



FEMININE LEADERSHIP

Context note to explain our support of the feminine leadership style

Clarifying notes

The term 'feminine' in this context refers to a specific leadership style that emphasises traits such as collaboration, empathy, and emotional intelligence, rather than referring to the gender of the person. Feminine leadership is not a replacement or a criticism of traditional leadership styles but rather a complement to them. We recognise that both feminine and masculine traits can be exhibited by individuals of any gender.

Our hypothesis in support of feminine leadership

The founding principles of the Sustainability Institute encompasses the three areas of head, heart and hands - connecting people to knowledge, each other and our natural world. Our organisational values, ways of working, learning pedagogies and approaches, and relational interactions strongly embeds these foundational principles. We also focus on strengthening the attributes of joy, hope, creativity, ukama and agency with everyone we work with. As an organisation striving to help bring about more just and regenerative futures for people and the planet, we have to set an example through how we lead and live these principles.

Today's challenges of political division, social injustice, economic uncertainty, declining biodiversity and climate change, calls for a kinder way to lead.¹ To be able to impact systems-change, strengthen people's agency to be changemakers, and reimagine more just futures collectively, feminine leadership traits are needed. And this starts in the workplace, by making choices led by the heart and intuition rather than from a place of fear, control and validation. Without understanding and embracing the importance of feminine qualities of care, empathy and collaboration in how we live, work and lead, the status quo will continue.

"Everyone who wants to leave the world a better place for future generations must speak up and change the way they do (or don't do) business. The way we lead today will determine the world we leave behind."²

¹ <https://theconversation.com/supporting-feminine-leadership-can-help-create-a-just-and-kinder-future-193607>

² <https://femininefutures.com/the-foundation>

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Feminine leadership recognises, calls out, and works actively to correct social injustice. It recognises that injustice exists and as a part of its leadership, it doesn't just focus on getting things done, but it also focuses on improving and correcting things.³

By embracing feminine leadership, we can create a more regenerative and equitable world for all.

What is our definition of feminine leadership?

Feminine leadership is a relational, values-driven approach to leadership that places people, connection and the collective good at the centre of how power is understood and exercised. It draws on qualities such as empathy, active listening, collaboration, emotional intelligence, intuition and inclusivity, while embracing courage, accountability and purposeful action. It takes a holistic, systems-aware approach to decision-making, considering relationships, long-term consequences and the ethical and human impact of our choices. Feminine leadership is not about softness or the rejection of structure; it is about balancing action with reflection, control with trust, and individual achievement with collective flourishing – using power not as something to possess, but as a responsibility to strengthen others, build community and create meaningful change.

Further explanation:

Feminine leadership is a relational and values-driven approach to leadership that places people, connection and the collective good at the centre of how power is understood and exercised. It draws on qualities traditionally associated with the feminine, including empathy, active listening, collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence, intuition and inclusivity – while combining these with courage, accountability and purposeful action.

At its heart, feminine leadership recognises that leadership is not simply about authority, control or achieving results. It is about using influence responsibly: building trust, strengthening others, creating psychological safety and bringing people together across differences to navigate complexity and create meaningful change. Power is understood not as something to possess, but as a form of stewardship and a shared responsibility to exercise with clarity, connection and conscience.

Feminine leaders take a holistic and systems-aware approach to decision-making. They look beyond short-term outcomes and the bottom line to consider relationships, interdependencies, long-term consequences, and the ethical and human impact of their choices. They are willing to

³ <https://onefuturecollective.org/blog/nrk-podcast-episode-2/>

listen deeply, remain open to feedback, make space for different perspectives and recognise that sustainable solutions are often discovered through connection, reflection and collaboration.

Feminine leadership is not softness, weakness or the rejection of structure; nor is it the opposite of masculine leadership. Rather, it brings a necessary balance to traditional models of leadership by complementing decisiveness and action with reflection and intuition; competition with collaboration; control with trust; and individual achievement with collective flourishing.

