

Alison Redford and the double bind

In the weeks following former Alberta Premier Alison Redford's resignation, pundits conducted their usual blow-by-blow analysis in the popular media. Common discussion themes included her inability to curb infighting within Alberta's conservative party, her status as a party outsider, and of course her \$45k trip to Nelson Mandela's funeral, which some suggested was just one example of questionable expense claims.

I listened to the arguments against Redford and agreed that they made sense. Yes, that was a pretty lavish trip to South Africa. Nope, she didn't take responsibility for over-the-top expenses as quickly as she should have.

But in truth, the beleaguered politician, Alberta's first female premier, won a great deal of my sympathy after Calgary backbencher Len Webber quit the party complaining – and I quote – his boss Alison Redford was “not a nice lady.”

There appear to be lots of good reasons why Albertans and Redford's colleagues are relieved she's no longer at the helm. But the tone of some of the backlash against her was decidedly misogynistic. Some of her most egregious leadership errors appear to be that she had a bad temper and was occasionally a bully. You can't see this, but I'm rolling my eyes right now. Hard. Redford had to go as leader because she had a bad temper and was a bully? Give me a break. Here is my four-word retort to that: Ralph. Klein. Steve. Jobs.

The world is filled with examples of men who manage to cultivate the adoration of many and successfully lead despite a penchant for short tempers and over-zealous venting techniques. I don't condone this behaviour, but in this respect Alison Redford appears to have become enmeshed in what gender researchers call the double bind.

The central problem of the double bind: women leaders may be seen as competent or as liked but rarely as both.

The double bind refers to the psychological impasse that occurs when contradictory demands are made of someone. And when it comes to women and leadership, a recent study from think tank Catalyst that explored attitudes about women leaders, says the double bind leads to three distinct predicaments.



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competitiveness and having a take-charge attitude, are often seen as unlikeable in women. In other words, when women display these attributes (as Redford seems to have done), they conflict strongly with the notion of how “nice ladies” should behave.

And the world doesn't appear to be ready for women leaders who are not first and foremost “nice ladies.”

One of the most interesting parts of Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's book on women and leadership, *Lean In*, is where Sandberg advises women to negotiate, to be firm – yes, even to be tough, but to do it with a smile. Women simply can't afford to be tough without wearing a perma-grin, is the apparent advice. I get Sandberg's wisdom and I think it makes a whole lot of sense. But it still grates.

Gender researchers suggest that this double bind plays an important role in why less than five per cent of Fortune 500 firms are led by women. And this leads to yet another bind: the fewer women leaders we have, the more likely it is that the underlying gender stereotypes that hold women back will continue to prevail. And this is bad news for the legions of sort of nice, occasionally nice, and I-don't-care-if-you-think-I'm-nice women and girls who – like many men – don't believe a penchant for pleasing is a prerequisite to lead.

Too tough, too nice

Predicament one is that when women act in ways that are consistent with gender stereotypes, they're perceived as too soft to lead. When they act in ways that are consistent with leadership stereotypes, they're considered too tough.

Higher standards, lower rewards

Predicament two is that not only do women leaders have to constantly manage the too tough-too sweet juggling act, they also have to prove themselves as good leaders over and over again, and often for less money.

Nice or competent, but not both

Predicament three is that women leaders have a forced choice of being perceived as either likeable or capable.

The idea here, and countless studies bear this out, is that the characteristics we have traditionally attributed to strong leadership, such as decisiveness, assertiveness,

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