Advancing Women In Leadership

Hearing the Opus: The Paradox for Women Leaders in the Postmodern University

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Leading in an organization is much like conducting an orchestra. The conductor must stay one full beat ahead of the orchestra, envisioning the whole opus as it is to be played while keeping a keen ear to the ongoing performance. Filled with unpredictability and contradiction, the musical interpretation of the opus flows through our bodies with great intensity. Sometimes the inclination is to reduce the composition and the performance into distinct parts to better understand the intent of composer, conductor and musicians. Often, this deludes us into the romantic notion that we can reduce the opus into discrete components that explain the unexplainable.

The need to reduce the complex, explain the unexplainable, polarize rationality and intuition, and describe traits and attributes of successful leaders is reflected in decades of research and publication across a multitude of disciplines. Yet, even the most sophisticated integration of these theories, coupled with self-awareness and introspection, seems to fall short when leading within the complex environment of higher education. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the changing landscape of higher education and present a summary of theories that apply to the study and practice of leadership. Furthermore, the author seeks to stimulate thinking about the potential integration of nomadic feminist practice and the central tenets of complexity theory as complimentary frameworks that can be employed by women leaders in the postmodern university.

The Changing Landscape of Higher Education

Universities have long been seen as traditional sites of learning, knowledge development, and scholarship. However, the restructuring of higher education in the 1990s, in an effort to move toward a global knowledge economy, has led to profound and substantive changes in the identity and defining characteristics of the university. Shrinking government funds, increased demands for accountability, demographic shifts, globalization, and an age of information technology in the midst of changing business culture are among some of the issues faced by leaders in higher education (Wenniger & Conroy, 2001). Increasingly, university leadership is under siege by the process of globalization, and is employing frameworks for decision-making that are based on economic restructuring with a powerful thrust toward creating a corporate university environment.

The base of the traditional university is increasingly being transformed into a privatized corporate commodity where the exchange of knowledge and learning is the source of 'value' to the consumer and is of high regard in a capitalist economy. Ann Brooks (2001) maintained that these changes have resulted in a shift from the epistemological foundations of the traditional university, with its westernized, humanistic frame of reference, to a more technocratic, instrumental emphasis in terms of knowledge, language, and goals. Others argue that these movements can be seen as positive and an aspect of the "repositioning of universities within an emerging global knowledge economy" (Robertson, 1998; Pritchard, 1999, p.5). Some claim that the direction of capitalistic economies is toward an intensified emphasis on the capitalization and misuse of learning and of knowledge practices and products (Pritchard, 1999).

Over the last decade, a number of countries have witnessed direct political involvement in the reform of higher education. Thus, government-sourced reform of higher education may be read as an outcome of alliances between state, private sector, and international consulting bodies and part of economic, political and social transformations involving an enhanced position for knowledge and particularly learning as a key source of value in capitalist economies (Pritchard, 1999). Critics of the changes contend that universities are being repositioned within an emerging knowledge economy. In the process, it is argued that the focus on careers, credentials, and managerial practices leaves little space for critical scholarship or challenging teaching (Parker & Jary, 1995). In addition, the focus on performance and transferability of the knowledge that is produced by academics has put the emphasis on 'exchange value' rather than 'use value' of such knowledge (Willmott, 1995). Prichard and Willmott (1997) claimed that the use of performance measures and associated practices as well as the language of line managers, customers, and products is centrally concerned with the repositioning of the university as a site of economic and managerial transformation.

In their comparative study of universities in Australia, the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, Slaughter and Leslie (1997) described the scenario of academic capitalism. They noted that state funds are being supplanted by private funds; new and more dangerous liaisons are being struck with industry; university

courses are being modularized, packaged, and marketed; and administrative officers shape programs and curricula, and standardize routine faculty work while costs are transferred to students. In general, academic work is being transformed. Innovative universities are now increasingly characterized by their entrepreneurship rather than their scholarship, faculty and administrative values are in conflict, and funding favors those who are self-funding.

