What Women Bring to the Exercise of Leadership

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Since the 1970s, women have steadily emerged in leadership roles in all societal spheres. Women bring to the exercise of leadership an arsenal of strengths, which increasingly are received to benefit the entities they lead on local, national, and global levels. Women's leadership styles have been shown to be more transformational, participative, and inclusive than the leadership styles of their male counterparts. According to the results of a 2008 Pew Research initiative studying whether men or women make better leaders, participants rated women over men by five-to-one in the top eight leadership characteristics, including honesty and intelligence. Although women are filling more managerial positions, they have yet to emerge in the top executive leadership positions. Therefore, this paper explores three primary areas: (1) women's leadership emergence, (2) ways women lead, and (3) benefits of women's leadership. Research grounds each of these three foci by highlighting women's leadership contributions inclusive of ethical moorings; peace-building; social change; and business and media entrepreneurship and innovation. With women making such substantive contributions in the exercise of leadership, the paper concludes with the rhetorical question, "Why not women?" in hopes of reinforcing a paradigm of women and men serving together for maximum benefit.

Introduction

What do 20th century missionary Gladys Aylward, contemporary Bible teacher Joyce Meyer, former president and CEO of eBay, Meg Whitman, and the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Dr. Wangari Matthai have in common? They are all women who brought their personal passions, convictions, energies, and strengths to their innovative efforts and exercise of leadership. Although quite different in their respective accomplishments, they share common characteristics that placed them in counter-cultural leadership roles, creating innovative venues for change.

In the 1930s, as a missionary to China, Gladys Aylward led a campaign to end women's foot-binding in Yungcheng, leading to the improvement of women's health.[1] In the 1980s, author and ministry leader Joyce Meyer, along with her husband Dave, founded Joyce Meyer Ministries, which supports Joyce's writing, television, and global conference ministry.[2] As an American

businesswoman, Meg Whitman has held many strategic corporate positions, most notably between 1998-2007, as the former president and CEO of eBay, where she expanded the company from a $4 million to an $8 billion enterprise.[3] The first African female to win the Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. Wangari Matthai is an environmental and political activist who spearheaded the Green Belt Movement in empowering poor women through planting trees for holistic and sustainable Kenyan development, democracy, and peace.[4] Whether social and health innovation (Aylward), business development (Whitman), or political and environmental innovation (Matthai), each of these women brought themselves to leadership and made a strategic impact on the world.

Women bring to the exercise of leadership an arsenal of strengths, which increasingly are being recognized and received to benefit the entities they lead on local, national, and global levels. Therefore, this paper will focus on three primary areas: (1) women's leadership emergence, (2) ways women lead, and (3) the benefits of women's leadership.

Women's Leadership Emergence

The landscape of women's leadership emergence has been steadily shifting since the 1970s. As women's educational achievements have increased, so have their job opportunities.[5] In 2009, women in the U.S. accounted for 51% of all those employed in management and professional occupations.[6] However, according to Catalyst, a U.S. organization promoting women in business and leadership, women hold only 14.4% of executive positions in Fortune 500 companies, while men hold 85.6%. Regarding executive earnings, women earn 7.6% of the top earnings compared to 92.4% for men.[7] For those employed full-time in management and professional occupations, the average median weekly earnings are $1,266 for men and $939 for women.[8]

Although women have moved into more managerial positions, they still have not emerged into the top executive leadership positions nor do they earn salaries commensurate with those of men for the same jobs. However, progress has been and is being made. Valerio asserts that global, social, and cultural forces such as globalization, e-business, changing markets, technology proliferation, and the need for teamwork, alliances, and partnerships have created room for women's leadership emergence.[9] Women have capitalized on these opportunities through the unique characteristics and styles in which they lead.

Ways Women Lead

Research on Women in Leadership

Since the release of two formative books in the 1990s on women's leadership characteristics, research on women in the exercise of leadership has burgeoned. The early work of Sally Helgesen compared similarities and differences in the ways women and men lead based on Mintzberg's analysis of what men did as managers.[10] Helgesen concluded that women work at a steady pace, view unscheduled interruptions as a part of work flow, make time for activities not focused on work, maintain a complex network of relationships, and focus on the "ecology of leadership," which emphasizes the social dimension, a vision for society, and time for information sharing with others.[11] Helgesen observed that women tend to frame a "web of inclusion" that is circular and inclusive, rather than hierarchical and exclusive.

