

Personality and Career Development

A Study of Gender Differences

What are the “right” personality traits for career success in hospitality management?

by Judi Brownell

SHE HAS ALL THE right qualifications for your assistant-manager position. Her parents own a country inn in Vermont. She spent two summers on a cruise ship and established an impressive record while earning a four-year degree in hospitality management. Her recommendations are excellent. On paper she far outshines the three other final candidates.

The problem? She just doesn't seem right for your four-star property. It could have been the

way she hesitated before answering your questions or the fact that she didn't laugh at the casual jokes you made. Or was it that she seldom made eye contact? Or that she sat in silence during lunch while everyone else at the table discussed the recent home-team loss to Chicago? You really don't know. She just doesn't seem to have the “right stuff” to be successful in your fast-paced, constantly changing workplace.

As the number of well-qualified candidates for your management positions increases, the

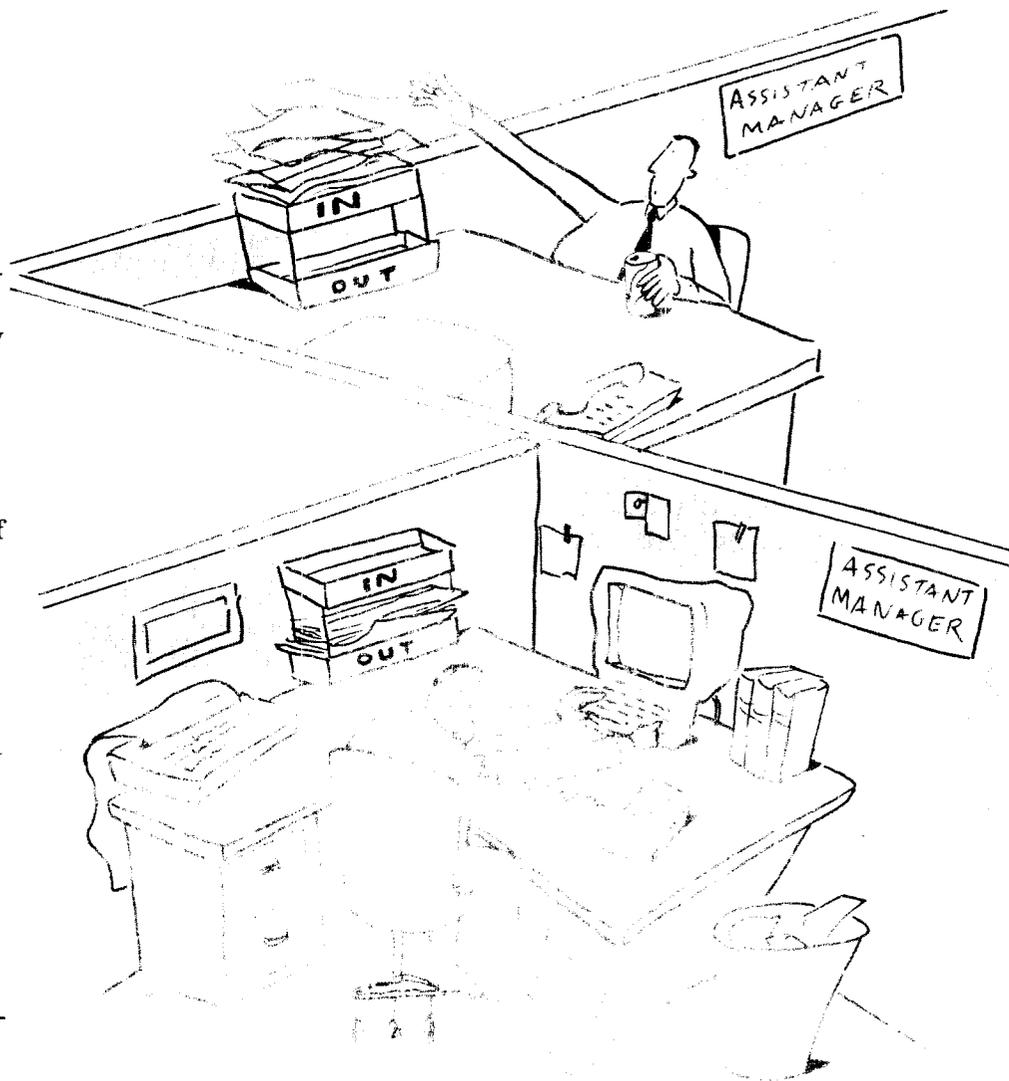
bottom line on selection decisions is often a matter of gut reaction as well as logical assessment. Those with appropriate experience and impressive credentials are often held to having other right stuff as well, stuff that is much more difficult to measure. In many instances, however, it comes down to a matter of personality character-

