

Women and the fine art of leadership

Rachael Jansen, Gold Coast Bulletin
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YOU sound too blonde. She's a bitch. She's a bulldog.

It could be the set of a *Mean Girls* movie but for some women, it's just another day at the office.

From the biggest office in the world — the Oval Office at the White House — to small business boardrooms, women attempting to lead the show are being criticised as they try to find their leadership feet in an area dominated by a masculine approach.

Sonia McDonald, a former Gold Coast schoolgirl and Griffith University graduate who is now recognised as one of the country's most influential women in leadership, has been told by other women she "sounded too blonde" during a presentation.

"I get criticised a lot, things like I put myself out there too much," said Sonia, who recently won an award from the Australian Centre for Leadership for Women, and who has just released her second book, *Leadership Attitude: How Mindset and Action Can Change Your World*.

"You do get crushed a bit. You do have to be really brave."



Sonia, who has worked with men and women in both large and small business across various industries, said while things were changing, the process of more women being included in leadership positions was a bit of a stormy ride.

"Sometimes men are not used to working with women — so it's more about them than us," she said.

"It's something they're not used to, so we feel the need to pushback.

"(I had a client who) was a fantastic leader but people described her as a bulldog. She is a very

talented lawyer who was working with an oil and gas company with mostly men.

“She was the exact opposite though — she discovered she was acting differently to her real and authentic self, she was trying to be like them.”

Rebecca Plant, a Burleigh-based small business and leadership coach and author of the book *Lead-The-Ship* which hit number one on the Amazon bestseller list when it was launched last week, said much of the criticism levelled at female leaders was simply because they're a new entity people weren't sure what to make of.



Sonia McDonald.

The women themselves also struggle to know how they should act as a leader because until now

they haven't had role models on how to lead like a woman and instead followed the style shown by the men before them, often leading to criticism of being a bitch or too tough.

“Women are trying to be men in a leadership position,” said Rebecca.

“The model of leadership that we see most is of a man's leadership style.

“There haven't been a lot of strong females in leadership positions to date. There wasn't a lot of opportunity for women to run a small business or become a Prime Minister or President.

“Now we're in this really exciting space where women are stepping up.

“They're looking for female role models because they're recognising the men who were there before them had a style not congruent with how they want to be.”

Both women recognised times were changing and as more women moved into leadership positions, both genders were working out how they could work together for a holistic approach to business.

“I've worked in organisations and environments where it makes it difficult for women,” said Sonia.

“There were people on construction projects saying women shouldn't be there and men who have a belief that women should be at home with children.

“You can also get a bit of the boys club sometimes within organisation and within leadership teams and subtle ways women are excluded, like golf days or drinks after work — women can't go to these things so they miss out on networking opportunities.

“But we're becoming more aware how we can become more inclusive.

“Men and women bring different styles — we bring in a more nurturing and caring side.

“Men are more results orientated where women can have more of a transformational leadership style.

“They tend to connect more, have stronger intuition and that’s a real strength and they tend to have more empathy.

“They can use emotional intelligence to bring cohesion in the team and understanding how other people may be feeling.

“The research is out there about the benefits of having more women in companies that do outperform one-and-a-half times more so than if a company doesn’t.”

Rebecca said female leadership styles would become more accepted and more balanced as more

women step up and lead in their own right.

When it happens, workplaces, organisations and businesses will become more balanced as well she said.

“We can keep reinforcing each other and more women can then step up and as women we can balance our leadership stance,” she said.

“The more of us that step up and have the courage to say this is an option, the more the landscape will change.

“It’s great for everyone. There are no negative effects to this type of movement.”



Sonia McDonald.

What makes a leader

Everyone can adopt simple strategies to become a leader and everyone can be a leader in some way, said Sonia.

“Leadership is not a role or title; it is how you think, feel and see yourself and how you act as a leader,” she said.

“Thinking like a leader generally means you will start behaving like a leader.

“People think: I’m not a leader because I don’t have it on my title — I’m not a CEO or MD.

“They think Barack Obama or Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King or Gandhi and think that’s leadership.

“Leadership is about behaviour and mindset though.

“If you’re out there trying to make a difference in the community or workplace, that’s leadership.

“Someone who is authentic, true to who they are, and they act with integrity and honesty.

“They really care about what they do, care about the people around them and they care about doing the best they can.”

Sonia’s tips for developing leadership qualities:

It’s as much about confidence as it is about competence. Remind yourself about the great things you have already achieved.

Foster self-awareness and understand who you are and what your values are. What’s important to you.

Focus on your talent and strengths. Women often focus on what they need to improve not what they’re already good at.