

Study

THE POWER OF TRUE VERSATILE LEADERSHIP

Lise Sustmann Allen
Solja K. Klargaard

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Lise Sustmann Allen, Chief Psychology and Innovation Officer at Master International A/S

Solja K. Klargaard, Senior Project Manager - Data Analytics and Psychometrics at Master International A/S



THE POWER OF TRUE VERSATILE LEADERSHIP

When women enter top leadership, their personality profiles often look more like those of male leaders than female peers. This narrowing of leadership style diversity may be silently costing organizations innovation, resilience, and engagement.

In a high-growth tech company, two senior engineers were shortlisted for a VP of Product role. Both had stellar track records in delivering complex projects. The first candidate was known for her bold decision-making and relentless focus on market dominance. The second stood out for her ability to foster cross-functional collaboration and mentor junior talent. The selection committee, composed mostly of leaders with similar profiles to the first candidate, chose her.

Within a year, product innovation stalled as teams struggled with low morale and siloed communication—highlighting the overlooked value of the second candidate's inclusive and empowering approach.

Leadership is one of the most powerful influences on the shaping of organizational progress, culture, and results. And not just any leadership styles; adaptive and versatile leadership behaviour has shown to be significant in fostering successful organizations. (Deloitte, 2024; Billing, 2004)

Versatile leadership refers to a leader who integrates a diverse range of personality traits - some traditionally labelled masculine, others feminine. When these personality traits are combined into a single leader, the concept of Androgynous Leadership emerges. In this article we will put effort into not equating masculine leadership behaviour with male leaders or feminine leadership behaviour with female leaders. Even though, the concept of masculine and feminine traits stem from the fact, that they are more represented in males and females respectively when we look at larger groups. Nevertheless, we are still interested in avoiding limiting the understanding of an individual leader by equating their gender with specific personality traits. So, while certain traits may be more prevalent in one gender at a population level, any individual leader can possess them. Our focus is on the full spectrum of traits and how their combination shapes leadership effectiveness.

Despite strong advocacy for gender balance, women remain underrepresented in top leadership. Globally, women hold only 23.3% of board seats, just 8.4% of board chair positions, and a mere 6% of CEO roles - highlighting a stark discrepancy, despite similar educational achievements between men and women (Deloitte, 2024).

Interestingly, our own data from Master International A/S reveals that the gap between the general population and leaders extends beyond gender representation.

The imbalance has shown to be even larger looking at personality traits, as many female top leaders have similar traits to the average male, suggesting selection processes that may favour certain trait patterns over others. This disparity presents not only significant challenges but also great opportunities for organizations to grow by embracing more diverse leadership perspectives.

Bias and social perceptions play a critical role in maintaining this gap. Research indicates systemic bias in which men in leadership positions tend to promote peers who resemble themselves, thereby reinforcing male overrepresentation (Ladegaard, 2011). Female leaders face harsher scrutiny, particularly when adopting traditionally masculine leadership styles, often placing them in a "double bind"; criticized for being either too soft or too assertive (Blake-Beard et al., 2020; Sisjord et al., 2022). Additionally, women often require multiple requests to take on larger roles, reflecting both internalized hesitation and societal norms discouraging female ambition in leadership (Ladegaard, 2011). Data from Master International A/S exhibits this tendency, showing that personality traits, which are seen more pronounced in female employees, diminish when looking at female middle leaders compared to their male peers, and the differences in personality almost disappear between female and male top leaders.

The missed opportunity here is significant. Leaders with traits more prevalent among women often integrate relational and transformational approaches that foster collaboration, innovation, and employee engagement (Sisjord et al., 2022; Blake-Beard et al., 2020).



Addressing the gender imbalance is not merely a matter of equity — it is a strategic imperative. This article argues for intentional systemic changes, such as implementing policies, promoting androgynous leadership traits, and normalizing inclusive cultural norms. All in the name of strengthening organizations financial performance, innovative mindset, and employee well-being.

Additionally, what research has named Androgynous Leadership, combines traits traditionally seen as masculine and feminine proven to enhance adaptability, a critical skill for managing crises (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010; Kaiser, 2020). Organizations with diverse leadership teams also consistently outperform their less diverse counterparts in financial results, innovation capacity, and decision-making (Deloitte, 2024; Billing, 2004).

