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Review of *Her Place at the Table: A Woman's Guide to Negotiating Five Key Challenges to Leadership Success* by D. M. Kolb, J. Williams, and C. Frohlinger

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Book Review

Kolb, D. M., Williams, J., & Frohlinger, C. (2004). Her place at the table: A woman's guide to negotiating five key challenges to leadership success. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Susan C. Davenport

Introduction

The book, *Her Place at the Table: A Woman's Guide to Negotiating Five Key Challenges to Leadership Success,* discussed the challenges women still face as they transition to leadership positions. According to the authors, "with their numbers exceeding 50%, women are well represented in the middle ranks of management and the professions, yet, today they hold less than 1% of the top leadership positions" (p. 2). The lack of women in these positions is attributed in part to research demonstrating that women lack "the presumption of credibility and competence when she takes on a leadership role" (p. 3). Because of this perception, many of the women who are given leadership opportunities do not succeed, further reinforcing the stereotypes that may limit women's appointment to executive level positions.

Overview

The authors provide concrete information and examples of how women can overcome challenges when embarking on a new leadership role. They describe four tests women leaders can encounter when entering into leadership positions. These are the token test, the double bind test, the fitness test, and the right stuff test, and women should be ready to pass these tests before they can successfully lead in their organization.

In the token test, the authors state, individuals in the organization may not believe that a woman has earned an appointment, but rather was given it based on her gender. "To pass the token test, you need to be clear on why you were selected for the role and what you bring to the table" (p. 5).

The double-bind test asks, "Can a woman be both a woman and a leader?" The authors state, there is an expectation for women to enact male characteristics of leadership, but must do it in a feminine way in order to be perceived as authentic.

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The fitness test is described as the process women go through as their colleagues determine if they have the right experience for the job. "Passing the fitness test means recognizing that nobody is a perfect match for a leadership role in a rapidly changing global environment" (p. 9).

Finally, the right stuff test requires a woman to convince her colleagues that she has what it takes to be a leader. Because women are less likely to have visible accomplishments and are less likely to have profit and loss accountability in their prior roles, women must prove their worth early on in their tenure.

Kolb, Williams, and Frohlinger provide concrete advice on how to confront and pass these tests. They interviewed more than 100 women. Half of the women were in their first leadership position and the other half were about to take a role with increased responsibilities. The women were diverse in age and ethnicity, but the sample was not scientific. The sample was drawn from both the private and public sectors. Through their research, five key challenges emerged. The book dedicated a chapter to each of these challenges. First, they outlined common traps found for each challenge, and then explored strategies to use to respond to each challenge. A case study of a leader using these strategies was described as a guide to help individuals get ready to address these challenges in their own work.

The advice was designed not only for individuals, but for "organizations committed to moving women into leadership positions . . . as it is critical that top management realize the part visible support plays in the process of 'proving up'" (p. 15). The book concluded with two appendices: Appendix A—a roadmap to the challenges for individuals, and Appendix B—an outline of what organizations can do to give an organizational response to the common traps described by the authors. The organizational piece is critical since women cannot stand alone in resolving these challenges. Organizational leaders are critical change agents in making the climate more accepting of women in leadership positions (Yoder, 2001).

The five challenges outlined by the authors were:

- Intelligence—Women leaders need to have the right information to make good decisions.

- Backing of key players—Women leaders need support from others to succeed.
- Resources—The credibility of women leaders is dependent on the ability to procure resources.
- Buy-in—Women leaders' success is dependent on support from their peers as well as their direct reports.
- Making a difference—Women leaders cannot make a difference unless their contributions to the organization are recognized.

In the first challenge, the authors stated, women must get enough information about a position to make an informed decision in determining not only if it is the right fit for her, but in determining what resources need to be negotiated for prior to accepting the position in order to be successful. The first trap that women faced was the belief that they will be judged solely on how well they perform. This, however, is not always the case, and new leaders must learn about the organization's underlying values and culture. The next trap occurred when women disregard the negative information they learn because they do not want to pass up a great opportunity. "Rather than ignore or suppress the bad news, let that bad news contribute to an informed decision and provide the foundation for some serious negotiations" (p. 23).

The third trap is the optimism a woman leader might feel about the challenge ahead of her. Although this optimism will help her, it may impede negotiations if she feels she "can tip the odds in her favor by sheer will and energy" (p. 23). Finally, new leaders are often given new responsibilities when they do not feel they have a choice but to accept. In these cases, women still must negotiate what they need to be successful.

