
Athena in Pin Stripes



By [Chris Howells](#), Deputy Editor

The business world is a place for the competitive and the self-reliant. But this is about to change according to the author of “The Athena Doctrine.”

In 2007, hard at work in his laboratory, Ijad Madisch, a Virologist in East Berlin, had a problem. Like all scientists, he occasionally hit dead ends and roadblocks in his research. On one of these days, he reached out to colleagues for help, but was promptly criticised for admitting his lack of knowledge on a certain point.

Undeterred, Ijad wanted to find collaborators. But given the difficulty of navigating the scientific field as other experts closed their doors in front of him, he realised that scientists not afraid to ask for help needed a global community where ideas could be shared and ego put aside. So he started ResearchGate, which now has over 3 million members, with over 800,000 articles being shared and which has also won the backing of Bill Gates.

Ijad’s story and others like it are what social strategist, leadership consultant and author [John Gerzema](#) says point to the dramatic shift taking place in the values of the 21st century. This shift, which he calls “The Athena Doctrine,” (also the name of his book) is the notion that traditional masculine

traits, such as competitiveness, independence and self-reliance, that have so far dominated business and politics, are rapidly being replaced by those considered feminine, such as collaboration, adaptability and nurturing.

The world that Gerzema envisions is one of inclusivity, accountability and community. “What you’re going to see is the aperture of what a public company is open up widely. I think the public company today is about shareholder value. The public company of tomorrow is about employee value, it’s about community value,” he said in an interview with INSEAD Knowledge on the school’s Asia campus in Singapore.

Masculine Conduct Unsatisfactory

Gerzema bases his predictions and his book on a global study of 64,000 people in 13 countries that went into The Athena Doctrine. Gerzema and co-author Michael D’Antonio found that the majority of adults (both male and female) across the world are dissatisfied with the conduct of men in their respective countries. This study came about after Gerzema and D’Antonio earlier studied the impact of the global financial crisis on values in the United States. From their travels across America, they started to discover that many of the traits being exhibited by entrepreneurs and leaders post-crisis were those widely regarded as feminine.

“There has been a swirling of different forces. There’s been the global financial crisis, there’s been a huge degree of cynicism that’s been levied on large institutions and corporations. In our data 86% of people felt that institutions have accumulated too much power,” said Gerzema. Respondents cited frustration with the codes of control, competition, aggression and the black and white thinking that has led to risk taking and scandal across business and politics in the dissatisfaction with men.

But The Athena Doctrine is not a “men versus women” concept, he says. Despite the fact that 66 percent of respondents in their study said that the world would be a better place if men thought more like women, masculine ideals such as decisiveness and resilience were highly ranked as key leadership qualities, alongside feminine ones such as collaboration, patience and flexibility.

“81% of people said that men or women need both masculine and feminine traits to thrive in today’s world and that’s really a reflection of where we’re at. There was a lot of frustration at masculine structures and the interesting

thing about that was a high degree of men in a lot of different countries were also dissatisfied with the conduct of men and what it was really about was these underlying challenges in politics and these traditional ways that business has been done and people are looking for something different,” Gerzema added.

Social impact

Throughout Gerzema’s travels, he came across many people facing challenges in their societies within the realms of masculine structures, but who sought new ways to handle them.

Another example he cites is that of Emily Bolton in London, a Director of Social Finance, an organisation that aims to alleviate societal problems with money - through issuing social impact bonds. In an experimental funding scheme in Petersborough, Social Finance seeks to achieve measurably better re-offending rates for prison inmates than existing agencies. The money is put to work on mentoring, housing support and mental health interventions. Investors stand to make a 13 percent profit if recidivism doesn’t breach 7.5 percent. Gerzema says such examples demonstrate the feminine values of empathy, flexibility and collaboration.

Future values

This demonstrates the new approaches being taken to business. Mixed with more meaning and more social impact, “millennials” - those born around the 1980s and now entering the workforce - have a new way of operating that is challenging the status quo.

“A lot of the traction of this idea was in millennial-based businesses, whether they were start-ups or NGOs, perhaps because they were starting from a blank slate, but they were using these skills to create really viable new businesses.”

“Young men and women want meaningful work, they want to build that into the companies that they work with and for... So you have this world that has become more social, more transparent, and more interdependent, and yet the skills we’ve been using to conduct traditional business have been a little bit antiquated and haven’t really caught up to this reality,” he added.

He also says that the contemporary framing of concepts like Corporate Social Responsibility as compartmentalised initiatives is insufficient to today’s

responsible company. “What we’re seeing in our data is that mindful consumption is really an emerging trend and customers really do look carefully at the quality and ethics of a company so really the overall theme is about engagement. The CEO of today has to engage their customers, employees and communities and they’ve got to do it continuously.”

The businesses of the future, therefore, should be adopting The Athena Doctrine to keep pace with rapid societal changes and expectations. While leaders must remain resilient, Gerzema says leadership will be based on “inclusivity, about gathering different points of view, more diverse mindsets, whether its men or women and getting younger people into the decision making process.”

Gerzema acknowledges, however, that the representation of women in boardroom ranks is still lacking. With female board representation on average at around 10 percent in Asia and 16-18 percent in Europe, but women representing as much as 80 percent of purchasing power, the inclusion of female thinking in the boardroom is more essential than ever. “If you step back and you think of the company of the future that’s going to follow the marketplace, you’ve got this incredibly important desire for companies to realise that they’ve got to bring these feminine values into fold if they’re going to survive in the future.”

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