

Foreword by **MARSHALL GOLDSMITH**

The
female
VISION



**Women's
Real Power
at Work**

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An Excerpt From

***The Female Vision:
Women's Real Power at Work***

by Sally Helgesen & Julie Johnson

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FOREWORD

Marshall Goldsmith

“I decided it just wasn’t worth it.”

Too many gifted women have used this phrase to describe why they departed from major corporations and passed up seemingly spectacular career opportunities, leaving positions that may have seemed glamorous to the outside observer but that felt personally depleting to them. I hope the wisdom and insights the authors share in *The Female Vision* will change that situation by giving organizations a way to draw more fully on what women see.

The Female Vision draws on the latest research (comparing women’s and men’s perceptions) to illustrate *why* what women and men see can be so different. It presents myriad examples from today’s challenging workplace to illustrate why these differences matter and how women’s vision can make a significant, positive difference in the workplace.

Even more importantly, the authors provide practical suggestions that can help women increase the probability that their vision is not only recognized but also implemented in organizations. *The Female Vision* also provides organizations with guidelines on how to incorporate women’s best observa-

tions into strategy and culture, building a comprehensive and inclusive vision for the company's future.

Most of the problems that led to the recent economic meltdown occurred in organizations dominated by men. These organizations illustrated classic stereotypical “male” behaviors, such as focusing on short-term profitability, a preoccupation with “making the numbers,” and a devotion to short-term personal—rather than long-term corporate—wealth. Who knows? Perhaps organizations that embraced more women in strategic roles and recognized their broader vision would not have experienced the same degree of crisis. We all would have been better off!

The Female Vision represents the collaborative effort of two wonderful professionals, who are also good friends of mine, Sally Helgesen and Julie Johnson. The breadth and depth of knowledge and the years of experience that Sally and Julie bring to the party shine through the pages of this book. Sally's background in research and journalism is evident in the clarity and richness of the writing. She is a gifted interviewer and author who can weave insights from multiple sources—survey research, expert opinion, executive interviews, and personal experience—into a coherent and meaningful story. Julie is one of America's most experienced and respected executive coaches. She understands from the inside how senior female executives experience their work and has insights into what corporations can do to incorporate women's vision. She also knows what men are doing right—and what they need to change.

I believe that leaders at all levels, men and women, can benefit from reading *The Female Vision*. Men can benefit by seeing

the world from a female perspective that shows why “different” doesn’t have to mean “better.” Women can benefit by learning how their personal experiences compare with those of other successful women and by gaining new tools to help them make a greater positive difference in the world.

As Sally and Julie aptly illustrate, the problems women face in organizations are rarely the result of male leaders being deliberately mean, callous, or indifferent. Most leaders want to do what’s right, for women and for their organizations; they are less sure of how to leverage women’s best skills. This book provides several examples of women’s leadership programs that have good intentions, but not good results.

Writing this book took courage. Dealing with gender differences (no matter how sensitive the authors try to be) can always be controversial. My suggestion for you, the reader, is simple: Read this book with an open mind. Don’t focus on what you disagree with or what you cannot change. Focus on what you agree with and what you can change.

With that in mind, I believe that *The Female Vision* can help both individuals and organizations create a more positive, inclusive, and effective future.

PREFACE

We believe that what women see—what they notice and value and how they perceive the world in operation—is a great underexploited resource in organizations. In this book, we explore what the female vision is, what it has to offer, and why it matters—to women, to organizations, and to the world.

Each of us has worked with women around the world for over twenty years. Sally is an author, speaker, and consultant; Julie has coached hundreds of senior executives in global companies and held leadership positions within major organizations. Our experiences have convinced us that, although women's capacity for vision is profound, companies routinely fail to recognize the power of what women see. As a result, women lose confidence in their own ability to articulate and communicate what they notice, and organizations lose the insights and balance that a female perspective might bring.

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 not perceived as visionary.¹ We believe this perception

not only gets things wrong, but gets things exactly backward. 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 La Jolla, California, where we were attending a professional retreat. At the time, each of us was 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 out? Why weren't more women represented at the senior executive level? Why did major corporate boards do such a poor job of recruiting senior women? We had followed the research and were familiar with phenomena such as the widely discussed "female brain drain." 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 considered doing so: *I decided it just wasn't worth it.* We realized 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 might conflict with what mainstream organizations expect their leaders to value.

We began interviewing dozens of senior women and immersing ourselves in academic research on the subject. Our aim was to put together a book that would set what was happening with women in the larger context of values. We soon recognized that we needed to develop original data if we were to accurately describe the values women bring with them to

work. We launched a full-scale research study, supported by an association with the National Council for Research on Women and with financial backing from sponsors who saw value in our project. In the final phase of our research, we decided to broaden our perspective and look at the connection between the values women bring to organizations and the vision most women hold about what life and work—at its best—could be.

