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Educational Administration, Department of

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Book Review

Catherine L. Morgan

Through The Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders, Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli, Boston, MA. 2007. Harvard Business School Press, 308 pages.

Introduction

Through the Labyrinth refutes the two-decade old metaphor of the 'glass ceiling,' deeming it to be a simplistic explanation of the barriers that prevent women from attaining leadership positions. The authors argue that women's paths toward advancement are indirect and littered with barriers at various stages in their careers, rather than being hindered by a fixed barrier. To them, a more appropriate metaphor is the labyrinth with its elaborate and confusing twists and turns. The labyrinth "conveys the idea of a complex journey that entails challenges and offers a goal worth striving for. Passage through a labyrinth is not simple or direct, but requires persistence, awareness of one's progress, and a careful analysis of the puzzles that lie ahead. . . . Because all labyrinths have a viable route to their center, it is understood that goals are attainable" (p. x).

Eagly and Carli wrote the book to help readers understand leadership and what it will take to achieve equality of leadership by men and women. Their primary audience is women who aspire to leadership positions.

Both authors are acknowledged scholars in the study of gender and leadership. In this book, they function in multiple roles—as thoughtful academics, as advocates for women's leadership, and as advisors for women who are on the challenging path to leadership. Dr. Alice H. Eagly is a social psychologist, professor and department chair of psychology at Northwestern University, and a faculty fellow in Northwestern's Institute for Policy Research. She is a prolific researcher in the study of gender, attitudes, prejudice, cultural stereotypes, and leadership. Dr. Linda L. Carli is an associate professor in the psychology department at Wellesley College. Her research is centered on the effects of gender on women's leadership; group interaction, communication, and influence; and reactions to adversity.

Overview

Each of the eleven chapters in *Through the Labyrinth* asks a single thought-provoking question. Eagly and Carli say that they analyze "all the possible causes of women's limited but increasing access to power and au-

About the Author

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thority" (p. 8). Whether or not they have addressed all causes, they have most assuredly analyzed a comprehensive set of causes so that readers will understand that there is not one single, monolithic barrier that stops women from rising to top-level positions. The barriers that impede women's progress include the bias that men, and not women, are natural leaders (Chapter 3), the disproportionate share of family responsibilities born by women (Chapter 4), discrimination (Chapter 5), prejudice toward women leaders (Chapter 6), resistance to women's leadership (Chapter 7), style differences between male and female leaders (Chapter 8), and organizational culture and practices (Chapter 9).

The first two chapters describe the past and the last two chapters contemplate the future. Chapter 1 reviews research to question the existence of the glass ceiling; Chapter 2 analyzes where women have advanced and where they have lagged behind. The last two chapters offer suggestions for how women can negotiate the labyrinth and contemplate what the future holds for women leaders.

In examining the past, Eagly and Carli cite the usual statistics that informed readers have come to expect. They present data from multiple reliable sources on labor force participation rates of men and women, degree attainment and share of management and executive positions. Readability of this material is enhanced by their style of documenting with extensive endnotes and references for readers who want to look at original documentation. (Of the 308 pages of the book, over 100 pages are endnotes, references, and indexes.)

The authors frame the history of barriers to women's access to leadership with a chronology of metaphors that offer powerful visual images of

how things have changed. The barrier for “most of human history” is described by the metaphor of the “concrete wall” (p.2). The twenty-year period dating from the mid-eighties is described by the “glass ceiling” metaphor—a term that the authors attribute to a *Wall Street Journal* writer (Hymowitz, 1986). Hymowitz is also said to have declared the glass ceiling as broken in 2004. (Note: This reviewer found evidence of other writers who attribute the first reference to the glass ceiling in the print press to an article in *Adweek* by Nora Frenkiel (1984).) Eagly and Carli argue that the facts call for a new metaphor and that a more appropriate structure describing women’s progress toward leadership positions is represented by the labyrinth. Careful readers will see that this is not the first time that the labyrinth metaphor has been called upon to describe women’s path to leadership. Eagly and Carli reference an article by Klenke (1997) in which the term “leadership and information labyrinth” was used to discuss obstacles that women face.