Judi Brownell, Ph.D., is an associate professor of management communication at the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration.

istics; the decision to hire a particular individual is based on intuition regarding what it takes to be effective in today's demanding work environment.¹

What is the "right" personality for success in hospitality management? A growing body of research has examined personality traits and their potential impact on the career success of hospitality managers.² Two themes are of particular interest.

First, there has been speculation that the personality traits that make hospitality managers effective differ from those that make managers in other types of organizations effective.³ Industry practitioners and researchers alike have suggested that the hospitality industry is unique and therefore requires a particular set of personal competencies. Normann, for instance, refers to the industry as "personality intensive," since managers' interactions with guests are perceived as part of the service itself, and their personal influence on employees affects customer interactions at all levels.⁴



Second, a wealth of literature on personality characteristics and their relation to managerial effectiveness suggests that the personality characteristics that contribute to the perception of high performance may be gender-linked.⁵ Although fewer studies have examined women in hospitality-management careers, the issue is of particular importance in an industry characterized by a

diverse workforce and the recognition that the glass ceiling has yet to be completely broken.⁶ In fact, women's career development has been an issue of much interest in the hospitality literature.⁷

In an effort to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on women and management, a study was undertaken to determine the characteristics that general managers believed were most

¹ C. Ostroff, "Relationships between Person-Environment Congruence and Organizational Effectiveness," *Group and Organization Management*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1993), pp. 103-122.

² B.E. Ashforth and R.H. Humphrey, "Emotional Labor in Service Roles: The Influence of Identity," *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1993), pp. 88-115; N.K. Austin, "Now about This Female Management Style," *Executive Female*, Vol. 15, September/October (1992), pp. 48-51; U.E. Gattiker and L. Larwood, "Predictors for Career Achievement in the Corporate Hierarchy," *Human Relations*, Vol. 43, No. 8 (1990), pp. 703-726; and L.H. Chusmir, "Personalized vs. Socialized Power Needs among Working Men and Women," *Human Relations*, Vol. 39 (1986), pp. 149-159.

³ M. Swanlung, "How Hotel Executives Made the Climb to the Top," *The Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 22, No. 1 (May 1981), pp. 30-34; L. Mullins and I. Davies, "What Makes for an Effective Hotel Manager?" *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1991), pp. 22-25; P. Worsfold, "A Personality Profile of the Hotel Manager," *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1989), pp. 51-62; and S. Mize, "Shattering the Glass Ceiling," *Training and Development*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (January 1992), pp. 60-61.

⁴ R. Normann, *Service Management: Strategy and Leadership in Service Businesses* (New York City: Wiley, 1984).

⁵ R.W. Pratt and D.L. Whitney, "Attentional and Interpersonal Characteristics of Restaurant General Managers in Comparison with Other Groups of Interest," *Hospitality Research Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1991), pp. 9-24; V. Wheelless and C. Berryman-Fink, "Perceptions of Women Managers and Their Communication Competencies," *Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (1985), pp. 137-147; J. Rosener, "Ways Women Lead," *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 68, No. 6 (1990), pp. 119-125; Catalyst, "A Matter of Personal Ability, Not Gender," *Management Solutions*, Vol. 32, No. 11 (November 1987), pp. 39-45.

⁶ R.A. Snyder, "The Glass Ceiling for Women: Things That Don't Cause It and Things That Won't Break It," *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1993), pp. 97-107.

⁷ C. Del Sesto, "Women in Lodging: How Far Have They Come?," *Lodging*, May 1993, pp. 28-32; A. Liddle, "CRA Show Panel Urges Women to Take Control of Career Path," *Nation's Restaurant News*, Vol. 24, No. 39 (1990), pp. 106-108; C. O'Dwyer, "Opening Doors and Minds," *Lodging*, May 1992, pp. 12-15; and J. Brownell, "Women Hospitality Managers: Perceptions of Gender-Related Career Challenges," *FIU Hospitality Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (1993), pp. 19-31.

Hospitality managers rate higher than other types of managers on calmness, assertiveness, enthusiasm, realism, and detail-orientation.

important to their career development. It may be enlightening to identify what general managers believe the right stuff is and to determine whether the perceptions of men and women differ.

