

“Feminist” Is Not a Dirty Word in Leadership: How Feminist Principles Inform Transformational Leadership

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Abstract

A feminist perspective illustrates valuable principles in the study of leadership. Discussing the negative stereotypes associated with the label and recognizing that the qualities of feminist principles can apply to the practice of women and men leaders offer key insights into inclusive, intersectional, and community-based leadership.

Introduction

Feminist perspectives are cloaked around inclusivity, human and equal rights, and empowerment of women individually and collectively. Activism to uproot structural inequalities underlies feminist values, as the ideology of feminism is fundamentally transformational. Leadership based on feminist values is collaborative, consultative, and caring—all behaviors that support empowerment and relationships.

These qualities of feminist principles apply to the practice of women and men leaders, offering key insights into inclusive, intersectional, and community-based leadership that seeks to empower and support. Yet, in numerous studies, women whose behavior is caring and consulting have been considered weak, incompetent, or indecisive leaders (Bongiomo, Bain, and David, 2013; Bornstein, 2008; Catalyst, 2007; Madden, 2011). At the same time, discourses around women and leadership often center around terms like “bossy,” and researchers have shown that women who are assertive as leaders are less respected than assertive men (Catalyst, 2007; Chin, 2004; Leanin.Org and Girl Scouts of the USA, 2014; Toegel and Barsoux, 2014).

In this chapter, I discuss how feminist principles enhance the current valued style of transformational leadership, while paradoxically women leaders in the United States face stigmas in their leadership behaviors.

Feminist leaders acknowledge differences, recognize bias and oppression, and are community based. Feminism supports political, social, and economic equality with a social justice framework. The goals of feminist leadership include egalitarianism, empowerment, and gender-equitable organizational cultures and environments.

However, in the news and around the table, the term “feminist” elicits negative connotations, often going along with the phrase, “I’m not a feminist, but . . .” Yahoo! CEO Marissa Mayer said in an interview:

I don’t think that I would consider myself a feminist. I think that, I certainly believe in equal rights. I believe that women are just as capable, if not more so, in a lot of different dimensions. But I don’t, I think, have sort of the militant drive and sort of the chip on the shoulder that sometimes comes with that. And I think it’s too bad, but I do think feminism has become, in many ways, a more negative word. There are amazing opportunities all over the world for women, and I think that there’s more good that comes out of positive energy around that than negative energy. (PBS and AOL, 2013)

When former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, a moderate conservative with a mixed record on issues involving women’s rights, was asked by a newspaper reporter if she considered herself a feminist, she responded:

I never did. I care very much about women and their progress. I didn’t go march in the streets, but when I was in the Arizona Legislature, one of the things that I did was to examine every single statute in the state of Arizona to pick out the ones that discriminated against women and get them changed. (Solomon, 2009)

And women in the public eye have often discussed the idea of feminism, such as actress Susan Sarandon, who has spoken out for reproductive rights and human rights, calling

the term “feminist” an “old-fashioned” word that is “used more in a way to minimize you” (Day, 2013).

The term “feminist” has been used to demean, dismiss, or silence conversations about sexual harassment, violence against women, pay structures, equal opportunities, and stereotypes. Feminist and feminine characteristics are interpreted through this socially constructed frame and accorded value or disvalue. As noted throughout this chapter, leadership qualities are socially constructed, validated, and perpetuated, and many currently valued leader characteristics are feminist principles as well and apply to women and men. In this chapter, I made a conscious decision to use the term “woman leader” instead of “female leader,” although these terms are used interchangeably in the literature. “Woman” conveys characteristics and behaviors socially constructed as feminine or masculine, while “female” denotes biological sex.

Feminist Leadership Principles and Practices

The practice of feminism revolves around collaboration, mentoring, and social change, supporting the notion that leadership is a social process (Chin, 2004; Suyomoto and Ballou, 2007). Regarding leadership as a process moves away from looking at strategies used by leaders to looking at the underlying values demonstrated by leaders. Narratives of women leaders described leadership as making positive contributions, communicating, collaborating, caring, and giving back (Fine, 2007). “A commitment to social change through collaboration that is grounded in a feminist ethic of care provides a new vision of leadership for women and men” (Fine, 2007, p. 188).

Bringing in community and care through inclusiveness of diverse experiences, feminist principles also adhere to intersectionality, which acknowledges the interactions and intersections of race and gender, as well as ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, disability, and profession. “[I]ntersectionality might be more broadly useful as a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1296).

These identities inform experiences, meanings, choice, and opportunities. Scholars undertaking a feminist leadership initiative in the American Psychological Association (APA) in 2002–2003 emphasized that feminist leadership theory must conceptualize multiple perspectives and diversity in experiences and privilege (Suyomoto and Ballou, 2007). Contexts, biases, perceptions, and values inform and define ideas and behavioral expectations about leadership among women and men (Chin, 2007).

