

The Greatly Exaggerated Demise of Heroic Leadership: Gender, Power, and the Myth of the Female Advantage

New Leadership Practices

New models of leadership recognize that workplace effectiveness depends less on individual, heroic action and more on collaborative practices distributed throughout an organization. The belief that “we don’t need another hero” has ushered in an era of what is often called “post-heroic” or shared leadership. This new, more relational approach is intended to transform stodgy, top-down organizational structures into flexible, knowledge-based entities able to meet the demands of the information age and global economy.¹

Despite the rhetoric calling for a new approach, there is ample evidence that people – and organizations – find it difficult to put this new leadership model into practice. Here, I argue that the difficulties result not only from the fact that new models challenge old ways of thinking, but that these challenges are linked in subtle ways to gender and power.

Post-heroic Leadership: What is it?

Embedded in new models of leadership are three significant challenges to the heroic paradigm. First, new models of leadership question the very concept of an autonomous self and individual achievement. Peggy McIntosh, for example, notes that while we may focus on leaders as heroes, they are but the tip of the iceberg. In reality, their “individual achievement” is enabled by a vast network of collaboration and support. Wilfred Draft uses another, equally compelling image from the sea. He notes

that while we might see the white caps in the water as leading, it is actually the deep blue sea that determines the direction and power of the ocean.²

Second, new models challenge static, command-and-control images of leadership. Instead, leadership is envisioned as a collaborative social process, one that is more mutual and relies on egalitarian, less hierarchical interactions between leaders and followers. There are many popularized images such as servant leadership, connective leadership or bottom-up leadership that convey this challenge to the old paradigm.³

Third, new models challenge the goal of good leadership and the skills it requires. It is no longer assumed that leaders will have all the solutions and the charisma to get others to implement them. Instead, leaders are expected to create conditions under which collective learning and continuous improvement can occur. Achieving these knowledge-based outcomes depends not so much on technical expertise but on what is commonly called emotional or relational intelligence. This includes skills such as self-awareness, listening, and empathy, as well as the ability to relate to, learn from, and empower others.

In summary, post-heroic leadership is a paradigm shift in what it means to be a leader. It re-envisioned the *who* of leadership by challenging the primacy of individual achievement, the *what* of leadership by focusing on collective learning and mutual influence, and the *how* of leadership by noting the more egalitarian

relational skills and emotional intelligence needed to practice it.

What do gender and power have to do with it?

Many have noted that this paradigm shift in what it means to be a good leader is gendered.

That is, the traits commonly associated with traditional, heroic leadership are closely aligned with stereotypical images of masculinity. Men or

women can display them, but the traits themselves – such as individualism, assertiveness, and dominance – are socially ascribed to men in our culture and generally understood as masculine. In contrast, traits associated with post-heroic leadership – empathy, capacity for listening, relational ability – are socially ascribed to women and generally understood as feminine. The popular interpretation of this phenomenon is to predict that the shift to new leadership practices will create a “female advantage” giving women a leg up in today’s business environment.⁴

But the implications of the gendered nature of the shift to new models of leadership are far more complex – and

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interesting – than this popular interpretation suggests. More complex because the shift is related to a gendered power dynamic, not just to gender. And more interesting because it is not about sex differences per se, but about a gender-linked shift in the very understanding of how to achieve business success. To explore these deeper implications we need to understand *why* we associate certain characteristics with masculinity and femininity and what that has to do with the rules for business success.

The reason we sex-type certain attributes lies in something commonly called the “separate spheres” phenomenon. This refers to the way we tend to view the social world as being separated into two spheres of activity: the public sphere of paid work where we “produce things” and the private sphere of family and community where we “grow people.” This way of seeing the world is so “natural” that we rarely think of it or question its influence. But if we do look more closely, there are three influential characteristics embedded in this world view: The spheres are seen as *separate* (i.e., there are different definitions of what it takes to be effective in each of them); *unequally valued* (i.e., labor in the work sphere is assumed to be skilled, complex, and dependent on training, whereas labor in the domestic sphere is assumed to be unskilled, innate, and dependent on personal characteristics) and *sex-linked* (i.e., men and images of idealized masculinity are associated with the first and women and images of idealized femininity are associated with the second). The leadership implications of this sex-linked separation of the two spheres of life are significant. Not only does it help explain why we so readily attribute the label “feminine” and “masculine” to certain characteristics, it also calls attention to the fact that most of us carry a sex-linked set of principles – an underlying logic of effectiveness – about how to do good work in each sphere that is assumed to be appropriate for that sphere alone.

