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Book Review

Linda L. Lyman

CLOSING THE LEADERSHIP GAP: WHY WOMEN CAN AND MUST HELP RUN THE WORLD. Marie C. Wilson. New York: Viking, 2004 (190 pages)

Marie Wilson is out to get your attention in a book beginning with facts and stories from a national and global perspective about the leadership gap between women and men. For example, she offers this question from a European attendee at a March 3, 2003, gathering of global women leaders at the National Press Club in Washington, DC: “Can a nation call itself a democracy when ‘women are so grossly underrepresented?’” (p. 14). At the same meeting, a woman from South Africa

marveled that America, for all its progress, was still so backward in advancing women in politics. And with a conviction that took our breath away, she offered to help us become a democracy: ‘I will stand by you, sisters, I will stand by you’. (p. 15)

Reading this book helps one place the struggle for gender equity in leadership of schools into its rightful larger context: equal numbers of women in school, district, and university leadership will contribute to transforming not only these organizations, but also American culture, and ultimately the world. Starkly stated, Wilson’s premise is “that our future depends on the leadership of women—not to replace men, but to transform our options alongside them” (p. x). Growing poverty, a broken health care system, looming environmental problems, and other human and organizational crises throughout the fabric of our society reinforce the need for new options.

Since May, 2004, Wilson has been devoting her full energy to an organization she founded in 1998 called *The White House Project*, “whose mission is to advance women’s leadership in every sector, up to and including the presidency, changing society from a system built on the labor of women to one led equally by their vision” (p. xi). Although she presents innovative research to document the leadership gap, Wilson’s purpose in

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writing the book is fundamentally to mobilize women, in concert with men who care, to bring about a major cultural shift in perception that will alter the reality of women's leadership in American society, and close the leadership gap permanently.

Overview and Themes

Wilson writes succinctly about the leadership gap, "The problem is layered, as is the solution" (xii). In the book she presents both: the multi-layered problem and multiple approaches to its solution. Noting research on how women lead differently, Wilson argues in Chapter 1 that women's leadership matters. Her discussion about how women's leadership differs from men's goes back to Follett's (1924) advocacy of a democratic participatory style, includes Peters and Waterman's (1982), Helgesen (1995), and even Goleman's (1997) work on emotional intelligence. Evidence for how women's leadership matters comes from what the few women in the U. S. House and Senate have been able to accomplish through working from "values women bring to the arena, both in how issues are discussed and in the legislation that follows" (p. 9). She also shares lessons from abroad, where "women now hold at least 30% of the seats in the parliaments of 14 countries, and 22 women are speakers of parliaments," (p. 11) as well as 17 countries where women serve as heads of state. Why so few women, only 14%, in the U. S. Congress, she asks? Answers lie in the many-layered cultural barriers.

In Chapter 2, Wilson explores the concept of cultural barriers to women's leadership, saying that in this country we remain in denial. "Americans tend to ignore the societal and cultural foot dragging at the root of the matter, often failing to recognize deeply embedded gender roles that, for all our advancement, have kept our nation from realizing its potential" (p. 18), she writes. The barriers are cultural and emotional, societal and historical. A huge problem is how many people insist there is *no problem*, although there is much evidence, to the contrary, of widespread problematic perceptions that men should be leaders and women should not. Although blatant discrimination may be illegal, perceptions rule, Wilson asserts, and

must be directly attacked. Perceptions can change, but if we simply wait for a critical mass of women to make it through the pipeline to higher positions we will likely wait for several more centuries. The current flow is only a trickle. The female advantage is not taking hold because it has “never found value in the corporate or political worlds in America. Male assertiveness and control continue to be in higher demand” (p. 21). We must redefine the culturally accepted definitions and perceptions of leadership and who leaders are, Wilson concludes.

Wilson then tackles what she calls women’s four scarlet A’s, “the ways we are minimized and defined, ways we are kept in our place, and ways we keep ourselves from the life we might lead” (p. 29). These are: authority, ambition, ability, and authenticity. Each barrier is explored in detail in Chapters 3–6. In Chapter 3 she addresses the role of the media in supporting the perception that women neither have nor can handle authority. She counters, however, with how several women political leaders have changed such perceptions “by addressing nontraditional issues for women and insisting that they themselves be taken seriously” (p. 47). The chapter concludes with suggestions for what readers can do to help resolve the cultural contradictions that keep women in roles with limited authority. Research from campaigns of women political leaders serve as illustrations.

In Chapter 4 Wilson looks at how women with ambition are often required to cut down their ambitions to what is considered appropriate for women. Only two ambitions for women are unquestioned: “wife and mother” (p. 56). She links resistance to women’s ambitions with culturally pervasive fear that we women, if given a chance, will all climb right out of the private sphere into the public realm and never return. She indicates that women have been relegated partly by religion to the private sphere, but does not elaborate. Wilson is articulate about the barrier, but concludes with strategies for overcoming it, including women helping women, acting “as if” big dreams were the norm for women, and keeping a really big dream alive.