Gendered experiences and ideologies shape understandings of leadership. Men's experiences have informed the dominant representations and ideologies of leadership. According to communications scholar Marlene G. Fine (2009), "The male ideology of leadership is visible in two critical ways: (1) the lack of representation of women in leadership positions in the U.S., and (2) the construction of leadership as comprising masculine characteristics" (p. 181).

Confidence, masculinity, and dominance are among the characteristics that have defined leaders (Chin, 2004). Organizational structure and practice has often been skewed toward masculine-defined qualities, including power and assertiveness (Fine, 2007).

Business psychology professor Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic (2013) posited that the gendered numbers in management result from stereotypical notions of desired leadership traits that confuse confidence with competence.

That is, because we (people in general) commonly misinterpret displays of confidence as a sign of competence, we are fooled into believing that men are better leaders than women. In other words, when it comes to leadership, the only advantage that men have over women (e.g., from Argentina to Norway and the USA to Japan) is the fact that manifestations of hubris—often masked as charisma or charm—are commonly mistaken for leadership potential, and that these occur much more frequently in men than in women. (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2013)

Looking at women's experiences and feminist ideologies shifts these male-dominated understandings of leadership. Sharing power and helping others to develop their leadership skills are aspects of feminist leadership (Williams, 2008). A feminist leader values members' contributions and participation, seeking inclusion, community building, and egalitarian environments.

Feminist approaches to leadership interact with and contribute to the transformational leadership framework. The 2003 APA initiative on feminist leadership concluded that transformational leadership style is effective for many women leaders (Chin, 2007). Feminist principles apply to the concept of transformational leadership, which is values based and involves collaboration and inclusion, both feminist principles (Chin, 2007; Madden, 2007; Porter and Daniel, 2007). Transformational leadership is future oriented and processual, with often charismatic leaders who motivate employees or followers to reach their potential, inspire change, and are concerned with social and individual needs (Northouse, 2013). Transformational leaders help their employees see the value of their contributions to the organization, as well as look to the future, valuing change. The five practices of transformational leaders are (1) model the way through defining their values; (2) inspire a shared vision through listening and supporting; (3) challenge the process through changing the status quo, innovating, and learning from mistakes; (4) enable others to act through collaboration and fostering trust; and (5) encourage the heart through appreciation and encouragement (Northouse, 2013).

Transformational leadership is an androgynous style of leadership, encompassing inspirational role modeling, mentoring, motivating beyond expectations, and developing positive human relationships with followers, according to Alice Eagly (2013), a social psychology professor at Northwestern University who has studied gender and leadership since the 1980s. The charismatic features of transformational leadership are culturally ascribed to men, while the mentoring and relational aspects are culturally ascribed to women (Eagly, 2013). In her meta-analysis of leadership studies, Eagly concluded that:

There is considerable evidence that female leaders have a somewhat more participative, androgynous, and transformational leadership style than their male counterparts. There are also multiple indications that women, compared with men, enact their leader roles with a view to producing outcomes that can be described as more compassionate, benevolent, universalistic, and ethical, thus promoting the public good. (2013, p. 8)

When African activist Mary Wandia discussed feminist transformative leadership, she emphasized that it is not “women’s leadership” (2011, p. 50), but rather this form of leadership stems from the feminist mission of political, economic, and social equality of the sexes. According to Wandia (2011), feminist transformative leadership is a social process of change to support equality and social justice. In higher education, researcher Tracy Barton (2006a) found that women leaders were ambivalent about power yet saw themselves as promoting social justice and equity. Diversity, fairness, justice, equity, inclusivity, and community building were found to be central to female academic leadership (Barton, 2006b). And in higher education leadership in general, interaction, collaboration, and consensus building are essential. “[University] presidents in this era, both women and men, must be resilient, adaptable, and creative leaders, able to inspire trust and collaboration while juggling a myriad of external as well as internal responsibilities” (Bornstein, 2008, p. 175).

Perceptions of Women Leaders

Gender stereotypes influence perceptions of women leaders, as well as advancement in the pipeline to upper management and beyond. In studies by Catalyst, a global nonprofit research organization that centers on women and business, and McKinsey & Company, a global management consulting firm, stereotypes have significantly affected corporate and individual mindsets, thus stymying women’s leadership opportunities (Barsh and Yee, 2011; Catalyst, 2007; McKinsey & Company, 2013).

Taking care versus taking charge underlies these stereotypes. When leadership is defined as assertive and taking charge, these stereotypical masculine behaviors become

the “natural” leadership style (Catalyst, 2007). Women seeking consensus appear tentative and thus not as effective as leaders (Bongiomo, Bain, & David, 2013; Bornstein, 2008). Women leaders face the dilemma of conforming to feminine stereotypes and not being seen as leadership material or behaving with masculine characteristics and being labeled or judged harshly. They are either too soft and weak or too tough and aggressive. Regarding gender-stereotypic expectations, women leaders are “damned if they do and doomed if they don’t,” concluded Catalyst researchers (Catalyst, 2007).

