## A Radical Perspective on Power, Gender and Organizational Change

### Power and Gender Equity

Why is gender equity in the workplace so difficult to achieve? For years, organizations have been trying to understand why, in economic systems that profess meritocracy, women are underrepresented in positions of power and leadership. As change agents, many of us have taken on the task of helping organizations understand the sources of gender inequity and the systems of power that hold these inequities in place. Although questions of power (e.g.; who has it? how is it exercised? how can it be shared?) are implicit in many of these initiatives, we believe that traditional ways of thinking about power are inadequate to the task of understanding and intervening in the deeply-rooted gender dynamics at play in the workplace. For this task we need a more radical perspective on power, one that moves beyond individual agency and begins to examine the deep structures in organizations that shape the distribution of power and affect gender equity.

### Dimensions of Power

Stephen Lukes offers a useful framework delineating three dimensions of power.[1] This framework is helpful in thinking about gender-related organizational change efforts because it includes individual as well as systemic dimensions of power. Lukes notes that traditional views focus on what he calls the first dimension of power, or the ability of individual A to get individual B to do something B might not otherwise do. This perspective emphasizes individual agency and the ability to make and enforce decisions. A second, and more sophisticated, concept of power looks at other, more subtle dimensions of the decision-making process: the power to control the agenda and determine what decisions are open to debate and what issues are considered legitimate topics worthy of discussion. The third, and most subtle, dimension of power is something Lukes calls the "unobtrusive exercise of power." He states, "Is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, their cognition, their preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things either because they see or imagine no alternative to it or they see it as so natural and unchangeable and they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial?"[1]

The third dimension of power differs from the other two in that it highlights both sides of the exercise of power and raises issues of compliance and resistance. When power is being exercised in this unobtrusive, systemic manner, agency is spread throughout the system. Both those who do and those who do *not* benefit from the status quo are active agents in maintaining it. The absence of conflict or resistance is not an indication that no problem exists. Indeed, consensus and the absence of resistance may be precisely the signal that power is being exercised in its most potent and insidious form. The exercise of power is unobtrusive because it lies not within a few powerful individuals but within the deep structures of the system itself. It is embedded in the way people understand the world and their role within it. Those whose best interests are not being served by the status quo suffer from what Lukes calls "false consciousness" when they either do not recognize inequity or are unable to envision any alternative to it.

### Practical Implications

What are the practical implications of this framework for thinking about gender equity in organizations? In our work with organizations, we have found that equity initiatives that focus on the first two dimensions of power, while important, do little to address the unobtrusive ways that gender inequity is sustained and reproduced in organizations. Change initiatives focused on the first two dimensions of power, for example, would focus on addressing the concerns of those who are openly questioning the status quo. Those raising the issue of equity are clearly aware that power is being exercised in a way that does not further their best interests. Indeed, their dissatisfaction with the status quo is presumably the reason a change initiative was begun and the presenting problem is probably clear. It may be an overt act of discrimination, such as pay ineq-

uity, or something less obvious, like the absence of a recruiting process to ensure an adequate number of women in the applicant pool. But whatever the presenting problem, change agents can identify the issue and possible solutions simply by asking women about inequitable treatment. While important, we argue that if change initiatives only address these more overt examples of power inequities, they will be unable to create the kind of changes that lead to genuine and lasting gender equity within organizations. To cultivate real gender equity in organizations, change agents need to focus on the third dimension of power, a situation where people may not be advocating change or may even be unwilling to associate themselves with an initiative concerned with "women's issues."

For example, women clustered in full or part-time positions with little power or influence rarely think of themselves as being in a "pink ghetto," clustered in sex-typed jobs at the bottom of the hierarchy. The low salary and lack of career mobility in these positions are often defined – by the organization as well as by the women themselves – as a trade-off women choose in order to have work/family flexibility. This individual level explanation diverts attention from less obvious, systemic forces that may be contributing to the situation. By internalizing this explanation, women become unwitting agents of the larger processes that keep these conditions in place. They may be content or even grateful for the situation and question the wisdom of changing something that appears to be in their best interest. If they remain unaware of the systemic factors that contribute to pay inequities or the systemically uneven distribution of career opportunities, they are unable to resist them. More importantly, they are unable to participate in defining an alternative.

If we look at this situation from the perspective of Lukes' third dimension

of power, it is clear that an intervention to achieve greater gender equity cannot simply ask women for examples of inequitable treatment. Instead, it requires a consciousness raising process in which the notion of "best interest" is surfaced and made an object of discussion. This would raise questions such as, "Whose best interest is being served by the fact that part-time positions have little career mobility? Could this be changed in a way that would benefit women *and* the organization?"

