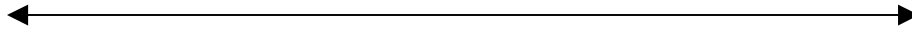


UNPACKING LEADERSHIP:



WHO GETS TO LEAD AND WHY?

VOICES FROM THE FIELD: LEADERSHIP FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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Shamillah Wilson, Young Women and Leadership Program Manager, Association for Women's Rights in Development School

We had two speakers, both affiliated with the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID). We asked both to talk about their experiences as leaders for social change and suggested some questions that they could address:

- Without being humble, tell us what you value most about yourself as a leader? Do you have a leadership "style"? What is it? How is it related to your vision of social change?
- Tell us about a time when you felt at your best or most alive as a leader? What were the circumstances? How is this situation related to leadership for social change?
- How does your organization approach developing leadership among its staff or affiliates or members? How is this process related to your vision of social change?

After the two speakers had presented, small groups met, followed by a full group discussion.

LUCÍA RAYAS

Rayas began by noting that she had never thought about her leadership or leadership in general, and was pleased to have had the opportunity to reflect on it. She noted two defining life experiences that have shaped her approach to leadership:

1. Being involved in the Central American revolutions of the 1970s and 1980s: Rayas worked with a number of organizations including groups of mothers of the disappeared in El Salvador and Nicaragua.

2. Being involved in the pro-choice community worldwide: This has shaped how Rayas sees change since reproductive rights work—especially in a country that is largely Roman Catholic—requires cultural change, which takes decades. This long-term perspective has influenced how Rayas thinks about the work of leadership.

Rayas listed five components of leadership style, described below: fostering empowerment (most important), clarity of vision, building a team, the ability to empathize and place oneself in a subordinate position, and handling stress well.

FOSTERING EMPOWERMENT

To do this, one has to build commitment, and that happens through consciousness-raising. It is a slow process. Rayas delegates a lot of tasks, while providing a clear context and direction. She works with many people over and over in order to build commitment. She also noted her ability to listen, citing her experience working from a pro-choice position in the very Catholic countries of Latin America. Since the pro-choice position is at odds with the region's culture and history, she has to really listen to questions and arguments from the other side.

CLARITY OF VISION

Learning and communication lead to analysis and synthesis, which in turn lead to clarity of vision. Clarity of vision needs to be built with others, including people from other groups and organizations. For that reason, never withhold information from other groups; instead, work with them.

BUILDING A TEAM/PLACING ONESELF IN SUBORDINATE POSITION

Building a team requires a commonality of interests, which means one has to have the capacity to put oneself in the subordinate position to truly understand that perspective. This is not easy, but if you do not do it, learning does not accrue.

Rayas said her approach is best described using the Italian term *affidamento*. The term is based on the notion that people and groups have different skills and that all are important and interdependent. In the 1960s, feminists thought of women as an interchangeable mass, but now we realize not everyone is good at everything. *Affidamento* refers to the capacity to recognize the leadership and particular contributions of others, rather than feeling competitive. For example, it might mean allowing someone else to take the limelight in a certain area and doing everything possible to support that person, rather than thinking we all need to share the limelight. It is about negotiating spaces, and belief and trust in others. It is a feminism of differences.

HANDLING STRESS WELL

This is an important part of leadership. One has to manage one's negative feelings and hold back hostilities when they arise. The pro-life movement is very powerful in Latin America, and it is difficult not to answer their base arguments with base arguments of one's own. It is important to establish one's limits.

Overall, Rayas's leadership style is related to her vision of social change. Because she looks for deep, cultural change, she needs to work with people who are committed and empowered. That happens through a respectful, inclusive style. Making a change, even a small change, can make a huge difference because people then experience having power and control.

SHAMILLAH WILSON

Wilson began by describing how leadership is conceptualized by the young women in her program: the ability to accomplish one's goals and make decisions within one's own realm; the harnessing of individual and collective potential to challenge current realities.

When you talk about leadership, Wilson said, you should start with the personal. She noted that she is from South Africa, a country with a specific experience of oppression. Her leadership is influenced by how she is classified by others in terms of race, gender, age, and religion. She sees herself as someone who has the potential to shape what society will look like.

Leadership is a process of lifelong learning. Listening is integral, as is acknowledging that one's own activism does not happen in isolation from other efforts. Be reflective: when you go into a particular context, you cannot decide for others how to change. Power is not zero sum. If shared, it is multiplied. Sharing knowledge, skills, and ideas is both a leadership strategy and comprises the process of leadership development.

Participation and consultation are important parts of leadership. Wilson said that she feels most alive as a leader when she has engaged in broad, consultative processes that bring in many voices. But even small successes make her feel good, as when young women on her e-mail listserv speak up after being quiet on the list for some months.

