Why Women Leaders are Ditching the Old Workplace Rulebook—and Winning Because of It

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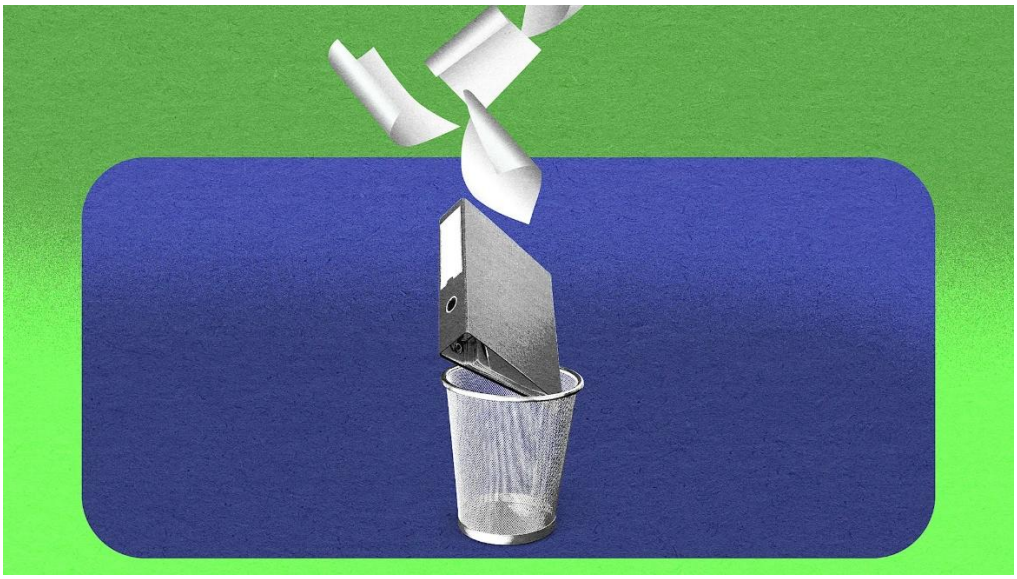

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For many years, women have been told that they needed to "step-up" to lead. You know the narrative—speak more assertively, be less emotional, less sensitive and toughen up. In essence, to "fit the mold."

The trouble is, that mold was never created with them in mind. It was built in an era where leadership equalled hierarchy, control, dominance, and outdated power dynamics. This has fueled countless burnout cases, while women have mastered leading within these "rules." Now though, there's a shift. That shift is birthing the realization that the old rulebook no longer applies.

The old leadership model is expensive and commercially outdated. The command-and-control paradigm was built in a time where things were less unpredictable. The world is now operating in constant volatility. This leads to workers who need and expect autonomy, flexibility, and meaning, not micromanagement.

I'm now watching women making conscious decisions to ditch this rulebook. To quietly step away from these rules. That's not driven by rebellion. It's because those rules are now a liability. It's a move to future proof, to stay relevant, and to rise without breaking themselves and their teams.

The old expectations

When we talk about the "old rulebook" what's meant is the informal expectations that have shaped careers, for example:

Being available at all hours. Being the one who picks up the work no one else wants and carries the emotional load of the team. Data backs up just how costly this is. It is reported that around six in ten senior-level women report frequent burnout. This is higher than men at the same level.

Rinse and repeat leadership style. This is to lead like the person who had the role before you. In many organizations this has meant adopting a narrow, traditional, and often masculine version of leadership. Typically leaving inherent skills like intuition, empathy, and connection suppressed, when it's a natural style many women would choose to lean into.

The "good girl" phenomenon. Saying yes as a default. Smoothing things over and not challenging too strongly so as not to run the risk of being seen as "difficult" or "not a team player."

These rules don't just exhaust individual women. They create cultures where people teeter at the edge of burnout. Stay quiet when something feels off and prioritize looking in control over telling the truth. More and more women are making the decision that this isn't leadership. It is, in fact, a risk.

Why now?

Some of the shift is very personal. Burnout figures in women are stark. This isn't just about individual wellbeing though. Global data suggests that around only one in five employees are engaged at work. The cost of this runs to billions in lost productivity. Engaged teams on the other hand deliver better productivity, profitability, and lower staff turnover.

Looking through this lens, it's plain to see that clinging to the old rulebook burns leaders out and kills human connection. It's outdated and its expensive. So, women are waking up. They are experimenting, getting curious, and asking "If the system wasn't designed with me in mind, what if I stop copying it and start leading in a way that works for me, and for my people?"

Let's face it, I am sure we can all agree that the smart thing to do given the poor state of play in many organizations, is to try something new.

The wins

Here are the wins when women play by the new rules.

They reduce risk, both for themselves and the organization. A burned-out leader is a risk. So is a leader who is exhausted or afraid of conflict. When women step away from the "available all hours" pattern, they free up capacity to see what's really going on. They notice strain earlier and have headspace to ask questions that propel momentum. This behaviour also helps retention. Leaders who model sane boundaries along with sustainable pace are far more likely to keep their best people, which is infinitely more cost effective than being on the replacement treadmill.

They make better decisions by using more of their intelligence. The old rulebook had a bias to rewarding data and hard numbers while demoting the proposition of intuition and emotion. Yet research on effective teams tells a different story. The single biggest factor in high performing teams is psychological safety. When people feel safe to speak up, ask questions, share "daft" ideas, or admit to mistakes, innovation increases. There is better decision-making and stronger engagement. The women who are ditching the "Don't be too emotional," or "Don't rock the boat" rules, are naming what others have to date have supressed: "Smething feels a bit off here," or "The team's tone is telling me something is missing, what are we not seeing?" This strengthens the strategy and analysis; it doesn't endanger or replace them.

There is growing evidence to suggest that when women are in senior roles, and allowed to lead in their own way, organisations benefit. A world economic forum summary of research on the Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE) 350 firms reported that companies where women made up more than a quarter of the executive committee had profit margins around 16%, more than 10 times higher than those with no women at that level.

When women ditch the outdated rulebook, they win (they have sustainable energy and careers that don't ask they abandon themselves); their teams win (they enjoy safer cultures and leaders who are human, not performative); and their organizations win (with lower risk, better decisions, improved innovation, and stronger engagement that shows up in the numbers).

International Women's Day often asks the question of how to get more women into leadership. I'd advocate to close the old rule book. The future of leadership needs something more powerful, more human, more intuitive, more empowering, and yes, more magical.