According to leadership scholars Ginka Toegel and Jean-Louis Barsoux (2014):

If women’s behavior confirms the gender stereotype, it lacks credibility and is deemed incongruous with the leader prototype; and if it matches the leader prototype, it lacks authenticity and they are not thought to be acting as proper women. It is a lose-lose situation.

Studies on gender stereotypes have shown that “women can be feminine, warm, and incompetent *or* masculine, cold, and competent” (Madden, 2011). Women leaders are rarely seen as both competent and liked. Women leaders who act authoritatively are more disliked than men, while women and men leaders are equally liked when acting participatory through inclusive leadership (Catalyst, 2007; Cooper, 2013; LeanIn.Org and Girl Scouts of the USA, 2014). Success does not affect likability, but violating gender stereotypes can result in penalties, such as not being promoted (Cooper, 2013). In numerous contexts, women leaders are defined as “overbearing and angry” when the same behaviors displayed by a male leader would be described as “aggressive and direct” (Chin, 2004, p. 7).

In her analysis of women as leaders, Eagly (2013) found that “women often face a double standard in attaining leadership roles” and that “people usually react more favorably to women when they lead with an androgynous style [transformational] rather than one that is either very feminine or very masculine” (p. 5).

A 2013 Gallup poll found that Americans preferred male bosses over female bosses by 35 percent to 23 percent, although four in ten Americans indicated no preference (Newport and Wilke, 2013).

In 2013, 4 percent of CEOs in Fortune 500 companies were women, while 16.9 percent of Fortune 500 board seats were held by women (Catalyst, 2013). Of the 51.5 percent of women in U.S. management, professional, and related occupations, only 14.6 percent of women were represented in Fortune 500 executive officer positions (Catalyst, 2013). Women have not been sponsored as often as men to rise up the corporate ranks, nor have women been given as many large, high-profile assignments as men (Green, 2013).

The 2014 Grant Thornton International Business Report looked at business leadership worldwide, finding that region and gender affected leadership differences. Globally, 24 percent of senior management positions were held by women, with the United States ranking of 22 percent in the bottom ten of forty-five countries, while Russia led with 43 percent and Japan trailed at 9 percent (Grant Thornton International Ltd., 2014).

The context of leadership and power, as reflected in these studies, must be acknowledged, as they show that the pipeline feeding upper management narrows for women. Women, who comprise slightly more than half of U.S. management and professional positions, are dropping out of the pipeline leading to higher positions. In a survey of 4,143 MBA graduates, men started at higher positions than women after graduation, and men moved up the career ladder more quickly than women (Carter and Silva, 2010). Women tended to enter leadership development programs earlier and spend more time in them, but men, after participating in development programs, received more high-profile or mission-critical projects or roles, which often predict advancement (Silva, Carter, & Beninger, 2012). While 51 percent of men who participated in leadership development programs received promotions within a year, only 37 percent of women did (Silva, Carter, & Beninger, 2012). The odds of advancement of men from executive committee to CEO were five times higher than for women (McKinsey & Company, 2013). Yet women are equally as ambitious as men (Carter & Silva, 2010; McKinsey & Company, 2013). A study by McKinsey & Company for

the *Wall Street Journal* in 2011 found that women, desiring to advance, remained at their current level due to lack of role models, not having mentors, or being unable to access informal good-old-boy networks (Barsh and Yee, 2011).

The Woman Leader Paradox

Feminist leadership traits rank high in studies of leader characteristics. The woman leader paradox is that feminist and feminine qualities—both chiefly collaboration and relational—are valued in modern business practice, yet stereotypical expectations hold women back. Women perceived that the current corporate environment hinders their chances of promotion to higher management levels, according to a survey of more than 1,400 managers worldwide (McKinsey & Company, 2013). Almost 40 percent of women and 30 percent of men in this survey believed that women’s leadership and communications styles were incompatible with leadership styles in the top management of their companies (McKinsey & Company, 2013).

However, in a survey of more than sixty-four thousand people worldwide, researchers John Gerzema and Michael D’Antonio found that traits considered feminine were desired in the modern leader.

[A]cross the globe, society wants those in power to connect more personally—an understandable response to the hidden agendas and tightly wound power circles often associated with men. . . . In a highly interconnected and interdependent economy, masculine traits like aggression and control (which are largely seen as “independent”) are considered less effective than the feminine values of collaboration and sharing credit. (Gerzema & D’Antonio, 2013, p. 11)

Masculine characteristics were identified in the study as decisive, independent, analytical, proud, aggressive, and resilient. Feminine characteristics were named as expressive, loyal, flexible, patient, intuitive, passionate, empathetic, selfless, reasonable, and collaborative (Gerzema & D’Antonio, 2013).