Professor Judy Rosener found that men and women have distinctive leadership styles, with men more likely to view leadership as a sequence of transactions with others, whereas women are more transformational, using interpersonal skills to motivate followers rather than applying positional power or authority.[12] Referring to this style as "interactive leadership," Rosner states that women use relational skills to influence others, encourage participation, share power and information, and heighten followers' self-esteem.[13]

Other researchers, including leadership specialist Alice Eagly and colleagues, note that women lead in a more democratic and participative style than men, and argue that evaluation of women leaders' effectiveness depends on several interacting variables including work context and culture.[14] Further, Eagly advanced a gender role theory, asserting that people judge leadership based on what they deem appropriate behavior for men and women. This has been shown to influence why women may be perceived less favorably than equivalent male counterparts, especially in contexts where stereotypically masculine styles are favored.[15] Differing perceptions of women's leadership effectiveness are based on socialization, gender stereotypes, and confounding variables that do not adequately control for perceived power.[16] Klenke calls for careful analysis of situational factors, such as biases, that serve as a filter for evaluating leadership based on gender.[17]

Quantitative and qualitative studies have shown that women in top corporate positions have both redefined the rules of business and leadership and have demonstrated these characteristics: self-confidence, emotional intelligence, and an instinct to maximize change for overall benefit. They also "display their feminine side" in employee interactions, and attract new customers by establishing a collegial environment through displaying nurture, empathy, loyalty, respect, and a team spirit.[18] Women seem to be aware of and maximize the self-concepts of others.[19]

In a five-year study, three McKinsey consultants developed a leadership model emerging from interviews with successful women executives.[20] They asserted that for centered and successful leadership to occur, women need to demonstrate the preconditions of talent, desire to lead, and tolerance of change; and to enact five characteristics: (1) meaning, connoting the realization of their life purpose, happiness, and core strengths; (2) framing, or self-awareness required to view situations clearly; (3) connecting, or developing collaborative and life-giving relationships; (4) engaging, or taking risks to move forward; and (5) energizing, or the managing of energy reserves to accommodate multiple responsibilities.[21]

Furthermore, their model included outcomes of impact, renewal, and joy as the end goal of the women interviewed, supporting the late Katharine Graham's assertion, "To love what you do and feel that it matters –how could anything be more fun?"[22] As the former president and CEO of the Washington Post after the death of her husband and as the first CEO of a Fortune 500 company, Graham captures the joy factor that motivates many women to exercise leadership. In addition, having passion for the cause that the leadership role represents is likewise tremendously motivating. Colleen Barrett, president emerita and corporate secretary of Southwest Airlines, recommends, "Don't ever agree to take on a leadership role for the money, power, title, or prestige; take on the role because you have a passion for the cause."[23] Andrea Jung, CEO of Avon Products, agrees, stating that women must have a "deep passion" for the work they do.[24]

Power and Authority

Another research initiative explored the secrets of 25 women political leaders, revealing that the risk-taking, courage, confidence, and multi-tasking abilities of women like Olympia Snowe of Maine and Nancy Pelosi of California contributed to their leadership emergence.[25] Female participants viewed power as the ability to make other people's lives better, rather than raw manipulation for personal gain or vision fulfillment.[26] For example, Paula Sneed, former vice president of Global Marketing and Initiatives for Kraft Foods and a woman of color who blazed a trail across racism and sexism, observed that power should be used wisely from the perspective of a servant who encourages others.[27] Commenting on that tandem between leadership, power, and authority, Ronald Heifetz noted that women can offer perspectives on "mistaken practices of authority and can help men generate new models for themselves," so as not to repeat the only models men know.[28] Further, Heifetz affirmed the "extraordinary women who exercise leadership every day, yet do not have authority," while also appealing to women to understand men and their sense of loss that may accompany women's leadership emergence.[29]

Gender Associations of Leadership

Socialization and culture influence perceptions of women's leadership qualification and effectiveness. Eagly and Carli explored the mental associations of leaders based on gender, noting that gender prejudice aligns with social constructions of masculine and feminine based on cultural perceptions and influences. Associations develop, with women often associated with communal qualities of compassion, affection, and gentleness, and men associated with agentic qualities of assertion, self-confidence, and dominance.[30] Prejudices may result when mismatches or role incongruity between stereotyped attributes of women traverse the leadership roles they fill.[31] Thus, favoritism toward male over female leaders may develop.