Before presenting the responses of general managers regarding the personality characteristics they perceived as related to career advancement, I will review previous work in the area, with a summary of research on hospitality managers' personality characteristics and an examination of theories of gender-linked differences in management style.

Personality Traits of Hospitality Managers

For several decades researchers have examined the personality traits of both middle and general managers to determine what makes an effective hospitality manager.

Swanljung, for instance, interviewed corporate executives to determine whether any common personality characteristics existed in this group. His findings suggested that hard work, fairness, the ability to motivate others, and determination were keys to success.

Stone's research attempted to distinguish hospitality managers from other managers.⁸ He concluded that hospitality managers rated higher on calmness, assertiveness or competitiveness, enthusiasm, realism, deliberate-ness, and detail-orientation.

Worsfold's 1989 study of hotel general managers in a major U.K. hotel group determined that the sample was more assertive, venturesome, and imaginative than managers generally. He also

proposed that hospitality managers place a high value on interpersonal and group skills, owing to their unique job requirements. When asked what they believed to be the characteristics required of a successful hotel manager, Worsfold's respondents most frequently mentioned people skills, resilience, self-motivation, and intelligence. Obviously, results to date have been inconclusive and the need for additional research is apparent.

The interest in linking personality traits with managerial effectiveness has naturally given rise to interest in measures to determine the personality traits of prospective employees, particularly for management-level positions. Personality assessment is a topic of increasing concern to human-resource professionals interested in measures that will provide the most comprehensive and accurate indicators of future success. Two primary types of testing have been explored as selection tools: paper-and-pencil measures and structured interviews.

Paper-and-pencil tests. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator measures individual preferences, or styles, along four dimensions: extroversion/introversion, sensing/intuition, thinking/feeling, and judgment/perception.

Pavesic and Brymer, using the MBTI, found that hospitality managers' most common profile was ESTJ (extroversion, sensing, thinking, judgment).⁹ In fact, the most significant difference between hospitality professionals and other samples was their stronger preference for judging. However, of the four indicators,

⁸G. Stone, "Personality and Effective Hospitality Management" (paper presented at the Symposium of the International Association of Hotel Management Schools, Leeds Polytechnic, November 1988).

⁹D. V. Pavesic and R.A. Brymer, "Job Satisfaction: What's Happening to Young Managers," *The Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 30, No. 4 (February 1990), pp. 90-96.

the judgment/perception dimension probably has the least impact on performance.

One of a growing number of companies that develop and market personality-assessment instruments is Performax, which produces tests that cover traditional topics such as communication and management style, as well as lifestyle, values, and other dimensions. From those indicators, interviewers make judgments about the fit between the individual and the organization. Similarly, Wonderlic tests measure personality traits such as cool/warm, easily upset/calm, relaxed/tense, and conservative/experimenting. Many other sources are available to those interested in assessing personality characteristics.

Structured interviews. By interviewing top performers in the hospitality industry, SRI Gallup has identified ten hotel-management themes, each of which distinguishes hospitality managers from other groups: focus; performance orientation; wanting to be liked; responsibility; excellence; and the ability to stimulate, activate, arrange, develop, and/or delegate. Themes are defined as "spontaneous, recurring patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior" that operate consistently. Rather than rely on traditional criteria, such as job experience and academic performance, SRI looked for personality traits that describe people who do an outstanding job.

SRI Gallup has developed structured-interview techniques to determine the extent to which a person has each of the above characteristics. The company has several video-assisted preemployment tests and can train staff members to conduct selection interviews that will

reveal the targeted personality traits.

The goal of yet another company, Talent+, is to identify a person's "talents" and match them to a particular job. Like SRI, Talent+ depends on a structured interview with carefully designed questions. A study of hotel-staff associates by Talent+ illustrates statistically significant differences between high and low performers with regard to work ethic, persuasiveness, empathy, exactness, and human-relations skills.¹⁰

Gender and Managerial Behavior

A second recurring question on the subject of personality characteristics is whether gender is an important variable in management style. A range of studies have addressed the issue, with inconsistent results.

In 1980 researchers for the American Management Association surveyed 2,000 male and female managers and found no significant gender-related differences in managerial style. One possible explanation for the similarity is that there are no gender-linked personality traits. Another possible explanation is that women in upper-level management positions have personality traits generally associated with senior managers, who traditionally have been men. In fact, many investigators have concluded that women in senior management positions have adapted their behavior to emulate traditional male styles.

