



LEADERSHIP AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT: WOMEN'S ROLE AS CHANGE MAKERS

GRACE NAJJAR, MANAGING DIRECTOR, MENA, PMI, SHARES INSIGHTS ON LEADERSHIP MINDSET AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT SKILLS WITH A FOCUS ON THE CHALLENGES FACING WOMEN PRACTITIONERS

A new generation of women is stepping into the leadership role in the MENA region and is leading the Project Economy. More executive level women are now working on complex megaprojects usually within male-dominated industries and have reached positions of influence in business, politics, civil society, academia and the media. Regionally and around the globe, more organisations are elevating women to executive positions to participate at the decision-making level. As a result of their success, they have not only been able to impact the industries in which they work, but have also had an important impact on the project management profession as a whole.

Women leaders are recognising the importance of qualifications to close the skill gaps, and are helping in securing the budgets needed to allow professional development and talent building through skilling, up-skilling and training academies. Unlike recent years where emphasis was placed on mainly technical skills, women leaders are reinforcing the adoption of what, at PMI we call the “Power Skills”, which are deemed critical in making projects succeed and deliver value.

These are the most in-demand leadership skills and capabilities that the World Economic Forum says will be critical in the next several years, which include emotional intelligence, strategic thinking, empathy, agility, problem solving, active listening, adaptability, resilience and the ability to care and inspire. Various studies have even proven that women’s emotional intelligence and empathy supersedes that of men, as they exhibit strong interpersonal skills, especially on complex projects; apply a systems-thinking view paired with empathy on critical projects. Women are methodology



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agnostic, embracing various ‘ways of working’, such as Agile, and their patience and determination drive the delivery of projects sustainably to the finishing line. Having said that, women leaders are now approaching organisations like PMI to help them influence the changes and transformations needed, which falls in alignment with our PMI 4.0 new strategy.

Effective leadership and project managers go hand in hand, and are uniquely positioned and needed by the hour to make such changes in a

world undergoing dramatic shifts. Therefore, it is now a great opportunity for women to consider project management as a rewarding professional career, especially that following the pandemic, women have been disproportionately impacted in terms of their workforce participation. Further research from McKinsey – as seen in their Women in the Workplace 2020, report that today more than one in four women are contemplating downsizing their careers or departing the workplace altogether.

Women currently constitute an estimated 20 – 30 percent of the project management staff worldwide and currently face some barriers:

Workplace inequality, are not only an economic and business issue but a societal one. The barriers to gender inequality must be removed before a woman starts her career as a project manager to encourage her successful career choice. It is also imperative for women to encourage each other. Workplaces that are more supportive towards women with families also benefit everyone else who will gain from a flexible work-life balance.

Gender-specific challenges are prevalent and project management remains a man’s world. Some sectors such as energy, might prefer men due to the nature of the job. Unfortunately, women still have to assert themselves to gain acceptance and overcome preconceived notions. However, as strong and resilient project leaders are sought after, women have these crucial skill sets to be successful.

Gender pay gap in project management is prevalent as it remains more lucrative for males than for women. Although women have been a prominent presence in the workplace for over five decades, and now make up more than half of the work force, they still struggle to advance into the highest positions at the same rate as their male counterparts.

However, findings from various studies indicate that women are more likely to be successful at juggling multiple roles if their career is meaningful and fulfilling. Therefore, women must be supported and encouraged to pursue both simultaneously and raise their confidence in their ability to manage responsibilities in all spheres of their lives.

At PMI, we focus on evolving the role of women in project management and support collaborative leadership by providing the power skills needed for woman to excel in the workplace. We are currently fostering ongoing dialogues on diversity, equity and inclusivity.

By shedding light on women who have been role models will encourage a new generation of women to take the lead.

We need to continue raising awareness on the scope of activities handled by women in project management, providing networking opportunities and the right mentorship. Together, we can make equality become a reality. **CEO**

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