Women may be accused of being too pushy or too soft. According to leadership research, a woman who leads with behaviors traditionally perceived as masculine may find herself at a disadvantage.[32] Women who are feminine may be perceived as less competent, causing a "double bind" of mutual exclusivity between the two,[33] creating a delicate balancing act.[34] For example, Hillary Clinton, who is often dismissed as being too masculine in her leadership behavior, has also been criticized for showing emotion, such as during the 2008 New Hampshire primary when she teared up during a question and answer session.[35] Cultural expectations also contribute to the notion that women should be polite in every situation.[36] Furthermore, when an incongruity exists between gender role and leadership role, prejudice often results, which may account for why it is more difficult for women to become leaders and achieve success than for their male counterparts.[37]

Benefits of Women in Leadership

Over the past four decades, the increase of female leaders, catalyzed by the women's liberation movement in the 1970s and globalization in the 1990s through today, has produced new approaches to the exercise of leadership. These approaches embrace a flatter leadership playing field with more collaboration, teamwork, and coaching, rather than hierarchical structures and authority.[38] Eagly and Carli addressed the increasing assertion that women have an advantage in exercising leadership because of alignment with contemporary culture. However, they warned

that any advantages women have as leaders may be offset by gender prejudice and discrimination.[39]

In one meta-analysis comparing male and female leaders, Eagly and colleagues found that female leaders were more transformational and demonstrated more contingent reward behaviors (i.e., rewarding followers for satisfactory performance); whereas male leaders were more likely to demonstrate two dimensions of transactional leadership: active management by exception (focusing on followers' mistakes and failures) and passive management by exception (intervening after problems with followers become dire). They conclude, "Research on transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles does suggest female advantage, albeit a small advantage"[40]

According to a national 2008 Pew Research Center Social and Demographic Trends survey, respondents rated "women superior to men" in honesty and intelligence, among other leadership qualities they value in political leaders.[41] Survey results of 2,250 adults (1,060 men and 1,190 women) ranked women better than or equal to men in seven of eight primary leadership traits assessed in the survey.[42] Half of survey participants ranked women as more honest than men, with just 20% saying that men are more honest than women. Regarding intelligence, 38% of respondents viewed women as smarter, with 14% indicating men are smarter, and the remaining 48% believing there is no difference between genders. Furthermore, women were ranked with larger leads over men for being compassionate (80% chose women, 5% chose men), outgoing (47% chose women, 38% chose men), and creative (62% chose women, 11% chose men).

Participants assessed men and women equally regarding hard work and ambition. However, men prevailed over women in decisiveness. To summarize, in the top eight leadership traits, women were ranked higher by participants five to one, including two ties. Regarding job performance, women were ranked higher than men in the characteristics of advocating for one's principles under political pressure, negotiating compromises, keeping government honest, and representing the interests of the people. However, when asked which gender makes the better political leaders, men or women, only 6% of respondents ranked women above men; 21% mentioned men, 69% indicated that both genders are equal, and 4% responded "I don't know."[43]

The paradox is that women are rated more highly on leadership traits, yet women make up a lower percentage of those in public office than men (i.e., 16% of U.S. senators, 16% of members of the U.S. House of Representatives, 16% of all state governors, and 24% of state legislators are female).[44] Responding to what accounts for this paradox, participants indicated that Americans aren't ready to elect a woman to high office (51%), women are held back by men (43%), and women are discriminated against in all societal spheres (38%).[45] The Pew Report commented, "[W]omen emerge from this survey a bit like a sports team that racks up better statistics but still loses the game…"[46] The benefits of having women in political leadership are countered by prevailing attitudes that undermine women's potential performance in top elected office. Also, as Forbes.com observed, women's modest strides in the government sector are stalled in the business sector.[47]

Women's advocate Marie C. Wilson, founder and President Emeritus of The White House Project and co-creator of Take Our Daughters and Sons to Work® Day contended that women bring greater inclusiveness, empathy, and communication to the exercise of leadership, which

"makes for stronger government and richer business.[48] Furthermore, she argues that women offer "fresh eyes and fresh solutions applied to old and abiding problems, unique skills honed through family and community service, the opportunity for a true democracy, transforming business and politics."[49] One qualitative study comparing 59 female business leaders of large companies with male counterparts found that women were more persuasive, inclusive, learned from adversity, and took risks.[50]

New York Times journalist Nicholas Kristof noted, "While no woman has been president of the United States—yet—the world does have several thousand years' worth of experience with female leaders. I have to acknowledge it: Their historical record puts men's to shame."[51] Kristof notes that several of the world's great leaders have been women (i.e., Queen Hatshepsut and Cleopatra of Egypt, Queen Elizabeth I of England, Catherine the Great of Russia, and Maria Theresa of Austria). Noting that women tend to excel in consensus-building and other leadership skills, Kristof hypothesized that female political figures in monarchies tend to do well; whereas women in modern-day democracies have to prove themselves and overcome public prejudices, making democratic politics more challenging for women than for men.