It is important to note that *in practice*, the separation and sex-linked nature of the two spheres is more myth than reality. Men are active participants in the domestic family sphere and women are active participants in the work sphere. Nonetheless, although they do not match reality, these idealized images of sex-linked attributes and inclinations have a powerful effect on how men and women act – and are expected to act – in each sphere and what types of behavior are considered appropriate – or tainted as inappropriate – in each.

The notion of separate spheres helps us see that new models of leadership violate some basic principles and beliefs – about gender, power, individual achievement, and even work and family – that we, as a society, hold dear. Engaging this shift is neither trivial nor benign. As our understanding of organizations changes and we begin to acknowledge the relational aspects of good practice and the collaborative nature of achievement, the very logic underlying organizational practice – a logic supported by a number of broader societal norms and beliefs – is being challenged.

The gender and power dynamics associated with this challenge are significant and can help answer three paradoxical questions related to the implementation of new leadership practices: Why, if there is general agreement on the need for new leadership practices, are the practices themselves not more visible in the workplace? Why, if these new models are aligned with the feminine, are not more women being propelled to the top? And why, if there is transformational potential in these new models of leadership, are organizations not being transformed?

Why are new leadership practices not more visible?

While the new rhetoric about leadership has been around for several years, the reality in most organizations has lagged far behind. In fact, the everyday narratives about leadership – the stories people tell about business successes, the

legends that are passed on as exemplars of leadership behavior – remain stuck in the language of heroic individualism.

Ron Heifetz and Donald Laurie, for example, note that despite all the data supporting the need to facilitate collective learning “managers and leaders rarely receive promotions for providing the leadership required to do (this) adaptive work.”⁵ Michael Beer notes that in recounting the story of their success, leaders themselves tend to ignore the relational practices and social networks of influence that accounted for that success and focus almost exclusively on individual actions and decisions. What accounts for this phenomenon? Conventional wisdom holds that it is due to the nature of identity and ego, whereby once we have achieved a goal and gained some prominence for having achieved it, we naturally downplay the help we have been given and reconstruct our behavior – in our own minds as well as in the perception of others – as individual action.

A gender and power perspective suggests that something additional might be going on. Western society conflates images of “doing work” with displays of idealized masculinity rooted in heroic images of individualism. As the definition of doing work changes, reflecting beliefs about the importance of egalitarian relationships and the collaborative nature of achievement, the behavioral displays signaling competence need to change. But there are two problems with this shift. One, it requires a set of relational actions that have long been associated – incorrectly but surely – with displays of femininity and unconsciously coded as inappropriate to the work sphere. Two, because these relational actions are associated with the domestic sphere they are not likely to be seen as requiring skill of any sort, but instead, are likely to be attributed to one’s natural inclination or personality. This makes it difficult to acknowledge them as leadership competence.

The difficulty is complicated by another power dynamic, related to gender but also to other aspects of identity. New leadership requires relational skills such as mutuality, an openness to influence, and a willingness to acknowledge the collaborative nature of achievement. But, because of our strong, societal beliefs about individual achievement and meritocracy, this stance of “needing others” is tainted. In addition, in any system of unequal power (inequities based on race, class, sex, or organizational level, for example), it falls on those with less power to be ultra-sensitive and attuned to the perceptions, desires and implicit requests of the more powerful.⁶ Because this attunement to others requires relational skills, most of us unconsciously associate the use of these skills with a *lack* of power.

