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POWERPLAY: WOMEN, LEADERSHIP AND THE GETTING OF POWER

by Dianne Jacobs

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Women are contributing new approaches to leadership and power. Yet the question remains – will this translate into advantage for women striving to make their way higher in corporate hierarchies? This author strongly believes so, but first, as she writes women must make certain adjustments.

Power is an intriguing, multifaceted concept. The reality is that when we effect change, compete for resources, forge consensus, utilise relationships, strengthen positions, further our team's reputation, or ask for support we are engaging in acts of power and influence.

"Power-over" is implicit in making "power-to" work. Those who take up a leadership role develop some kind of power through which to attain influence over others. Power-over is the capacity to get people to do what they don't want to do due to resources, status, expertise, reward or punishment. Power-to is the ability or potential to bring about change. Empowerment has an assumed good. Power-to recognizes that power is relational and reciprocal. Anyone at any level can exercise power and also resistance.

Power plays out in decision-making and how goals are gained. It is as much about followers as it is leaders. It is used for individual gain or to help others. It does impact group dynamics. It can empower or repress relative power. Ethical and purposeful use of power is at the core of effective leadership.

Changing the C-suite contexts

This is "the era of the inclusive leader" Booz Allen Hamilton recently declared, "where the power of today's CEO is not as absolute." A synergistic approach is a paradigm shift in leader identity and the practice of leadership. Think about autonomy and individual achievement versus results enabled by an intricate collaborative network of alliances. Think of command-and-control hierarchies versus participative interactions of leaders and followers. Think of a directive style versus enabling others to take up their own authority. Think of making choices versus integrating the "and."

Within C-suites and particularly for the global executive officer (GEO) the profound complexity inevitable in working across countries, cultures and markets presents new contexts at every cross-point. GEOs constantly work on the inside, the edge or the outside of shifting global agendas. Articulating vision and strategy from a multi-country and multi-environment perspective, GEOs understand the need to unite and engage everyone. This global collegiality requires greater acceptance of difference, with absolute meritocracy, enhanced by open information flows. Collaboration is the corporate *zeitgeist*.

Leadership genre connects to gender. Traits typically linked with traditional 'heroic' leadership – individualism, assertiveness and doing – are regarded as masculine, while "post-heroic" traits – collaboration, emotional intelligence and adaptive approaches – are typically regarded as feminine. Does this post-heroic model give women an advantage? Will social assumptions become irrelevant? Should we posit that an inclusive leadership style will see more women in C-suite levels of the talent pipeline?

When I ask executive women: "Do you have power?" there is a moment of reflective silence followed by confidence. They tell stories about their use of influence, how they create change, build teams, develop sustainable approaches that prevent crisis; and of 'power-to' replacing 'power-over.' They talk about backing their judgement. They take up their personal authority derived from their role and task. They do not turn away from power or leadership, but altruistically, they do want it for purposes broader than personal advantage. Not very heroic!

Gender schemata are powerful. The experience and consequences of practicing leadership will be different for women. Men who exhibit post-heroic traits can claim they are embracing fresh paradigms, in tune with leading in this brave new global world. Women have a harder time differentiating what they do as unique because it looks like they are doing what women just do.

Noticeable is combining traditional heroic leadership with greater degrees of emotional intelligence and relationship building. But "The Emperor Has No Clothes." These post-heroic leaders have learnt to tack a new set of skills onto their established leadership style. They are, as Joyce Fletcher from Simmons Graduate School of Management astutely remarks, "post-heroic heroes."

Dominant group dynamics

The vast majority of companies, and the organizational architecture of those companies, reflect a distinctly male viewpoint. This is deeper than subjective heroism. It manifests in how performance, success, commitment, credit and reward is determined. Metaphors from sport, war and competitive games abound in corporate language. Face-time, long hours and "extreme-job" cultures prevail. Behaviour is frequently interpreted based on gender. This signals who is included and who is excluded.

It is human nature to make distinctions. Everyone is unconsciously biased. Majority groups normalise power to the point they no longer see their advantage and privilege. The dominant group-sense diversity takes something away from them. They are often unaware of the barriers to change this mindset creates. Difference needs to be experienced and acknowledged for it to be understood.

