearly, make eye contact and never wait for an invitation to speak. Once women have mastered those skills, they can focus on building their personal leadership styles.

The most effective leaders embrace the best of both male and female styles, Dr. Maxwell says. Genderless leaders are community builders who promote interactive leadership and share power. They are holistic thinkers who hold themselves to high ethical standards and believe in power within, not power over. Genderless leadership requires being simultaneously:

- Empathetic and tough
- Timely and patient
- Flexible and orderly
- Diplomatic and candid
- Competitive and collaborative.

### WE’VE COME A LONG WAY, MAYBE

Although she still believes the business world has a long way to go to achieve true equality, Dr. Maxwell does recognize the positive steps women have made in the field of project management.

“In the early days,” she says, “there were places you didn’t expect to see women. There were people who would approach me and say I should be ashamed for taking work from a man

with a family to support. The good news is that today when people see women in non-traditional roles, they are not so shocked anymore.”

In 2007, Hind Yousef Al Youha made a huge change to the project management landscape in the United Arab Emirates. She became the first female to receive a master’s degree in project management from the British University in Dubai in association with Manchester University in the United Kingdom. Ms. Al Youha now works as head of the business excellence department of Dubai Holding Group’s TECOM Investments, which owns and operates free-trade zones set up to support the development of knowledge-based industries.

Her country’s rapid development spurred her interest in the field and now Ms. Al Youha is out to be an active part of Dubai’s economic growth.

“You only have to see the pace of development throughout the region as a whole,” she says. “Dubai is trying to do something unique, creating marvelous opportunities to work on marvelous new buildings, homes, workplaces and communities, from the Palm Islands to Dubai Sports City.”

Despite being a pioneer, she doesn’t feel she has faced much adversity. “In line with local traditions, I am respected as a woman,” Ms. Al Youha explains. “The main difficulty was with people respecting my authority as a young woman, especially men and women who are older than me. But after they deal with me directly, they believe in me and accept my leadership.”

Yet even as project management extends beyond traditionally male-dominated industries such as construction and IT, female project managers may not be treated the same in all fields, says Lizz Robb, PMP, owner of Yellowhouse, a program and project management agency in Brisbane, Australia.

“I do feel that even today women are viewed less favorably in sectors such as engineering and construction than they are in sectors such as information services or pharmaceuticals,” she says. “As a woman, I feel there is more a requirement for me to have more professional qualifications than my male counterparts.”

### THE PROBLEM OF PERCEPTION

Look around most organizations from the CEO-level down, and you’re likely to see a lot of women. But that doesn’t necessarily translate to fair compensation. “The main point here is that we have not achieved parity yet and we need to talk about it and strategize,” Dr. Maxwell says.

She believes the first step toward closing the gap is for companies to stop being afraid of being perceived as giving “special treatment” to women. “Organizations are not getting the best from us if they are not talking to us about how best to support us. They need to understand that if they want the best, brightest minds available, women have multiple responsibilities. Most often, women are the primary caregivers for their families. Companies need to offer work/life balance and present that balance in a positive light for both male and female employees,” Dr. Maxwell says. “That fear of being perceived as doing special things for women exists because many people—including other women—resent anything that could appear as special treatment.”

Tricia Kirkman experienced some of that animosity when she started working from home two days a week after having her first child, and then more often after her second.

“I’ve been very fortunate, and for a while I was the only person with that

## Handle With Care

Male or female, project leaders have to look out for their teams.

“Good leaders are constantly looking for ways to improve and for ways that their employees can improve. You have to earn the trust of your employees by rolling up your sleeves and participating. Genuinely caring about employees’ goals, motivations and interests helps leaders get the best work and the most support from their teams.”

—Tricia Kirkman, Kronos Inc.

“People believe in a person more by what they see the person doing than by what they hear the person saying.”

—Lizz Robb, PMP, Yellowhouse

“I have a democratic leadership style and I like to share and exchange knowledge. I love teamwork, and the best aspect is having strong team members that exchange knowledge and ideas in a civilized way. This makes the work better, more successful and enjoyable.”

—Hind Yousef Al Youha, TECOM Investments

kind of flexibility—my ability to do that was built around maintaining a high level of performance coupled with the trust I built with my management team and my customers,” says Ms. Kirkman, manager of the project management office at Kronos Inc., a workforce management solutions provider in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, USA.

She handled the resentment by being honest about her situation and reminding coworkers that every situation is unique. Ms. Kirkman also encouraged those who wanted to work from home to make a business case and present it to their management team.

In some cultures, flexibility isn't an option, it's a necessity.

“Australia has a relatively low population, the projects here do not tend to be as large or as complex as projects in Europe or North America, which can be a constraint in terms of career development,” Ms. Robb says. “This is also reflected in the remuneration package for project managers. While project managers are currently well-paid in Australia, due to the current labor shortage, we find that many go to the United Kingdom where they can earn far more money.”

So at Yellowhouse, Ms. Robb says she doesn't worry about outside perceptions. She determines her staff's needs and caters to them.

“We give people the option of working full-time or part-time,” she says. “We also support flexible working hours, which tends to appeal to women. We like giving people choices. We aim to recruit the best talent possible and in order to attract and retain them, it pays to look after them and ensure they have a work/life balance.”

Although organizations are responsible for helping to groom female project managers, it's women themselves who hold the power to change corporate culture with their leadership—both in the project arena and in the office.

## Checks Don't Quite Add Up

Achieving parity isn't all about the cold, hard cash, but a quick glance at paychecks does paint a picture of how wide the gender gap is. “The primary reason we go to work is to make a living,” says Pearl Maxwell, Ph.D., Advanced Management Services Inc. “Look at the pay difference—we still have issues.”

### UNITED STATES

**77** cents  
Amount U.S. women earned for every dollar made by a man in 2005

**\$0.0043**

Average amount the wage gap has narrowed in the United States each year since the Equal Pay Act was passed in 1963

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

### UNITED KINGDOM

**12.2**

Percent men earned over women among managers of all grades in the United Kingdom in 2006

**23**

Percent men at the director level in the United Kingdom earned over women in 2006

Source: Chartered Management Institute

### AUSTRALIA

**7** The percent of top-earner positions held by women in the ASX200, an Australian Securities index of share-market leaders

Source: *Gender Income Distribution of Top Earners in ASX200 Companies*, Australian Government's Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency

### UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

**65** percent  
Portion of female university students in the United Arab Emirates

**14.7** percent

Portion of women in the United Arab Emirates workforce in 2003

Source: United Arab Emirates Yearbook 2005 and 2006

But change can't occur without honest discussion. Truly powerful leaders, Dr. Maxwell says, cannot be afraid of criticism that might come from starting the conversation.

Female project managers who aspire to be great leaders must be willing to speak up and say, “This is what I am doing for the business and this is what it needs to do for me,” Dr. Maxwell says. “Women have to get comfortable with the fact that we deserve to be leaders. We deserve to be where we want to be in our careers. We are equal contributors. And we are not asking for something special when we insist upon parity.” PM

*This article is based on material in the white paper “Success Strategies for the Female Project Manager,” presented by Pearl Maxwell, Ph.D., at PMI's Global Congress—North America 2007 in Atlanta, Georgia, USA.*