In this article, we explore what organizations - and society as a whole - miss out on when versatile leadership is underrepresented. Drawing on a dataset of over 20,000 respondents from 39 European countries (83% from Northern Europe), collected between 2021 and 2024 using the OPTO personality assessment, we identify the leadership traits most over- and underrepresented in current leaders, and we highlight that lack of diversity in personality traits in leadership not only limits diverse perspectives internally but also hinders the potential for innovation and sustained organizational growth.



METHODOLOGY

The personality profiling tool, used in this analysis, OPTO, is a psychometric tool developed by Master International A/S and designed to assess personality traits that influence workplace behaviour and leadership potential. Rooted in the Big Five personality framework, it measures personality traits derived from a self-reporting questionnaire ensuring detailed and personalized insights into individual personality traits. These are presented as OPTO Aspects and provide a comprehensive picture of an individual's personality profile in a work environment, and its alignment with effective leadership qualities is presented to the user in the OPTO Leadership Report.

Specifically, OPTO measures 20 Aspects such as Problem Solving, Assertiveness, Communication, and Stress Management. By offering insights into personality traits, the tool helps identify leadership strengths and potential areas for development. OPTO Leadership offers a unique blend of McCrae & Costa's Five-Factor Model (FFM) of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 1999), Ofman's ideas of Core Qualities (Ofman, 2004), and Goleman's insights into Emotional Intelligence (Goleman et al, 2002).

The findings in this article are based on OPTO, and data was drawn from 21,964 assessment responses collected between 2021–2024 across 39 European countries - 83% from Northern Europe (Master, 2025).

The data gathered prompted an exploration into whether significant differences exist between the personality of male and female leaders. Identifying such differences could highlight how companies with less diverse leadership teams might miss out on specific and valuable leadership traits.

Analyses compare male and female respondents across three self-reported organizational levels, that reflect a structured labelling of roles based on responsibility, authority, and complexity - Employee, Manager, and Top Manager. Differences were evaluated using statistical significance ($p < .05$) and effect sizes (Cohen's $d \geq 0.20$) to identify patterns that are both statistically reliable and practically meaningful.

While the dataset provides extensive quantitative insights into the actual traits of female and male leaders, it does not account for qualitative evaluations of leadership success. We will address the consequences of our quantitatively derived insights by referencing previous research. A further investigation into other perspectives of diversity could also have been of great interest, yet here we have confined ourselves to look at the binary concept of male and female leaders.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM OPTO DATA

Analyses of the OPTO dataset reveal small but consistent differences between managers and employees across multiple personality traits. These differences represent genuine variation in trait expression rather than artefacts of the assessment design or scoring process. OPTO in English is certified by the British Psychological Society (BPS) and in Norwegian by Det Norske Veritas (DNV), and its scales and underlying model have been validated through extensive psychometric research, ensuring a fair and reliable assessment across all individuals. (Master, 2025)

Nine out of the 20 OPTO Aspects show meaningful score differences ($p < .05$ and $|d| \geq .20$) between managers and employees, and four - Assertiveness, Drive, Ingenuity, and Confidence - with the largest differences forming the Managerial Aspects that rise consistently with leadership level as shown in figure 1.

Figure 1 shows a tendency for the scores to increase with the level of leadership, from employees to middle managers to top management. Quality Assurance is the only OPTO Aspect out of the nine, where managers score less than employees. Nevertheless, the tendency is still accentuated by leadership level.

