

# BALANCED LEADERSHIP: INTEGRATING FEMININE AND MASCULINE

BY BEATA C. LEWIS, JD, MSC  
EXECUTIVE COACH & CHANGE CONSULTANT

Achieving balanced leadership—for women and men—means dedicating our attention to what produces health and vitality. We live in an era foretold by numerous traditions as being about the re-emergence of the feminine and reconciliation of the whole. It is understandable and predictable that both men and women regularly dis-identify with their innate and essential feminine nature in a culture that diminishes and derides the positive value of the feminine. If we are going to fulfill any promise of becoming qualitatively different leaders, we must reclaim aspects of our dis-identified selves for the sake of being more fully generative and honoring our complex wholeness. Emerging models of leadership – such as transformational and integral leadership – are based on a fundamentally different approach to human motivation, interaction and accomplishment. Balance and integration can arise from a conscious emphasis on relationship, on alternative ways of perceiving and using power and on what makes living systems function and evolve.

## LEADERSHIP AND GENDER NORMS

When we consider the gains made in the 20<sup>th</sup> century for political and social “equality” for women, we do not find corresponding gains in the respect for and value of what is “feminine.” The perennial conversation about women in leadership has focused on access for women to rights, resources, and positions by which to express their choice, their gifts, and their leadership in parity and partnership with men. Numerical parity in gender representation is necessary but insufficient for balanced leadership. We can expect “more of the same” if women mimic their male counterparts by conforming to well-established molds and expectations of the acceptable content and boundaries for leadership.

Gender norms and sexual politics receive the lion’s share of attention in the conversation for integrating “feminine” with “masculine” for exemplary leadership. The mold of an “effective leader” remains predominantly masculine in its characteristics and expression. Current understanding of leadership styles includes a dual emphasis on leader roles and gender roles. Leaders occupy roles defined by their specific position in a hierarchy and simultaneously function under the constraints of their gender roles. Gender roles are the largely consensual cultural beliefs about the attributes of women and men; they provide an implicit background identity for individuals. Women and men tend to differ in their expectations for their own behavior in organizational settings due to differing social identities. Deeply rooted double standards favor men and behaviors perceived as masculine in leadership. As humans we learn largely by imitation, so it is not surprising that women leaders have, by and large, “pretzeled” themselves into this pre-existing mold to succeed according to pre-existing measures.

Women who have chosen to emphasize their masculine qualities have been rewarded—to a point—for being more like men, and therefore more “equal.” Even so, we say we want a new kind of leader and



**COACHING FOR LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATIVE EXCELLENCE**

Beata C. Lewis, JD, MSC, Executive Coach & Change Consultant

P.O. Box 31115, Santa Fe, NM 87594 | 415-332-8338/505-819-3834 | [Beata@BridgingLives.com](mailto:Beata@BridgingLives.com) | [BridgingLives.com](http://BridgingLives.com)

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suggest that women hold a key. More recently, women are being hailed as naturally competent in the skills and qualities required for modern leadership: e.g., effective communication and emotional intelligence, collaborative process, participatory and inclusive governance and decision-making, mutual empowerment, promoting appreciative inquiry and learning environments. Do competence and preference here have to do with a person's "feminine" attributes or is it by virtue of being female in society? What range of competencies are likely expressed by either all-male or all-female leadership teams? Are women at top levels of leadership representative of this competence? Do ambitious, strong-willed women who attain recognized status and power tend to be known and rewarded for qualities of compassion, generosity, or even collaborative competence?

In practice, women are tested against measures that challenge the presumption of their credibility and competence to succeed as transformational leaders. The persistent double standard means that women often face more stringent requirements to attain and retain leadership roles. Highly political, confident and self-promoting women may be penalized for adopting what is perceived as an overly masculine style. In leadership roles, they can be disliked and regarded as untrustworthy, especially when they exert authority over men, display very high levels of competence, or use a dominant style of communication. They also experience considerable self-doubt and suffer from a sense of in-authenticity at needing to be someone other than themselves in order to get ahead.