The unconscious association of relational skills with femininity and powerlessness helps explain why heroic images of leadership and individual business success are so resilient. Leadership, like all social processes, is an occasion to enact one’s identity. Although new models implicitly acknowledge that relational wisdom is critical to business success, they do not take into account that acting on this wisdom requires displaying characteristics that subtly mark us as “feminine” and “powerless.”

Is it any wonder then, that leaders avoid describing these relational leadership practices when speaking of their own successes, and instead focus on other, more individualistic actions? The rhetoric may be “we don’t need another hero,” but practicing new leadership engages significant identity issues and is antithetical to how we have been taught to express ourselves at work. Attempts to change behavior without a recognition of these deeper identity issues is unlikely to have much effect because these issues exert potent – albeit invisible – influence on leader and follower behavior, expectations, and experience.

What has happened to the “female advantage?”

We might expect that women would stand to benefit from the move to newer, more relational models of leadership. Yet, if we look at today’s top leaders, we find few women among them. Why, if there is a female advantage, are women not rising more quickly? One explanation can be found by exploring some additional gender dynamics and the double binds they create for women at work.

The principles of new leadership are generally presented as if the social identity of the actor is irrelevant. At a practical level, we all know this is untrue. Our interpretation of events is always contextual and is influenced by many factors, including the social identity (sex, race, class, etc.) of the actor. A boss saying “drop by my office” is interpreted quite differently from a peer saying the same thing. A white man slamming his fist on the table during a meeting is perceived quite differently from a man of color – or any woman – doing the same thing. We filter behavior through schema that influence and determine what we see, what we expect to see, and how we interpret it.

Gender schema are particularly powerful, which means that the experience and consequences of practicing new leadership will be different for women and men. Men, while they risk being labeled wimps when they engage in new leadership behaviors, may have an easier time proclaiming what they do as “new.” Women, on the other hand, may have a harder time distinguishing what they do as something new, because it looks like they are just doing what women do.

But there is another, even thornier problem women encounter. The femininity associated with the domestic sphere of family and community is that of *mothering*, a labor of love that entails selfless giving. Mothers are people we expect to nurture and support us, to be the wind beneath our wings, wanting nothing in return but our success. This

confusion of new leadership with selfless giving and mothering creates special problems for women.⁷ People who put post-heroic leadership into practice have a right to expect that others will join them in creating the kind of environment where collective learning and mutual empowerment can exist. Indeed, to be effective, post-heroic leadership must have embedded within it an expectation of reciprocity. But gender expectations constrain this possibility for women. When attempts to lead are misunderstood as mothering, the expectation of reciprocity embedded in the practice is rendered invisible. As a result, women are often expected to nurture selflessly, to enable others while expecting nothing in return, to work mutually in non-mutual situations, and to practice less hierarchical forms of interacting even in hierarchical contexts. Thus, many women experience the so-called female advantage as a form of exploitation, where their behavior benefits the bottom line but does not mark them as leadership potential.

Is the workplace being transformed?

The transformational call of the new leadership is to create learning organizations that are able to manage dynamic processes, leverage the learning from diverse perspectives, and accommodate the interests of multiple stakeholders. This potential will be unleashed by tapping into the expertise of the collective, establishing more fluid patterns of influence and power, and using difference – including difference that comes from social identity – to challenge assumptions, learn, grow, and innovate.⁸

However, this transformation is not living up to its promise. Not only are new leadership practices rarely enacted, but those brave enough to try often fall victim to the gender and power dynamics noted above. The result is that the transformative potential of new leadership practices is being co-opted, silencing its most radical challenges to workplace norms about power, individual

achievement, meritocracy, and the privileging of managerial and hierarchical knowledge.⁹ For example, in the wake of September 11th, a plethora of articles in the business press written by popular advocates of post-heroic leadership evoke yearnings for the old heroic leadership with an interesting sleight of hand. Although post-heroic principles are touted, it is individual leaders who are highlighted and personal characteristics such as integrity, charisma, and vision that are described. Reading it, one would assume that the way to create less hierarchical, more adaptive leadership paradigms depends on simply hiring *better hierarchical leaders* who have “emotional intelligence” or who “value relationships.”¹⁰

