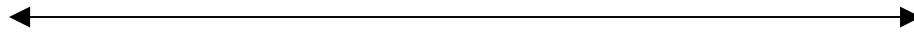


UNPACKING LEADERSHIP:



WHO GETS TO LEAD AND WHY?

A GENERATION OF PROFESSIONAL WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: FINDINGS FROM THREE NEW RESEARCH STUDIES

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PRESENTERS:

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In this seminar, we brought together three speakers, each of whom had recently concluded research on mid- and upper-level professional women. How are they making it (or not) in today's corporate environment? What does "making it" mean to them? What issues and challenges do they face now, 40 years after Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*? How are they meeting those challenges? This document summarizes each of the three presentations and the question-and-answer session following the talks. It concludes with some themes from the small group discussion that followed.

CONNECTIONS AND DISCONNECTIONS: TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF WHY MID-CAREER PROFESSIONAL WOMEN ARE LEAVING LARGE CORPORATIONS

JILL SILVERSTEIN

Silverstein described herself as an organization development/corporate education practitioner in an asset management company. Her interest in the issues around women leaving corporations began 5-10 years ago. She has mostly worked in large organizational systems and has seen a lot of people leaving just when they are hitting their strides. And they generally exited the system altogether, rather than going to another corporate job. As someone responsible for developing the talent of both women and men in her company, Silverstein wanted to know why people were leaving, what were the business implications for a company to lose half its talent at mid-career, and how to retain women in particular.

METHODS

Silverstein spoke to 15 women in depth, all at Fortune 500 or 1000 companies, in such sectors as technology, retail, financial services, and advertising. She asked them, "Tell me about your career journey." The sample was comprised of women between the ages of 40 and 56; they had left their corporate positions between the ages of 37 and 45. These interviews lasted between 1.5-4.0 hours.

Of the 15 women, eight went on to pursue non-business careers, such as joining the clergy. She did more in-depth interviews with the seven who stayed in the business arena either as consultants or small business owners. Her focus in these interviews was to understand the images of success that were motivating them as well as the business and leadership practices they were enacting in their new roles.

FINDINGS

In their early work, her informants had both good and bad experiences. Everyone was willing to do what was needed to do to make a name for themselves. In their second decade of work, they began to feel they had something to contribute that wasn't appreciated. All assumed they would continue to grow and develop, but instead experienced disconnection—from work, from other people, from themselves, and from who they really were. These women had used team-building and mutual empowerment to get work done, but while the product might have been rewarded, how the work got done was disappeared or seen as deviant. In addition, they felt a disconnection from others. They saw themselves as the ones who established reconnections, but sometimes they found they couldn't reconnect at all.

Silverstein used the work of Jean Baker Miller and Irene Stiver to understand mutuality in work. Her informants felt they started playing a role—who should I be so I can be heard? One woman described how she went to colleagues and asked this question, but found the experience dissatisfying because she got different answers. She found she was disconnected from herself.

Another women related that the time she spent covering up who she was, was time that should have gone to the project. She felt a real disconnect from work. She was good at bringing groups together and her product was lauded, but not the process. This didn't help her career; she was not tagged as special.

These women's exits came from readiness. They felt they had the confidence, skills, and experience to do things in a different way with better results. Generally, they were delighted with their newfound work, and all reported being more successful financially in their new roles as well. Silverstein concluded by summarizing her key finding: that women left because they felt a disconnection from meaningful work, from others, and from themselves. She was surprised to find such a similarity of experience.

INSIDE WOMEN'S POWER: LEARNING FROM LEADERS

LAURIE SLAVITT

Slavitt placed her remarks in the context of the aftermath of the September 11th attacks. She remarked how leadership is magnified in moments of crisis. Who is leading and who is not? As a result, she decided to present some material that is not included in her foundation's report on the research she conducted.

The Winds of Change Foundation's mission is to advance women in leadership in order to change the voice of leadership in the United States today; to bring women to the table to involve them in shaping the national agenda.

METHODS

The Foundation's research project involved interviewed 60 women in a range of disciplines—law, medicine, politics, the arts, the non-profit sector, the media, and the sciences—over a period of two years. Many of these women were very high profile. They ranged from 32-70 years old. They were asked: What has allowed you to succeed? What hindered you? How do you use your power effectively? The interviewers were interested in getting definitions of such terms as leadership, success, and leadership style.

They also wanted to elicit substantive responses, rather than getting pat answers. They found they were met with great enthusiasm by their informants and were successful in getting behind the public face. Slavitt related the following story as an example: She tried to be very prepared before her interviews, in terms of what her interviewees were like. In one case, she heard that the informant vacuumed when she was nervous. During the interview, Slavitt found the informant somewhat difficult and reserved. She rose as if to leave, telling the informant that she had to go do some vacuuming. The surprised informant laughed and after that the interview went much better.

