



The Female Vision

*Defining Women's
Strategic Strengths*

Sally Helgesen & Julie Johnson

We believe that what women see—what they notice and value and how they perceive the world in operation—*is a greatly under-exploited resource in organizations.* In this manifesto, we explore what the female vision is, what it has to offer, and why it matters—to women, to organizations and to the world.

Organizations today are far more committed to developing women's talents and leadership potential than in the past, and good companies recognize the value of workforce diversity. Yet women still have limited impact at the strategic level because they are often not perceived as visionary. We believe this perception not only gets things wrong, but gets things exactly backwards. Women's greatest asset lies in their visionary power.

We came to this belief after four years of research and thinking about the true value that women bring to work. What we present evolved over the course of a long-running conversation that began in 2005 on a beach in LaJolla, California, where we were attending a professional retreat. At the time, we were preoccupied with the questions then engaging most people in our field—why were so many talented women either leaving senior positions or watching their careers stall?

Why weren't more women represented at the C Suite level and on boards? We knew the orthodox reasons behind what was being described as "the female brain drain," and we had followed research. But our own experiences suggested that fundamental issues were not being addressed.

Our conversation kept returning to a phrase that each of us had heard from women who had either left high positions or were considering doing so: "*I decided it just wasn't worth it.*" We decided we could not meaningfully explore the relationship between women and power unless we addressed the question of what women most deeply value and how this conflicts with what mainstream organizations expect.

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Why What Women See Matters

When women speak the truth of what they see, they gain energy and a sense of purpose. Organizations access fresh ideas and perspectives by learning to value intuitive insight along with analytical skills. And the world moves toward a safer and more sustainable understanding of what constitutes progress by framing it in a broader social context.

Addressing the complexities of our common future requires us to see the world in full perspective, employing a wide lens as well as a sharp focus.

For all these reasons, what women see matters.

It matters especially given the interconnected nature of today's global environment, in which mistakes have consequences that can reverberate unexpectedly in far corners of the world. We can no longer afford—as individuals or as citizens of the planet—to operate from an artificially restricted pool of data that ignores the diverse richness of what human beings perceive; the cost of doing so has simply become too high.

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Doing so, in turn, requires incorporating what women see at the strategic level, which is why leveraging the female vision is ultimately a leadership issue.

Although the last thirty years have witnessed a steady influx of women into many sectors—finance, media, government, medicine, law, the military, higher education and religion—women continue to lack influence when it comes to shaping the big picture. They participate in figuring out the hows and whats—the tactics, the implementation—but are rarely in the position to decide the whys and the ifs. Women have gained a seat at the table, but since what they see is rarely included in the big conversations that determine purpose, their most authentic and distinctive gifts often remain locked within them.

Most organizations understand that developing women leaders is desirable. And they know they must get better at attracting and retaining talented women. They recognize—as Catalyst founder Felice Schwartz argued nearly two decades ago—that women constitute a business imperative. But they rarely consider that women might also constitute a strategic imperative, a source of vision as well as a source of talent.

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The First Element of the Female Vision

The first component that shapes our vision is our capacity for notice. What we notice determines what we see. It provides the details that determine how we understand events, order information and assign value. Our individual style of noticing is an expression of our character, our talents and our interests. What we notice makes us who we are.

Men and women often have different styles of noticing; not always, but often enough to make a distinction. For example, researchers find that men tend to focus deeply and narrowly on a single perception or task, while women's attention is simultaneously engaged by different things. As a result, women's style of noticing can be described as broad-spectrum. This is hardly surprising.

Women's domestic experience and socialization have accustomed them to monitoring the emotional atmosphere around them, anticipating what others might need and making subtle adjustments in order to avoid potential conflicts. Researchers also note that women are more skilled than men at reading other peoples' moods. Women pay closer attention to tone of voice and facial expression, and draw more accurate conclusions about how others are responding.

Focused and broad spectrum notice complement one another. Broad spectrum notice is good at gauging context and making unexpected connections, while focused notice provides clarity and analytic rigor. Broad spectrum notice resists quantification and can seem overly subjective, but focused notice can leave out vital information. Organizations can benefit from acknowledging the strategic value of broad spectrum as well as focused notice, and bring greater balance to strategic intent.

The Second Element of the Female Vision

Just as men and women often have different styles of noticing, so too do men and women often perceive value in different ways. This difference constitutes the second element of the female vision. How we perceive value gives context to the details we notice. It shapes our judgments about where we invest our time, energy and talents. It determines where we put our attention.

In our research, we became aware of differences in how men and women perceive value as we interviewed women who had either left high positions or were considering doing so. As we listened to these stories, we were struck by the phrase we heard time and again that initially spurred us to begin our research: *“I decided it just wasn’t worth it.”*

What does this mean?