Universities across the globe are experiencing the pressures of: (a) globalization and e-commerce, (b) government policies for lifelong learning and widening participation, (c) changing markets, (d) greater research selectivity, and (e) new imperatives for community links (Tysome, 2000). Universities have responded to the need for ever-increasing efficiency through creating a more casual workplace, downsizing employees, strengthening accountabilities of staff by working in a more competitive manner, and encouraging mergers between institutions. The resulting culture is one that is suggestive of a marketplace, promoting individualism and individual achievement rather than collegiality and cooperative efforts. Paradoxically, this change is occurring at a time when there is increased emphasis on universities to implement equal opportunity policies and anti-discrimination measures (Hearn, 1999).

The day-to-day operations of the university reflect the changes of globalization by an increased importance on the principle of optimizing performance where efficiency and effectiveness become the criteria for judging knowledge acquisition. Performance is focusing on responding to the demands of market forces and the design of new processes that redefine academic work. At the same time, Blakemore and Sachs (2000) pointed out that the performance principle relies increasingly on exploitation of the emotional, intellectual, and physical work of academics and their desire to be successful in ways that many academics and educational leaders find distressing. They suggested that this focus on performance is mainly about image and efficiency under the new management approach, market order, and that these images of success are gender inflected.

Gender and the Academic World

Despite significant changes in legislation, the women's movement, and increased numbers of women who participate in education and the labor market, women continue to be underrepresented in positions of leadership. The demographics of female leaders throughout higher education illuminate the fact that there are far fewer women occupying positions of senior leadership than should be expected. According to Chliwniak (1997), only 16% of college and university women are presidents, only 13% of chief business officers are women, and only 25% of chief academic officers are women. However, women comprise more than 52% of the current student body. This beckons the paradox: we say leadership in higher education is not gender based, but significant numbers of women do not occupy positions of leadership.

Dominant and diverse gendering of organizations has been the subject of extensive research and analysis. Feminist and other critical feminist-influenced studies have

examined the explicit and implicit gendering of organizations and management (Acker, 1990; Ferguson, 1984; Hearn & Parkin, 1995; Mills & Tancred, 1992; Powel, 1988). In contrast, academia often is presented as gender-neutral, in both popular and academic representations. According to Hearn (2001), academic life is incessantly, perhaps inherently, gendered organizationally, structurally and practically. Like organizations, and managements more generally, universities have grown as institutions characterized by definite hierarchical patterns, themselves defined by and reproducing other social divisions and social relationships, including age, class, disability, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

Furthermore, Hearn (2001) elaborated that gender equality is not just about structures and procedures but also about the content of academic teaching and research, and the deconstruction of non-gendered mainstreams. Unfortunately, it is still possible to be a respected male social science academic and not read, support or cite scholarship by women, especially feminist scholarship. These are common academic practices that are in need of urgent attention and change. It also must be noted that gender is but one expression of diversity. It exists with race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, and social class, family of origin, gender preference, profession, and level of education to name just a few defining characteristics of individuals.

Research into the position of academic women in universities has focused on the structural and cultural impediments to women's progression into senior levels (Brooks, 1997; Castleman, A., Allen, M., Bastalich, W. & Wright, 1995) but little attention has been given to leadership attitudes, performance and the development needs of women holding leadership positions in universities. A challenging issue is that leadership traditionally has been studied employing male norms as the standard for behaviors. It is not unusual for women to adopt male standards of leadership success so as to fit into the patriarchal structures and systems that compose higher education.

The management and business literature often portrays the leader as genderless or gender-neutral. However, according to Chliwniak (1997) and other scholars such as Barrie Thorne and Deborah Tannen, who research gender differences, social norms and issues of gender-role ascription create differences between women and men. Gilligan's (1988) research on cognitive development has served as a catalyst for many of today's contemporary scholars to examine, explore and revise the overall definition and understanding of leadership. Gilligan (1988) argues that a single model or reasoning pattern and stages of moral development fail to capture the different realities of women's lives. Gilligan's work identified a separate development pathway that results in personal and relational responsibility being of highest value for females and legalistic justice for individuals being highest in males (Chliwniak, 1997).