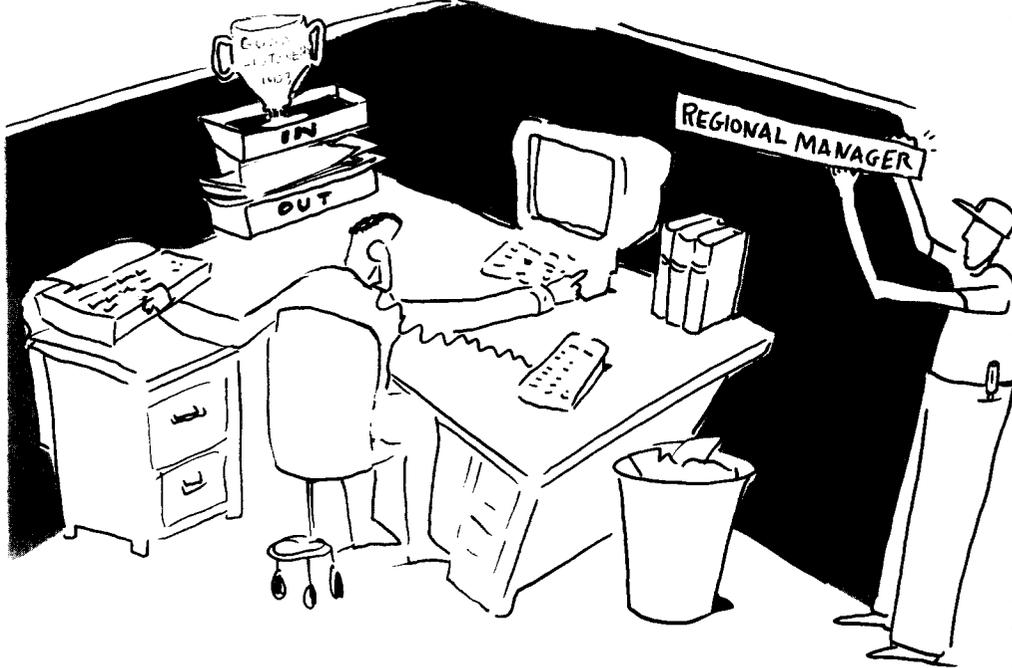
Not everyone agrees. Rosener argues that the increase in the number of top female executives has facilitated a feminine management style characterized by a

On the other hand, researchers who surveyed male and female managers found no significant gender-related differences in managerial style.

¹⁰ Information about the study of hotel-staff associates is from an undated, unsigned public relations brochure issued by Talent+.



stronger relationship orientation, more information sharing, and more concern for employees' feelings of self-worth. Bass concurs, reporting that female senior managers rated higher than their male counterparts in



transformational leadership, a style characterized by greater employee empowerment and shared decision making.¹¹ A study reported in the *Wall Street Journal* also suggests that female managers are more sympathetic to employees' personal concerns.¹²

Evidence to date on the question of whether there are gender-linked leadership traits is far from conclusive. Even those who have proposed that an androgynous style may be the key to high performance have been accused of suggesting that both genders should sacrifice their unique strengths to the service of popular management theory.

¹¹ B.M. Bass, "Debate: Ways Men and Women Lead," *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 1991, pp. 151-152.

¹² S. Shellenbarger, "Workforce Study Finds Loyalty Is Weak, Divisions of Race and Gender Are Deep," September 3, 1993, *Wall Street Journal*, p. B1.

The interest in the relation between personality traits and managerial effectiveness remains high; yet the issue is fraught with problems. Even if there is a configuration of traits strongly associated with managerial effectiveness, such traits are difficult to measure. The realization that most performance problems result from poor person-job fit, not a lack of training, has given rise to increased emphasis on managing the selection process and assessing personality traits. In addition, organizations looking to the future seek methods to identify managers who are most likely to move smoothly into senior positions.

The following study contributes to that effort by identifying the personality characteristics that hospitality general managers perceive to have been most critical to their career development.¹³

A Study of Hospitality Managers

Although many studies have examined personality characteristics and leadership, few have focused on hospitality managers and very few have addressed the question of personality traits as they influence career development in our industry.

