

How do women lead? What does the literature say?
A study of women leading women in independent schools.

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HOW DO WOMEN LEAD? WHAT DOES THE LITERATURE SAY?

A STUDY OF WOMEN LEADING WOMEN IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS¹.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ways in which women lead women in independent schools. The intention is to develop a paradigm of female leadership style in education rather than pursuing the two existing threads of discussion: leadership as a male paradigm and as a comparative study between the genders. Essentially, the literature argues that women adopt a 'transformational' leadership style and that their style is modified by factors such as organisational climate, socialisation both at work and in general and organisational demographics. Discussion of the need to develop an 'androgynous' or 'bi-gendered' style is considered as women see the need to be consistent with gender expectations as well as develop strength as leaders. The development of a female paradigm of leadership is an important step in recognising that research into women in leadership is not a discussion about limitations but about opportunity and organisational health.

¹ This paper forms part of the doctoral studies of the first author

INTRODUCTION

In more than 30 years of research into male and female styles of leadership no tangible results have emerged which confirm that there may be differences in leadership styles between the genders. Research results have vacillated from the proposition that male and female leaders are essentially different to quite similar (Smith 2000). Despite this apparent inability to prove differences exist, the research continues. Rather than pursue this seemingly inconclusive research area, this paper explores leadership within one gender: women. Although reference will be made to male styles of leadership, the intention in this paper is to discuss women on their own terms rather than make a comparison between genders.

Cornelius and Skinner (2005) conclude in their research that the debate about women and leadership has adopted what they term a 'victim' perspective. They cite issues such as equal status, pay, the 'masculine' shape of leadership and the 'glass ceiling' as evidence of this perspective. The 'victim' perspective will not be pursued in this paper. The interest of the writers is in the leadership of women in itself and the ways in which they lead women. This paper will outline the research to date seen in sectors outside education and in the education sector and link these to some basic research questions.

HOW DO WOMEN LEAD?

The terms 'management' and 'leadership' have some interchangeability in the literature yet there needs to be some clarification of the terms as they represent distinctly different elements of workplace behaviours. 'Management' is the competent running of an organisation. Another word might be 'administration'. 'Leadership', however, is about being granted power and authority by subordinates. Leaders do more than plan, coordinate and control. They also make decisions and attend to motivation and conflict issues. Owens suggests that symbolic leadership and the leadership which builds organizational culture are two essentials which differentiate leaders from managers (Owens 1991). Symbolic leadership allows the culture to recognise what is important and what 'vision' needs to be followed. The leader who builds

organisational culture uses this symbolic level to communicate the 'norms' of the environment they shape. Contemporary leadership theory speaks of 'transformational leaders' and 'transactional leaders' (Higgs 2003). The common thread of these definitions is the need to inspire followership in subordinates. Without this element the research into women leading women has little credence.

What then does the literature tell us about the ways in which women do lead? What do these women 'look like' and 'behave like' as leaders?

Sinclair's research found that women are reluctant to describe themselves as leaders because of the negative connotations of leadership (Sinclair 1998). This is reflected in simple things such as the vocabulary used to describe female and male leaders. Forster (2005) cites, for example, a cluttered desk as representing 'busy' for a man but 'disorganised' for a woman; a family photograph as 'family oriented' for a man, yet 'family before the job' for a woman. This gendered language can have a discouraging effect on women's desire to seek promotion. If women do accept the term 'leader', researchers identify women leaders as interpersonally oriented, charismatic, democratic (Trinidad & Normore 2005), citing Eagly & Johnson, 1990; (Freeman & Varey 1997). Appelbaum, Audet and Miller (2003) quote Stanford in claiming that women as leaders have what they term essentially feminine qualities such as 'heightened communication skills, advanced intermediacy skills, well-developed interpersonal skills...a soft approach to handling people' (p.7). Kabacoff writes that women score highly on their focus towards production and achievement of results (1998). Other writers list skills such as: focus on relationships (van der Boon 2003), motivating others (Pounder & Coleman 2002), fostering communication (Pounder & Coleman 2002), listening to others (Pounder & Coleman 2002), and the production of high quality work (Pfaff 2000), relationship building and a team approach (Pounder & Coleman 2002).

The literature would suggest that the masculine model of leadership is the dominant paradigm and that women who succeed in leadership move closely to this style. Sinclair (1998) indicates that 'invisibility' is the reason women in leadership has not been a focus of investigation. She claims that there was only one style of leadership that was worthy of serious investigation and she believed that was the male style. Schien, Mueller and Lituchy (1996) also address this issue. The fact that the absence of women was noted in leadership research indicates that the 'norm' was not female. Kim Cambell, former Prime Minister of Canada quoted Schlosser in parallelling the qualities of men with the qualities of leadership' (Schlosser 2002). Wajcman (1998) investigated the leadership style of men and women in multinational corporations and discovered that although they espoused differences in leadership styles, in fact all led in a 'masculine' manner and contributed to a 'macho ethos' (Wajcman 1998; Forster 2005).