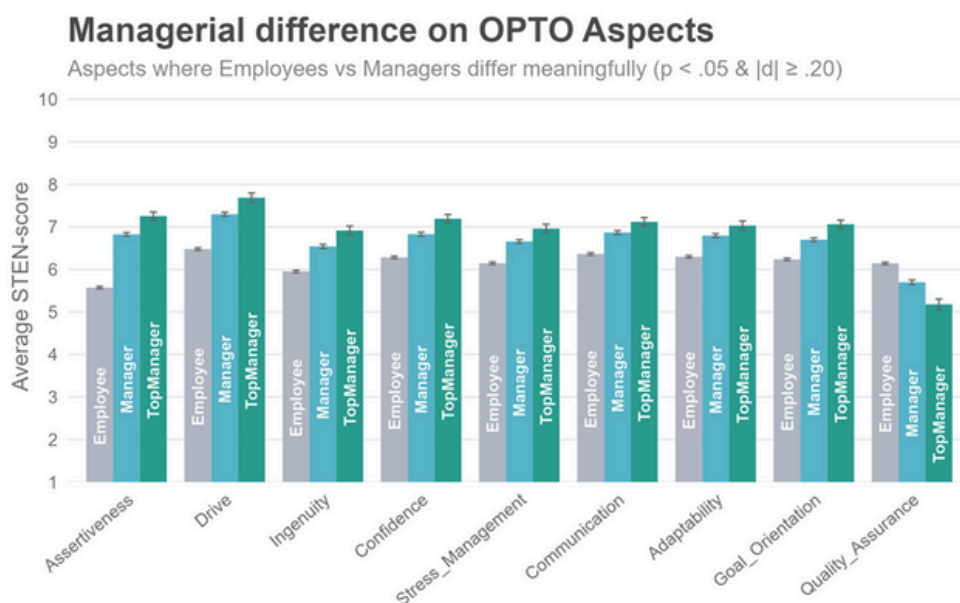


Figure 1 – Managerial differences on OPTO Aspects. Bars show average STEN scores for Employees, Managers, and Top Managers, with 95% confidence intervals. STEN scores are standardised ($M = 5.5$, $SD = 2$), with higher values indicating greater expression of the measured OPTO Aspect.

VERSATILE LEADERSHIP

In the OPTO framework, Aspects with the largest difference ($d > .3$) were selected as Managerial Aspects and are described as:

- **Assertiveness** - the degree to which one takes the lead, impacts decisions, and naturally convinces others.
- **Drive** - the commitment to ensuring progression, maintaining momentum, and having a high work pace.
- **Ingenuity** - the degree to which one has original ideas, contributes with new perspectives, and challenges the existing.
- **Confidence** - the degree to which one is self-assurance and has a visible, socially confident presence.

These traits emphasize a result-oriented leadership style, characterized by decisiveness and a focus on achieving short-term objectives through quick decision-making and strong presence.

To balance the Managerial Aspects, four different traits, referred to as Complementary Aspects, stood out: Altruism, Stability, Sincerity, and Trust.

The Complementary Aspects are defined as:

- **Altruism** - the degree to which one is supportive, helpful, and considerate of others.
- **Stability** - the degree to which one keeps composure and has control of own emotions at work.
- **Sincerity** - the degree to which one is genuine, honest, and authentic.
- **Trust** - belief in the honesty of others and a readiness to give others the benefit of the doubt.

These traits promote inclusivity and empathy, fostering long-term goals like employee well-being, strong networks, and team commitment.

Together, the Managerial and Complementary Aspects create a framework for balanced, flexible, and adaptable leadership, capable of excelling in both immediate and long-term strategic challenges, when both sides are firmly present in a leader. We named this concept Versatile Leadership.

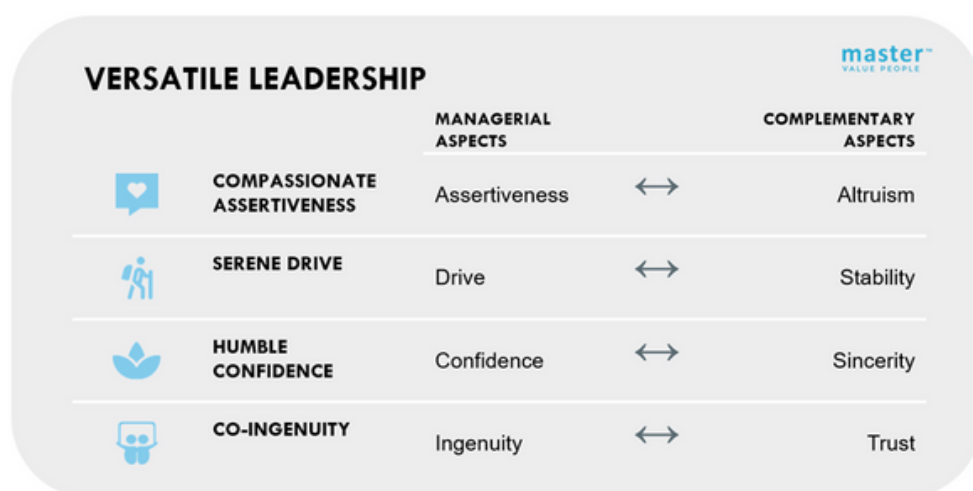


Figure 2 – Versatile Leadership: The four Managerial Aspects and the four Complementary Aspects. Together they create potential for more balanced leadership behaviour.

