

Turning our world around—with women in the lead

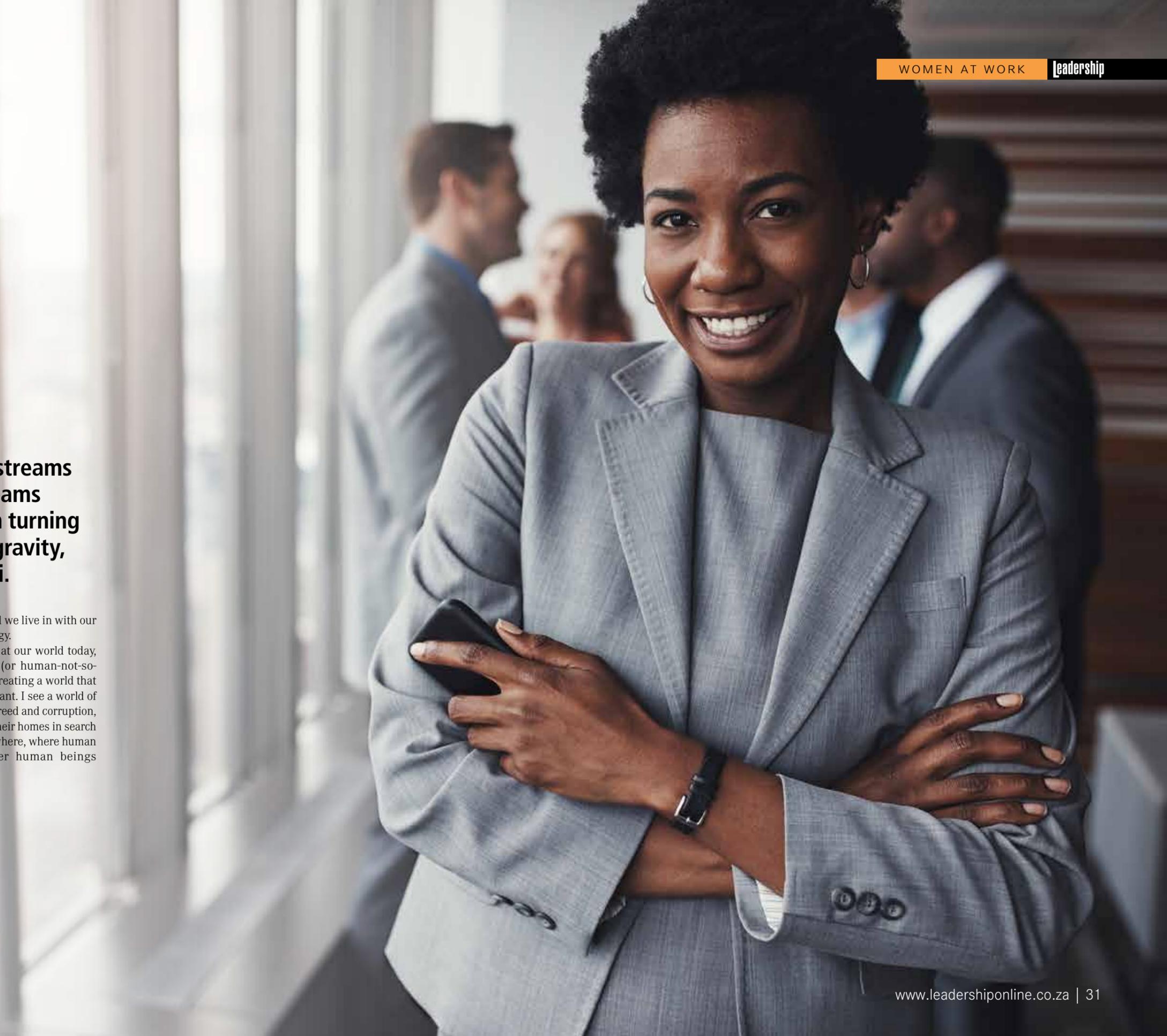
An Ethiopian proverb says, “Where a woman rules, streams run uphill.” How disturbing... and how exciting! Streams should not run uphill, should they? That would mean turning the world on its head and going against the law of gravity, writes sought-after Leadership Coach, Dr Layo Seriki.

This must be magic, dangerous and hard, therefore, better not be allowed. But hang on for a moment. Before we jump to the conclusion that this proverb must be telling us that women should definitely never lead, let's think about some of the magic mankind has created, lives with and benefits from already.

For example, it has become normal for many human beings to sit calmly in a huge metal container 10 000 metres above the ground, reading a newspaper and sipping on a glass of wine or cup of tea. You could say that this is not due to magic at all but rather due to the ability of mankind to oppose the force of gravity with an equally strong or stronger force. It is due to our ability

to change the world we live in with our ideas and our energy.

Looking around at our world today, I see humankind (or human-not-so-kind) collectively creating a world that none of us really want. I see a world of poverty, violence, greed and corruption, where people flee their homes in search of better lives elsewhere, where human beings treat other human beings



atrociously—not to mention how we treat other species. I see a world in which communities and the environment are destroyed.