In another op-ed piece, Kristof reports that Wall Street may not have encountered the same financial crisis over the past three years if Lehman Brothers had been Lehman Sisters, since Wall Street is "the most male-dominated bastion in the business world."[52] Adding that a greater gender balance could reduce the consequences of "male herding," particularly taking high-risk bets under financial pressure when surrounded by males of similar status, Kristof highlighted the research of Hong and Page,[53] who found that "diversity leads to optimality" when it comes to problem solving. Thus, Kristof implied that women not only create needed diversity leading to business/financial optimality, but also contribute to ethical moorings which dissuade unethical business practices.

Women, Ethical Behavior, and Whistleblowing

Research suggests that women may be more ethical than their male counterparts, which might explain why women tend to be whistleblowers. In August 2000, prior to Enron's collapse, Sherron Watkins, former vice president at Enron, sent her boss, Jeffrey Skilling, a memo concerning shady accounting practices within the company. FBI agent Coleen Rowley wrote her boss, FBI Chief Robert Mueller, that the disarrayed agency might have prevented the 9/11 terror attack if its house had been in order. Retired Army Lt. General Claudia J. Kennedy, the first woman to hold a 3-star rank, exposed a sexual harassment incident of a fellow officer three years after the fact, when he was close to being promoted. Cynthia Cooper, chief audit executive at WorldCom, exposed the fraudulent practices which had cost her company a total of $9 billion. [54]

In one study, Miethe and Rothschild found that women were more likely than men to speak out against unethical behavior and to use internal reporting channels in responding to wrongdoing.[55] Another study by the same authors found that women were twice as likely as men to be internal whistle blowers.[56]

Peace-building Initiatives

Examples abound regarding women involved in peace-building initiatives. After 30 years of conflict, women organizers in Northern Ireland[57] mobilized on short order to open talks between Protestants and Catholics to mediate ongoing hostilities, culminating in the Belfast Agreement between Protestant unionists and Catholic nationalists.[58] In 1976, these women won the Nobel Peace Prize for their peaceful public demonstrations, coalition across religious and political lines, and their reconciliation efforts.[59]

In a 2006 debate between Hanan Ashwari, former spokesperson for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and Ehud Barak, former prime minister of Israel, moderator Bill O'Reilly acknowledged in closing comments, "It [the conflict between Arabs and Jews] will never, ever end—ever—until what happened in Northern Ireland happens in the Middle East," O'Reilly explained. "It was the women of Northern Ireland who said 'Enough, this has to stop.'"[60]

Another contemporary exemplar, Swanee Hunt, former ambassador to Austria and current director of the Women and Public Policy Program at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, personifies inclusive transformation efforts, particularly in her work in Eastern Europe from 1993-1997. During the crisis in Bosnia from 1992-1995 that left 150,000 dead and 2 million Bosnians displaced, Hunt brought together the Croat and the Bosnian Muslim delegations for negotiations, resulting in a successful military alliance, which was the first step toward peace. Hunt actively developed initiatives to include and empower women in emerging Eastern European democracies. [61] Hunt contends that women must be involved in formal and informal peace processes because women's perspectives differ from those of men in four primary ways. They are (1) highly invested in preventing and stopping conflict, (2) adept at bridging ethnic, political, and cultural divides, (3) aligned with the pulse of the community, and (4) innovative community leaders, regardless of formal authority and power.

Hunt's observations are clearly evident in the life of Agathe Uwilingiyimana (1953-1994). As the first and only female prime minister of Rwanda, Uwilingiyimana was compelled to stop the genocide and war. Therefore, she bravely spearheaded negotiations and peace initiatives between rival Hutu and Tutsi factions, which led to the Arusha peace agreement in August of 1993. Due to Uwilingiyimana's peace-making initiatives, she was assassinated in 1994 by members of her own political party.[62]

Other peace-making initiatives are personified in the fifteen female Nobel Peace Prize laureates including: (1) Mother Theresa of Calcutta in 1979 for humanitarian work, (2) Aung San Suu Kyi from Myanmar in 1991 for human rights, (3) American Jody Williams in 1997 for efforts to ban and clear land mines, (4) Shirin Ebadi in 2003 from Iran for the championing of human rights for women and children, (5) Wangari Maathai in 2004 from Kenya for humanitarian, environmental, and democracy advocacy, and (6) Leymay Gbowee from Liberia and Kawakkul Karman from Iran who shared the 2011 prize for the tireless advocacy of women's safety and women's rights in peace-building efforts.[63]

