

Executive Summary of “Inside Women’s Power: Learning from Leaders”

Introduction

This report summarizes a study of top women leaders in the United States carried out jointly by the Winds of Change Foundation and Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College. The study was originally conceived to help Winds of Change understand the barriers and facilitators to successful women’s leadership, and opportunities for support. The project turned into both a learning experience and an opportunity for self-reflection for all of the women involved in the research, development, and writing of the report. The women we interviewed were ordinary women with extraordinary accomplishments. We could easily relate to them, which made the lessons of their accomplishments all the more relevant to our lives and, we hope, to the lives of others. Our goal in preparing this report is to convince readers, as we became convinced ourselves, that the example these women set is attainable. Moreover, their experiences have illuminated a brighter path for those who aspire to follow them, and lead.

Methodology and Context

The 60 women we interviewed include elected politicians; college presidents; artists; academics; leaders in industry, medicine, the law, and other professions. They differ in race and ethnicity as well as social class background. They have achieved prominence in different periods in the social history of this country’s acceptance of women leaders; they represent several generations of women, ranging in age from their 30s to their 70s. They are at different points in their career and family formation. The variety in their backgrounds, and in the fields in which they have achieved prominence, provides both breadth and depth to what we can learn from their experiences and perspectives on achieving diversity in leadership. The majority of the interviews were carried out face-to-face, the rest via telephone. The interview transcripts were analyzed using grounded theory as the analytic method because it allows the stat to speak for themselves without being obscured or prejudged based on hypotheses developed from other research.

In examining the experiences of these women, we pay homage to Mary Parker Follet, the originator of many of the contemporary ideas that have come to define effective leadership for both men and women. In the 1920’s, Ms. Follett wrote and lectured widely on both sides of the Atlantic on the virtues of a democratic, participatory style of leadership as the most effective way to run a business. Since her death in 1933, she was vaguely remembered in England, but almost totally obscured in her native United States. After W.W. II, her ideas about joint action through consensus and integration of interests were introduced to Japan, where they became one of the cornerstones of the Japanese-style business management. It is sweetly ironic that as U.S. and British businesses tried to emulate Japanese ways of managing in the 1980s, they were getting Follett second hand. It wasn’t until 1995, after Pauline Graham, an English woman, revived interest in Ms. Follet’s work at Harvard University, that Harvard Business School published a collection of her selected writings and lectures with commentary by contemporary scholars from

the world of business. That Mary Follett's legacy was nearly forgotten illuminates some of the challenges that contemporary women leaders have faced. We place our results in the broader context of socio-historical forces that have obscured Follett's contributions and rendered her invisible for nearly seven decades, even while her ideas have been gaining in prominence.

To provide a broader historical and developmental perspective on the persistent lack of diversity in leadership, we begin with an overview of early ideas, and then move to present-day trends in the study of leadership, to place the experiences of these prominent women into the broader context of the literature on leadership and women's emerging place therein. To this end, we have examined race/ethnicity, generation, and work context and career trajectories as important categories that illuminate historical and developmental trends.

The literature is fraught with controversy (both historical and current) over how to account for the lack of diversity in leadership. What is not subject to controversy, however, is the fact that there are few women in top positions of leadership. In 1999, women made up 46.5% of the U.S. labor force and 45.1% 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 and women held only 12.1 % of the seats in the 106th U.S. Congress. The situation is even worse for women of color. In the same year, women of color comprised 1.3% of corporate officers in Fortune 500 companies and 1.9% of board directors in the Fortune 1000 and they held only 3.36% of the seats in the 106th Congress. In this report, we seek to understand the impediments to women's leadership through a thorough overview of other academic work in this area, and through the first-hand experiences of the women leaders we interviewed.