The challenge of post-heroic leadership goes well beyond these important interpersonal skills, however. Being a post-heroic leader requires not only relational skills, but also a set of beliefs and principles, indeed a different mental model of how to exercise power and how to achieve workplace success. When this alternative logic of effectiveness is dropped, the essence of post-heroic leadership is in danger because its transformational aspects are undermined. The skills and behaviors may be noted, but the basic principles of human growth and interdependence that would present the most serious challenge to old leadership models are cut off. In other words, the new leadership is being incorporated into the mainstream discourse according to the rules of the old paradigm. The result is yet another idealized image of heroic leadership – post-heroic heroes.

The death of heroic leadership cannot be accomplished by simply reconstituting old models with new language. Cap-

turing the transformational promise of new models of leadership will require recognizing and naming the radical nature of its challenge and the gender and power dynamics inherent in it. It will require acknowledging the way post-heroic leadership challenges current power dynamics, the way it threatens the myth of individual achievement and related beliefs about meritocracy, the way it highlights the collaborative subtext of life that we have all been taught to ignore, and the way it engages displays of one’s gender identity. Without explicit recognition of these complicated dynamics, the transformational potential of this new model of leadership is unlikely to be realized.

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Notes

¹ See Badarracco, J. 2001. We don’t need another hero. *Harvard Business Review*, 79 (8), 120-126. For an overview of new models of leadership, see Pearce, C. & H. Sims. 2000. Shared leadership: Toward a multi-level theory of leadership. In M. Beyerlein, D. Johnson & S. Beyerlein (Eds.), *Advances in the Interdisciplinary Studies of Work Teams*, Vol 7. New York: JAI Press.

² See Draft, W. 2001. *The Deep Blue Sea*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass; McIntosh, P. 1989. *Feeling Like a Fraud, Part 2*. Working Paper #37, Wellesley Centers for Women. Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College.

³ See Greenleaf, R. 1977. *Servant Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass; Lipman Blumen, J. 1996. *The Connective Edge*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass; Bradford, D. & A. Cohen. 1998. *Power Up*. NY: Wiley; Block, P. 1993. *Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self-interest*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

⁴ This perspective on the gendered nature of organizational norms has its roots in Joan Acker’s

(1990) ground breaking work: Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender & Society* 4: 139-158. The idea that gendered norms would translate into an advantage for women came much later and was popularized in works such as Helgeson, S. 1990. *The Female Advantage*. NY: Doubleday; and Rosener, J. 1995. *America’s Competitive Secret*. NY: Oxford University Press.

⁵ Conger, J., G. Spreitzer & E. Lawler (Eds.). 1999. *The Leader’s Change Handbook*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, p. 65. See also for the following and other perspectives on the challenges of new models of leadership.

⁶ Miller, J. B. 1976. *Toward a New Psychology of Women*. Boston: Beacon Press.

⁷ Fletcher, J. K. 2001. *CGO Insights, No. 8 Invisible Work: The Disappearing of Relational Practice at Work*. Boston: Center for Gender in Organizations.

⁸ For a discussion of learning from diversity, see Bailyn, L. 1993. *Breaking the Mold*. New York: The Free Press; and Thomas, D. & R. Ely. 1996. Making differences matter: A new paradigm for managing diversity. *Harvard Business Review*. September-October: 79-90. For an understanding of how individuals can use difference to create change, see Meyerson, D. & M. A. Scully. 1999. *CGO Insights, No. 6: Tempered Radicalism: Changing the Workplace from Within*. Boston: Center for Gender in Organizations.

⁹ For a deeper discussion of the process and effects of co-optation, see Fletcher, J. K. 1994. Castrating the female advantage. *Journal of Management Inquiry*. 3 (1) 74-82.

¹⁰ See Fletcher, J. K. & K. Kaeufer. (Forthcoming). Shared leadership: Paradox and possibility. In C. Pearce and J. Conger (Eds.), *Shared Leadership: Current Thinking, Future Trends*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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