Chapter 3 (“Are Men Natural Leaders?”) examines the barrier that comes from a bias that men, and not women, are natural leaders. It relies on a meta-analytic review of studies on aggression (p. 36), laboratory games and experiments studying bargaining and negotiation (p. 37) and a meta-analysis of personality tests (p. 38). The evidence is presented in an easy-to-read and comprehensible manner with high impact graphs supporting the discussion. The authors investigate, as dispassionately as one can, the evolutionary psychology theory of sexual selection and reject it. According to this theory, “men are psychologically prepared for leadership because ancestral men competed with one another for access to fertile women. . . . Ancestral women were better able to reproduce and survive if they developed a preference for mates who could provide resources to support them and their children” (p. 30). One would hope that the theory was too old to be included in a book written in 2007 but, alas, this is not the case. Kingsley Browne, in a book published in 2002, is quoted as saying, “The dearth of women in high places can be understood only against the fundamental sex differences in temperament” (p. 48), and “women will be forever consigned to lower status” (p. 30).

Eagly and Carli do not refute the evolutionary psychology case with emotional arguments or weak anecdotal evidence. They challenge it with research on aggressiveness, dominance, assertiveness, competitiveness and leadership to reject the notion that men are natural leaders. They find that, with respect to personality differences that contribute to leadership, studies show a “female advantage at least as often as a male advantage” (p 47).

Not surprisingly, Eagly and Carli conclude that “women’s domestic responsibilities do contribute to their lesser access to power and authority in society” (p. 49). Hardly anyone will be surprised by the reported results from Bureau of Labor Statistics time diary studies on housework and wages. The ‘wow statistic’ is the staggering picture of inequity that emerges when the authors compare earnings for women and men over a typ-

ical 15-year period. Over such a period, a typical US woman's earnings are 38% of men's, largely due to time out of the workforce. Women's time away from paid work results in less continuous employment, less opportunity for advancement, and a resulting huge difference in lifetime earnings. Differences in time in the paid workforce cannot be accounted for by differences in educational credentials (p. 56), differences in ambition (p. 61), or differences in commitment to one's place of employment (p. 61).

From reviews of correlational research by economists and sociologists on wages and promotions, meta-analytic studies, and experiments, Eagly and Carli conclude that there is persuasive evidence that gender discrimination contributes to men's advantages in wages and promotions (p. 80). A basic assumption underlying the presentation of this evidence is that wage and promotion studies are relevant to leadership.

In studying the impact of prejudice as a barrier in the labyrinth, the authors assert that comparing people's associations about leadership and their associations about gender forms the 'crux' of their "psychological argument about the importance of gender to leadership opportunities" (p. 90). Readers will find lots of interesting evidence in this chapter from political polls, surveys, and experiments with college students. One of particular interest to women in higher education is the finding in a 2004 study that stereotypes of students at a women's college compared to those at a coed college were less by their second year and that the size of stereotyping at the women's college correlated with their contact with women faculty (p. 89).

Key to this and later chapters are the leadership concepts of agentic and communal. Stereotypically, men are seen as more agentic (assertive, directive, confident, competent) and women as more communal (warm, helpful, collaborative). Women who are seen as agentic (Hillary Clinton?) are less accepted than men who have communal qualities (Barak Obama?). Backed up by polling data, the authors conclude that "when people's ideas about leadership do not match their view of women, they evaluate women less favorably than men" (p. 97). The authors conclude that "stereotypes block women's progress through the labyrinth in two ways: by fueling people's doubt about women's leadership abilities and by making women personally anxious about confirming these doubts" (p. 95). For women in, or aspiring to, leadership positions, this chapter may be enlightening as to why some people react positively to them and why some traits and behaviors produce a negative reaction.

If one is not depressed or, at the least, discouraged prior to getting to Chapter 7, this may be the one that pushes readers over the edge, at least until they get to Chapter 10. This chapter deals with 'the double bind' which women face. That is, in this context, if they are communal (as expected because of their gender), they may be deemed too soft and not competent to lead; if they are agentic (as expected for leaders) they risk being resisted as too assertive, too self-promoting, and too 'masculine.' Through good use of anecdotes, quotes from high profile women and some women who remain anonymous, and synthesis of a range of studies, the authors conclude that,

for women, “the route to leadership wends through a labyrinth, where they find themselves diverted—sometimes by doubts about their competence, sometimes by doubts about their warmth, and sometimes by resentment of their very presence” (p. 117).

In a concise 15 page chapter, with more than 70 endnotes, Eagly and Carli cover leadership styles to examine whether women lead differently from men. They discuss task-oriented and interpersonally-oriented leadership; democratic and autocratic leadership; and transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership. A table (p. 129) nicely summarizes the meta-analysis (co-authored by Eagly) of 45 studies that compares women and men on transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire styles.

“The startling conclusions from this project are the following: women, more than men, have generally effective leadership styles, and men, more than women, have styles that are only somewhat effective or that actually hinder effectiveness” (p. 130).