Some researchers identify the need in women to retain 'feminine' qualities to keep their sense of identity. This means there is a tendency to be 'masculine' enough to gain credibility and yet not deviate from gender expectations (Trinidad & Normore 2005).

The term 'androgynous' is used for a style which seems to incorporate both feminine and masculine leadership approaches (Pounder & Coleman 2002). This style is advocated in order for leaders to achieve maximum flexibility in their leadership and was coined from a convergence of 'transformational' and 'transactional' characteristics (Pounder & Coleman 2002). A similar term, 'bi-gendered' is used by Sinclair (1998) where women determine their mode of 'masculine' or 'feminine' operation by the context of their work: with whom they are working and how much power or influence they perceive themselves as having in that context. Sinclair argues that women need to learn several ways of influencing others depending on the context of their work.

The question of what influences leadership style is answered by Normone (2005) who notes that leadership style, rather than a product of gender, emerges from three elements:

socialisation (society), culture of origin and organisational culture. The third of these is perhaps the area where women are most able to develop their own style as they are considered to be sensitive to the codes of behaviour, policies and processes in an organisation. Additional influencing factors are the dominant culture, socialisation (work) and organisational demographics (Pounder & Coleman 2002); (Trinidad & Normore 2005). Further research to develop an understanding of which of these factors can best account for women's leadership style would be useful in adding to the picture of women as leaders.

A range of writers speak of women leaders as adopting a 'transformational' style: consensual (Jewell & Whicker 1994); facilitators of interaction (Gibson 1995); builders of spirit de corps (Fierman 1990); empowering of subordinates and high levels of encouragement (Eagly, A.H., Johannesen-Schmidt & van Engen 2003) and a team approach (Kouzes & Posner 1990; Rigg & Sparrow 1994).

Rather than ascribing a particular style of leadership to women, Larson and Pepper (2003) and Jorgenson (2002) discuss women's leadership in terms of 'positioning theory'. In discussing women in engineering, Olsson (2004) discussed the development of an executive identity and found that women leaders: identify with individual men as mentors, develop a sense of unity with some groups of women, but not all; differentiate themselves from groups of women; and speak of themselves in individual terms.

If the threads of the literature are followed, and women as leaders are investigated in their own right, we can conclude that there is an identifiable 'style' assumed by women. Exactly how this translates into their role depends on the organisation itself, individual responses to their socialisation and to the male paradigm that is leadership. Contemporary leadership by women is characterised by their determination of their own leadership identity rather than seeking to belong to a particular subset of women or a particular style.

ASPIRATIONS TO LEAD

The earlier reference to women as ‘victims’ needs some explanation in terms of research into career aspirations. Sinclair (1998) describes women as being nervous about electing to move into leadership and believes that this is a result of their understanding of the construct of leadership. She believes that women reject the perception that ambition and ruthlessness are required and that women do not see their activities defined as ‘leadership qualities.’ This leads, she suggests, to their disinclination to seek leadership positions. The research of Powell and Butterfield (2003) indicated that females have lower aspirations than males despite the call for ‘feminine leadership’. They note that in measuring their career success, women look to subjective measures such as opportunity and work/life balance rather than promotion and salary. Klenke (2003) argues that apparently ‘feminine’ qualities such as agreeability, are more related to women’s experience of less power and lower status positions than to actual leadership qualities.

WHAT CHARACTERISTICS DO WOMEN *NOT* USE IN LEADERSHIP?

What then does the literature tell us about the ways in which women do not lead? Loden, (1985) cited in Eagly and Johnson (1990) describes the masculine style of leadership as being characterised by such aspects as competitiveness, a belief in hierarchical authority and high control for the leader and an unemotional and analytic problem-solving approach. Wacjman (1998) describes it as a ‘command and control’ style. Klenke (2003), describes male leaders as treating their roles as setting up a series of contracts and thus aiming to maximise power. Powell and Butterfield (2003) indicate that aspirations to top management were associated with largely masculine traits and that the qualities perceived as essential for the managerial role require what they would term mostly masculine characteristics. Women were not associated with these characteristics in the literature even in the androgynous model of leadership.

The picture of women as leaders is a contradictory one, ranging from androgynous, transformational to the belief that they have an identifiable style. Contemporary women would perhaps assert their uniqueness in style rather than belonging to a particular classification and this perception needs to be tested in the research.

PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN AS LEADERS

How do women respond to female leaders? There is limited research which reflects women's feelings about being led by women but what little there is gives an interesting perspective on the subject. Moore, Grunberg and Greenberg (2005) found that women with female supervisors demonstrated a higher level of mastery and social support than those with male superiors. They also had higher levels of job autonomy but only 'modest benefits' could be ascribed to having a female supervisor but that these should not be dismissed as irrelevant. Eagly argues that these may still have consequences of note for organisations in terms of organisational effectiveness. Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt and van Engen (2003) however found that women tended to trust men as leaders more than they trusted women and that coaching was less with women, despite the belief amongst women that they did a considerable amount of coaching. Pounder and Coleman cite evidence that female subordinates trusted female supervisors leading them, less than they did male supervisors (Jeanquart-Barone. & Sekaran 1994).