Examining Leadership through a Critical Lens

The definition of leadership varies greatly according to theoretical, societal and organizational assumptions. However, there is general consensus that leaders are individuals who provide vision and meaning for an organization and embody the

ideas toward which the organization strives. Contemporary authors' research and publications on leadership (Bass, 1985, 1990; Baum, Locke, & Kirkpatrick, 1998; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; House, 1977; Larwood, Falbe, Kreiger, & Miesing, 1995; Sashkin, 1988) have argued that outstanding leaders are typically described by their followers as inspirational and visionary. Generally, the literature on charismatic and transformational leadership appears to take vision as vital in terms of being a critical component of leadership that motivates people to enhanced levels of effort and performance. According to Marriner-Tomey (2001), leaders need to do the right things, are challenged by change, focus on purposes, and have a future time frame. They ask why and use strategies on their journeys to developing human potential.

In an essay exploring the evolving nature of leadership research over the latter half of the last century, Hunt (1999) described a period of leadership research he called the "doom and gloom" period (the 1970s and 1980s). This period was characterized by a generalized apathy with the development of the field and the emergence of critics who claimed that leadership research told us very little and had out-lived its usefulness. Specific criticism included the belief that the number of non-integrated leadership models, prescriptions, and the like were mind boggling, and that much of the research was fragmentary, unrealistic, trivial, or dull. Other criticism questions the implicit assumption of the importance of leadership, arguing instead that there are situations in which leadership would have no effect (Kerr & Jermier, 1978).

Hunt (1999) argued that this period ended with the advent of the "new leadership school" (Bryman, 1992), including visionary, transformational and charismatic leadership approaches. He claimed this school constituted a paradigm shift in the leadership field. Furthermore, Hunt asserted that these new theoretical approaches transformed the field, and we acknowledge the continuing importance of current research that helps us incrementally increase our understanding of leadership issues.

Kouzes and Posner (1987) described five leadership practices common to successful leaders. These practices involve: (a) challenging the process by seeking out opportunities, experimenting and taking risks, (b) inspiring a shared vision by envisioning the future and enlisting support, (c) enabling others to act by fostering collaboration and empowering others to act, (d) modeling the way by setting an example and planning small wins, and (e) encouraging the heart by recognizing individual contributions and celebrating accomplishments.

Bass and Avolio (1993) suggested that transformational leaders change the organization by realigning the organization's culture with the new vision and revision of assumptions, values and norms. They identified four components that characterize transformational leaders: (a) idealized influence, (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation, and (d) consideration for the individual.

The transformational leader promotes employee development, attends to needs and wants of followers, inspires through optimism, influences changes in perception, provides intellectual stimulation, and encourages follower creativity. Bass (1985)

described transformational leaders in terms of charisma, inspirational leadership, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation. Transformational leaders provide the language, symbols, and emphasis on mutual goals that can help lead to correlation (Bass, 1985; Hater & Bass, 1988). They also lead followers to forgo their personal needs in an effort to meet the needs of others (Bass, 1985). Moreover, transformational leaders encourage followers to challenge ideas and assume responsibility because they show confidence in followers' capability to take on assignments. This represents a facilitating rather than controlling leadership style (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001). Burns (1978) emphasized that transformational leaders seek to meet needs of the whole person. This results in a mutual relationship between the leader and the follower.

According to Chliwniak (1997), transformational leadership develops organizational consensus and empowers those who are like-minded in their goals. Further, since patriarchy has been organized through men's relationships with other men, a similar unity among women is an effective means by which to combat institutionalized forms and norms that exclude women.

Hollander and Offermann (1990) addressed that the latest trends in research on power and leadership:

reflect a shift in focus from a leader-dominated view to a broader one of follower involvement in expanding power … [and] presume the willingness of leaders themselves to embrace the notion of sharing power with subordinates, … [thereby fostering] the development of leadership in others. (p. 179-185)

Such approaches promote good interpersonal relations, team leadership, worker participation in decision-making, and the establishment of a climate of openness, mutual trust, respect, concern, and receptiveness (Harris, Smith & Hale, 2002).

A conceptual framework for women's ways of leading can be found in the work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Taruel (1986). In their discussion of women's ways of knowing, they described a way of viewing the world that is characteristic of what they refer to as "constructed knowledge," "a position in which women view all knowledge as contextual, experience themselves as creators of knowledge, and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing" (p. 15). Constructivist women "show high tolerance for internal contradiction and ambiguity" (p. 137) and completely abandon the "either/or" way of thinking. Women who have achieved success in higher educational leadership possess the needed qualities and behaviors that are critical to educational reform and the creation of a truly humanistic educational community (Harris, Smith & Hale, 2002). This allows both men and women to break away from the confining nature of stereotypes; and that can lead to fluid and productive communication among men and women as they work in collaboration to address the challenges of leading in higher education.