Ultimately, feminine leadership is the art of leading from alignment rather than expectation – having the courage to act from purpose and inner truth, to pause and listen when needed, and to ask not only “What is the fastest way to the result?” but also “What is the wisest, truest and most responsible way forward?” It recognises that, in an increasingly complex and interdependent world, some of the greatest sources of leadership strength lie in our capacity to connect, to care, to build community and to use our power in service of something greater than ourselves.^{4, 5, 6}

Feminine leadership traits

1. **Empathy:** Leaders who listen with compassion, seek to understand others, and offer support when it matters most. These leaders are better able to understand and respond to the needs of their employees. They listen to their concerns and create a supportive environment that fosters well-being and engagement.
2. **Collaboration:** Leaders who work well with others, value every person's contribution, and help the team achieve shared goals. These leaders are able to build stronger relationships and foster innovation within their teams. They encourage open communication, idea-sharing, and feedback, which can lead to new insights and solutions.
3. **Vulnerability:** Leaders who have the courage to be honest, acknowledge mistakes, ask for help when needed, and build trust through openness and authenticity. Leaders who express vulnerability can create a more supportive and inclusive environment.
4. **Emotional Intelligence:** Leaders who respond to others with self-awareness, empathy, and respect, helping to build positive relationships and navigate challenges with care.
5. **Inclusivity and diversity:** Leaders who make everyone feel welcome, respected, and valued, ensuring every person has the opportunity to contribute and belong. These leaders prioritise creating opportunities for people of different backgrounds and experiences to contribute and thrive. They value collective consensus-based decision-making, and in so doing build systems

⁴ <https://management30.com/blog/feminine-leadership/>

⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/esmtberlin/2025/11/04/the-future-of-power-how-female-leaders-are-rewriting-the-rules-of-influence/>

⁶ <https://globalwomanmagazine.com/rise-of-feminine-leadership-living-unmuted/>

that are inclusive and values each person's lived experiences.

6. Intuition: Leaders who combine experience, insight, and good judgement to respond thoughtfully, act with integrity, and make choices that reflect shared values. These leaders are better able to make decisions that align with their values and the needs of their team and organisation. They rely on their own judgment and experience to guide their choices, rather than following a set of rigid rules.

*"There is no thing as a single-issue struggle
because we did not live single-issue lives."*

Audre Lorde ⁽⁷⁾

Practical ways to embody feminine leadership

1. Build trust through authenticity and vulnerability

Lead with honesty, self-awareness and integrity. Be true to your values, communicate openly, acknowledge mistakes and take responsibility rather than assigning blame. Showing vulnerability creates trust, credibility and a culture where others feel safe to do the same.

2. Lead through connection, empathy and emotional intelligence

Listen deeply and seek to understand the experiences, needs and perspectives of others. Be attentive to your own emotions and those of your team, respond with empathy, and create an environment where people feel seen, heard and supported. This can also mean recognising individual needs and offering appropriate flexibility, support or mentorship.

3. Share power and create space for others to grow

Make hierarchies functional rather than rigid, and recognise potential beyond age, experience or position. Give young and emerging voices opportunities to contribute, lead and influence decisions. Invest time in training, mentoring and developing people so that leadership and knowledge are continually shared rather than concentrated in a few individuals.

4. Create a culture of collaboration and inclusion

Actively invite different perspectives and create safe spaces for people to share ideas, challenge assumptions and disagree constructively. Bring diverse people and disciplines together, value difference, and ensure that participation is not limited by background, status or position.

⁷ <https://womenrisingco.com/articles/the-rise-of-feminine-leadership/>

5. Trust intuition while encouraging creativity and courage

Make space for reflection, instinct and intuition alongside evidence and analysis. Encourage experimentation, new ideas and thoughtful risk-taking, and be willing to change direction when something is no longer serving the purpose. Feminine leadership recognises that not every answer can be found through certainty or predetermined plans.

6. Lead for collective and long-term impact

Look beyond immediate results to consider the wider system and the people affected by decisions. Ask not only “Will this work?” but also “Who does this serve, what are the consequences, and what might be possible?” Use leadership and influence to strengthen people, relationships, communities and the organisation as a whole.

Sources: 8, 9

⁸ <https://onefuturecollective.org/blog/nrk-podcast-episode-2/>

⁹ <https://womenrisingco.com/articles/the-rise-of-feminine-leadership/>

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