

LEARNING FROM WOMEN LEADERS

by Sumru Erkut

In 1999, women made up nearly half of the paid labor force and of managers. Yet, in the same year, only 11.9% of corporate officers, 11.2% of board directors, 5.1% of highest titles, 3.3% of top earners, 2 Fortune 500 CEOs were women. Additionally, only 12.1 % of the seats in the 106th U.S. Congress were held by women . How can we increase the numbers of women in top leadership positions? In 2000, the Winds of Change Foundation initiated a study of women leaders in collaboration with the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College. Our project sought to learn from the experiences of women who are leaders by virtue their accomplishments in their work about how other women can rise to leadership positions.

Among the 60 eminent and prominent women interviewed were elected politicians; college presidents; independent authors and artists; university professors; leaders in industry, medicine, law, and other professions. Some wield social influence, contributing to—even defining— national debates on social, economic, political, and moral issues. Others are trailblazers who model how to achieve excellence in their fields for subsequent generations of both women and men. Some are leaders in a more traditional sense, working as managers in business or executives in nonprofit organizations. Among these women are a CEO of a successful women's sports franchise, a founder of a multimillion dollar company, and a president of an international foundation. Their vision, business acumen, and leadership skills have been critical to the growth and success of their organizations. Indeed, the accomplishments of the leaders interviewed have been extraordinary by any measure. Our goal has been to understand what experiences, contexts, and personal characteristics have contributed to the remarkable success of these women.

Our participants differed in race and ethnicity as well as social class background : 27% of the sample were women of color; 20% reported a working class background or limited economic means in their family of origin while 5% described their family background as well-off. They represent several generations of women, ranging in age from 30s to 70s, at different points in their career and family formation. As such, they achieved prominence in different periods in the social history of this country's acceptance of women leaders. The variety in their backgrounds, and the broad range of fields which they represent, provides both breadth and depth to what we can learn from their experiences and perspectives.

Results

Some of our findings confirmed what other researchers had observed such as the institutional rather than individual roadblocks to women's success, the importance of tenacity and optimism in pursuing one's passion at work, and the increasing value placed on a democratic and people-oriented style of leadership. Additionally, we found two distinct reactions to describing one's leadership practice using traditional leadership language and an intriguing connection between leadership and maternal roles that represents a third option.

Almost all of our leaders spoke about the existence of roadblocks to women's rise to leadership. These obstacles are embedded in the general organization of work that was not designed with women in mind. Many reported having had to surmount these gender-based barriers in their own careers. For some, this struggle continues to be a daily aspect of work life; for others, their individual prominence and achievements now protect against

incidents of gender-based inequity, while others still have benefited from the work of earlier generations of women in leveling the playing field.

The leaders in this study achieved eminence by leading in a variety of ways, depending on the context of their work environments. Their leadership styles reflect generational cohorts, racial and ethnic backgrounds, career trajectories, and their fields' receptiveness to women leaders. While it is not possible to talk about a singular female style of leadership, the majority of these leaders combined a focus on results with attention to the growth and development of the people surrounding them. Indeed, nearly all the women in the study described their own leadership practice as democratic with a people-oriented style. We refer to this as "relational practice," after Joyce Fletcher's work on relational practices in the work place.

Whether or not it is put into actual practice, the ascendancy of the democratic, people-oriented leadership practice forms the contemporary context of leadership today. It is touted by both men and women as capturing many of the requirements for effective leadership in our contemporary fast-paced, turbulent, and innovation-driven economy. Indeed, the leaders in this study described not only their own practices as including relational elements, but also the practices of the men and women they felt personified exemplary leadership.

Throughout their careers, these women were tenacious and optimistic. They paid little attention to obstacles in their work life.

The strategy these leaders employed to gain visibility, hence credibility, for their work can be summarized as "know and value yourself and let others know." In terms of knowing and valuing themselves, they identified their strengths and capitalized on them. In terms of letting others know, they persevered through repetition to inform others about their ideas and the results that they obtained.

Many of the women leaders had a strong foundation of early support from family and friends, teachers, mentors, or business associates, which they parlayed into a successful focus on following their passions. But this was not a universal experience and other participants, who lacked support, also achieved extraordinary success. While early support for leadership can come from many sources and it can be helpful, it does not appear to be necessary for later success.

These leaders can be categorized into two leadership styles: Adapters and Resisters. The adapters indicated varying degrees of comfort with using traditional words for leadership such as power, success, and even "leader" to describe their practices while the resisters opposed using such traditional terms.

Regardless of their stance as an adapter or a resistor, some of women articulated a key framework for understanding the roots and practices of leadership as emerging from mothering, which we call the third option. The participants spoke of honoring mothering as both a training ground for leadership and a metaphor for describing relational leadership behavior.

This is a key finding as it represents a radical departure from the early traditional advice for women aspiring to leadership to "become more like men." First, mothering can be understood as leadership training as illustrated in these examples. One interviewee said, "When you deal with small children...you just develop a certain level

of patience... Having kids really forces you, if you're not already pretty good at time management, it just forces it." Another stated, "I think women are inherently more multitasking than men...any woman that goes through motherhood has to be" and a third claimed that "One of the best training grounds for leadership is motherhood and if you can manage a group of small children, you can manage a group of bureaucrats."

Mothering can also be used as a metaphor for leadership. In describing their own leadership styles one woman said, "I lead warmly, like a mom." while a second stated, "I'm more of a mother type with these people. It doesn't matter what age, but more of a mother type." This metaphor extended to describing the leadership that the participants valued in others. "The leader I admired was the head of our department.... She paid attention to [her staff] and how they were advancing. She made sure to point out when they did a really good job. She didn't say much about a bad job. She talked about a good job and they really responded to it. It's kind of like childrearing.... She never was a mother ,but I thought those were very motherly traits." This third option reflects the lived experiences of the prominent and eminent leaders in the study as mothers and also daughters.

The results of the study show that many of the traditional ways of talking and thinking about leadership can mask the strengths women bring to their successful lives as leaders. The vision and leadership styles and practices many of these women employ in their current leadership roles require a new language and a new understanding—one that is inclusive, and honors the ways many women lead. Our findings suggest that the inclusion of maternal roles, as a training ground for leadership and metaphor for leadership styles, needs to be incorporated into the everyday language of leadership. This could contribute to the development of a climate that grants greater legitimacy to the practices of many talented leaders.