This book is organized into three sections. In the first, we define the female vision, show why it is important, and describe the consequences of it being undervalued. In the second, we explore the three components that shape the female vision: the capacity for broad-spectrum notice, the ability to find satisfaction in the daily experience of work, and the penchant for viewing work in a larger social context. In the last section, we show how women can act upon their vision and what organizations can do to support them.

We intend this book for a broad audience. We want to engage individual women seeking to identify and articulate their own strengths in order to create more rewarding ways of working and living. We want to help organizations and institutions seeking to develop women leaders and benefit from their strategic strengths. And we want to provide a resource for teachers and students—in colleges and universities and in high schools as well—who hope to build a better world by preparing young women to exercise their vision and develop the leadership skills that will be required in the years ahead.

PART I

*Value of
the Female Vision*

What Women See

What we notice, what we believe is important, and what we perceive life should be are the primary components that shape our vision. The more authentically we understand, express, and act on the distinctive aspects of what we see, the greater our contribution will be and the more we'll fulfill our purpose in the world.

Translating vision into practice is challenging for anyone, but it can be especially difficult for women in organizations. This is because what women see can be out of sync with what the workplace expects. Having entered the workplace in significant numbers and having begun to assume positions of authority and influence only in the last thirty years, women have had little opportunity to shape the culture of work—its values, assumptions, and expectations.

The disconnect between what organizations expect and what women at their best have to offer has become an issue as workplace demands have grown more intense. Companies today require more from their people—more time, greater commitment, fresher ideas, a continual learning curve. Thriving in this environment requires passion and engagement. But

it's difficult to feel fully engaged when your vision, your fundamental way of seeing things, is not understood, recognized, or valued. And it's tough to feel passionate when you feel unable to bring what is best about yourself to your work.

When women's ways of seeing are not validated, it shortchanges women, requiring them to exercise their skills without drawing on the full power of what they notice and value. Operating at less than full capacity undermines their effectiveness and their ability to feel authentic, as well as keeping them from being fully present in the moment. It can also leach away the zestfulness and fun that comes from engaging what is best within themselves and putting that forth into the world.

When women's ways of seeing are not validated, it also shortchanges their organizations, narrowing the base of talents and ideas from which they can draw. In a global environment where change is constant, companies need to be nimble, innovative, and very smart, which is why relying on the usual suspects to do the usual things in the usual way is no longer effective. When organizations fail to appreciate the fullness and scope of what women have to offer, they diminish their capacity to "think outside the box"—a frequently stated objective—because the blinders they require their people to wear keep them firmly inside it.

We've all seen what happens when women's ways of seeing are not recognized or are dismissed as being beside the point. The consequences play out on a large scale—which we'll explore later—and in the smallest interactions.

For example, Jim and Jill are walking out of a sales meeting in which the regional manager has been outlining the sales figures he expects their team to meet in the next quarter. As

they step into the hall, Jim, who was scribbling down numbers during the presentation, says, “I figure it’s doable if we can get client X to expand his budget by 6 percent while cutting our costs by \$3.2 million.”

Jill nods. “That sounds about right. But did you notice how Ron in the back of the room seemed depressed? He’s usually so outgoing and engaged.”

Jim doesn’t respond. He’s wondering why Jill is making an irrelevant comment. She needs to be thinking about how they can make their numbers, not worrying about what someone else is feeling. Besides, Jim wasn’t looking at Ron. For one thing, he doesn’t have eyes in the back of his head. Plus, he was focused on the presentation, which is exactly what the regional manager would expect.

Jill was paying attention, too, but not in a single-minded way. For example, she was aware that some of the attendees couldn’t hear what the presenter was saying—not surprising since he has a habit of speaking too fast and then getting testy when someone asks him to repeat his remarks. But it was Ron’s disinterest that most caught her attention. He’s key to the team’s effort, and it’s going to be a rough road for everyone if he’s struggling.

Still, it’s clear to Jill that Jim doesn’t want to pursue the subject. She’s not sure she can make him understand that she was engaged by the presentation but was also taking in a lot of other things. She also wants to signal to him that she’s on board. So she says simply, “I think your numbers are right on target.”

This brief exchange typifies a fundamental dynamic that occurs thousands of times every day in the workplace. Both Jim and Jill are bringing useful information to their encounter: Jim

by proposing specifics that could move the team ahead, Jill by noting a potential problem that could undermine it. Both Jim's focus and Jill's active antenna offer clear benefits to their sales team.

However, Jim can't see the value in what Jill is trying to contribute, nor has Jill framed her observations in a way that compels Jim's interest. Once Jill senses his skepticism, she backs off rather than persisting in trying to make her case. She gives up on trying to help Jim understand what she sees and tries to placate him instead. As a result, the team misses out on potentially vital information. And Jill winds up ignoring her own best insights, thereby undermining the value she could otherwise bring to the effort.