From a leader perspective, Klenke (2003) noted that female executives were reluctant to promote other women into senior ranks for fear it might jeopardise their own positions. Jones (2003) comments in a similar vein that women do not mentor other women and are not able to promote other women.

Klenke makes the rather challenging observation that women are not only more likely to engage in conflict than men but that they are more competitive than is commonly believed. This is a comment worthy of exploration as it does not belong with the list of

‘transformational’ characteristics nor other perceptions of women as leaders. The assumption that women belong to a professional ‘sisterhood’ perhaps need to be tested in research as there is evidence that women are not necessarily supportive of each other either as leaders or as subordinates.

Olsson (2004) encapsulates the change in the way women position themselves in leadership roles. She believes it is women supporting other women that is of primary importance in the development of the new culture of women in leadership

HOW DO WOMEN LEAD IN EDUCATION?

One sector in which women leaders are found in a higher than usual proportions, despite the view that, given the number of women in the field, they are still underrepresented, is education (Cubillo & Brown 2003). Often assumed to be an area requiring more ‘feminine’ qualities, the numbers provide fertile ground for research about women as leaders (Trinidad & Normore 2005).

There is little argument that teaching as a profession is dominated by women or that they are under-represented in the promotional ranks but again the argument of women as ‘victims’ in a leadership sense is not a useful one (Cubillo & Brown 2003). Research has shown that many women do not in fact seek promotion, preferring to invest their energies in a ‘career tree’ rather than a ‘career path’.

Trinidad and Normore (2005) note that women are expected to behave in a sufficiently authoritative manner so as to gain respect and maintain discipline but to also operate within gender expectations by being caring and nurturing. This reflects the ‘androgynous’ style described in the literature on women in leadership.

The literature describes women in leadership in education using terms such as ‘democratic, participative, inclusive and collaborative’, and asserting that women use ‘shared problem-solving and decision-making’ (Cubillo & Brown 2003). Rather than seeing their leadership as

a form of power, they translate the term to mean ‘empowerment’ to build a climate of ‘trust and respect’, which is linked to principles of ‘justice, fairness and responsible behaviour towards others’ (Trinidad & Normore 2005).

As with the literature from general leadership roles, there are gaps in the research and thus questions need to be raised and answered if we are to develop a picture of women as leaders in secondary education.

AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

If the assertion that leadership is essentially masculine is true and that women in education lead with an androgynous style, then it is timely to begin to reassess the language and redefine the terms. The assumption that models of leadership are essentially ‘masculine’, ‘feminine’ or ‘androgynous’ gives a misleading and oversimplified view of a complex area. Conversations with women in leadership become an important way of determining how they view their roles. Ironically, because the language of the literature is so clearly gendered, this is the language used by women to define their style and thus reinforces the status quo. Research will need to isolate and interpret the terms used in order to ascertain specific meanings beyond gender.

Conversations, however, are misleading in such an area of research. Leaders can say what they believe is expected of them in order to adhere to the existing stereotypes rather than looking through a new lens. The language used by women leaders needs to be closely examined to assess its accuracy in reflecting their style and matched with anecdotes of leadership they have experienced.

The factors which influence leadership styles in women also need to be reviewed, in particular the environmental and cultural aspects.

If research is to find out how women lead women in the education sector, these conversations will tell us their perceptions of style but not always objectively. Earlier research based on conversations of female leaders in education indicated that women perceive that they need to

lead objectively and yet also demonstrate a range of qualities: sensitivity, fairness, compassion. Some would believe they need to be fairer than a male leader and yet are more harshly judged. The comparison with male leaders is always made. Conversations will tell some truth and some of what the women believe to be the truth or believe they should say in order to comply with the style they feel is required of them. The challenge to the researcher is to deduce what is closest to the truth, knowing that perception becomes truth for the interviewee. Ultimately and ideally there should emerge a picture of women as leaders which allows for individuality in style.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The literature discusses the barriers women face in leadership using what has been termed a 'victim' perspective. Assumptions have been made that women aspire to leadership and are prevented from achieving this by obstacles put in their way by both a male paradigm and societal factors which preclude them from entering and remaining as leaders in organisations. Women in education are defined more in terms of their 'transformational' style of leadership and recognition is given of their capacity to adopt different skills depending on circumstances. Their leadership, however, is still seen largely as a nurturing and conciliatory style.

More recent research paints a different view. Women do not wish to be seen as part of a gendered stereotype but to be defined as individuals. This possibility will strengthen the value of women as leaders and allow organisations to more flexibly ascertain leaders with particular qualities rather than defined by their gender.

There is in the literature recognition of some unhealthy gender interactions between women and women in organisations and it is important that this be identified and explained, if possible, so women can overcome any prejudice about their leadership style.

CONCLUSIONS

The research needs to draw conclusions about women in leadership which defines them as individuals.

Other elements contributing to the development of this new paradigm are the importance of women speaking about their experiences as leaders and of the value of research such as this to the process of changing perceptions of women in leadership. Both of these factors give some direction to our attempts to understand women in leadership as a construct in its own right.

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