In the study reported here, both male and female general managers were asked to identify the personality characteristics they believed contributed most significantly to their career

¹³ Of course, there may be differences between the traits that actually led to advancement and the traits that a respondent perceives to have led to advancement, but the general managers' perceptions can, I think, be taken at face value. Their perceptions likely relate to their attitudes and become their reality.

advancement. Since a substantial body of literature suggests that strong stereotypes are associated with gender and leadership characteristics, respondents were requested to answer an open-ended question about the personality traits that they believed contributed to their professional advancement, rather than choose among a set of traits.

Survey design and procedures. An extensive literature review of managers' career development was undertaken to determine the variables associated with mobility in organizations generally and advancement in the hospitality industry in particular.¹⁴ Interviews were also conducted with eight general managers to determine general perceptions of factors influencing career development. A survey was then developed to identify the personality traits male and female general managers believed contributed most to their career advancement.¹⁵

Subjects. A sample of female general managers was derived from the 20 largest U.S. hospitality companies, by number of rooms, in the American Hotel and Motel Association directory.

Only the general managers of full-service hotels were surveyed, and only U.S. companies were selected to help rule out variations in career development due to cultural differences.

A corporate representative from each company was invited to participate by providing the names and addresses of all current female general managers. Nineteen companies responded; women from 16 of them were represented in the final sample. Surveys were sent to 107 female general managers; 69 of them, or 64 percent, responded. A stratified random sample of 203 male general managers from the other properties owned by those sixteen companies was surveyed; the final response was 144, or 71 percent.

Demographic differences.

The first section of the survey requested demographic information. Respondents were asked to indicate their age, marital status, educational background, years of experience in the hospitality industry, and other pertinent information.

Female general managers, as a whole, are younger than their male counterparts. Consequently there is a notable difference in

Traits that are practically a given among successful managers may not be the traits that an individual would mention as contributing to his or her career advancement.

¹⁴ C. Anthony, "Public Relations: Successful Women in the Lodging Industry," *Hotel and Resort Industry*, Vol. 9, No. 19 (1986), pp. 19-27; J. Christensen, "Educator's Forum: Women in Management: Advice to Recent Graduates," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 28, No. 3 (November 1987), pp. 48-49; H. Cohen and E.H. Neilson, "Finding and Developing Tomorrow's Top Managers," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 29, No. 1 (May 1988), pp. 34-41; J.A. Fernsten, L.L. Loury, L.K. Enghagen, and D. Hott, "Female Managers: Perspectives on Sexual Harassment and Career Development," *Hospitality Education and Research Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (1988), pp. 185-196; P.W. Williams and M. Hunter, "Supervisory-Hotel-Employee Perceptions of Management Careers and Professional-Development Requirements," *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (1992), pp. 347-358; Del Sesto, pp. 26-32; and S.A. Lobel and L. St. Clair, "Effects of Family Responsibilities, Gender, and Career-Identity Salience on Performance Outcomes," *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 5 (1992), pp. 1057-1069.

¹⁵ For the purposes of this study, I assumed that the personality traits that make for effective managers—the SRI themes—aren't that different from the traits that helped them advance in their careers. On the other hand, it is important to note that the traits that are practically a given among successful managers may not be the traits that an individual would mention as contributing to his or her career advancement, even though they may be among that person's strongest assets. For example, if you have a pool of determined, ambitious, goal-oriented, hardworking managers from which to select a new general manager, which personality trait (or traits) actually distinguishes one of those individuals from the others so that she or he gets to be the general manager? Maybe that person would say that being flexible and a compassionate listener (in addition to the shared traits) was what set him or her apart and contributed to that career advancement.

EXHIBIT 1

Career-advancement characteristics

From a pool of 213 people (69 women and 144 men), the following figures show the percentage of men and women who believe a given trait has contributed to their career advancement.

	% of total (N = 213)	%women (N = 69)	%men (N = 144)
Hardwork	28	30	27
Interpersonal skills	27	44	26
Determination	26	44	21
Fairness, honesty, integrity	22	11	32
Industry knowledgeability	15	13	18
Compassion	14	14	14
Flexibility	13	13	14
Listening skills	13	10	14
Positive attitude	13	19	10
Commitment, loyalty	12	4	22
Goal orientation	10	9	11
Ambitiousness, aggressiveness	8	14	4
Enthusiasm	8	26	2
Sense of humor	6	14	2
Financial ability	5	0	12
Organizational skills	4	11	2

the number of years men and women have spent in the industry. The percentage of women who have worked in hospitality organizations fewer than ten years is four times larger than the percentage of men, while the percentage of men who have worked in the industry more than twenty years is over six times larger than the percentage of women.