Wilson then spoke about how her organization, AWID, does leadership development. The organization's motto is Connect, Inform, and Mobilize. Its mission is to foster connections among its members, who are students, activists, and practitioners. The organization sees itself as an information or resource provider that will mobilize people to action.

The young women's leadership program is meant to develop a generation of new leaders who listen to each other. It provides a space and opportunity for young women to talk about their vision of social change and what skills are required, and then to facilitate their getting these skills. The program uses an e-mail listserv, e-mail primers, and an e-based membership program. People have been talking about leadership issues for a long time, and AWID's program is designed to provide a critique of conventional wisdom about leadership from a young women's perspective.

The group has identified a weakness: "We are 600 people, but who are we really?" So, they have begun creating a regional network with a leadership board of young women to run the program. These young leaders are in effect a case study about current understandings of leadership.

The six staff of AWID also try to model leadership for social change. They aim for participation and engagement from all staff and promote personal and professional development.

SUMMARY OF GROUP DISCUSSIONS

The small groups were asked to address two questions:

1. What are your thoughts about leadership for social change? How is it similar to or different from other forms of leadership?
2. What role do you think organizations should play in developing leaders for social change?

The full group discussion was wide-ranging. Comments grouped below by several key themes.

CONCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP

Both speakers were very tuned into the idea of who the other is and giving that person a voice, which is much more exciting than just focusing on task.

Leaders have to have passion. Hopefully organizations can help people develop passion. When you have passion, people want to follow.

The standard literature on leadership is very instrumental. To create organizational change, you have to drive the vision, and there are six rules that you have to follow, 1-2-3. That is very different from the speakers' idea of "making space." Leadership is about learning, inquiry; and understanding that you alone do not have the answers. Leadership does not mean, "I know." It is about learning, revision, and change.

SOCIAL CHANGE ORGANIZATIONS

Many organizations want to create internal organizational structures that reflect their social change agenda. How do we do that? We are so used to hierarchical models—how do we resist them?

Social change organizations are very inclusive when it comes to marginalized populations, but less so with their donors. They are more likely to use top-down methods to "educate" their donors about the organization's mission. Why do we use different strategies with the marginalized and with donors (the privileged)?

As one participant stated, "When I worked for a non-profit, I could be out there as an advocate. I was open and passionate about change. I could own the change agenda because it was more tied to the mission of the organization. When I worked for a corporation, in a social change position, I had to influence more than advocate. I could not show passion or feelings. If it looked like my agenda, then it was a negative. It had to be about the business. My work was more behind-the-scenes."

Change in organizations is different from social change. In organizations, you can use incentives such as pay or promotion to motivate. In social movements, especially with marginalized groups, it is more difficult to use these standard levers. In fact, in social change organizations, people might be offended by the use of traditional incentives.

Charismatic leaders can present a vision to the public, but they may not be good at empowering or community building. They may not be good at relational work. How do we as women feel about that? Do we expect all women to be the same and have the same “feminine” attributes? Can we adopt an *affidamento* approach and recognize the need for all kinds of leaders in social movements?

There are many books out now about underground competition and conflict among women. How can we think about this in more complex ways than these books imply? Are we as women comfortable accepting—or giving—others’ authority? To make *affidamento* work, you have to donate your energy to someone else. It is not just “you do your thing, and I’ll do mine.” You need reciprocity and mutuality.

For *affidamento*, you have to have faith and trust. You must believe that you will reap your investment in due time, though it may take 20 years.

It is not possible to understand relations between women without recognizing the larger societal factors influencing them. Women may be competitive because of their structural environment, e.g., the fact that there are not enough resources.

Perhaps because feminism rejects hierarchy, we as women do not want to authorize people to do what they need to do. We may think we are justified in rejecting hierarchy, but perhaps the issue is that we are failing to make a distinction between it and the legitimate granting of authority to do a task or perform a role. The result is that a lot of hostility may be directed at women leaders even from (or perhaps especially from) other women. On the other hand, if you as a leader begin to accept the conventional attributes of hierarchy and cannot, for example, subordinate yourself or practice *affidamento*, then perhaps you attract that hostility.

Women with positional power will say, “I need to empower other people.” But “empowerment” is a very top-down concept. Subordinates, in social change organizations in particular, who are not there for the money or career potential may resent efforts to “empower” or “develop” them, because they feel they already have a number of important gifts to contribute.

There is a tension between women as leaders. As leaders, our standards are too high for each other. Some women are charismatic; others are more collaborative. In some organizations, women who are charismatic are judged. That’s handicapping. Let’s stop being so judgmental of differences. Why can’t we say, “She’s good at certain things, but not everything”?

Because women often hear the message that they are not competent and cannot be independent, they think they need to do it all. They may have trouble allowing others to help or to shine.

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