FINDINGS

The early interviews fundamentally changed the way the interviewers approached their work. They had originally thought that the women in their interview pool were the exceptions. Instead, they came to realize that the women's experiences were the rule. These women have done extraordinary things, but many other women could do these things as well.

The Foundation found seven common themes among interviewees:

1. These women worked harder than most people. One woman remarked that we need to take power, it won't be handed to us.
2. These women had the courage to be themselves. Maya Angelou said that one develops courage in little gestures and experiments. We must build up our muscles.
3. They held themselves accountable and knew when it was appropriate to hold others accountable.

4. They were eternally optimistic. They focused on goals and on what needed to get done rather than obstacles.
5. The informants looked for opportunities. They attributed their success to opportunity: “I’m not a leader, but I’ve had the opportunity to lead.”
6. They took risks: “If you’re not standing on the edge, you’re taking up too much space.”
7. These women were willing to take responsibility for others.

AT THE CROSSROADS

MARION RUDERMAN

Among their other programs, the Center for Creative Leadership offers executive education programs for women, and the research Ruderman described was tied to that program. *Breaking the Glass Ceiling* (Morrison, White, and Van Velsor, 1987) was written by staff of the Center for Creative Leadership. At that time, the assumption was that women needed to fit into the male model, and so the book was significant because it described the “narrow band” that women must operate within in order to fit expectations. Now, however, women don’t want to just fit in, so the Center made a decision to do another project on more current issues facing women in management. How do women make their choices in life?

METHODS

The project involved 61 women. All had gone through a five-day program on leadership development at the Center. As part of the project they filled out a variety of diagnostic instruments, gathered 360-degree feedback, engaged in simulations, etc.; they also were taught some content about leadership. In general, these women were seen as primed for development. The research followed these 61 women for a year, conducting one interview just after the program, one after six months, and the final interview at the end of a year.

FINDINGS

From their research, the Center for Creative Leadership identified five themes: authenticity; feeling whole and complete; having agency; making connections; and gaining self-clarity.

1. Authenticity

Authenticity refers to a desire to have a healthy alignment between one’s inner values and outer behavior. After September 11th, it seems even more important. Some women had some kind of un-lived dream and were sorry they hadn’t followed it. For others, they liked their job, but something had gone awry and they felt disconnected from their work. Others were tired of dealing with a male environment. Many of these women were trying to gain more authenticity by examining their choices and taking small steps.

2. Feeling whole and complete

This refers to a sense that one's different selves are integrated together. For some women, they had nothing in their lives but work. They wanted something else. Some understood work/family issues as how to deal with competing identities. They wanted to be both the perfect mother and the perfect manager. Over the course of the year, these women worked on these issues. They learned skills from their work and applied those to their personal and family lives and also did the reverse.

In a second study, the researchers looked at cross-fertilization of skills from home and family. They found the degree to which women were involved in multiple roles was positively related to their performance at work. They also found and catalogued a number of skills and abilities women believe they have learned from their multiple roles that enhance their work effectiveness.

3. Having agency

The informants wanted to control their destinies, a feeling that is more associated with men. This became an issue in three ways. First, these women felt that having authority was tough because they had not been socialized into it. Second, it was a struggle to find the right amount of agency since people don't give women allowance for agency. Women strove to find the right balance between being more and less aggressive. Third, if they felt stuck in a situation, they focused on their goals and took risks.

4. Making connections

The informants wanted to feel attached to others. They struggled with interactions in two ways. First, some were the only women in their environment. They missed having a reference point or a touchstone. Second, some had no intimacy in their lives, lacking close friends or family. After the executive education program, some put new emphasis on relationships by becoming mentors or getting involved in community activities.

5. Gaining self-clarity

These women wanted to understand themselves in the context of their world. They asked, "When people respond to me, is it me or is it the context?"

The themes did intertwine to some extent, and some became more or less important depending on life stage. For young women (between the ages of 29 and 33), agency was salient. Many of those between 34 and 40 were emphasizing wholeness and connection. Women between 40 and 45 continued the focus on connection, but took a greater interest in authenticity than they had previously. Those in the 46-50 range had a renewed interest in agency; they felt they had just a few years to make their mark. Finally, the oldest informants spoke of their search for authenticity and for self-clarity.

QUESTION AND ANSWER

Seminar participants asked the following questions of the three presenters:

1. What was the source of the disconnection experienced by women in the State Street study? Did their organizations recognize the problem?

Silverstein: No, the organizations didn't see the problem and that is why the women left. The disconnection came from the sense that everything was about individual success, not interdependent success. As a team leader, I am supposed to take credit for the whole project. All the women I interviewed were successful in their later domains. All were making more than double what they made in their corporate life. Many were working with the same clients or working with their former organizations as clients.

2. It seems like women who stayed and those who left were having a similar experience of disconnection and the search for authenticity. Why did some women leave? Why did some stay?

Ruderman: Not all our people were stayers. Some had changed their work within the company; others fixed their relationships and were able to feel more connected again.