Women report being continually tested for how "tough" they can be, especially with respect to promotions into the higher echelons of organizational leadership. Tough, as in can they make the bold, unpopular decisions and follow through without wavering. Can they negotiate and win the "golden ring" in highly politicized, complex and high-risk situations. Can they "transcend" their emotional nature and be purely reasoned and rational in charting a course of action and dealing with difficult people. Are they willing to make the sacrifices necessary to be single-mindedly focused, even at the expense of the needs and well-being of colleagues, family and friends. Indeed, even at the expense of their own well-being. In whatever new level of responsibility and power, can they dish it out and take it "like a man?" The presumption is that they cannot be that tough, so women wanting to "get ahead" find themselves proving all the time how much tougher they can be. Many of the attitudes that undercut a leader's authority and undermine self-confidence are so embedded in an individual's identity as well as the fabric of organizational cultures and practices that people can be unaware of their continued potency.

## **POWER PLAYS**

Since we are, inescapably, human animals who seek belonging and acceptance in the "herd," we cannot ignore gender norms. Nor can we ignore the politics of power. Questions of gender dynamics predominantly concern "power over." As a cultural observation, women tend to have an ambivalent relationship to power, especially the kinds of power that connote domination. Hierarchical, command-and-control leadership is largely about "power over" as defined by rank or position and control over the consequences of compliance or performance. Indeed, one of the biggest challenges for women leaders is claiming legitimate "power over." Even women who have attained high degrees of legitimized power and influence and appear remarkably competent in the "upper leagues" tend to dis-identify with that power. To



the extent that women are contributing to changes in the rules about how we interact and do business together, that will impact what we collectively deem as acceptable or vital in “power games.”

Of growing importance for leadership competency (and human evolution) is the idea of “power to.” “Power to” refers to ability or capacity and connotes a kind of freedom. “Power to” is generally considered to be a personal attribute, based on ability and developed through self-discipline. In truth, an individual’s “power to” is rarely achieved by that individual alone; it takes communities or networks of support. Even in organizations that claim to promote and reward individuals on the basis of merit have to deal with the reality that people in society value certain kinds of talent and encourage them above others. An ability, like a person, requires nourishment and scope if it is to grow. “Power to” reflects not just individuality, independence, and drive to excel, but also dependency, interconnection, and the acceptance of society. “Power to” overlaps with “power over” where the practice of a skill becomes competitive or where it involves managing, influencing, or persuading other people.

Of particular relevance for collaborative ventures is another kind of power: “power with.” It is the power that arises when people connect and combine – their energy, ideas, talents, resources, labor, etc. “Power with” refers to joining together and is related to the concept and experience of synergy. It connotes interrelated gain.

Increasingly, leaders are moving from a reliance on rank to a cultivation of links to produce results. Because synergy, “win/win” and collaboration are concepts currently in vogue, there is considerable talk about them but precious little experience of the real item. “Power over” has changed its guise in many cases; in practice it is often an imposter for the sought-after “power with” that is essential for genuine, sustainable collaboration. Even so, there is a significant shift moving away from a dominator model and towards the actual experience of a partnership model. Power – its sources and manifestations – is present at all levels of integral leadership: personal meaning, individual behavior, organizational culture and shared values, and business systems and processes. Questions of power concern one’s capacity to translate self-awareness into productive, coordinated action and meaningful results. One’s power to lead is not simply about one’s relationship to the “other.” It is about leading from the inside out.

## **FEMININE AND MASCULINE ENERGY: MOVEMENT TOWARD BALANCE AND WHOLENESS**

Historically, the conversation about the interplay of feminine and masculine in leadership has been set up as a contest. It is a battle of either/or, missing the opportunity of greater resources, healing and creativity in both/and. Our efforts go to overcoming or reinforcing the limitations and barriers that we perceive and which block the fuller expression and aliveness that we long for. In the mean time, people are wearing themselves out in battle and withdrawing their creative energy and potential from the field. Look around. Aggression, exhaustion, depression, defiance, resignation, isolation, disillusionment...all words that describe moods too common in leadership today. Is this necessary? What would it feel like to relax into one’s beauty, truth, authentic voice and wisdom? And isn’t that the point of being fully alive, and leading from that aliveness? The idea of balance predicates both/and. It is a qualitative description of movement within a whole.



