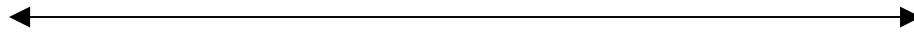


UNPACKING LEADERSHIP:



WHO GETS TO LEAD AND WHY?

WHO DO WE FOLLOW AND WHY?

February 25, 2002

PRESENTERS: Dr. Patricia Romney, President and Founder of Romney Associates, therapist, organizational consultant, executive coach, and professor of psychology

Dr. Kathy Kram, Professor of Organizational Behavior, Boston University

Dr. Marion McCollom Hampton, Southwind Associates, organizational consultant, educator, and lecturer.

This seminar explored how followers' perceptions of leaders both enable and constrain leaders and leadership. It focused particularly on perceptions of women leaders, both white and of color. Dr. Romney spoke about her experiences coaching women of color in management positions in organizations. Dr. Kram and Dr. Hampton presented their theory about the particular challenges that women leaders face, illustrating the talk with examples given by Dr. Romney.

PATRICIA ROMNEY

Dr. Romney began by describing executive coaching, differentiating it from psychotherapy, and then gave three different cases of women she has worked with, all black women in their 30's.

Psychotherapy deals with dysfunctional emotional or behavioral problems. Coaching moves an already functional person towards increased functioning. Coaching builds a client's competence, confidence, and commitment. Coaching is also a way to increase a person's leadership skills and potential.

CASE 1

Zarina, a pseudonym, was an African-American woman with an associate's degree. She came to Dr. Romney for therapy, but after an assessment indicating that Zarina was very high-functioning but simply had "too much on her plate," Dr. Romney suggested she act as a coach rather than therapist. They looked at how Zarina spent her time and clarified her values for her life. Their mutual

assessment indicated that while Zarina valued family, she spent 90% of her time at work or in community service. They spent little time on leadership issues, because Zarina already was a leader: She had started two community programs and was already widely known in her community.

CASE 2

This woman, left unnamed, was an African-American manager hired as part of a diversity initiative that Dr. Romney was running at a public sector agency. Her hire was considered one of the successes of the diversity program because she was the first black manager in her unit. One goal of the diversity program was to provide ongoing support as people were hired, so the woman's supervisor offered Dr. Romney's services to her. However, the woman was distressed and resistant. She felt the offer made a statement about her perceived inadequacy. She did not know that her supervisor was also being coached regularly.

Dr. Romney tried to work with her and supported her concerns, but ultimately wasn't able to develop a working relationship with her. The woman worked at the agency for several years, but ultimately left and brought suit. She had a history of difficult relationships at work. Dr. Romney's learning from this case is that an unwilling client is a contraindication to coaching. This case also indicates how the organizational environment affects coaching and whether it can be successful.

CASE 3

Lily was a mid-level, Jamaican manager in the same public agency. She had an air of warmth and self-assuredness—even, according to Dr. Romney, a touch of arrogance. Lily approached Dr. Romney for assistance when she received a job review (from her white supervisor) with which she was unsatisfied—she had received an “admirable,” the second highest rating, rather than a “notable.” Lily believed that race was a factor in this review.

Dr. Romney worked with Lily on her goal-setting. Ultimately, they developed the goal that she would perform in a way that would garner her the marks she deserved. Lily met with her manager to get the concrete skills and behaviors that were considered “notable.” The manager was not able to be very specific about what was required. Dr. Romney found that much of her coaching time with Lily was spent discussing the manager's problems, so she worked to get Lily to look at her own issues. Lily was very resistant to thinking about her own actions. While she did begin to look at her own behavior, she continued to believe that the organization was racist and that she'd never have the growth in the organization that she deserved.

Ultimately, Dr. Romney feels she and Lily had a lot of success. Lily is still at the agency and has developed a better relationship with her manager. She has developed relationships with other black women managers in the organization, through Dr. Romney's intervention, and has seen that many of them have also been successful.

MARION MCCOLLOM HAMPTON

Dr. Hampton summarized the first part of her article with Dr. Kram, “When Women Lead: The Visibility-Vulnerability Spiral” [in the book *The Psychodynamics of Leadership*, E.B. Klein, F. Gabelnick,

and P. Herr (Eds.), Psychosocial Press, 1998]. The article is based on organizational and psychodynamic theory.