In any system of unequal power, those with less power are ultra-tuned and highly sensitive to conscious and unconscious actions of the more powerful. The less powerful vigilantly watch the powerful acutely. Needing to know more about this power group than that group consciously knows about itself; they try to read every signal. The power group, however, has a different priority. As the dominant group they are oblivious to their privilege or impact. The relational skills that the less powerful use to navigate this fraught environment becomes associated with a lack of power!

Behaviour is filtered through schema that determines what we see, what we expect to see and how we interpret it. Stereotyping sees all members of a group as having similar attributes – all women are the same or all men are the same. As we know, neither women are homogeneous as a group nor are men. There are layers of diversity. Men and women who neatly fit a pure stereotype are actually quite rare.

Pervasive is stereotyping women's capacity for leadership. Women executives are thought to be better at "taking care" while men "take charge." Catalyst research shows that a "men-as-default-leaders" mindset derails women's advancement. Examining two forms of leader power: Interpersonal Power – problem-solving, team-building and inspiring; and Position Power – rewarding, supporting and mentoring; the research surprisingly shows men stereotype women as having limited interpersonal power (a strength usually attributed to women) because men see women as less effective at problem-solving.

It becomes a no-win situation – women's care behaviours are less valued and then their interpersonal power is limited due to the perceived need to be more effective at "identifying, analysing and acting decisively" as problem-solvers.

Soft power has some hard realities. The focus on gender differences creates the flawed view that we have to fix the women. The Henry Higgins lament "why can't a woman be more like a man" lingers. If women do not shape their brand and identity they will be judged by prevailing

stereotypical thinking.

Assimilation is an intense process of consistent integration absorbing members of one group into an established, larger community. Assimilation is also a state of change. The majority tries to change the minority into what their society expects. The minority group, wanting to succeed, attempts to be similar to everyone else. But in reality, women who try to fit in by acting like men get labeled 'alpha females' – not fully accepted by the men they work with, while alienating themselves from other women and more so, from their authentic self.

Identity makes an entity distinguishable, definable and recognizable. It makes something either the same or different. Declaring someone as 'other' marks them 'not the same,' 'not me' and 'a stranger.' This practice of comparing ourselves to others and simultaneously distancing ourselves from them re-confirms one's normality and defines and secures one's positive identity. But this practice comes at a price – stigmatizing 'others.' The 'other' is truly an outsider.

Leadership is personal, reflecting who you are. Executive women, as with non-dominant communities, mask their true identity making decisions about which parts of themselves to hide and which parts to reveal. Having to make this choice creates 'schizophrenia' where women deny aspects of their life experience. In many ways, women are not 'at home' in corporations, often feeling as if they are 'in exile.' The emotional cost is high

Individual-achievement dynamics

Leadership enacts persona. It is as much about performance as it is performing. Even when collaboration is cited, the individual, their contribution and attributes are described. It is natural for people to credit their results to their personal talents. Ego and identity encourage us to perceive the action as individual.

Executives with high self-efficacy, sense of self and internal locus of control believe they can succeed, perform well in future tasks and make things happen. These 'movers and shakers' willingly try more different things for greater returns. They see opportunities where others see threats. They feel in control and rarely victims of fate, luck, muses or chance. They believe there is a meritocracy! They regard success as a direct result of their own drive and ability – not external factors. A cliché, but true nonetheless, is that success breeds success.

These factors: self-efficacy, sense of self and locus of control, all influence how women take up their roles, and how they regard and use their power and authority.

The belief that one has the capabilities to execute on future situations is central to self-efficacy. Where self-esteem is a sense of self-worth; self-efficacy relates to perception about the ability to reach a goal. People with self-efficacy truly believe they are in control of their lives and that their actions or decisions shape their lives. It is a critical aspect of motivation, because people regulate the effort they put into a task based on expected outcomes.

Self-efficacy directs what is taken on, how much effort is put in and thoughts about task difficulty. It allows people to act as if they are more capable at what they do than they are. Typically higher for men, it lets them jump in and seize new opportunities. Men think 'can do, will do.'

Women often perceive the need to prove themselves, be better and work harder before being promoted or taking opportunities. Thinking they are not as good as they actually are they hold themselves back, even if qualified. Women rely on past experience rather than believing in their capability to execute future situations. Women think "have done, can do."