The interplay between Managerial Aspects and Complementary Aspects lies at the heart of Versatile Leadership, and leaders who excel in both domains are better at adapting to changing business demands - a leader who can be both decisive and inclusive, strategic and empathetic.

But an imbalance reflects a productive tension: High Assertiveness without Altruism risks becoming authoritarian, while high Confidence without Sincerity risks becoming egocentric.

Similarly, high Drive alone risks leaving team members behind, but will benefit from the grounding influence of Stability.

And high Ingenuity alone risks narrow minded creativity but achieves greater organizational impact when reinforced by Trust in others.

The significant differences on the four Managerial Aspects shown in figure 1 are replicated and compared to differences on the Complementary Aspects in figure 3.

The data indicate quite stable scores on the Complementary Aspects across organizational levels, indicating that the personality traits and behaviours of Complementary Aspects are not more expected nor less likely to appear with managers compared to employees.

Managerial Aspects			Complementary Aspects		
	Cohen's d	t-test		Cohen's d	t-test
Assertiveness	0.77	<0.001	Altruism	0.05	<0.001
Drive	0.47	<0.001	Stability	0.08	<0.001
Confidence	0.33	<0.001	Sincerity	-0.03	0.027
Ingenuity	0.36	<0.001	Trust	0.07	<0.001

Figure 3 – Significant differences between Employees and Managers ($p < .05$ and $|\text{Cohen's } d| \geq 0.30$) are highlighted as green, indicating a tendency where scores raise with the organizational level.

GENDER PATTERNS IN LEADERSHIP PROFILES

Building on the manager-employee differences from figure 1 and 3, figure 4 examines how men and women score on the OPTO Aspects central to the Versatile Leadership framework - Assertiveness, Drive, Ingenuity, Confidence (the Managerial Aspects) and Altruism, Stability, Sincerity, Trust (the Complementary Aspects) - across three organizational levels: Employee, Manager, and Top Manager.

Our analysis showed that while Managerial Aspects have a tendency towards higher scores for managers compared to employees across gender, the Complementary Aspects tend to remain even more consistent between managers and employees with same gender.