Women leaders are visible because they are in the minority, which in and of itself creates potentially difficult dynamics. They are also targets of others' projected feelings of vulnerability, because they are seen as physically and emotionally vulnerable. Further, women are genuinely vulnerable in the workplace. Therefore, women are targeted for vulnerability by both women and men. Their visibility adds to this dynamic by making them available for projection of others.

Ultimately, women leaders are watched very carefully. Will they stumble? Are they tough? Are they acting in sex-role appropriate ways? They are scrutinized intensely, both personally and in their role, which gives them little margin for error. But it is difficult to grow into leadership roles without making mistakes, which makes women genuinely vulnerable at work.

Three specific dynamics, described below, undermine women leaders.

ROLE OVERLOAD

When you are the only representative of a particular identity group, people will make a lot of demands on you. You will be asked for help and advice from people within your group, and you will be asked to take on formal roles, such as sitting on committees, in order to create more diversity. Dr. Hampton suggested Zarina may have been suffering from role overload.

CLOSE SCRUTINY OF LEADERSHIP STYLE

Women's leadership appears to generate discomfort regardless of what style is chosen. For example, women need to be both tough *and* sex-role appropriate, which is a double bind. It is very difficult to satisfy the competing demands.

STRAINED RELATIONSHIPS

As women assume leadership roles, historically supportive relationships become strained. Relationships with mentors, peers, and junior colleagues are all affected. Mentors, especially male mentors, are uncomfortable as their protégés outgrow the need for coaching and protection, and enact different styles. Peers also appear uncomfortable with women who are now more independent and outspoken. Junior colleagues often become disappointed when women assume leadership roles, as junior colleagues feel that these new leaders are less accessible because of their additional responsibilities.

KATHY KRAM

Dr. Kram continued the summary of the article. She outlined three responses, described below, to the Visibility-Vulnerability Spiral.

1. INTERNALIZING

Women who have this response assume that they are totally responsible for what is happening. They blame themselves for the criticism they receive, and for their own and others' anxiety. This can lead to loss of self-esteem and confidence, and the need to conform to others' standards. This means the organization loses a leader, a valuable resource. Dr. Kram suggested that Zarina, described by Dr. Romney, may have had this response.

2. EXTERNALIZING

This response shifts blame outside the self, looking for forces in the system that are responsible for criticism or attack. Any criticism will be viewed as indicative of others' limitations rather than one's own. This response helps maintain self-esteem, but limits learning. Dr. Kram suggested that Lily started out with this response, and that Dr. Romney's work seemed to help Lily develop a more complex view of the situation.

3. INTEGRATING

In this response, vulnerability becomes a source of strength, as it can be leveraged for learning about oneself, others, and the system one is trying to lead. This response takes in the complexity of situations. Those who enact this response can empathize with others, empower others to voice their concerns, and develop insight from criticism.

DISCUSSION

Discussion was wide-ranging, but most of the time was spent on how to deal with these issues systemically. There was also some discussion of how these dynamics affect white women and women of color differently, the role of management education, "real" vs. "projected" vulnerability, and individual-level responses.

ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC ISSUES

While the Visibility-Vulnerability Spiral argument provides some ways that individuals can respond, systemic dynamics broaden the range of responses.

The question was raised as to whether it is possible to change established systems in organizations or whether women should "jump ship" and start their own organizations. Some participants expressed that women should leave. They felt that there are some organizations where an integrating response would not work and might even put women at risk, since this response does require an openness to learning, which then implies some vulnerability. Others felt it was worth testing an integrating response. But some countered that though an individual might be able to make an integrating response work for herself, she might not be able to use it to intervene in the system.

Some participants noted the need for women to build alliances to counter "the system." Importantly, these alliances can be with women in other organizations and/or other systems.

Coaching is often viewed as an intervention to align people with a system. However, coaching could be seen as coaching into powerlessness if the coach does not use a systemic frame. Could coaching be reconceptualized in more liberating terms? Organizations appear to be moving away from organization development interventions, which do address system change, to coaching, which is more about individual change and alignment. This move raises the following questions: Can coaching work with both supervisor and supervisee? Can coaching report back to the system about the individual issues that are related to systemic factors? The point was raised that some 360 degree coaching programs do feed back to the larger system.