An inquiry about balance focuses our attention on health. All life in nature moves towards balance or homeostasis. Homeostasis comes from the Greek, meaning a state of stability or equanimity between different but interdependent groups or elements in an organism or system. Feminine and masculine are interdependent elements of human identity and life. Life naturally seeks health and vitality. Therefore, we are asking about leadership that both embodies and engenders health and vitality of the feminine with the masculine. Balance also points to an interplay of energy in the context of wholeness. Balanced leadership is an ideal. As an ideal, we are concerned with potential. What allows a person to realize their own potential – as well as elicit that in others – more fully? To realize potential (distinct from expectation) means first to become aware of it and then to “real-ize” it, as in, have it be real. It is a possibility to be nurtured, encouraged, developed and practiced. The challenge for leadership is in restoring self-generative and self-correcting function and balance to what has become imbalanced, dysfunctional or unhealthy.

One place to begin is by revisiting power. Polarization in the feminine/masculine conversation has been fueled by the energy of force. Because force automatically creates counter-force, its effect is limited, by definition. Its effect is to polarize (which inevitably produces costly win/lose dichotomies) rather than to unify. Constantly faced with enemies, force requires constant defense. Defensiveness – whether in the marketplace, politics, international affairs, or in intra- and interpersonal relationships – produces rigidity and is enormously costly. Force, as distinguished from power, is associated with judgment and makes us feel poorly about ourselves. By contrast, power in its essence creates attractor patterns that strengthen; it is associated with that which supports the significance of life itself. Power is associated with compassion and dignity and makes us feel positively about ourselves; we feel whole. True power emanates from consciousness itself and is experienced internally and expressed externally.

Life can be defined as movement between polarities of positive and negative, expansion and contraction, outflow and inflow. All living systems have an innate power to create and to heal. Where that power is free to flow, we experience health. Any living system that is out of balance or has a blocked flow of energy is unhealthy and functions at less than optimum. The dynamic inflow and outflow of energy generates available power. Masculine and feminine can be understood as energetic polarities necessary to life: positive and negative, yang and yin. Neither is sufficient alone; life requires the fluid interplay of both.

According to the ancient Chinese cosmology of the Tao, the interplay of yin and yang potential underlies the movement that defines all life. Life is movement. At the core of all movement is the vast, neutral unmoving essence of all life: the Source or Tao. There is manifest potential and un-manifest potential of Tao. Polarities emerge from a positive burst of creative energy movement. This upsurge is represented as yin and yang. Yin is the phase of energy which is contractive, negative in polarity, and receptive. Yang is the phase of energy which is outgoing, positive in polarity, and expansive. Both yin and yang potentials are necessary phases of one movement, the grand pulsation of life. We see this principle at work on all levels of life. It is true whether we are talking about energy movement as electricity, heat or – more personally – breath and the movement of emotions from one person to another.

The symbolic representation of yin/yang is a circle divided into two balanced hemispheres. Each hemisphere is a reverse image of the other, one being black and the other white. An important detail about the symbol is the round dot of opposite color contained in each field. Each field includes an aspect of the



other. They cannot even be defined without reference to one another. This traditional cosmology in which everything is seen as whole has modern expression in the frontiers of science.

The late physicist David Bohm used the hologram to describe the nature of the universe. He envisioned the universe as a vast hologram with two aspects to it. A hologram is a three-dimensional image within which patterns of energy waves interfere with each other as they cross each other's path; the interference sets up an interference pattern. All of the information of the complete interplay of energies is stored in this interference pattern. Because of this, every part of the hologram, no matter how small, contains information about the whole interplay. The microcosm has within it all of the information of the macrocosmic movement. Bohm described two aspects to the hologram: the "implicate" or enfolded aspect and the "explicate" or unfolded aspect. The "implicate" is the realm of subtle relationships that bind everything together as a whole. Even what appears to be separate is nonetheless related and part of a larger whole.

The holographic interplay of energies applies to human life and endeavor, too. We can think of feminine and masculine in terms of energy qualities, movement in inflow/outflow loops. The feminine is the energy field for reception, experience or context. In the feminine field of energy we experience our being and feeling. You, yourself, are the sole authority about what you feel, what gives you passion, what your innate purpose is and what vision you perceive. The masculine is the energy field for transmission, expression or content. In the masculine we express our knowing and doing. This is the realm of definition and knowledge as well as action and service. Vision, mission, passion and action all work together. By internally accessing higher truth and purpose we move towards the external expression of service and health. By internally accessing kindness and worth we move towards the external expression of access and wealth.