Social Change

Examples of women spearheading social change abound. For example, Sojourner Truth (1797-1893), abolitionist and women's rights advocate, had an itinerant preaching ministry focusing on the evils of slavery.[64] Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906) led the women's suffrage movement,

laying the foundation for women's right to vote.[65] First lady Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962) was instrumental in the formation of the United Nations and drafted the UN Declaration of Human Rights.[66] Rosa Parks (1913-2005) both organized and participated in civil rights initiatives, leading to the bus boycott that catapulted the civil rights movement and brought Martin Luther King, Jr. into prominence.[67]

Wendy Kopp, founder and CEO of Teach For America, has grown an organization that seeks to eliminate educational inequity across the U.S. by recruiting qualified college graduates for two-year teaching commitments in low-income communities.[68] Teach For America has impacted 500,000 students in 39 regions across the U.S. Additionally, Kopp co-founded Teach for All, which applies this educational model around the world. Other innovative contributions of women worldwide have dramatically impacted social change through applying use of technology and economic transformation for women's empowerment and gender equality.[69]

Melinda Gates, a philanthropist and the wife of Microsoft founder Bill Gates, was the impetus for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which is the most funded private foundation in the world dedicated to promoting global healthcare and curtailing poverty. The foundation operates with a budget of just under $25 billion.[70] As former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan affirmed, "Study after study has taught us that there is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls and the empowerment of women…When women are fully involved, the benefits can be seen immediately: families are healthier, they are better fed; their income, savings, and investment go up. And what is true of families is true of communities, and eventually, of countries"[71]

Business, Media, Entrepreneurship, & Innovation

Successful women exercising leadership in business and media spheres likewise abound. They include Oprah Winfrey, entertainment entrepreneur and philanthropist; Anne Sweeney, president of Disney-ABS Television Group and co-chair of Disney Media Networks; Andrea Jung, chair and CEO of Avon Products; Anita Roddick, founder of the Body Shop; Debbi Fields, founder of Mrs. Fields Cookies; Carly Fiorini, former CEO of Hewlett-Packard; Sherry Lansing, former chair of Paramount Motion Pictures; Anne M. Mulcahy, former chair and CEO of Xerox; Marie J. Toulantis, former CEO of Barnes & Noble; Ann Moore, former chair and CEO of Time, Inc.; and Pat Mitchell, former president and CEO of PBS. Women offer conduits for individual and organizational learning and change, which these women exemplify.[72] As Andrea Jung of Avon asserts, "Innovation is key. This is a seminal moment for companies to invest [in innovative initiatives] that must be "inside out and outside in.""[73]

Although women have slowly emerged in top executive positions, they still lag behind their male counterparts, while women leaders in small businesses continue to flourish.[74] When compared with women in top executive positions, women entrepreneurs in small businesses comprise the "fastest growing groups of business owners," owning over 51% of them and signifying over two and one-half times the rate of all U.S. privately held firms.[75] Women develop businesses to overcome the "glass ceiling," (i.e., the invisible barrier that prevents women from rising to leadership positions) but also to accommodate family commitments and the need to make a contribution to better society.[76] Initiatives such as "Roadmap to 2020," overseen by IBM marketing executive, Denise Evans, is one of several national and global initiatives to empower

women through job creation and improved health initiatives for a safer and more sustainable planet.[77] Through business, media, and entrepreneurial endeavors, women are changing the world.

Summary

This paper addressed women's emergence in leadership, the ways women lead, and the benefits of women in leadership. Women bring diverse strengths, perspectives, and innovation to the exercise of leadership. Although women have emerged in leadership roles despite the glass ceiling, the glass wall (i.e., obstacles in moving laterally within an organization),[78] and the glass cliff (i.e., when women are invited into leadership positions of organizations in precarious or crisis situations),[79] disparities still persist due to traditional gender stereotypes, inadequate mentors, and workplace paradigms.[80] As advisor to four previous U.S. presidents and now a senior political analyst for CNN, David Gergen suggests that we cut the gender leadership gap in half by 2015 and then close it altogether thereafter for three reasons to enhance: (1) economics and a prospering society, (2) a more caring society, and (3) a more just society with women in full participation with men.[81] In this process, we need to avoid two biases: the alpha bias that exaggerates gender differences and the beta bias that minimizes or ignores them.[82] With the benefits and contributions of women functioning together with men in the exercise of leadership for overall benefit in all societal spheres, the question then arises, "Why not women?"[83]

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