Wilson traces in Chapter 5 how perceptions of women as less able have developed historically over time through the devaluing of women’s work in the home. She cites “dueling polls,” that reflect our cultural schizophrenia about gender. For example, results from a January 2001 Gallup poll indicated that “a majority of Americans (57 percent) believed the country would be better governed with more of us [women] in office” (p. 77). However, in a Roper poll in November of 2001 the message was “Nearly six in ten Americans said they felt the sexes were naturally suited to different jobs” (p. 77). Then by spring 2002 another Roper poll

found a majority of Americans comfortable with women at the top of most industries—over 90 percent felt we can lead large technology companies, major film studios, universities, financial institutions, law firms, newspapers, charities, and large retail organizations, as well as serve in Congress. (p. 77)

She concludes the chapter with a powerful argument for women as peacemakers, for sustaining peace as the biggest contribution women in leadership could make to the world. Wilson elaborates on how women's values and skills could reshape our country's involvement in the international arena, ending with powerful stories of how women everywhere are working for peace. The final sentence of the chapter is, "If we interrupt even one entrenched pattern a day, we will create our own butterfly effect, changing the lives of women far beyond our own shores" (p. 93).

In Chapter 6 Wilson explores the authenticity barrier. She suggests that as we review the choices we have made we ask, "What songs have we stopped singing? What parts of ourselves have we cut off to survive" (p. 96). Looking at the cultural disconnect between "leader" and "woman," she advocates hanging on to authenticity and emphasizes the importance of refusing to imitate men as a pathway to authority. She considers the cost to men and boys, as well as to women and girls, of keeping one's caring side out of the public sphere. She documents the price, including school violence, we all pay for our culture's one dimensional view of manliness. She insists that we redefine what is meant by "real men" and "real women," calling for a "post heroic" understanding of leadership as "relational and collaborative (read female)" (p. 107). However, "traditionally, our culture sees leadership as men's work; when it is executed by women (or nontraditionally by men), it is often not acknowledged as leadership at all" (p. 106). She explains how as a result of gender codes "no one who practices post heroic leadership is seen as real leader material, even though they are the most real of all" (p. 110). She proposes a campaign for *role expansion* that allows both men and women to bring their private sides into the workplace and create genuine community. Her final point in this chapter is that we must move the private and public circles closer, so they almost fully overlap, and include women's voices. "Women's leadership, with its focus on community, could neutralize the nastier aspects of capitalism and shift the balance of our democracy, making it about *all* the people, using *all* the resources we have to make 'work' a community value" (p. 115), she writes. The chapter closes with this sentence: "When we finally assign value to the assets of women, when we encourage men to lead relationally, when we merge our public and private selves to create strong bonds at work and at home, we will alter the meaning of leadership" (p. 115). A disturbing slice of the chapter is the discussion of

gender and party politics in America, how we have developed “mommy and daddy parties, separated by the gender of their issues, even though that analysis is not so clean” (p. 111). The Democratic party is regarded as feminized, with only 22% of white men now identifying themselves as Democrats according to a July 2003 poll.

In the final three chapters Wilson offers what she and others have learned through experience about approaches to transforming culture. She reiterates her firm belief that we can overcome or change the common perception that men are leaders, and women are not. In Chapter 7 she reports on successful initiatives that have contributed to changing perceptions. Her first venture was the phenomenally successful *Take Our Daughters to Work* day, an idea that gave people something concrete they could do to make a difference for their daughters. She also initiated the creation of a *President Barbie* doll through working with Mattel. Doing so required her to look at the reality of Barbie’s potential for being a positive influence on aspirations, to hijack what had been for her an anathema, a negative cultural symbol, and use *President Barbie* to start new conversations for big and little girls. Wilson reviews and details ongoing media initiatives to change current effects of television, movies, and advertising on perceptions of women as leaders. Throughout the chapter she asks and answers the chicken or the egg question: “Does culture simply reflect society, or does it change the society it serves, moving it a step beyond its comfort zone?” (p. 123). The answer is both, with numerous examples. The chapter ends with a section headed *Don’t Just Watch TV! Do Something!*

In Chapter 8 Wilson presents two in-depth examples of how women’s leadership both transformed and was good for business. A law firm in Houston is presented as a business model for the expansion of women’s leadership, and the Women’s Initiative in the crisis-ridden state of Alabama is depicted as a model for grass roots political change. Both were fascinatingly similar in their problems and solutions. “Neither initiative assigned blame, but both took responsibility for future solutions” (p. 145), Wilson explains. These two models have succeeded in redrawing the frame and creating circles of work and family that overlap. She describes the women involved in each initiative as refusing to accept barriers and demanding new options. In the process of creating change, “ability went unquestioned, authority was given and used, ambition became a group value, and everyone spoke with an authenticity that brought strength and diversity, and a culture of inclusion” (p. 146). Such change required male allies, but also persistence on the part of women. Wilson concludes, “We must make it known that we are ready to lead, that, in fact, we demand it, not only to fulfill the promise of democracy, but also to save it from a laundry list of ills”

(p. 148). She calls on our courage to choose action, to “speak your mind by telling all your heart” (p. 149).