Slavitt: Their paths were very varied. Some were in corporate life but had done ten other things before they got there. Their paths were not linear. Change was important. Passion for work was the motivating force. Their non-linear path added to the richness of the job. It gives women more flexibility.

3. I was thinking about my own personal issues when I heard you talk. Did the studies help each of you think about your own issues?

Slavitt: Yes, I changed my life. I had been a divorce lawyer and was a consultant to the Winds of Change Foundation. I was helping with the interviews. I was asked if I would consider being Executive Director and I said yes.

Silverstein: I know I will make a change, but I'm not sure what change to make.

Ruderman: I turned down an opportunity to move higher in the company because I would have had to work full-time and I didn't want to. I learned from the women that if you do something that feels inconsistent, that's a hard situation.

4. For your studies, what was your definition of leadership? How do leaders evolve? Is it just passion? Or do people see themselves as leaders? Or does it happen by default?

Slavitt: People took different paths to leadership and definitions varied. There was no one "women's leadership style."

5. The finding that having multiple roles leads to higher performance is very important data. We're losing our highest performers when we lose women who want to integrate work and personal life and are pressured to make work their only priority.

Slavitt: Our foundation is trying to be supportive of people attending to home life.

Participant: But since the leaders you interviewed worked very, very hard, how do they have full lives?

Slavitt: Their paths were not linear. For older women, there were times in their lives when they raised their children. Working hard doesn't have to mean 24/7. Someone can work hard half-time.

6. Did you look at the organizations these women worked in and their degrees of supportiveness?

Slavitt: We didn't look at the organizations. We questioned that decision later.

7. The presentations were about leadership at the individual level. But leadership for what? Leading for change? How do women think about leading for something that's beyond just careerist?

Silverstein: Women who went into the clergy wanted to make a difference in a bigger way. But no one is trying to change corporations, trying to change the system. If we get out, then we're not in the inner circle when big decisions get made. For instance, look who is making the decisions post-September 11th.

Slavitt: Our leaders were not all corporate. For example, we interviewed a leading breast cancer researcher. So leadership for her meant leadership for a cure.

Ruderman: We had women who pushed back on the organization; this was part of their authenticity.

8. Did these women aspire to be leaders?

Slavitt: Some strove for leadership. Others didn't think of themselves as leaders, for example, women in the media.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

After the seminar, a small group continued the conversation with the speakers. Some themes of the discussion are outlined below.

1. THE LANGUAGE OF POWER

In the Winds of Change study, the interviewers asked about power: Do the women have power, and do they use it effectively? Many of those interviewed didn't like that word. They preferred "responsibility" or "influence". The women were saying that they define power differently, not in terms of personal power, but more in terms of social power. Stereotypically masculine language associated with power has narrowed the concept of power itself. So the report says we need to change the language about power.

Risk was another term of contention. Some women said that they hated risk; others loved it. For some, taking risks means irresponsibility. Words have different meanings if they are defined from a relational perspective. Not just risk, but risk for whom?

How do leaders frame issues so that we take responsibility for what we've done? Do we frame things as understanding that we have control over them?

2. TRAINING LEADERS

Ruderman described how the Center for Creative Leadership's training program has changed. They had always talked about authenticity, but now there is a greater focus on it. For example, they have women do value sorts. They also emphasize the theme of agency, what they call "influencing behavior" (instead of influencing politics)—how to evaluate alliances and their networks. They've started a networking group and include more content, making it more of a leadership development workshop than a retreat. But perhaps the Center shouldn't be training just women: they should think of society as a whole and the men who are the gatekeepers.

Silverstein related that her corporation does a year-long leadership program for both women and men. They have better results with younger leaders.

3. YOUNG WOMEN

Slavitt noted that the Winds of Change Foundation found different issues with their younger interviewees. These women saw themselves as the "we" generation: "We need to have men in the equation." They didn't want to hear about "women's" leadership. They also said they wanted to be able to stay home and raise children and not be judged for it. They didn't say, "We want companies to support work/family balance." All of these women were very involved in their careers. But perhaps this is positive—they can ask for balance instead of feeling that leaving for a time would mean dropping out

4. GENDER STEREOTYPES AND EVALUATION AS LEADERS

Experimental studies show large gender differences in how women are seen as leaders. But real life studies looking at 360-degree feedback indicate that people do not rate women and men differently. One explanation is that in the lab studies, people are thinking about stereotypes, not real people. When you're dealing with people you know, stereotypes don't come into play.

How can we evaluate leadership as a shared function, as the property of a group rather than an individual? Mary Parker Follett said this long ago. Why don't these models take hold?

How do we create 360-degree feedback that includes invisible work, since it is so hard to name and articulate? At one organization, a group created specific measures of invisible work, but then the management team removed them. This was a teachable moment: the management team, when confronted, understood what they had done. They put the language back in.

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