Significant differences also appeared in the numbers of men and women who were married. Nearly 35 percent of the women in this study indicated they were single, compared with only 6 percent of the men.

Personality traits. Respondents were asked to name up to three unranked personality characteristics that they believed had the most influence in helping them advance in the field and achieve their current position. Two trained assistants and I sorted characteristics into content categories; we had a 97-percent rate of agreement.

Ninety-two percent of the characteristics fell into one of 28 categories. Seven of the categories were identified by less than 5 percent of one of the samples: problem-solving ability, decision-making ability, service orientation, willingness to take risks, consistency, common sense, and creativity. Another five categories were mentioned by less than 10 percent of one of the samples: leadership ability, long-range vision, team playing, intelligence, and patience.

Exhibit 1 presents a summary of the characteristics that were important to women or men, showing the combined percentage of all respondents who identified any given trait, as well as the separate percentages of identification within each group.

Women were in slightly greater agreement than men about the characteristics they believed contributed to their career development. Most often mentioned by women were interpersonal skills (44 percent),

determination (44 percent), hard work (30 percent), enthusiasm (26 percent), positive attitude (19 percent), and ambitiousness (14 percent). Asked the same question, men responded most often with integrity (32 percent), hard work (27 percent), interpersonal skills (26 percent), commitment (22 percent), determination (21 percent), and industry knowledgeability (18 percent).

Some characteristics were mentioned with much greater frequency by one of the two samples. Women mentioned enthusiasm, determination, interpersonal skills, sense of humor, and ambitiousness more frequently than did men. Men identified integrity, commitment, and financial ability more often than did women.

Some traits were mentioned in nearly equal proportions by both groups. Men and women shared an appreciation for the significance of listening skills, hard work, goal-orientation, flexibility, and compassion.

Study Summary

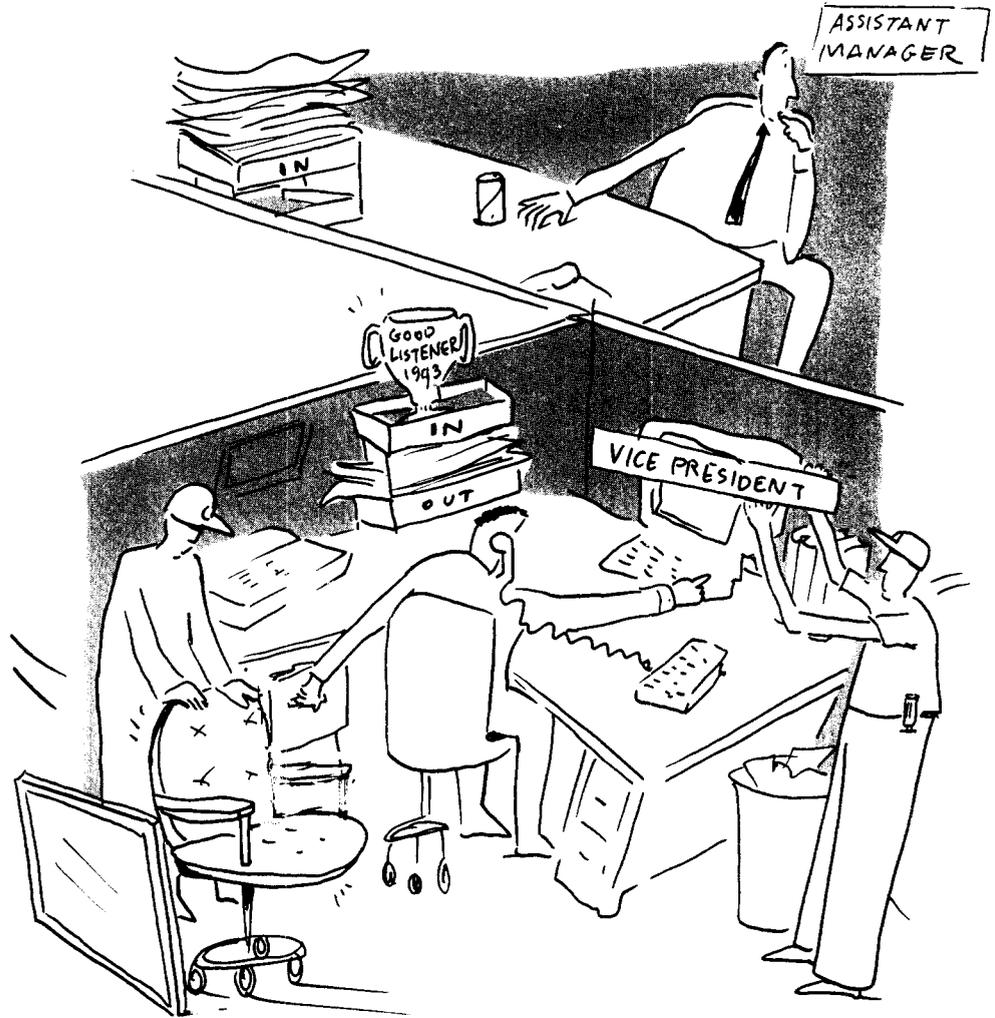
In this study female general managers' self-reports of the personality traits that contributed to their career advancement present a profile characterized by determination, excellent communication skills, and hard work. The women also relied on their enthusiasm and positive attitude in making their way through the organization.