Locus of control is significant in achievement motivation. People attribute their performance and destiny to internal or external reinforcers. An internal locus attributes success or failure to personal ability or effort, assuming individual responsibility. An external locus attributes performance to factors over which there is no responsibility, citing the ease of the task or luck. When a man gets promoted he thinks 'I deserve this,' while a woman thinks 'I am lucky.'

Voice and visibility

Identity is reinforced in dialogue and interactions. It is a shifting construct. While “majority males” often do not see the privilege that comes from being male or white; women often feel invisible as individuals and hyper-visible as a group.

Research shows there are gender differences in competitiveness and risk-taking. This does not mean women lack ambition. Less important aspects of power for women are: competing for key assignments, increasing direct reports or working long hours. Women pursue power by producing results, forming collaborative relationships and building alliance networks. The benefits from this approach are significant, but often less visible, take longer and less valued.

C-suite decision-making relies strongly on power, political savvy, conflict management and trust. Women do have a different decision-making style. There is a pragmatic argument for women’s participation in C-suite decision-making. It starts from recognizing that women and men have different needs, perspectives and priorities. Discussing different perspectives does produce more creative solutions.

‘Womenomics’ builds on the rationale that revenue-generation is power. Astute companies are creating marketing programs targeted at the mega-niche of the female market. In corporate hierarchies, power goes to those who generate the most business or run profit-centers – which depend on face-to-face client relationships, ‘rainmaking’ and business development from a referral network. ‘Pink-collar’ roles lack this commercial force.

Masculine jargon and symbols, that are such a large part of communal corporate life, create community. They also raise the hurdle for women being heard and included. There are conversational rituals. Men are more sensitive to power in conversations. Women are more concerned with rapport, speaking in ways that ‘saves face’ for others. Women use a relationship style peppered with tentative words. Men hear doubt. Women use an upward inflection. Men hear uncertainty. Using language of competence, ‘linking and labelling’ actions to organisational goals, can assist women avoid confusion about their confidence and capability.

Positive is the increasing number of men wanting to be included and actively involved in developing the wide range of initiatives needed to bring more women into executive and board roles. Their presence and determination – engaging jointly with women – is fundamental for the diversity agenda to shift to the next level.

Taking up power

People do not “have” power implicitly; rather, it is an applied modus operandi. Power is both strategic and situational. It depends on context – who relates to whom, under what circumstances, relying on influence and compliance of others. It also depends on timing – reading the dynamics in the moment and understanding that power has a lifecycle.

Situational diagnosis gives insight into available options and the prevailing landscape. In adopting Andy Grove’s view that “only the paranoid survive,” you anticipate “strategic inflection points.” We see things as we are, so it is important to reframe. Gathering good intelligence on opportunities and challenges can then show the way for a mutual outcome.

It is critical to have buy-in, resources and backing for effective problem-solving! Negotiating and asking pays. Women’s ‘softer’ negotiating style with lower expectations of what is possible takes its toll. Effective negotiating narrows the gender pay-equity gap. Women executives with the appetite to negotiate have higher performance ratings, motivation and greater control. They *are* viewed as having leadership potential and ability.

Power is conditional and executive-role tenure is becoming shorter. There is a normal life cycle of nurture, growth, peak and decline. Look for new currencies of power before existing ones become a liability. It is also important to read the ‘moment’ to decide whether to act, hold or fold.

Charting centres of power against your networks-map is revealing. Essential is to know who is an ally, who is neutral and who is a resistor. Analysis identifies strategies, frames agendas and anticipates derailment. Trusted advisors offer: new perspectives, pinpoint key issues, build confidence and give alternate dilemma resolution. Self-efficacy and internal locus of control are

affected by learning from strategically selected role-models and mentors.

Exchange and reciprocity are critical for: relationships, influencing, exercising power and negotiating. Know your worth, identify your assets, consider trade-offs and assess what others truly need. You have more choices to offer than you think. You are not without power. You just need to assert it.

Imperative for women rising into senior levels in corporations is to recognize roadblocks that detour the journey. Women must not only understand corporate context and the attached power dynamics, but also explore the webs of power existing around roles. They need to know when and how to use power and what makes them powerless. More so, they must effectively position themselves within the power domain – believing in their power – if they are to achieve their goals in the world of business. Women can own their power, influence and authority.

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