Lukes maintains that once individuals are freed from what he calls "false consciousness" and are able to determine their "real interests," they will become active agents in resisting the status quo and in creating alternatives. However, Lukes does not address the practical dilemma this raises: Who determines which interests are "false" and which are "real?" Resisting the status quo can take many forms, some of which may be at odds with each other. For example, in practical terms, gender equity from a Marxist or class perspective might suggest one course of action, from a radical feminist perspective it might mean something else and from a gender perspective that takes other aspects of social identity into consideration, such as race, ethnicity or sexual orientation, it might mean something else. Whose definition of women's "best interest" should be used?

## Poststructural Perspective

Practical help in addressing this dilemma can be found by adding a poststructuralist perspective to Lukes' framework. Unlike Lukes, poststructuralist perspectives on power recognize that there are many different positions from which to challenge the status quo and that there is no one definition of "best interest." From this perspective, the goal is not to substitute one group's interests over another, but to

open up the discussion in order to envision something new. In practical terms, adopting this perspective requires that we as change agents be clear about our own normative agenda and biases and open to being influenced by other perspectives. Naming where we stand makes it clear that there are many possibilities and that the goal is to open up the discourse to alternatives and to entertain new possibilities, rather than imposing a set change agenda. Thus, proposed solutions to achieve greater equity are always partial and in progress as new voices and new perspectives are added to the discourse. For example, an initiative that may have started to help some women in the organization (e.g., establishing an on-site day care center) might surface other gender equity issues, such as the needs of lower level women in the organization who provide the day care at minimum wage.

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Adding a poststructuralist perspective to Lukes' framework offers a practical way of helping organizations focus attention on the power that resides in organizational assumptions about good work, good workers, organizational success and the deep structures that support these assumptions. The framework is particularly useful in thinking about gender and organizational change because it offers a way to think about the exercise of power that relaxes the guilt and blame that often accompany equity initiatives. Rather than looking to identify culprits, such as white men, who are unwilling to share power and influence with women, it is an approach that looks at underlying organizational as-

sumptions as the place where power is being exercised. Thus, the responsibility for inequity lies not in self-interested individuals who are actively and intentionally oppressing another group, but in the systemic common, everyday assumptions that underlie organizational behavior and the way members of an organization make sense of their world. Using this systemic approach also makes it clear that since people at all levels are active agents in the unobtrusive exercise of power, the responsibility for change cannot be taken up by just a few, but must be widely shared across all levels within the organization.

## Application to Organizational Change

How do we implement organizational change efforts from this perspective? With a goal of gender equity, we would begin by trying to uncover the gendered assumptions that drive behavior, distribute power, and make meaning in an organization.[2] The first step is to listen to women – all types and levels of women, not just those who identify with equity issues – in order to understand their experience. Listening to women up and down the hierarchy surfaces new information and uncovers assumptions that are rarely questioned by those who are more mainstream or who are currently benefiting from the status quo. However, uncovering these assumptions requires that we, as change agents, listen carefully for systemic factors underlying the questions. For example, women often question organizational norms such as extensive off-site training sessions that take them away from their families for long periods of time or norms about confrontational interaction styles or the valuing of aggressive behavior over more collaborative methods. But they may state their concerns at the individual level, for example, as reasons they have not applied for higher level jobs that require off-site training or require confrontational styles. Our

job as change agents is to dig beneath the surface to understand these questions from a systemic perspective. What gendered assumption about good workers, success and commitment are behind these norms? What underlying beliefs about "what's best" for the work and the organization do they reveal?

The next step is to understand the consequences of these norms. What is their effect on women? On men? What is the effect on the organization of unquestioningly accepting these norms? For example, accepting the assumption that individuals must choose to give priority to either work or family and that successful workers cannot do both, leads to a number of work consequences. At lower levels, it may result in a "pink ghetto" and limit an organization's ability to think creatively about job design or inhibit its ability to recognize potential (e.g., how people with experience in caring for family or community might have developed valuable relational skills that could qualify them for supervisory or management positions). At higher levels, the assumption that ideal workers have no outside responsibilities may lead to unquestioningly accepting expensive off-site training programs that are no longer in line with the latest information on how adults learn. In the same vein, valuing aggression over collaboration may be hampering an organization's ability to meet its strategic business goals or its ability to move to a cross-functional team structure. Examining the unintended consequences of gendered assumptions helps us develop a "dual agenda" that focuses on changing assumptions that have negative consequences for both gender equity *and* organizational effectiveness.[3]