Although the men also relied on effective communication, determination, and hard work, two additional characteristics that consistently emerged were integrity and loyalty. That finding is consistent with earlier research aimed at distinguishing hospitality managers from other groups. Shamir suggests, for

instance, that hospitality managers' most important values are honesty and responsibility.¹⁶

Of the 16 key characteristics identified by the two samples, those that are male characteristics, in terms of what researchers have considered male and female stereotypes, include ambitiousness, goal orientation, and strong financial ability.¹⁷ Current literature regarding female stereotypes includes compassion, enthusiasm, and flexibility. However, in the current study the self-reports of both male and female samples conform only marginally to stereotypical notions of gender-linked characteristics.¹⁸

With regard to traits that are stereotypically male, 14 percent of the women and only 4 percent of the men described their behavior as ambitious. About the same percentage of men and women (11 and 9 percent) reported that their goal orientation contributed to their career advancement. While no women identified



financial ability as a key characteristic, almost 12 percent of the men reported it as one of the three most important traits.

Shifting to the characteristics often associated with women, we find that both compassion and flexibility were reported equally by the two groups, while enthusiasm characterized the women (26 percent) much more than the men (2 percent).

It appears, then, that women who have moved into upper-level management positions are more likely than men to identify their ambitiousness, positive attitude, and enthusiasm as assets.

Conclusions

The ideal work environment may be one in which gender is no longer an issue. If the stereotypes can be broken down, we will equally value women and men who are focused, goal-oriented,

and compassionate. Such individuals have increased opportunities not only to be rewarded for their contributions but also to shape their organization's future. Excellence is most likely when hardworking, determined people with strong interpersonal skills work together to achieve high standards of quality and performance.

The high number of all respondents who believe that honesty and integrity contributed significantly to their career advancement speaks to one of the most important lessons of all, that success may be a matter of character, not gender. Tomorrow's industry leaders, men and women alike, must bring a keen sense of ethical responsibility and high standards of integrity to an industry that will clearly require many tough decisions in the decades ahead. CQ

¹⁶ B. Shamir, "Between Bureaucracy and Hospitality—Some Organizational Characteristics of Hotels," *Journal of Management Studies*, October 1978, pp. 285-307.

¹⁷ J.C. Pearson, *Gender and Communication* (Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown, 1985); G.N. Powell, *Women and Men in Management* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1988); C. Berryman-Fink, "Changing Sex-Role Stereotypes," *Personnel Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 6 (June 1983), pp. 502-504; M.E. Heilman, C.H. Block, R.F. Martell, and M.C. Simon, "Has Anything Changed? Current Characterizations of Men, Women, and Managers," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 74 (1989), pp. 935-942; and S.A. Lobel, "Allocation of Investment in Work and Family Roles: Alternative Theories and Implications for Research," *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (1991), pp. 507-521.

¹⁸ The meanings that individuals assign to words can vary, by gender or by other factors. "Enthusiastic" may be a gender-linked term, and men may tend not to use it to describe themselves, regardless of how "enthusiastic" they may actually be. Women, on the other hand, may feel comfortable applying "enthusiastic" to themselves and use it to describe the same trait for which men use another word. The question of what language means to different people is outside the scope of this study, where I had to assume that respondents were clear about the general meaning of the terms they chose to describe themselves.