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THE QUEEN BEE SYNDROME

Combatting leadership's gender-related stereotypes

By Nadine ElShiaty

Bossy, pushy, selfish, vain and a show-off. This is how a commercial for a well-known brand of shampoo characterized women in leadership positions while male leaders were featured as convincing, dedicated and efficient — overall well-rounded for the workforce. This came as part of the company's campaign against negative stereotypes of women in the workforce.

According to the Global Gender Gap 2013 Report, Egypt ranks 125 out of 136 countries in gender equality. Persistent gender stereotyping is raising the debate on whether any balance could be achieved between both genders in the workforce.

Heba Gamal, managing director of Endeavor Egypt and Nermeen Hassan founder of Vivid Life, two Egyptian women leading on different platforms, shared their stories with ABR. They spoke about their success, the pitfalls they've encountered and the gender stereotypes they had to combat in their journeys as women leaders.



Courtesy Heba Gamal



HEBA GAMAL

'THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS AN INDIVIDUAL STORY'

Early on in her life, Heba Gamal realized that the essence of her journey lies in those who inspire her, leaders she looks up to and mentors who can help her identify her strengths and see opportunities as they come along.

Gamal carries this motto with her wherever she goes: "There is no such thing as an individual story — there is *our* story." After spending half her career abroad working in different settings, Gamal realized that the challenges of becoming a woman leader are more or less universal.

From 2008 to 2011, Gamal was Search Quality Program Manager at Google's MENA regional division. Her position, as she explained, involved working closely with programmers and IT geeks who sometimes came to work in pajamas or shorts. "I was working in an environment where if you dressed up or wore heels or even a clean pair of jeans, you looked odd," she said.

Recalling a work acquaintance in Egypt who always commented on her clothes, Gamal points out that the interaction between men and women in the workplace is understated. "It's one of the most typical yet understated gender stereotypes...You could both have similar qualifications, but I doubt that a man will ever tell another man 'Oh, that purple tie again,'" said Gamal explaining that she was well aware that some people's comments were meant as compliments.

Another stereotype Gamal dealt with in her pro-

fessional life was the expectation that women should be *nice* and that a woman's assertiveness and straightforwardness can be misinterpreted in the workplace as her being mean or malicious. The idea that women should be *nicer* than men became obviously persistent to Gamal in the work culture.

"I think that this is simply unfair. I tend to be a very confrontational direct person. I don't like to waste anyone's time. I think a lot of times this is viewed as being rude or heartless," she said.

Female leaders are either seen as motherly or bossy with a queen bee syndrome — bipolar stereotypes associated with women in the workforce. "We don't talk about men the same way. We don't sit down and criticize a man that is too nice and another that is too bossy, assertive and mean," explained Gamal, adding that the two stereotypical examples of women leaders represent different management styles.

"We will always have the assertive hardliner as well as the naïve leader. Those are different management or leadership styles," she pointed out. Leaders could acquire certain characteristics that are not necessarily innate as part of their adaptation to the work culture. "Women sort of look at these characteristics with a monocle — we inspect every single thing as a potential threat or a major opportunity," she added.

Becoming a female leader for Gamal is the same as becoming a male leader in terms of having equal ambitions and learning an identical set of skills and work ethics. What makes it harder for women to become leaders is overcoming the stereotypes and misperceptions associated with gender in leadership which makes them spend a lot of their time "managing perception and expectations." A woman's success has a different flavor, given that she has to juggle between several roles as mother, wife and daughter.

LEADERSHIP BETWEEN CAREER AND PASSION

Although her stint at Google had been exciting and engaging, Gamal left when it no longer became challenging for her. She then took her first failed attempt



at doing a job that she was passionate about, but it turned out to be too operational and lacking the passion she was looking for.

"In either direction, you're going to face problems, you're going to make wrong choices, you may end up with a bad manager and you may end up not being in the right learning environment," Gamal said, adding that the match between career and passion is extremely rare.

But the perfect career-passion combination eventually crossed Gamal's path when she joined Endeavor, a global organization supporting entrepreneurs around the world by connecting them with mentors and key players in their region.

LEADERSHIP MOTIVATIONAL GEARS

Constructive feedback is a source of motivation for Gamal, who said that knowing that there is always room for improvement is quite encouraging. Gamal also expressed her passion for learning and acquiring new information. "I am extremely motivated by learning and it could be anything. I love just having dinner with a friend and learning something as trivial as 'did you know that there are three types of butternut squash?' I really love the idea of having new information entering my brain," said Gamal.

A good team is another source of motivation for Gamal. The people that she works with, as she said, make her want to become "a better person, a better teammate, and a better manager."