Reframing the Leadership Journey

Leadership is a dynamic and interconnected process that involves interacting with

complex systems and structures within the university. Feminist scholar Braidotti (1994) provided an energizing and valuable perspective on leading within the changing university environment. Hills and Rowan (2002) discussed the strength of Braidotti's (1994) framework in that it showed a liberating representation of the work associated with transforming university environments. Braidotti (1994) called for a nomadic type of feminist practice, "where discontinuities, transformations, shifts of levels and locations can be accounted for, exchanged, and talked about" (p. 172).

The nomad appealed to Braidotti because of its ability to pass through occupied territories (such as universities) while remaining in excess of them. It is precisely because of the nomad's ability to make transient connections and its transitory and mobile image that Braidotti (1994) chose this as her figuration for a new feminist subjectivity and politics. She went on to write that being a nomad, living in transition, does not mean that one is unable or unwilling to create those necessary stable and reassuring bases for identity that allow one to function in a community. Rather, nomadic consciousness consists in not taking on any kind of identity as permanent. The nomad is only passing through; making those necessarily situational connections that can help in survival, but never taking on fully the limits of a fixed identity. An insistence on mobility and a refusal to be pinned down or trapped within the options offered by masculine approaches is one of the hallmarks of nomadic feminism. This framework is useful to female leaders because it frees them to move beyond traditional boundaries and provides opportunities to form connections between our lived experience and our current activity. It can also be used to form non-hierarchical and experimental alliances across diverse fronts in a feminist community. Our differences become strengths not weaknesses (Braidotti, 1994).

Hills and Rowan (2002) wrote that by acknowledging that there are multiple ways in which women can de-territorialize traditional roles, images and spaces for women in universities are an important means of making diverse ways of being a 'female academic', a 'feminist', or a 'woman' visible. This allows women to recognize their own contributions to the broad political project of feminist reform, without requiring them to demonstrate how their contribution matches up to any feminist dogma. It is on this point, that nomadic feminism can be most useful in that it allows us to see that as our context changes so must our response to change. We cannot rely on habituated responses or purist dogmas but must be mobile enough to develop new strategies that are specific to the constantly altering self-representations of a university (Hills and Rowan, 2002). Nomadic feminism provides women leaders with an invigorating contextual way to frame leadership that fosters a healthy and joyful work experience for both men and women in higher education.

Complimentary to nomadic feminism is the theory of complexity. Women leaders can readily use the central tenets of complexity theory in concert with nomadic feminism as a holistic and practical framework for leading in multifaceted organizations. Complexity theory, according to Regine and Lewin (2000), moves away from linear, mechanistic views of the world, where simple cause-and-effect solutions are sought to explain physical and social phenomena, to a perspective of

the world as nonlinear and organic, characterized by uncertainty and unpredictability. Complexity science moves us away from reductionist perspectives that reduce holistic systems to isolated observations. Instead, it encourages us to see organizations as complex adaptive systems composed of a diversity of agents who interact with one another, mutually affect one another, and in so doing generate novel behavior for the system as a whole (Marion, 1999; Regine & Lewin, 2000).

Complexity theory asserts that effective leadership is about learning to take advantage of interactive dynamics (correlation, randomness and interaction) among and within organizational groups (defined as sets of individuals such as departments or other work groups that are characterized by common, direct interrelationships). Thus, leadership effectiveness cannot be built exclusively around controlling the future; rather, it depends on being able to foster interactive conditions that enable a productive future. Nor is it limited to human relations concepts that focus on the leader's ability to foster relations with followers. Complex leaders understand that the best innovations, structures and solutions to problems are not necessarily those that they, with their limited wisdom, proclaim, but those that surface when interacting groups work though issues. From a complexity perspective, relationship-oriented behaviors would enable effective networks rather than simply keeping peace or motivating enhanced effort. This changes the role of the leader to one who is able to create conditions in which followers' behaviors can produce structure and innovation. This can be risky but it can produce remarkable and lasting results. Complex organizations exist on a cusp, "the edge of chaos," just shy of anarchy, risking catastrophe to enable creativity and fitness (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001, p.396).