The Visibility-Vulnerability Spiral assumes that projections are unconscious. How does one intervene when dealing with largely unconscious issues? How do we get people to experience largely unconscious dynamics? One can try to name them in the moment, but it can be difficult to know what is happening, much less name it. The Problematic Moment Approach presumes that reflection must come later. Family systems therapy tries to get families to create a story of how an individual is a carrier of a family's tradition, how individuals get scapegoated. Is there a way to do this in organizations?

RESPONSES OF WHITE WOMEN AND WOMEN OF COLOR

Dr. Romney suggested that white women, socialized more to be "good girls," may be more likely to internalize. Black women, who have had to develop a strong, protective veneer, may be more likely to externalize. Some members of the audience disagreed, suggesting that all women internalize and don't tend to think in terms of systemic dynamics. Black women may have a veneer, but underneath, have a similar response as white women.

Others thought that women of color may learn earlier to see themselves as members of groups, and so are more likely to address systemic issues like racism and more likely to externalize. It is also likely that one's response (of internalizing or externalizing) is dependent on context.

We need to tease out the specific vulnerabilities projected onto different groupings of women, e.g., Latinas, Asians, African-Americans. We have some data on the different images of black women, but there is much more to be done. Perhaps these images may be both sources of strength and of vulnerability; many of these projections have multiple textures. And what about black men or Latinos? Certainly they are subject to unconscious projections, but we need to know much more.

For women of color, the Visibility-Vulnerability Spiral might be heightened because of the stigma of affirmative action: people of color are presumed to be less competent because it is assumed that they have to meet lower standards to be hired or promoted. While this notion is incorrect, people of color will then be subject to even greater projections of vulnerability.

THE ROLE OF MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

Management schools have very masculinist assumptions about values and achievement. There is resistance to acknowledging the pressure on women who have primary responsibility for family in addition to their work outside the home. The connections between work and family are not legitimated. Further, there is little recognition that most men do not equally share these same pressures.

On the other hand, women students are resistant to systemic theories like the Visibility-Vulnerability Spiral, because they believe that it makes them vulnerable. They want to believe they have control.

REAL VS. PROJECTED VULNERABILITIES

What is “real” vulnerability? Women’s experience is an example of what all leaders experience, but it is stronger with women. This is a way to use diversity to learn more generally: explore the experiences of people outside the norm and what they teach us about people within the norm. If we pay attention to how some dynamics get amplified by people in different groups, then we can learn. Women’s experience can thus be used as a resource for organizational learning, rather than simply for women’s learning.

But how do we create the psychological safety to do this? Perhaps it is easier for a man to lead a group to address these projections for all the reasons laid out in the Visibility-Vulnerability argument.

Perhaps “real” vulnerability is the vulnerability of white men. “Projected” vulnerability is what is above and beyond what they have. Rudolph Giuliani (former Mayor of New York) was applauded after September 11 for projecting confidence and showing emotion at the same time. Jane Swift (Governor of Massachusetts), on the other hand, was criticized for her evenhanded responses regarding what the state could and could not do to ensure safety.

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL RESPONSES

While most of the conversation was about systemic issues, there were some suggestions for individuals dealing with the Visibility-Vulnerability Spiral:

- Know yourself, your capacities, and your own leadership style.
- At the same time, know what is happening in the group and how people are forced into certain roles. Awareness of group dynamics can be liberating.
- Women who are most adaptable to change will be most successful.
- Women will be better leaders if they consult with staff and build decisions from the ground up.

The Center for Gender in Organizations (CGO) is an international resource for innovative ideas and practice in the field of gender, work, and organizations. Recognizing the pervasive role of work organizations in society and our individual lives, CGO seeks to advance learning and support organizations to strengthen both gender equity and organizational effectiveness. In our approach, we understand that gender works simultaneously with race, class, ethnicity, age and sexual identity in shaping organizational systems, cultures, and practices as well as individuals’ identities and experiences at work. We work at the intersection of research and practice and we pursue our mission through action learning, consultation, research, education, convening, and information dissemination.

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