Gamal keeps a daily list of all the items she enjoys doing including things that drive her at work and those she wishes to do.

The list helps her identify any mismatch in her routine and helps her acknowledge the skills that she hasn't practiced for a while.

"I think it's important to do this check-in every now and then to not only make sure that you are doing the things that you love, but also do the things that you *are* interested in doing, because it is important to have a good mix of everything," Gamal said.

As a leader, Gamal likes to put a lot of emphasis on people's dreams and where they want to be. She doesn't view her relationship with her team as transactional where they are only being assessed by the work they do.

"I believe that if you really understand what people's dreams are, you'll be better equipped to place them on the right path even within a small organization. You could put certain projects their way and give them the right type of feedback so that they grow certain skills and the strength they have," Gamal said.

NERMEEN HASSAN

A LEADER MERGING TWO WORLDS TOGETHER

Understanding one's purpose and objectives is one of the key factors in leading a balanced life, said Nermeen Hassan, an Egyptian leader in her forties who succeeded to bring the wealth and depth of the unconventional yoga philosophy into the corporate world through her Dubai-based business, Vivid Life.

A veteran with more than 20 years of experience in the corporate world, Hassan holds a degree in telecommunications, a master's in international business administration and a practice record in multiple industries.

Following her passion for yoga and philosophy, Hassan decided to pursue a master's degree in Yoga Teaching; a four year program where she studied philosophy, anatomy, physiology and psychology.

"I felt that I was what they call 'torn between two



Courtesy www.egyptianbondyogafestival.com



lovers.' I felt that I was very corporate and at the same time, I was quite ancient. I knew how to mentor and teach people, but I wanted to incorporate the teachings I acquired in my yoga studies into the corporate world that had rules and regulations," Hassan said.

In February 2012, Hassan co-founded Vivid Life, an organization that focuses on developing human talent in both the personal and the corporate world through yoga and meditation.

STEREOTYPES IN HASSAN'S CAREER

Hassan said she was often taken lightly for looking a lot younger than she really is. "When I was in my thirties I looked 18. In some of the business interactions I had, people thought that I was inexperienced because I looked younger. Only when we start talking or negotiating, that's when they knew they were very much mistaken," Hassan said.

The disparities that exist between genders in the workforce are what Hassan sees as one of the main reasons for having few women leaders today.

"When a man is asked how much he is expected to be paid in an interview, he is given something like double the salary that is normally put for the job because men know how to sell themselves, how to position themselves and they have no limitations," Hassan said, adding that for women, it is barely the same salary.

One of the most frustrating stereotypes that women have to deal with as Hassan described, is judging a woman by her looks rather than the quality of her work.

"It is unfortunate that some people still think or believe that if you look beautiful, you could use that to be better at work. I think people started looking at the exterior façade rather than [what a person is like on the inside]. This was not the case at all 20 years back," Hassan recalled.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES FACING WOMEN LEADERS

Working and living in the UAE, Hassan noticed how women in the country do not face the same social challenges which cripple Egyptian women today. Women in the Emirates are rather granted leadership as a gift, she added.

"Emirati leaders believe in women and always put

them in the front. Women in the UAE are leading businesses, companies, organizations, even in the government," Hassan said, adding that she believes Egyptian women have all the required qualities to become good leaders, except that they struggle to be in positions of power.

The struggle of Egyptian women in their leadership journey can be traced to past conditions that Hassan's generation went through.

"My generation was put in limited boxes for a long time," said Hassan explaining that Egyptian culture constantly imposed limitations on women.

The generations that followed have better chances at becoming leaders by beating gender-related stereotypes. According to Hassan, women tried their best to overcome cultural limitations rooted in education, family, and the media.

"We tried our best to prove ourselves although proving yourself in such an environment was very difficult," Hassan added.

THE TRUE MEANING OF A LEADER

Quoting one of her yoga sutras on what she views as the perfect definition of a leader, Hassan said, "Leaders are like gardeners. Gardeners know exactly when to put water and when to hold it back, because sometimes putting too much water kills the seeds. Being too tough and not putting water at all would dry out the seeds."

For Hassan, a leader has to grow certain skills through the years; most importantly, the ability to listen, understand and effectively communicate with teammates.

According to Hassan's favorite book Bhagavad Gita, developing leaders is built on two pillars, knowing yourself and renunciation; which involves removing the obstacles that could hinder an individual from reaching personal and career goals.

"I think of everyone who is making a positive change somewhere as a leader. You could lead in your own house, at work or in your entire community. You could even make a simple change in yourself and be a leader. The people who actually make the small difference in their own way are those who inspire me the most," she said. **ABR**



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