Our cultural preoccupation with the masculine energy is apparent in much communication. We emphasize expert knowledge and message delivery. Collectively, we do not give as much attention to how (or how deeply) we listen. Pay attention to how much care is given to preparing a listener to receive. In the "argument culture" in which we live, we value the contest of opposing views more than conversations that generate empathy and in which we allow ourselves to be influenced. This is especially important with respect to change. In the feminine (not female) energy field we connect with what we want, to what we care about and why it matters. By attending to the feminine energy, we allow the possibility of choosing change. We choose to change when we feel desire and a sense of meaning in connection with that change, not just when we know the reasoning and likely outcomes of change.

The paradox is that our strength lies in our willingness to be receptive and vulnerable. We honor the feminine in ourselves when we choose to soften and to be present in those instances where we are otherwise inclined to become hardened. When we allow another person to get a sense of our humanity—to connect with what we sincerely care about and why it matters—our message is more likely to land and create impact in another person. We communicate with greater strength, authenticity and power. Healthy, balanced leadership opens opportunities where they have been blocked before, especially in terms of who and what is allowed, encouraged and rewarded. When we consider masculine and feminine in terms of energy fields, we can begin to comprehend that meaning, strength and power come into being and felt experience in the feminine; they find expression and are of tangible service through the masculine.



## **BALANCED LEADERSHIP: PERFORMANCE WITH PRESENCE**

The quality of the whole we perceive is dependent on the quality of our consciousness and awareness. A significant shift is taking place in how we think about and practice leadership. Leadership experts and “tuned-in” business leaders are devoting more attention to “soft” variables, the intangible and relational. These are variables such as intentions, interpretations, mood, and identity. Returning to the idea of energy fields, these variables are all in the feminine field. Devoting time and space to questions of vision and passion allows people to reflect and connect. It allows people to rebalance the energy for a creative process that includes the inner experience. That way, outer expression can have real meaning and be of genuine service.

A hallmark of excellent leaders is a balance of performance and presence. Performance without presence lacks depth, coherence, wisdom or meaning. Presence without performance stagnates. Both are necessary. Our cultural obsession with performance has come at the expense of presence. We cultivate presence by attending to qualities of Self. By changing consciousness—one’s inner reality—we open the possibility of changing our outer reality (individually and collectively) in remarkably powerful ways. Ultimately, we live in the world the way it is. We can react to adversity, resisting that which we will not accept. We can wait to take risks or action until the external circumstances are closer to one’s own ideal. Or we can respond to life with resilience and direction toward something positive. It all comes down to the same crucial variable: Self.

Balanced leadership is healthier, more resourceful and therefore more powerful. Healthy by how energy flows, less impeded by defensive behaviors or blind resistance. Individuals with high self-esteem tend to be the best performers; they remain open, flexible, and responsive under pressure. They elicit and welcome (rather than are threatened by) excellence in others and are open to ideas and perspectives (rather than are defensive about being right.) Organizational health is more likely where people feel connected by a fundamental identity about who they are and who they aspire to become together; they connect to new and vital information and are able to reach beyond traditional boundaries to develop relationships anywhere within the system. More of the self is accessible (rather than dis-identified or shut down) in balanced leadership, allowing a wider range of options for seeing, interpreting and choosing to move in the world. Finally, balance translates to power no matter how power is defined.

### **About the Author:**

As a professional coach and consultant, Beata C. Lewis, J.D., provides focused guidance for highly accomplished individuals and teams. They lead in businesses where creativity, resourcefulness and agility are critical to individual and organizational success. Her coaching emphasizes the human element of leadership. Clients develop awareness and implement practices to achieve tangible, transformational and sustainable improvements in leadership, trust building and collaboration. Beata's field-tested expertise in negotiation, conflict resolution, change management and collaborative process facilitation combine elegantly with her experience as a Master Somatic Coach™. The somatic emphasis helps individuals to cultivate mastery of Self. With greater self-awareness and presence, clients build their capacity to approach new opportunities and challenges with authenticity, resilience, clarity, grace and power.