The final Chapter 9 is simply a compilation of quotes gathered from those friends and professional contacts to whom she sent two questions: (a) What were your biggest obstacles to attaining leadership, and what helped you most to overcome them?; and (b) If you could give leadership advice to the generation that will ultimately replace you, what would it be? The advice in this chapter is particularly worth pondering. One representative piece of advice is: “Don’t ever agree to take on a leadership role for the money, power, title, or prestige; take on the role because you have a passion for the cause” (Colleen Barrett, president and COO, Southwest Airlines) (p. 157). This is advice any woman leader would do well to heed, including those of us in education. The quotations in this chapter speak for themselves and Wilson ends the book on a positive and optimistic note.

Discussion

Wilson offers this description of her book in the introduction: “It is not a scholarly work and it is not comprehensive; it is a book about experience—*my* experience and the lessons I’ve learned—backed by research conducted and gathered at the White House Project and the Ms. Foundation [which she directed for 20 years]. It is a book of stories and facts, historical and current, with suggestions for how we might all, in our own way, put more women at the top, possibly even ourselves” (p. xiii). This “non-scholarly” book in fact has 57 references, and reports on more research than can be remembered after one reading. The author does not gloss over or minimize the leadership gap in any way, but remains fundamentally optimistic that concerted action can and is changing the current reality. “In each of the following chapters,” she writes in the introduction,

you will learn how, through guts and gumption, women have managed to outsmart the limits of our prescribed roles, providing a template for change. If enough of us follow their examples (and create our own methods of resistance), we will accelerate the movement of women into top positions.
(p. xv)

Her stories of individual and collective action are inspiring. The book is intended to be both *manifesto* and *handbook*, both a call and a guide to action. We in educational leadership need to pay attention.

Seemingly unconcerned about the error of essentializing, Wilson calls it a hot underground topic and clearly states and restates her view that women’s leadership differs, and that the difference is both powerful and needed in the 21st century. She describes female leadership as inclusive and other-

centered; featuring communicating across lines of authority, caring, and relationship building; and focused on broader issues that reflect values. Essentializing, seeing women as all alike, typically shows up in generalizations about gender differences in leadership style. Wilson manages to get away with asserting gender differences, however, perhaps because the book includes so many examples of diverse women from differing racial and ethnic groups and nationalities. In fact, she makes clear that we have much to learn from our sisters abroad, like how to become a truly democratic country, for example. Her position is that women leaders who are authentic will integrate female approaches into leadership, whereas those who take a more stereotypically male approach limit their own effectiveness.

Wilson's presentation of the cultural barriers to women's leadership is enlightening and more memorable for me than Jamieson's (1995) scheme of the "double binds." The scarlet letter works as a metaphor, and I for one am more than ready to wear the scarlet A's of *authority, ambition, ability, and authenticity*—to turn the barriers into badges of honor. Wilson not only has the ability to find the sliver of hope in the complex cultural puzzle of contemporary American society but with audacity she has attacked cultural constraints with the "tools of the master," as she characterizes television, movies, journalism, advertising, toys, and books. Whereas others fixate on the problem she sees "a huge opportunity to stretch the collective imagination, showing women and men in nontraditional roles and changing the perception of what is possible in the real world" (p. 119). She has used her passion, position, and contacts to be an agent of cultural change on a large scale. If Wilson can take on the whole culture surely we can work to change the face of educational leadership one school, district, and university at a time. Continued quiet *accommodation* is clearly not the answer.

Conclusion

Although the book does not directly address the leadership gap in education, I would recommend this book to any educator interested in understanding education's leadership gap and envisioning creative remedies. Wilson offers a vision we could learn from of how to close the leadership gap through innovative out-of-the box actions to change cultural perceptions, through claiming our strengths and supporting each other. At the very least, her book suggests that the work of women educational leaders is enormously important. By their very presence, women school, district, and university leaders strongly influence cultural change by providing a female image of leadership. As images change in the minds of the young, so over time do cultural perceptions. The common perception that men are leaders and women are not *must*, in the words of Blount (1998), "go the way of the

buffalo” if we are to have an America where women and men share leadership, if we are to have mutually supportive merged public and private worlds, if we are to have schools that teach democratic values, if we are to have a society where public policy emerges from human values, and if we are to have a world in peace.

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