Such incidents occur because what Jill notices, believes is important, and perceives her company should be—the components of her vision—are to a large extent countercultural in her organization. Sure, the senior executives talk a lot about how “our people are our most important asset.” They even had the phrase printed up as a “vision statement” on a laminated card. But it's not their authentic vision because it doesn't reflect what they actually notice or value or how they operate. It's just something the president's speechwriter thought would sound good.

Jim accepts the discrepancy between what the company says and how it acts, and forges ahead. But Jill can't help wishing the company would match its actions to its words. If it did, she'd feel more at home and would have more to contribute. The company would also be a better place to work and would probably have better relationships with clients as a result.

But there's another reason that Jill's observations are not particularly valued in her organization, and that has to do with

numbers. Most of what she notices, values, and would like to see can't be easily quantified or expressed by an equation. Many of her perceptions are relatively subjective. By contrast, Jim and the regional division head pride themselves on sticking to what the numbers tell them. The sales VP whom they report to is known for cutting discussions short with a brusque, "Just get to the bottom line." This reflects the company's presumption that numbers are not only an essential business tool but the final determinant of value.

Jill was a math whiz in college, and she can tote up a spreadsheet with the best of them. But she's never believed that numbers tell the whole story. She can't deliver an algorithm to prove that Ron is in a fragile state or offer a figure that quantifies how much his distraction could cost the sales team. Unable to put what she notices in a numerical frame, she can't figure out how to advocate for the value of her observations—so she ends up backing off entirely. She stuffs what she sees, and as a result her interaction with Jim is less authentic and productive than it otherwise might be.

Dr. Mary O'Malley, a neuroscientist and psychiatrist who works with senior executive women, sees exchanges such as the one between Jill and Jim all the time.¹ She notes that women often have difficulty defending the value of what they see in part because the traditional workplace is not necessarily structured to recognize subjective observation. Lacking support, women are likely to lose confidence in the value of what they have to offer and may internalize their inability to do so as a failure. Suppressing their best insights also makes women feel out of place and lowers the quality and authenticity of their exchanges. In the end, everybody loses.

Of course, not all women are like Jill, nor are all men like Jim. We're all individuals whose talents and aptitudes fall along a spectrum. Some women are totally focused on the bottom line and some men exhibit sensitivity to the nuances of human interaction. Some women do not question organizational values and commitments, and some men most certainly do.

But, *in general*, women's observational style tends to be broad and wide-ranging, while men tend to focus more narrowly on what they perceive as relevant to the task at hand. Women are continually scanning their environment for information, whereas men are more apt to restrict their observations to what a specific set of actions requires.² These complementary capabilities *should* be a source of strength and offer a perfect demonstration of the benefits that diversity can bring to organizations.

But because diversity is often viewed as a numbers game—"We will increase our percentage of women at director level by 30 percent over the next five years"—companies often end up missing the larger picture. Diversity does not result simply from creating a richer demographic mix. True diversity is the diversity of *values*.³

A Brief History of Attention

A physicist might describe the difference between men's and women's ways of seeing by saying that women's attention operates like radar, picking up signals across a wide spectrum, whereas men's attention operates like a laser, focusing on a single point in depth. Attention is the key word here, for what we see is determined by where we direct our attention. Our atten-

tion in turn is shaped by how we are accustomed to engaging our senses in the exercise of habitual skills. If we repair cars, we recognize the sound of a faulty belt as soon as the engine engages; if we bake bread, we can tell when a rising loaf is ready for the oven by pressing a finger to its surface. Our skills and experience channel our attention.

Given that men and women have until very recently exercised very different skills in the world, it's hardly surprising that they would—again, *in general*—attend to different things and have different ways of assigning value. Anthropologists like Helen Fisher believe the difference goes all the way back to the earliest phases of human history, when men contributed to their tribe's survival with their hunting prowess while women sustained the group by gathering plants.⁴ Clearly, the ability to focus attention on a single task is an advantage when pursuing antelope across the plains, whereas reading the environment broadly is useful when your job is to choose which roots are safe and nourishing while also caring for babies and raising children.

As people settled into small communities, men and women continued to exercise different skills, with men protecting the group and women doing pretty much everything else. As agriculture grew more complex, the division of labor continued, with men working the fields and women tending to house and garden. When work became centralized in the industrial era, men moved from farms into factories and offices while women stayed at home to do the domestic work. With few exceptions, women who did work outside the home were driven by fierce financial necessity. Poorly paid, undereducated, and excluded from leadership positions, they didn't play much of a role in shaping the culture of the industrial workplace.