Zooming in further, I see a predatory power-play between and within business organisations, where profit maximisation is the ultimate goal and human beings have turned into mere resources, to be used in order to achieve this pinnacle.

Looking at South Africa, I see that many women still face terrible abuse and discrimination, and from the world and suffer silently, all within the patriarchal traditions that prevail in this country and the largest parts of our world.

I also see that we celebrate women in South Africa for a whole month in August, remembering the women of all races who marched to Pretoria's Union Buildings on 9 August 1956. These women joined forces to confront the pass laws, which limited them. They succeeded in joining forces to make their voices heard, publicly stating that women do not just belong in the kitchen, they belong everywhere. Let's keep that snapshot of our world in mind and be inspired by it.

I believe our world could do with some turning around. Perhaps this is the time for women to take a big step up, tap into their female power and work some magic for humanity on mother earth. Why should women lead, do you ask?



Women seem to be especially good at living the type of leadership that is called for in this fast-paced, ever-changing day and age. Modern leadership thinking emphasises change management, empowerment, collaboration, diversity and ethical purpose. The majority of our male leaders appear to be struggling

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with this, as they get distracted by the need to aggressively exhibit superiority and toughness—and, thus, to prove their worthiness of the alpha male position.

Having noticed some negative effects of male domination in patriarchal traditions, I've taken a curious glance at what a matriarchy may be. According to Heide Goettner-Abendroth, founder of The International Academy HAGIA for Modern Matriarchal Studies, cited by Dame Magazine in 2013, matriarchies are not the exact opposite

of patriarchies. This would mean that, now, the women are the bosses and the men are the oppressed. She explains that “in matriarchies, mothers are at the centre of culture without ruling over other members of society” and that “the aim is not to have power over others and over nature, but to follow maternal values, i.e.

to nurture the natural, social and cultural life based on mutual respect”. Patriarchy as power over others could, thus, be contrasted with matriarchy as power from within.

Catherine Edsell details this, as she explains her “Matriarch Adventures” in a Ted Talk. She takes groups of women out into the desert to observe elephants as the “iconic matriarchs”, which, to her, means that they value instinct as much as intellect, receptivity as much as assertiveness, collaboration as much as individualism and empathy as much as objectivity. She explains that in the elephant world, successful matriarchs are leaders because their family respects them and, therefore, has chosen to be led by them. Over the years, the matriarchs have proven that they can be trusted to make wise decisions.

I agree that human beings can learn a lot about leadership from this. But is it really true that women are naturally better at leading and men are naturally worse, because they are genetically programmed for aggression and competition?

This leads us to the old “nature versus nurture” debate. Strong arguments have been found for both sides. Boys and girls come into this world with clear differences in their physical attributes, their hormones and their brains. So it is explained to us by the nature-advocates in this debate. It is an irreversible fact that men and women are naturally different.

On the other hand, the social learning theorists explain that children model the behaviour they observe in the adults around them and,



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therefore, the gender-specific behaviour is nurtured or socialised into us from a very young age. Boys are encouraged, by the games, toys, stories and attention they receive, to be strong and brave, clever and tough, while girls are encouraged to be beautiful and kind, quiet and obedient.

I deduce that, as men and women in the modern world, we need to continue working out for ourselves, not just what it means to be a man or a woman, but also what it means to be our own true self.

Each of us—male and female—is born with some characteristic tendencies, which we can learn to recognise and harness to contribute our bit to the world we live in. As leaders, we must develop our own authentic leadership style, taking into account what inspires and energises us, what we are good at, what we struggle with and what we and those we are leading need.

In my work with leaders as a coach and consultant, I have observed that women tend to feel more comfortable in nurturing roles than men

do, listening, empathising and taking feelings into account.

Men led by women often value these leadership competencies in their female bosses, while they may see a man who leads this way as weak. Men tend to feel more comfortable in structuring roles than women do, voicing demands and providing boundaries. Women often readily accept clear structure from male leaders but call female leaders who are firm in sticking to clear limits “bitchy”. This is where we all need to do some rethinking and relearning. To develop good leadership, we need structure as much as nurture and it does not matter who provides which.

Ideally, all leaders—men and women—work on learning to provide both in a positive way. Realistically, some leaders will be better at one, some will be better at the other.

My suggestion that women should take the lead is not about eliminating men and the traditionally masculine leadership traits but rather about increasing the share of traditionally

feminine leadership traits in our collective leadership development.

In my mind's eye, I see men and women recognising each other, supporting each other and leading in partnership. I see women awakening to the fact that they don't need to think, feel and act like a man in order to be successful. I see women taking up the challenge to find out what they are really best at—each one as the woman she is and as groups of women, together.

With renewed self-knowledge, self-confidence and mutual support, I see women truly leading their families, organisations and societies into collaborative adventures in search of ways to reverse at least some of the destructive processes we have allowed ourselves to be sucked into and, thus, to make streams flow uphill.

As South Africa celebrates Women's Month, I call on the women and men of this country to join forces in leadership to enable this society to fly, as if by magic. ▲

Dr Layo Seriki