

SALUTING THE SPIRIT OF ATHENA

by Michael Couch and Richard Citrin

Athena, daughter of Zeus and protectress of the City of Athens, is the Greek deity revered for her courage and her attention to the virtues of justice and morality in the face of battle. In Homer's Iliad, Athena fights alongside her fellow warriors and brings the qualities of strategy, planning and practical actions to the battlefield. Unlike her brother Ares, who is the personification of violence and brutality and fought most savagely, Athena strove for a more civilized approach to war.

This year's ATHENA awardees may or may not identify themselves as warriors. Still, they have remarkable leadership skills that have made a meaningful difference to their organization and our community. There is, perhaps, a question that is raised when we think about how Athena and Ares approached life and whether those same qualities apply to leadership today between men and women.

Researchers distinguish between sex (biological) and gender (social) when discussing leadership differences between men and women. However, the researchers found no significant difference between men and women from a biological perspective. According to a Deloitte report, previous efforts to create a distinction between how female brains work and male brains work were discredited by further research. A *Harvard Business Review* cited a meta-analysis by Janet Hyde, a developmental psychologist. She found statistical differences for girls in spelling and language and the personality trait of agreeableness, while boys tested higher on motor performance and aggression. Overall, the differences are slight, and she concludes that we are more alike than dissimilar from a biological perspective.

From the gender or social perspective, things are a bit different. In a report by Deloitte Consulting, its research findings indicate that most of us operate within a gender framework, and expectations of how male and female leaders should operate come to fruition. People will look for gender differences in the workplace. When they see a particular type of leadership behavior, their "confirmation bias" affirms the way a man (strong and overbearing) or a woman (caring and understanding) operates. When leaders don't conform to those stereotypes, they may get nasty names attached to them since the rest of us to appear unable to recognize that either gender can own good and poor leadership skills.

This bias may play into how women and men lead and how they are perceived. In a Pew research study, most Americans believe that men and women in top leadership positions conduct themselves in a highly effective manner for their role. Although 57% think men and women are different, most Americans believe both approaches work effectively. While most critical leadership skills are viewed as equally capable for both men and women, there are some differences:

- Women are more compassionate and empathetic than men.
- They are better at compromising.
- Women are better at being honest and ethical.
- They do better at maintaining a tone of civility.
- Women will stand up for what they believe.

Men, on the other hand, are viewed as:

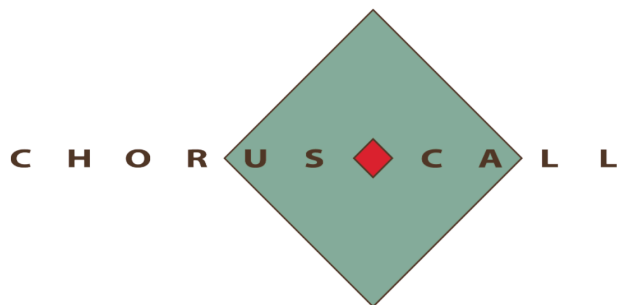
- Being slightly better at working well under pressure.
- Men are more willing to take risks.

Remember that these qualities are not fixed or biological but social, and as people, we often look to conform to expectations of what others think we should be.

From our perspective, we believe that leadership as a skill is learned and is not innate. Leadership develops by identifying the key behaviors or abilities required to successfully navigate a business challenge and then subjecting oneself to that opportunity. It is always interesting to see how business leaders such as Mary Barra at GM lead the company. When she took over in 2016, many thought she would not survive the crises facing a company needing to transition its business model. She has done so with efficiency and effectiveness and recently added Chairperson of the Board to her title.

Our Athena Award finalists and honoree are making their mark through their unique leadership skills. Their capabilities far exceed our perceptions of how women lead, and they break stereotypes in their efforts to advance the success of their business and community.

We salute you for the gifts you bring in the Spirit of Athena.



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