Marion and Uhl-Bien (2001) provided a valuable framework as to the application of complexity theory to leadership in higher education that is radically different from the past theories and leadership. They gave five specific examples as to how leadership roles are reframed through complexity theory: (1) foster network construction, (2) catalyze bottom-up network construction, (3) use leadership tags, (4) drop seeds of emergence and (5) think systematically.

Foster network construction

In complex organizations, effective leaders learn to manage and develop networks. They foster and cultivate interdependencies within and without the organization (Marion & Bacon, 1999). Regine and Lewin (2000) concluded in their ethnographic study of leadership in a dozen US and UK industries that were operating according to complexity principles, "Leaders generally felt that is was their responsibility to enrich connections in the system and to forge new connections where none existed or to improve existing connections" (p.10). Networks not only provide contacts but it is the network itself, more than direct gain from a relationship, which benefits network participants. According to Marion & Uhl-Bien (2001), networks provide the structure within which innovation can emerge and grow. Systems within a network feed one another both directly (universities and students) and indirectly (employers that provide positions that require a degree in higher education). A sound network

provides the university with a sense of organizational fitness and resiliency that is gained through interaction.

Catalyze bottom-up network construction

The leader can serve as a catalyst for the development of networks within the organization. In this environment leaders effectively delegate, empower others to make decisions and trust colleagues to use their responsibility wisely. The atmosphere of the work area is designed to facilitate the building of community and face-to-face interaction. Thus, the woman leader who sees herself as a nomad can readily move throughout the system in a fluid and highly effective manner.

Become leadership "tags"

Leaders catalyze network development by becoming what Holland (1995) has called a "tag." Tags are not necessarily leaders. Flags and ideas do not lead, yet they symbolize and draw people together. For example, the catalyzing dean might serve as a tag for developing a reputation that a university is a place where women are intentionally mentored into roles of leadership. Tags promote and express an idea and an attitude. The tag does not control the movements of ideas as some charismatic writers suggest (Howell & Frost, 1989; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996). Movements and organization systems are complex entities, and the wise leaders will not stifle their creativity with strict, top-down controls (Marion & Bien, 2001).

Drop seeds of emergence

Complex leaders identify centers of knowledge within an organization. They encourage these centers or groups to work and create together by taking on new projects. The complex leader does not closely control, for controls limit the organization's potential; rather, the complex leader creates organized disorder in which dynamic things happen at multiple locations and levels within the system (Regine & Lewin, 2000).

Think systematically

Systematic thinkers are able to see the whole system (Senge, 1990). It is an awareness of the interactive dynamics that are occurring at all levels within and outside of the organization. Complex leaders create the conditions that enable interactions among employees to flourish, provide environments that foster healthy and productive organizational cultures, and cultivate innovative and fit systems that are fluid and resilient.

In sum, complexity theory proposes that leaders must deal with the conditions of organizational activities more than their local manifestations. Marion & Uhl-Bien (2001) insisted that complex leaders generate transformational environments, or the conditions necessary for innovation, rather than creating the innovation itself. Complex leaders drop seeds of innovation rather than requiring innovation plans; they create opportunities to interact rather than creating isolated and controlled

work spaces; they tend networks; they catalyze more than they control. Complex leaders are tags, symbols, rather than brave ship captains guiding their vessels to port. Leaders are seen as part of a dynamic rather than being the dynamic itself and are one element of an interactive network that is far larger than they.

Looking to the Future

Leadership is practiced within the complexity of the human setting. The unpredictable, chaotic and fluid nature of the academic environment requires the leader to be able to transform himself or herself by valuing differences and acknowledging that there are different ways of leading. Women leaders in higher education must resist the traditional and hierarchical leadership models entrenched in current university structures and systems.

It is imperative that we stretch ourselves to create inclusive and innovative academic environments by looking at current practices through new and different lenses. In leadership roles women can take advantage of opportunities for change and demonstrate new models of leading that resist negative practices and create learning communities that ensure the future of the university. The central tenets of complexity theory in concert with the practices of nomadic feminism provide a stimulating and practical approach to leading in the postmodern university.

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