The authors note that considerable changes in organizational practices and culture will have to take place before women attain equality of access to leadership positions. Chapter 9 demonstrates the many ways in which organizations disadvantage women through time demands, holding women to higher standards than men, not assigning appropriately challenging assignments in which women have a chance of succeeding, assigning women to managerial staff (rather than line) positions, unequal access to training programs, subjective evaluation and recruitment practices and tokenism. They conclude that because women have such difficulty in building social capital within their organizations, building networks outside the organization may be their best route (p. 146). This finding is reinforcing of the recently published study that found that women’s CEO skills are more portable than men’s because they have built networks external to their organizations.

“The star women in the study, thwarted in their efforts to integrate themselves into the existing power structure, went to great lengths to cultivate relationships with clients and contacts at the companies they covered. Their decision to maintain an external focus rested on four main factors: uneasy in-house relationships; poor mentorship; neglect by colleagues (notably the sales force and traders); and a vulnerable position in the labor market” (Groysberg, 2008).

Some readers may be disconcerted by the shift from the academic discussion on labyrinthine barriers to the advisory discussion in the latter part of the book. The tone and style of the last two chapters is very different from the rest of the book.

They recommend in Chapter 10 “that women should demonstrate that they are both agentic and communal” and that “they should create social capital” (p. 161). While this is sound advice, the specific advice that they offer to achieve these aims may raise ire, or eyebrows, for some readers.

Some readers may find it more effective to figure out for themselves how best to implement this advice.

The final chapter does an excellent job of summarizing answers to the questions raised in Chapters 3 through 9 about what holds women back, where the barriers are, and why the labyrinth is a metaphor more suitable than the glass ceiling. They conclude “advancing in a male-dominated hierarchy requires an especially strong, skillful, and persistent woman” (p. 191). To borrow from an old feminist line, fortunately that is not difficult.

Conclusion

While the tone of this book is academic, Eagly and Carli clearly and succinctly explain complex concepts, research, and findings, reflecting their familiarity with and knowledge of the literature and research on gender and leadership. Their integration of studies from multiple disciplines (psychology, sociology, management, organizational behavior, and economics) differentiates their approach from most discussions on leadership. They make their case, not on the basis of one empirical study or literature review but on the basis of literally hundreds of empirical studies, surveys, polls, small group studies, case studies, and behavioral experiments. They interject anecdotes just enough to enhance reader interest but by no means do they rely on anecdotal evidence to make their case.

The research behind their conclusions will be convincing to most readers. Obviously, not everyone will agree with the data or with the inferences drawn. As a case in point, a blogger on the *Wall Street Journal* site wrote, “The glass ceiling is a myth subscribed to by the statistically illiterate, who probably earned their degrees in English or journalism.” (That should provoke a good chuckle from those who know Eagly’s and Carli’s credentials.)

The main geographical focus of *Through the Labyrinth* is the U.S. but, when possible, they expand their discussion to research from other countries. What also stands out is that there is woefully little to report on in the way of studies of women of color and in different ethnic groups.

Young women, women who have benefitted from Title IX and civil rights legislation, may need the guidance of older women to see that they really do face a labyrinth filled with twists, turns, and dead ends. The glass ceiling metaphor was often interpreted as a barrier that women did not see until they got close to it. The implication was that women were misled by thinking that advancement opportunities were greater than they were in reality. Similarly, a young woman now standing at the beginning of the labyrinth may be misled by not realizing just how far into the labyrinth the center is and just how many barriers she will bump up against before she reaches her goal.

Eagly and Carli have performed a valuable contribution to women simply by replacing the discouraging glass ceiling metaphor with a hopeful metaphor that suggests that there is a path to success. The one extension of the metaphor that the authors could have emphasized more is that (as in the

case in one version of Greek mythology) having someone go before you with a 'string' to guide you through the labyrinth argues for current women leaders to serve as mentor/guides for a younger generation. (In Greek mythology, Ariadne gave a thread to her lover so that he could find his way out of the labyrinth after he had slain the monster, Minotaur.) (http://www8.georgetown.edu/departments/medieval/labyrinth/info_labyrinth/ariadne.html retrieved 4/25/2008).

This is a well-written, well-edited book worth the time of any woman who is in a leadership role, who aspires to a leadership role, or who cares about leadership possibilities for her daughters and granddaughters.

Suggested Readings

The best source of readings for women interested in furthering their knowledge of gender and leadership is the 40 pages of reference material at the back of *Through the Labyrinth*.

Readers of this journal may also enjoy articles that examine some of the principles of this book within the context of higher education. Suggested readings relating to tenure, letters of recommendation, committee participation and other topics are in the references at the end of this review.

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