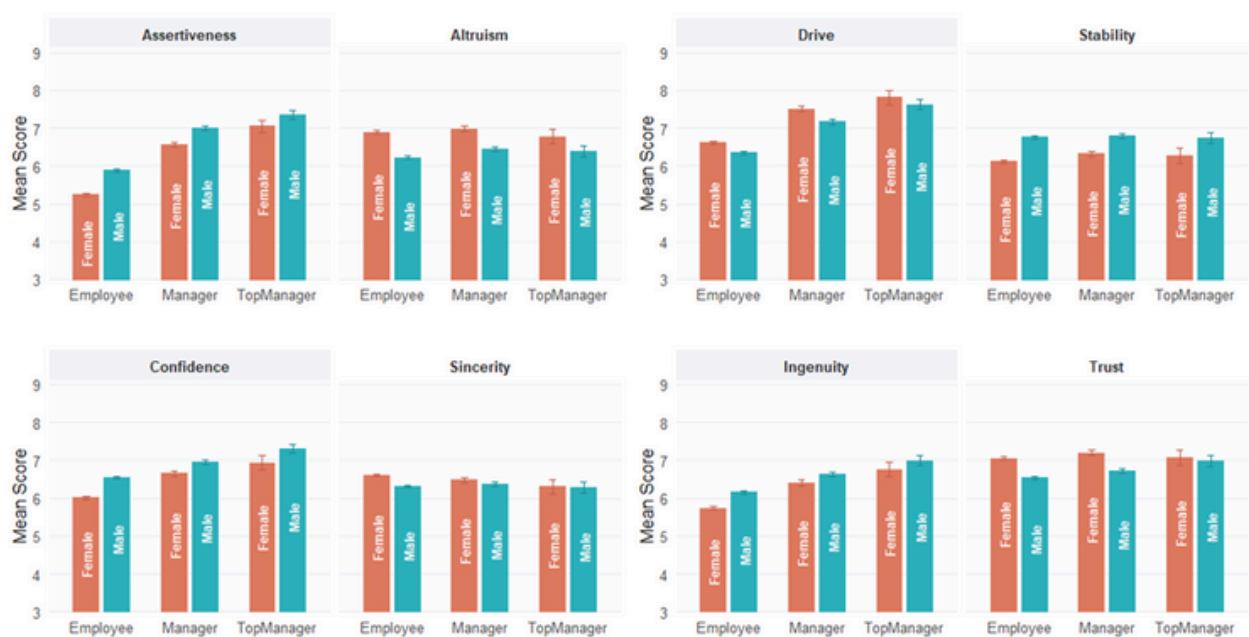


Figure 4 – Gender differences in Managerial and Complementary Aspects across organizational levels. Bars show mean STEN scores for Female (orange) and Male (teal) respondents at three organizational levels - Employee, Manager, and Top Manager - with whiskers representing 95% confidence intervals. In each Versatile Leadership pair, the left facet is a Managerial Aspect and the right facet a Complementary Aspect.

This observations from figure 4 suggests a pronounced inclination among females at work to contribute with empathy and inclusivity. By fostering such traits among leaders, they can contribute significantly to creating environments that promote trust, equity, and sustained engagement within organizations. On the other side, we see an inclination among males in general at work to contribute with decisiveness and critical thinking. By fostering such traits among leaders, they can contribute significantly to creating environments that promote innovation, clarity, and direction.

The data also shows, that on three out of the four Managerial Aspects, Males score higher, with only Drive standing out with higher score on Females across all three organizational levels. And the reverse can be seen on the Complementary Aspects, where Females tend to score higher, except on the Stability, where Males have higher scores across the three organizational levels. This is highlighted in figure 5 and 6, where we have looks closer at the mean differences between Female and Male on the 8 Aspects of Versatile Leadership.