In a survey of 7,280 leaders worldwide, women leaders ranked higher than male leaders in integrity, driving for results, developing others, motivating others, building

relationships, collaboration, championing change, solving problems, communication, and innovation (Zenger & Folkman, 2012). Yet women leaders pointed out that they had to work harder to prove themselves and felt pressure to not make mistakes and prove value to the organization (Zenger & Folkman, 2012). Catalyst's analysis of data from more than 1,200 leaders worldwide concluded that "women leaders have to choose between working doubly hard for the same level of recognition and getting half the rewards for the same level of competence" (2007, p. 16).

Former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, former First Lady and former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, current president and chief executive officer of Yahoo! Marissa Mayer, former vice president of General Motors Susan Docherty, and current chief operating officer of Facebook Sheryl Sandberg are all leaders who have been defined against the masculine norm of leadership. Albright wrote in her memoir:

As I began to climb the ladder, I had to cope with the different vocabularies used to describe similar qualities in men (confident, take-charge, committed) and women (bossy, aggressive, emotional). It took years, but over time I developed enough faith in my judgment to do my job in my own way and style, worrying at least a little less about what others thought. (2013, p. xii)

Clinton has been criticized as being powerful, outspoken, and aggressive, as these break the gender stereotypes. Articles have been written about her when she appeared without makeup and when she cried. Fashion, appearance, and motherhood have been the foci of media stories about Mayer. Sandberg and Docherty have been called bossy.

Docherty, a former vice president of General Motors and president of Chevrolet and Cadillac Europe prior to resigning in 2013 to spend time with her family, displayed a feminist leadership style, building diverse teams and collaborating and soliciting input and perspectives from others. Labeled "bossy," Docherty said:

And there's a big difference between being a boss and being bossy. And I think it's even more negative when you're a female, because I think that there's a cultural bias. When a man is bossy, he comes across as assertive and in

command. When a woman is bossy, she comes off as aggressive and power-hungry. . . . I knew that as a leader, the best way to counteract coming across as being bossy would be to ask others what they thought. (Bryant, 2010)

In early 2014, the “Ban Bossy” campaign, sponsored by Sandberg, LeanIn.Org, and the Girl Scouts of the USA, was launched. As documented by numerous studies and anecdotes by women leaders, the term “bossy” is a sexist, applying to women and implying negative behavior since direct and authoritative behavior by women is called heavy-handed and bossy. Yet that same behavior is labeled in positive tones for men, using words like authoritative, assertive, and commanding. The key message of this campaign is to understand how words and messages perpetuate stereotypes or become weapons of dominance.

“This is a word that is symbolic of systemic discouragement of girls to lead. We are not just talking about getting rid of a word, even though we want to get rid of a word,” Sandberg said. “We’re talking about getting rid of the negative messages that hold our daughters back” (McFadden & Whitman, 2014).

Conclusion

Words are powerful, describing and controlling meaning. Banning “bossy” would eliminate a term that has become defined as negative and misogynistic. While “feminist” has a negative connotation, this word should not be banned but embraced by women, as well as by men. While the historical foundations and standards of leadership are rooted in masculine-defined attributes, twenty-first-century best practices in leadership rely on historically feminine-defined attributes such as relationship building and collaboration. Feminist principles pervade the transformational leadership style favored by many twenty-first-century leaders, both women and men. Key feminist principles include collaboration, inclusion of diverse experiences and perspectives, acknowledgment of social context, mentoring, and attention to power and social construction of identities.

For women leaders and feminist leaders, the objectives of leadership include empowering others through (a) one's stewardship of an organization's resources; (b) creating the vision; (c) social advocacy and change; (d) promoting feminist policy and a feminist agenda (i.e., family-oriented work environments, wage gap between men and women); and (e) changing organizational cultures to create gender-equitable environments. For many women, an effective leadership style is transformational. (Chin, 2007, p. 15)

A definition of feminist leadership proposed in the APA initiative is the following:

Feminist leadership is transformational in nature, seeking to empower and enhance the effectiveness of one's team members while striving to improve the lives and social conditions of all stakeholders including those indirectly affected, such as consumers and other members of society. (Porter & Daniel, 2007, p. 249)

Leadership is a different experience for women and men. However, feminist leadership includes principles that enhance the effectiveness of leaders, regardless of gender. The feminine characteristics of relational practice enhance leadership models for leaders regardless of gender and can contribute to the transformative approach (Bornstein, 2008). Understandings of collaboration and diverse experiences, through the notion of intersectionality and through organizational structures and contexts within which leaders work, turn transformational leadership into feminist transformative leadership.

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