Key Findings

- It is not possible to define a singular 'female' style of leadership. Women have achieved eminence by leading in a variety of ways, depending on the contingencies of their work environment. Their leadership styles reflect their generational cohort, career trajectories, and their fields' receptiveness to women leaders.
- The theory of participatory, people-oriented leadership originally pioneered by Mary Parker Follett has become a norm within the field of leadership for both male and female leaders. This approach builds upon many traditionally 'female' strengths, including relational and nurturing skills. While this kind of leadership is closer to many women's upbringing as relationship keepers than the stereotypically masculine, hierarchical, and directive style, relational practices reflect strategic business decisions on how best to lead.
- External barriers are still the lingering culprit hindering women's leadership, though they may be diminishing. Neither the pipeline theory nor internal barriers embedded in 'female' qualities can explain why women's progress to top leadership positions has been so slow. Instead, external factors such as the structure of organizations and work, tracking women onto a 'mommy track,' overt discrimination, subtle biases, and tokenization have influenced the experiences of women leaders. The presumption that all workers are from the same background builds additional barriers for women of color and lesbian and bisexual women. Women of color cite difficulties in identifying the cause of roadblocks, as sexism and racism

are intertwined, and lesbian and bisexual women face the difficulty of work not necessarily sanctioning their home life.

- The women we interviewed adopted many creative strategies to increase their visibility at work. A predominant strategy echoed in various contexts consisted of a three-pronged approach: know yourself, value yourself, and let others know. Most women struggle with at least one, if not all, of these tenets, but the third is a particular challenge. “Modesty doesn’t create opportunity...It’s very difficult for an awful lot of women to talk about their accomplishments, to say, ‘I did this and it was good.’”
- Optimism in the face of adversity propelled these women forward. Many (though not all) of the leaders in our sample reported struggling with gender-based barriers in their rise to leadership. What is remarkable is how little attention they paid to the obstacles in their work life. Whether these women recognized obstacles in their way or were oblivious to them, they went to work with a positive attitude; gained the necessary tools to do their work well, and succeeded. These leaders have focused not on misfortunes but on opportunities.
- Career-related support was more important to the success of women leaders than having exceptional support networks or inspirational role models early in life. Two-thirds of the women interviewed had benefited from career support, and many of those who hadn’t thought this kind of support would be desirable. On the other hand, early sources of support were important but not critical to the success of these women leaders. Fifty percent of the women in our study reported having received early support from family members, teachers, or other role models.
- While all the leaders we interviewed engaged in risk taking, confrontation, and power-seeking behaviors, there were differences in their comfort levels with these behaviors. Fewer leaders who were women of color said they were comfortable with having power (21%) compared to Caucasian leaders (49%). On the other hand, regardless of whether they found it stimulating or very scary, they had all found a strategy that worked for them to take risks, to communicate their disagreements and conflicts to those with whom they worked, and to wield influence. Most of these strategies involved a leadership style that is democratic and relational.
- The language of leadership, where a masculine bias still dominates the discourse, has not caught up with the emerging reality of leadership. Our study highlighted a reluctance among some women leaders to describe their practices using words such as power, success, and even leadership. These very women are all highly accomplished leaders, yet they do not want to use these words to describe what they do. The problem we have identified is not a leadership problem, but a language problem.

Wanted: A New Leadership Language

“I have a very different leadership style, and it really is modeled on the normative ideal for mothering. It’s a normative ideal,...not that all mothers by any stretch of the imagination do this...These words have become so overused, but it’s

empowering rather than disempowering leadership where you inspire others, where you elicit from others their highest capacities. That’s what a mom is supposed to do, guide...”

“I look at a lot of young people, and I want to showcase them. I want to say, ‘you know, you can do this.’ In a weird way, it’s like being a parent at work: a parent that isn’t holding on,

but...that’s letting go and saying ‘you are so good and so capable and I know you can do this, and let me help you.’”

Our finding related to some women’s ambivalence in using masculine-identified words to describe their leadership practices was augmented by an unexpected finding of describing one’s leadership using metaphors from family roles. It was instructive to note that none of the women interviewed used sports metaphors to describe their leadership, even though many of them said that they had excelled in sports as a girl and had had leadership opportunities on sports teams. Rather, they likened their leadership to mothering or parenting and described a good leadership in terms of good mothering.

These findings suggest that family roles, as metaphors for leadership styles, need to be incorporated into the everyday language of leadership. It is time to create a more inclusive climate that invites more of those who have the skills and inclination to lead into the fold. The vision and practices that women (and many men) bring to their current leadership roles require a new language—one that is inclusive, and honors a broader spectrum of the ways that women and men lead.