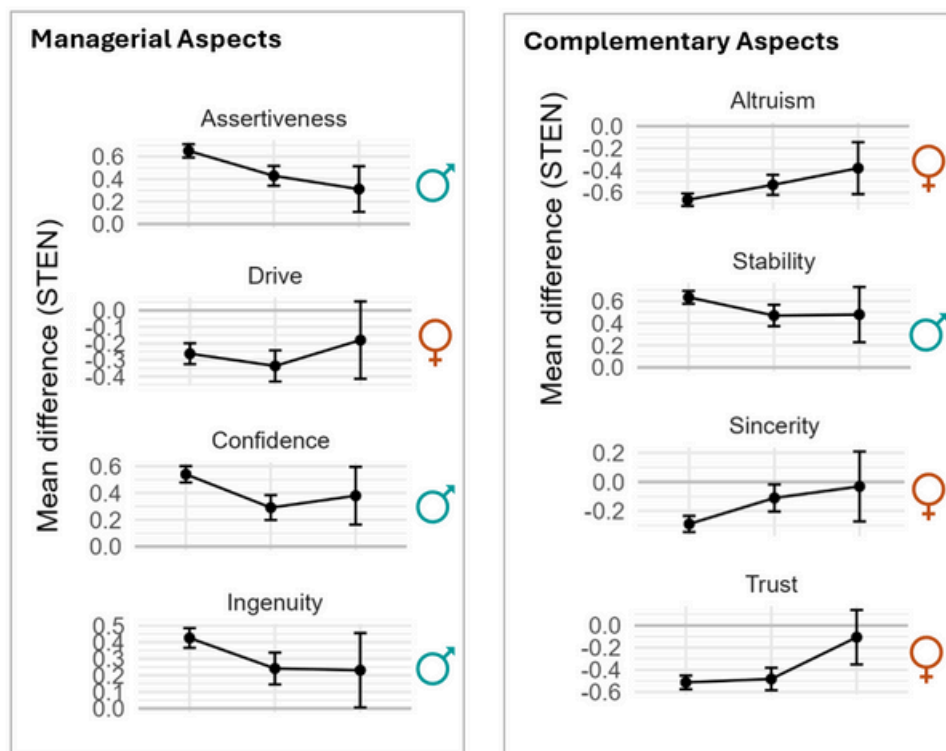


Figure 5 – Gender gap between Female vs Male (STEN scores) measured as mean difference (Cohen's d) across three organizational levels: Employees, Managers and Top Managers. Zero indicates no gender gap, positive a male advantage, and negative a female advantage. Vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals (Welch's t-test). When these overlap zero, the average gender gap is not statistically significant. Icons indicate overall Male or Female advantage on each scale.

	Employee	Manager	Top Mgr.		Employee	Manager	Top Mgr.
Assertiveness	0.65	0.43	0.31	Altruism	-0.67	-0.53	-0.38
Drive	-0.26	-0.34	-0.18	Stability	0.63	0.47	0.48
Confidence	0.54	0.29	0.38	Sincerity	-0.29	-0.11	-0.03
Ingenuity	0.43	0.24	0.23	Trust	-0.51	-0.48	-0.11

Figure 6 – Gender gap between Female vs Male (STEN scores) measured as mean difference (Cohen's d) across three organizational levels: Employees, Managers and Top Managers. Teal indicates a Male advantage (general higher score on Males). Orange indicates a Female advantage (general higher score on Females).

So, in general we see a gap between Males and Females, but interestingly enough these gender gaps in Drive, Ingenuity, Sincerity, and Trust seem to almost disappear in top leadership as seen in figure 6 with the general decline in mean difference following the organizational level. Just as noticeable, this tendency is more often because Females' scores resemble more Males' rather than the opposite.

For the Managerial Aspects, Males tend to score higher in Assertiveness at all organizational levels, though the difference narrows with leadership level, suggesting a partial convergence in leadership style at higher leadership levels. Females score higher in Drive among employees and middle managers, but this difference fades almost entirely in top management. Ingenuity shows Males scoring higher among employees, yet the gap diminishes with each leadership step. Confidence remains higher among Males at all levels, though the difference is smallest at Middle Management level.

This general pattern of narrowing Management Aspect levels reflects a decline in diversity at the top, with potential implications for organizational adaptability and relational capacity.

In the Complementary Aspects, Females consistently score higher in Altruism across all levels, though the gap decreases with leadership level. Men consistently score higher in Stability, but here too the difference slightly narrows at the top. Sincerity is higher among Females at the employee level, yet this difference vanishes in leadership, in part because Females' Sincerity scores decline with managerial level while Males remain stable. A similar pattern is seen in Trust where Females score higher among employees, but the gap disappears entirely in leadership roles.

These results highlight two simultaneous dynamics. First, leadership progression tends to narrow gender differences in several traits, which could reflect both selection effects - with leaders possessing certain profiles being promoted - and role-shaping effects, whereby leaders adapt their behaviour to meet role demands. Second, some traits retain persistent gender gaps, particularly Stability, which continue to influence leadership style even at the highest levels. From a Versatile Leadership perspective, the reduction in style diversity at senior levels underscores the importance of intentionally cultivating a balance in Aspects of the personality in all leaders, ensuring that empathy, trust, and collaboration are not diminished as individuals advance.

GENDER PATTERNS IN LEADERSHIP PROFILES

The concept of Androgynous Leadership, borrowed from research, has gained prominence, particularly during times of global crises, where leaders needed to navigate complex challenges with both empathy and decisiveness (Blake-Beard et al., 2020). This model integrates traditionally masculine personality traits, such as Assertiveness and Strategic Thinking, with feminine traits like Empathy and Collaboration, resulting in a balanced and adaptable leadership style. The importance of this approach is exemplified through leaders who successfully combined these traits achieving higher team resilience and trust (Blake-Beard et al., 2020).

However, adopting an Androgynous Leadership style is not without its challenges.