Once these assumptions have been surfaced and their consequences explored, it is possible to envision changes in everyday work practice that can relax some of the unintended consequences of an assumption, while keeping its positive

effects. Implementing the change is an opportunity to pull back the layers of meaning to understand why things are as they are and ask interesting questions about what would have to change for the work practice itself to change. For example, the belief that time spent at work is a measure of commitment is a common assumption underlying many work norms and practices that often fit men's life situations better than women's. Although there may be times that long hours are necessary to get the job done, this assumption can lead to long hours even when not required by the work, or to a reluctance to take compensatory time, even if management urges people to do so. People are attributing a career "meaning" to spending extra time at work that goes beyond the requirements of the work itself. This exerts a powerful influence on behavior, and may result in inefficient work norms that may not be good for the work *or* for the people doing it. Individual managers telling individual people to feel free to take compensatory time is unlikely to change these career-related norms because they are deeply embedded in organizational routines.

Thinking about this as a systemic issue that has power beyond individual intention re-frames the problem and suggests different questions. What about time makes it the critical criterion for getting the job done? Is there a way to keep what is critical about it while eliminating what is not? What other criteria are important to the quality of the work? How does the system recognize these criteria? Can this be changed? With what effects? Are there differences in *what* time is valued? Does time away during the middle of the day (a long lunch to work out at the gym) have the same career consequences as time away at the beginning or end of the day (to drop off or pick up children from school)? Why? Who benefits from this situation? How can it be changed? Opening up the discourse in this way

allows new voices to be heard and new solutions to be considered. More importantly, it focuses attention on the embedded nature of the issue which allows the meaning-making process itself to become an object of discussion and the subject of a problem-solving exercise. Once solutions are proposed, it is important that all parties are involved in designing and trouble-shooting the details of implementation. We have seen modest proposals fail because management did not join in the design or did not help brainstorm suggestions for how their concerns could be met. When people in power are not working with a change effort to make sure it addresses their concerns, they are unwittingly working against it. Under these circumstances, it has little chance of success. The goal of equity initiatives is to change not only behavior but the meaning people make of their behavior and the language they use – or the story they tell – to describe it. Changing meaning in this way requires that people at all levels be actively engaged in the change process.

## Conclusion

A poststructuralist perspective on the third dimension of power provides a useful framework for thinking about the deep structures that influence gender equity in an organization. It helps identify leverage points that might be invisible in other change methodologies. Most importantly, it makes visible the need to engage a wide range of people in the change effort. Focusing on only the subset of women who are aware of inequity limits the scope of the change and the range of possible interventions to address it. On the other hand, using

gender more broadly (i.e., as a lens to help uncover organizational assumptions that may not be serving the best interests of women, men, or the organization) enlists a broad constituency for change.

A poststructuralist perspective requires that we be clear about the lens we are using and clear that learning from it is an on-going, evolving process. For example, we may say we are listening for "women's voice," but this perspective forces us to acknowledge that gender is not a monolithic category and that when other aspects of identity such as race, class or sexual orientation are considered, other suggestions for change may emerge. The goal is not to impose a predetermined solution, but to open up the discourse to allow new voices, new perspectives and new alternatives to surface. This allows new stories to be told and new meanings to be created. Lastly, connecting the issues to organizational effectiveness and business concerns ensures that dominant, as well as marginalized, perspectives will be included in the co-creation of alternatives, increasing their chance of success and sustainability.

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[1] Lukes, S. (1974). *Power.* London: MacMillan Education, p. 24. Lukes is Fellow and Tudor in Sociology and Politics at Balliol College in Oxford, England.

[2] Fletcher, J. and Merrill-Sands, D. (1998). "Looking Below the Surface: The Gendered Nature of Organizations." *CGO Insights*, No. 2, November.

[3] See Kolb, D., Fletcher, J., Meyerson, D., Merrill-Sands, D., and Ely, R. (1998). "Making Change: A Framework for Promoting Gender Equity in Organizations." *CGO Insights*, No. 1, October. Also see Merrill-Sands, D., Fletcher, J. K., Acosta, A. S., Andrews, N., and Harvey, M. (1999). "Engendering Organizational Change: A Case Study of Strengthening Gender Equity and Organizational Effectiveness Through Transforming Work Culture and Practices." *CGO Working Paper*, No. 3, June.