But the divide that has separated men and women since the dawn of civilization began to erode during the last thirty or forty years, as women entered the workplace in significant numbers and closed the historic education gap with men. This in turn has resulted in men taking a far more active role in raising children and has changed our perception of what it means to be a father. Men and women now exercise many of the same skills in the course of their everyday lives and share more aspects of their daily experience. This erosion of separate spheres has gained speed over the last twenty years as cheap, powerful, networked technologies have decentralized the workplace and begun to transform how both men and women work and live.

The tools we use determine the skills we develop, giving order to our experience and providing us with an identity in the world. The spear, the helmet, and the plow are ancient symbols of male activity, while the infant, the spade, and the spinning wheel have from earliest times symbolized the work of women. This identification of tool with gender persisted well into the industrial era; when Sally graduated from high school, for example, she was given a gold typewriter charm for her bracelet, a symbol that she intended to become a “career girl.”

But the advent of the personal computer ended the identification of tool with gender, signaling a major shift in the relationship between men and women. For the first time in human history, men and women are not only using the same primary tool in their work but are also using different iterations of that tool to manage their personal and domestic lives. This requires them to develop similar skills and to use a common language, making our daily experience more similar to each others’ than in the past.⁵

As the tissue and the texture of men's and women's lives become more similar, our ways of being in the world become less tied to and determined by gender. Yet we retain fundamental distinctions that are a legacy of our different but complementary histories, for evolution proceeds at a slower pace than technological or social change. One of the most important of these distinctions is the difference in how men and women direct their attention, which in turn determines what we see.

We bring our individual ways of seeing with us to our daily work. The diversity of our perceptions has the potential to broaden and enrich the scope of how organizations make decisions and form connections in the marketplace, but all too often this does not occur. Despite an often sincerely stated commitment to supporting and developing women's talent, many organizations still do not know how to value women's ways of seeing or understand how to use women's insights to their advantage.

The costs to organizations of this failure are not easily quantifiable, but they are very real. The costs to women are more obvious. When women's most authentic observations are not valued, they either resign themselves to suppressing their best contributions, or they decide to take their insights and talents elsewhere. In either case, their capacity as leaders is diminished.

Acting on What We See

We make our vision tangible by acting on what we see. Our actions provide the link between what we see and what we achieve in the world. When we don't have the opportunity to act on our perceptions, our true potential to contribute remains

locked inside ourselves. What should be a source of power in the world becomes a source of frustration. This damages our ability to bring our whole self to our tasks and sets us up to feel inauthentic even when we are doing our jobs. Because our minds are divided, we can't be fully ourselves.

Dr. O'Malley believes that the disconnect between what women see and what their organizations value may be the primary reason that women are more likely than men to report feeling fraudulent at work.⁶ Elizabeth, a top editor at a major financial magazine, provides a perfect example.

My boss and colleagues always said I was doing a good job, but I never felt I was because I wasn't able to bring my best thinking to my work. In the morning when I got dressed, I'd look in the mirror and I couldn't put together what I saw with who I was supposed to be. The only thing that made my job feel real was picking up my briefcase. I'd walk out the door with it and think: I *must* be this person because otherwise I wouldn't be carrying this briefcase.

When women like Elizabeth—talented, highly educated, and insightful—feel disconnected from who they think they are supposed to be at work, they can lose energy and a sense of purpose.⁷ They also lose touch with the creativity that is available to all of us when we are fully present and engaged—the creativity that is synonymous with *flow*.⁸ By routinely suppressing their own best insights, women undermine their own capacity for satisfaction and joy.

Dr. O'Malley observes that people feel fraudulent in situations where their real value is not being acknowledged or in which they are being measured according to a standard that doesn't apply.⁹ She says, "It's this vague feeling of unease that

occurs when we know we have something real to offer but we don't have the right words to articulate it. When this happens, we tend to measure our self-worth by externalities that always leave us falling short of the mark."

Timothy Keller, the author and pastor, expands upon this observation. He writes, "In the end, achievement can't really answer the big questions—Who am I? What am I really worth? How do I face death? It gives the initial illusion of an answer. There is an initial rush of happiness that leads us to believe we have arrived, been included, been accepted, and proved ourselves. However, the satisfaction quickly fades."¹⁰

As we surveyed similarities and differences in how men and women perceive, define, and pursue satisfaction in their work, we found that both men and women place a high premium on feeling authentic at work.¹¹ They both agreed with assertions such as, "I seek congruence between my feelings and my actions" and "I strive to be the same person at work and at home." Yet, achieving this kind of alignment can be difficult for women because what they notice, value, and believe the world should be often runs counter to the culture they find at work. In order to make their best contribution, women must find a way to communicate and build support for what they most authentically see.

this material has been excerpted from

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