Hardaker et al. (2023) explore the expectations placed on leaders, particularly women, to embody traits like Caring and Nurturing, which can conflict with perceptions of Authority and Competence. Female leaders often face heightened scrutiny, needing to strike a perfect balance without appearing "too soft" or "too aggressive." These conflicting expectations highlight the "double bind" some women experience when attempting to claim an Androgynous Leadership identity.

On the other hand, one could argue that this is precisely what is needed. Rather than lowering expectations for female leaders to excel at balancing diverse traits, organizations might benefit significantly from raising their expectations of male leaders to adopt a more integrated approach. By encouraging all leaders, regardless of gender, to integrate traits such as Empathy and Collaboration alongside Assertiveness and Drive, the potential for fostering balanced, adaptable, and innovative leaders increases. And by doing so, they can consequentially cultivate teams capable of meeting the demands of an ever-changing world.

Our results show that some aspects of this integration happen naturally as leaders progress. Gender gaps in Drive, Sincerity, and Trust diminish ($d < .2$) - or vanish - in top leadership, pointing to a degree of profile convergence between men and women at higher levels.

However, this convergence often happens by reducing Complementary Aspects in women rather than increasing them in men. For example, women's Sincerity scores decline with managerial level, while men's remain steady; and the higher scores on Trust women hold at the employee level disappears in leadership roles.

This pattern suggests that current promotion processes may inadvertently narrow the spectrum of leadership traits at the top. Instead of cultivating and retaining both Managerial and Complementary strengths, organizations may be reinforcing a model that prizes decisiveness over empathy, and strategic drive over long-term relationship-building.

The challenge - and opportunity - of Androgynous Leadership lies in breaking this cycle. Rather than expecting women to adapt toward a narrower, traditionally “masculine” profile, organizations could raise expectations for all leaders to develop the full spectrum of traits central to Versatile Leadership. A truly versatile leader combines Assertiveness with Altruism, Drive with Stability, Confidence with Sincerity, and Ingenuity with Trust - regardless of gender. By doing so, they become more resilient, innovative, and able to lead teams effectively through complexity.

This is not simply a matter of equity. Research shows that leaders who integrate both sides of the leadership spectrum build more engaged teams, navigate change more successfully, and make better long-term decisions (Blake-Beard et al., 2020; Kaiser, 2020). For organizations, fostering this balance is a strategic imperative that can strengthen performance, innovation, and adaptability in an uncertain world.

AVOIDING SIMPLIFYING TRAITS INTO GENDER STEREOTYPES

While terms like “masculine” and “feminine” leadership traits can be useful shorthand, they carry a risk:

reinforcing outdated assumptions about what men and women should be like as leaders. As Billing (2004) cautions, labeling traits such as Altruism or Trust as inherently “feminine” can narrow our understanding of leadership potential, making it harder to see men as capable of these qualities - and women as capable of traits like Assertiveness or Confidence.

Our data confirms that these traits are not the exclusive domain of any one gender. For example, while men score higher on Assertiveness and women higher on Altruism on average, both men and women in top leadership show a more balanced mix of traits. Gender gaps in Drive, Sincerity, and Trust disappear at the highest levels - proving that both “sides” of the leadership spectrum are accessible to all.

On the other hand, one could argue that this is precisely what is needed. Rather than lowering expectations for female leaders to excel at balancing diverse traits, organizations might benefit significantly from raising their expectations of male leaders to adopt a more integrated approach. By encouraging all leaders, regardless of gender, to integrate traits such as Empathy and Collaboration alongside Assertiveness and Drive, the potential for fostering balanced, adaptable, and innovative leaders increases. And by doing so, they can consequently cultivate teams capable of meeting the demands of an ever-changing world.

Our results show that some aspects of this integration happen naturally as leaders progress. Gender gaps in Drive, Sincerity, and Trust diminish ($d < .2$) - or vanish - in top leadership, pointing to a degree of profile convergence between men and women at higher levels.

At the same time, the issue is that this convergence often results from women reducing Complementary traits (e.g., declining scores on Sincerity and Trust) rather than men increasing them. This suggests that organizations might implicitly be rewarding a narrower, more traditionally “masculine” profile for top leadership positions - and in the process, losing valuable interpersonal strengths that support collaboration, resilience, and employee engagement.

