

CAN WOMEN BE GOOD FAMILY LEADERS?



Crossing the Gender Divide
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“May I speak with the man of the house?”

When I was a child--and JFK was president-- I answered the stylish princess rotary phone. The caller said, “I’d like to speak with the

man of the house.”

This was code. The caller—a telemarketer-- wanted to speak with the person who made the family’s buying decisions.



His assumption about “who wore the pants in the family” was wrong. He lost a sale because my mother--not my father-- made the purchasing choices for the services he was selling.

Sometimes the outside appearances do not reflect what’s happening inside the family.

Just as men can cross the gender divide to be good caregivers, so, too women can be strong family leaders. In fact, many women are the family leaders without even knowing it.

I’ll show you how and why leadership transcends gender, and how women with or without men can assume leadership.





Why do families have leaders?

You have a dream for your family. You may want your kids to grow into happy adults who make their way in the world. You may want your parents to find joy in their golden years. You and your partner may have a plan for making the world a better place.

A family leader helps the family move closer to these dreams.

A family leader creates the experience that leaves its members saying, "I belong here." A leader also sets the stage in which family members feel included, valued and loved. Its members know someone cares and trust that what they want is important to someone besides themselves

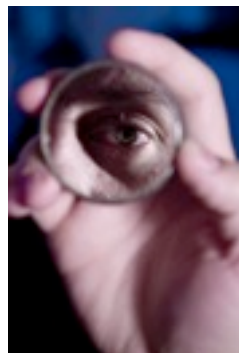
A leader helps shape the members' outer worlds and inner worlds.

What do family leaders do and how do they do it?

Every family has a leader. Sometimes it's a man, sometimes it's a woman and sometimes it's the toddler.

If family leaders carried three tools, they would be: a compass, a thermostat and a lens.

A compass helps leaders align the big choices with the family's core values and beliefs. A strong leader can live with the discomfort, disappointment or even anger that an unpopular decision like taking away the car keys-- from either an unruly teenager or an aging parent with failing vision-- will trigger.



The thermostat allows leaders to set the emotional temperature of the family. Moods and emotions are catchy. A strong leader keeps the calm rather than catching the chaos.

Leaders see each member through a lens that offers clarity about an individual's strengths and gifts.

How does style enter the leadership equation?

Some leaders are more effective than others, and some leadership styles work better than others.

Here are some family leadership styles you may have experienced in your own home:



Feedership



Concedership



Mindreadership

How are men and women different?

The major leadership style difference falls along gender lines. This vignette captures the difference.

A husband and wife meet for dinner at the end of a long day. She shares the blow-by-blow details of her big meeting. He fidgets, thinking, "Why won't she just get to the point?" She notices his impatience and thinks, "Why won't he just listen?"

Call it what you want. The difference between men and women, Mars vs. Venus, or feminine energy vs. masculine energy.

In broad strokes, here's the difference: a man's at his best when he fixes things and at his worst wading through a problem that has no solution. A woman's at her best when she's connected and at her worst when she feels alone.

Transcending gender: Being and Doing Mindsets



As a practicing surgeon I had side-by-side exam rooms. When my son was born I converted one of the rooms into a nursery. While standing in the hall, I had a light bulb moment: it was as if I were two different people walking through these two doors.

When I went into the exam room on the left, I had a mission focus: arrive at a diagnosis and create a treatment plan. I was there to do something to cure my patients. I had a doing mindset.



When I went into the nursery to see my son, my job was to connect with him. I had a being mindset.

In general, men lead from a doing mindset and women lead from a being mindset.

Do you favor “a doing mindset” or “a being mindset”?



Just as some people are left-handed and some people are right handed, so, too and some people are “fixers” and others are “connectors.” In fact, the fixing mindset may well be a left-brained function while being mindset uses in the right part of the brain.

Just as some people are ambidextrous, some people move fluidly between fixing and connecting. Most people only write with one hand, and most people lead from one mindset.



One mindset is not better than another. They both have a place. Leaders know which mindset is the best fit in any moment.

Mindsets and leadership

Both leadership mindsets have strengths and downsides.

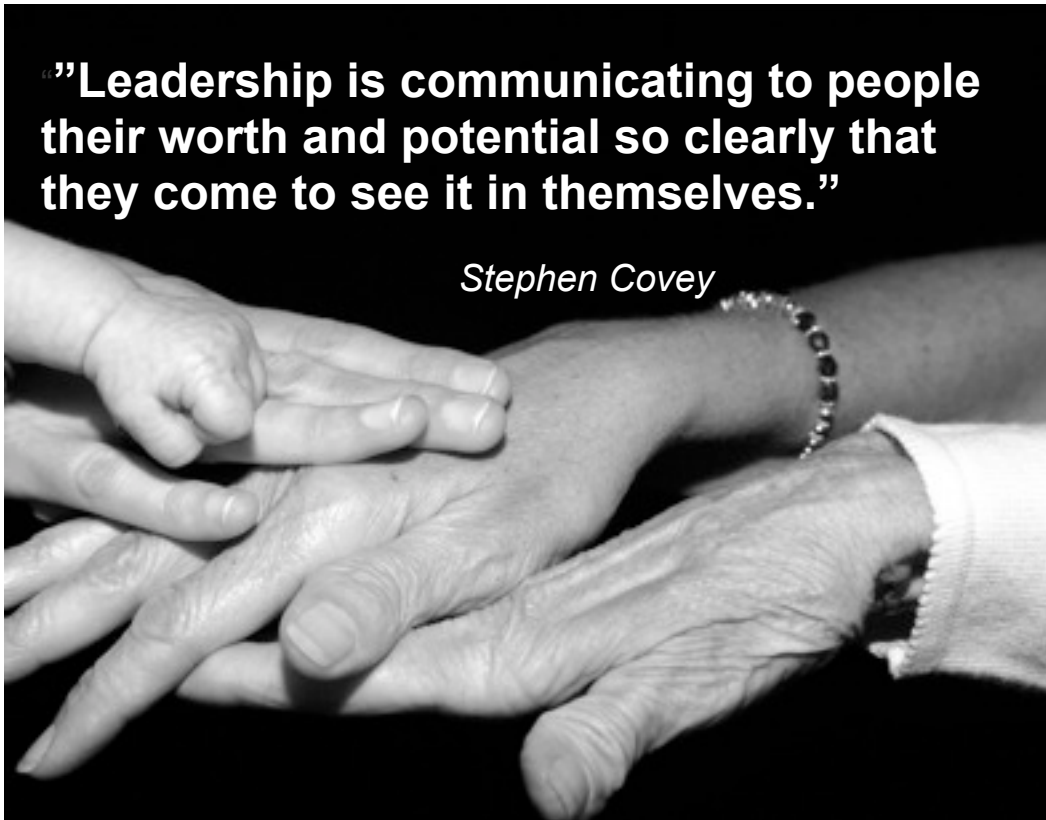
The major strength of someone leading from a doing mindset is the clarity about the big picture that guides day-to-day choices. They know that sometimes the long-term gain outweighs the short term pain. Patients are willing to put up with temporary post-operative discomfort to avoid the pain of a gallbladder attack.