It means the women we spoke with did not perceive the tradeoffs their companies were asking them to make—in terms of time, stress, lifestyle, relationships—to be adequately compensated by the rewards offered in return. It does *not* mean that the women were unwilling to sacrifice their time or live with the adrenaline rush we all experience when we’re over-extended (or thrillingly involved). It *does* mean that they did not find their company’s traditional reward system sufficiently compelling.

Our research suggests a fundamental mismatch between what the marketplace assumes people will value in their work and what women (not all women, but enough to make a difference) most deeply value. This occurs because organizations still structure reward, recognize achievement, build incentive, and decide promotions using definitions of worth that reflect an all male industrial leadership culture.

One of the most significant findings to emerge from our research is that women are more likely to assign value to their work based on the quality of their daily experience than on what their job implies for the progression of their careers. Organizations have traditionally tried to motivate people based on what a job might *lead to*, assuming that individuals would be willing to sacrifice the daily quality of their lives for the promise of ascending to a higher position. This approach may not be as successful with women, who tend to take satisfaction from the texture of their everyday experience rather than from seeing the present as a stepping stone to the future. Organizations that recognize that true diversity lies in a diversity of values will have a better chance of leveraging a broad spectrum of talent.

In today's environment, which is above all defined by options, variety and choice, having a clear sense of larger purpose is more important than it's ever been.

The Third Element of the Female Vision

Just as what we notice determines what we value, so does what we value determine what we believe the world should be. This understanding comprises the third element of our vision. It shapes how we see the big picture and informs how we connect the dots. It links what we are doing now, in this moment, with what we hope to achieve, what we most profoundly want to bring forth into the world.

Our daily actions have power when they serve our larger vision. Setting them in this context enables us to stay inspired and motivated over time. It also helps us to make the right choices. In today's environment, which is above all defined by options, variety and choice, having a clear sense of larger purpose is more important than it's ever been. If we can't articulate what we are trying to achieve in our lives, we will have no yardstick against which to measure our decisions, no notion of why we should do this instead of that.

Our research suggests that women are most inspired when they see their work in a social context rather than compartmentalizing it as a game. Women often find the game metaphors that traditionally define purpose to be too bounded, too restricted, even pointless. By contrast, the work of maintaining the social fabric has, throughout history, been perceived as the work of women.

As a result, women have developed a sensitivity to the nuance of relationships—a sensitivity that has not necessarily been seen as a leadership capacity. Concern for the social fabric has often been viewed as a kind of frill in the rough and tumble culture of organizations—nice, but beside the point, and expendable during periods when pressure grows intense.

Yet as organizations grow more weblike, more dependent upon relationships and the nurturance of talent, the strategic nature of tending the social fabric becomes more apparent. The capacity to integrate social skills into a larger vision offers women a way to move beyond outmoded dichotomies between big picture thinking and the care and maintenance of relationships. In a world of webs, the ability to see decisions in a larger human context becomes an essential, and profoundly strategic, advantage.

Four Key Steps for Tapping Into Vision

When the female vision remains untapped, both women and organizations suffer. Women are unable to translate their best observations into action. What they see remains locked within them, and their connections with others can feel shallow and inauthentic as a result. What should be a source of power becomes a source of isolation and frustration.

Without the female vision, organizations also lose power. They undermine their base of talent and diminish their ability to make balanced decisions. They reduce their access to a creative yet practical resource. They remain one dimensional in a multidimensional world.

To create the conditions in which women's vision can flourish, organizations must learn to value diverse ways of knowing, encourage mindfulness, supports webs of inclusion and respect the power of empathy. All of these capacities can and must be incorporated into an organization's larger vision.

But women must also take the initiative. They can't wait for organizations to start valuing what they see. They need to build a market for it by teaching their companies to recognize the power of the female vision.

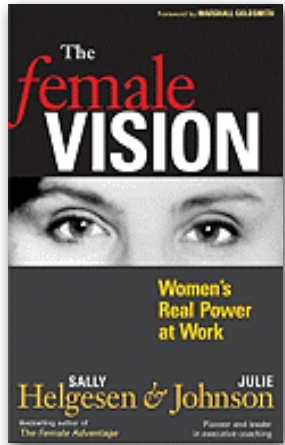
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Acting on your vision requires taking four steps:

- 1. Articulate your vision:** start by being as clear as you can about what you see and communicate it in a way that your organization can understand and value.
- 2. Enlist allies:** allies are people willing to listen, who try to help you when you ask, who give you feedback and explain your cause when you're not in the room.
- 3. Hold yourself accountable:** once you have articulated your vision and enlisted allies, you need a plan of action and you need to make a commitment to follow through on it.
- 4. Practice presence:** Achieving your vision requires balancing persistence and flexibility, commitment with being open to new ideas. Practice being present in the moment.

In this way, women can create the change they seek. 🌱

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