A more constructive approach is to see these qualities as human traits rather than gendered traits. Empathy, collaboration, and trust are not the “soft” counterpoint to “hard” leadership - they are essential components of effective and powerful leadership in complex environments.

Likewise, decisiveness, strategic focus, and confidence are not inherently male; they are traits every leader should hold.

By embedding this understanding into leadership development, assessment, and promotion criteria, organizations can ensure that leaders are encouraged - and expected - to cultivate the full range of traits. This shift removes the artificial link between gender and personality style, broadens the available talent pool in recruitment, and builds leadership teams better prepared to meet the demands of modern business.

ACTIONABLE STEPS TOWARD THE POWER OF TRUE VERSATILE LEADERSHIP

Creating versatile leadership teams requires deliberate, strategic interventions at multiple levels. Systemic changes are essential to address the deep-rooted disparities in leadership representation.

Implement structural policies for balanced representation

Systemic changes are essential to address the deep-rooted disparities in leadership representation. One such measure is the implementation of policies designed to ensure balanced representation. Countries such as Norway and France have shown how structured approaches can yield measurable improvements (Deloitte, 2024).

Strengthen sponsorship as well as mentorship

While women often have access to mentorship, they are significantly under-represented in sponsorship opportunities. Sponsors actively advocate for an individual's advancement, opening access to leadership positions and helping overcome systemic barriers to growth (Bedford, 2011).



Redefine traits as gender-neutral

Cultural and organizational shifts are vital. Normalising the view of personality traits - such as collaboration, empathy, assertiveness, and decisiveness - as human gender-neutral qualities rather than gendered traits can limit gender bias and expand the leadership talent pool.

Promote Versatile Leadership as the benchmark

Embedding Versatile Leadership in development programs and assessment criteria ensures leaders are valued for both Managerial and Complementary Aspects, aligning leadership culture with the demands of modern, complex workplaces (Blake-Beard et al., 2020; Kaiser, 2020).

These steps, taken together, can create an environment where diverse leadership styles are recognised, nurtured, and rewarded - equipping organizations to meet complex challenges and drive sustainable success.

CONCLUSION

The underrepresentation of Versatile Leadership is not only an equity issue - but it also represents a lost opportunity for organizational performance, innovation, and resilience. When leadership teams lack a balance of Managerial and Complementary traits, they risk over-relying on decisiveness and drive at the expense of trust-building, collaboration, and long-term stability.

Our analysis of over 20,000 OPTO personality profiles shows that the four Managerial Aspects - Assertiveness, Drive, Ingenuity, and Confidence - consistently rise with leadership level in both men and women.

At the same time, the four Complementary Aspects - Altruism, Stability, Sincerity, and Trust - show more complex patterns: some gender gaps persist (e.g., men's advantage in Stability, women's advantage in Altruism), while others narrow or disappear in top leadership.

Crucially, this convergence at the top often results from a reduction in Complementary traits among women rather than an increase among men. This suggests that current promotion and selection processes may unintentionally narrow the range of leadership styles at senior levels - a trend that could limit the adaptability and relational capacity of leadership teams.

The Versatile Leadership framework offers a way forward. By deliberately cultivating both Managerial and Complementary Aspects in all leaders - regardless of gender - organizations can develop leadership teams that are decisive and empathetic, strategic and collaborative. Such leaders are better equipped to navigate uncertainty, foster innovation, and sustain engaged, high-performing teams.

The aim of this article has not been to define how a male or female leader "should" be or to reinforce stereotypical understandings of gendered leadership traits.

Instead, the findings underscore the importance of valuing and integrating both sides of the leadership spectrum - traits traditionally associated with both masculinity and femininity - into leadership development, evaluations, and organizational leadership strategies.

Effective leadership is not about conforming to a single ideal but about embracing a diverse set of qualities that drive both immediate results and long-term organizational health.

Recognising this, and embedding it into leadership development and talent strategies, allows organizations to unlock the full potential of their leaders - creating environments where both people and performance can thrive.

Organizations that actively embed Versatile Leadership into their leadership development and talent strategies will not only close gender gaps - but they will also gain leaders capable of delivering both performance and trust in an increasingly complex and demanding world.

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