Cathy invited her father-in-law to move in with them when he was too frail to care for himself. She took on caregiving out of love. The family reached a new balance that worked well—except on Sunday morning. Cathy and her family attended church each week. It provided the spiritual fuel to get them through their week. It was unsafe for the father-in-law to be home alone. Cathy approached her father-in-law about hiring someone for the few hours they went to church, but he made it clear he did not want to be taken care of by a stranger. To support the bigger goal of caring for a loved one with an open heart, she hired the in-home care staff. She needed to keep her family strong to be the caregiver she wanted to be.

The major strength of someone leading from the being mindset is the ability to make its members feel valued, included and loved. Some people think of a family as a place where they belong.

“Leadership is communicating to people their worth and potential so clearly that they come to see it in themselves.”

Stephen Covey



Mark was concerned he had ignored his son during his mother's long illness. He took his son on a fishing trip. Just the two of them. He said it's the best parenting choice he ever made.

Unbalanced leadership creates problems

An unbalanced being mindset, a woman's most common leadership mistake, creates problems. In a misguided good intentions, women can make the comfort of the most vulnerable members the highest family priority. Parents who make their kids happy all the time are placing their kids in the leadership position.

A divorcing woman who buys her kids things instead of saying no is not moving towards her bigger parenting goals of raising successful adults who are gracious when they don't get exactly what they want exactly when they want it.

An unbalanced doing mindset, a man's most common leadership mistake, creates problems, too. The take charge, "do it because I said so" attitude does not create a loyal following.

The eldest son concerned about his aging parents' safety who springs into decisive independent action should not be surprised if his siblings and his parents are angry instead of grateful for his efforts.

Successful family leaders know when to lead from the being mindset and when to lead from the doing mindset. The fix-connect spectrum has a point of balance. The wise leader of either gender knows when it's time for doing and when it's time for being.

You can lead your way

It's a rare individual who can shift back and forth between a being mindset and a doing mindset. Successful families often call on one person to fix things and another to provide connection and comfort.

Just as a baseball manager will change pitchers for an important at-bat, so, too, leaders can call in another person to handle specific circumstances. A single dad may ask his sister to talk with his teen-age daughters about sexuality.

Some families divide leadership. My dad was in charge of certain things and my mom was in charge of others.

If you're a woman suddenly without a man, you can redefine your family to include your girlfriends and relatives. Leadership can become a patchwork quilt.

There is no leadership rule book. You can do things your own way.

Here are some tips if you have a doing mindset and the situation requires a being mindset:

Tips for connecting

- Put on a smile before you enter the room.
- Make eye contact
- Synchronize body language
- Synchronize breathing
- Synchronize the loudness and speed of speech

Tips for saying "I love you."

Families share love. Dr. Gary Chapman describes five love languages.

- Words
- Touch
- Gifts
- Acts of service



Be sure to speak your loved one's love language

Here are some tips for people with a being mindset and the situation requires a doing mindset

- Define your measurable outcome. "I want the kids to have enriching after-school activities"
- State the family values. "We want Mom to live and die on her own terms."
- Delegate. There are family members and friends who want to pitch in, but they are just waiting for a chance to learn how. Hire help. Remember that anyone can wash the dishes, fill the gas tank or get the medication at the pharmacy. You are the only one who can laugh about a shared vacation disaster, reminisce about the birth of your first child or tell a loved one how they made your life better.
•Read *The Disease to Please* if you cannot stand it when people are unhappy.



The final thought

Each family has a leader. The strength of family leadership is the single most important factor in predicting which families will flourish and which will flounder.

Women CAN be excellent family leaders. Divorced women and widows take the reigns of leadership every day.

Women are more likely to lead from a being mindset

Men are more likely to lead from a doing mindset.

Strong leaders use both mindsets. Imagine driving a car that would only turn right and not left. You could navigate, but you would take a round-about way.

Strong leaders--both men and women-- have the wisdom to choose the right mindset for the right circumstances.

Family leadership is complex and challenging. The rewards make it worth it. You can help the people you love move towards their dreams.

Dr. Vicki Rackner is a former surgeon who now helps people build strong, healthy families. She is an author and speaker frequently quoted in the national media about care-giving issues, including family leadership. Reach her at (425) 451-3777 or visit her website <http://www.DrVickiRackner.com>.