Therefore, in order to gain enough information to make an informed decision, the authors described four strategic moves. The first is to tap into networks. It is important to use both internal and external sources to get multiple perspectives on the situation. Women also should begin building relationships with individuals within the organization to test how well you will work together. If there is confusion or conflicting information presented, it should be pursued, not ignored. Finally, women leaders need to anticipate blockers in the organizations. By identifying the individuals in the organization who are not in favor of your appointment, women can begin to develop a strategy for dealing with them.

In Chapter 2, the authors described the second challenge: mobilizing backers who will provide critical support during the transition period. In the authors' informal research, they found that 68% of women believed they were not expected to succeed in their new role, and that one third of them were surprised by the close scrutiny their ability to lead received. The authors

tell of a paradox new leaders can face. "In order to lead, they first have to be perceived to have the authority to lead" (p. 62). Because leaders must deliver results quickly, they also must garner support from key leaders within the organization so that they are in a position to perform.

Common traps for this challenge included leaders believing that their appointment speaks for itself. However, according to the authors, all new leaders benefit from a credible introduction. Women also can believe that their results are most important and will speak for themselves. This is dangerous, however, because results often lag significantly behind efforts and are not always immediately visible. Perceptions of performance are important, especially in the early stages and must be worked at along with one's actual performance. Finally, women believed that asking for help will make them seem weak both to the backer and to their colleagues. However, asking for help can help build future relationships.

To avoid these traps, new leaders need to negotiate their backing from key leaders prior to beginning their position. They should secure responsibilities that are results-oriented, visible and signal authority. Then, key leaders should make the case throughout the organization as to why their new leader was the best person to move the organization forward. Allies within the organization can then spread good stories that will help shape perceptions and win over skeptics. Yoder (2001) found this in her research, as well, and stated that, "organizations need not to only enhance women's abilities by offering them training, but also to make group members aware of women's expertise by openly legitimizing them" (p. 822).

In Chapter 3, the authors discussed the third challenge: garnering resources by negotiating key alliances. "Resources—be they financial, human, or simply time—are necessary on a purely practical level. You need them to get the work done" (p. 111). It was critical for leaders to negotiate for these resources early in their tenure. Common traps included the belief that "I can pick up the slack." However, if women succeed in achieving goals with the resources allotted, later failure will be attributed to lack of effort rather than insufficient resources. Another trap is the admirable goal of controlling costs. Although the importance of controlling costs was recognized, resources were described as a symbol of influence and inability to secure them can be taken as an inability to execute plans.

Strategies that can avoid these traps included aligning resource requests to strategic objectives. The authors stressed the importance of linking the new leader's agenda with the organization's stated priorities. In addition, leaders should appeal to others in the organization who could benefit to assist in both securing resources and in helping the project to succeed. Finally,

leaders need to leverage their successes. By showing small successes, leaders can pave the way for additional resources.

> Resources determine to a large extent, what you can accomplish in a new assignment. But their impact is felt on two distinct levels: First is the practical, where trade-offs must be made between capacity and investment, between inputs and outcomes. But resources also carry symbolic weight. They are prime indicators of what an organization thinks important and who can be trusted to exercise judgment and leadership. (p. 144)

This is echoed by Yoder (2001) who stated that "having resources, both material and supportive, enhances women's effectiveness. Thus, organizations may expand women's power base by supplying leaders with the resources necessary to reward and help others" (p. 821).

In Chapter 4, the authors described strategies for negotiating buy-in from internal stakeholders. "To get peers and subordinates to put their weight behind a change agenda, you must first convince them that you can lead them through it successfully. You have to engage them on the agenda" (p. 151).

The authors described the first trap as "I know what I am doing is the right thing to do." However, if the team does not feel that their voice has been heard when they voice objections, it can lead to the next trap of the new leader feeling that the ownership of solving a problem is all their own. Failure to bring in the team to help fosters mistrust. It also can lead to missed opportunities for resolution. Another trap is too much reliance on the support of senior management rather than fostering support from subordinates. Finally, the trap avoidance of issues in the short-run can allow resisters and blockers to gain traction and jeopardize long-term success.

Strategic moves discussed by the authors included listening to the team and to peers across the organization. This can lead to broad links across an organization that can move a new leader's agenda and help their team to feel less isolated. New leaders should also work to solve nagging problems in the organization so that the team has concrete examples of how new changes have helped them within the organization. Finally, leaders need to create opportunities for themselves and their team to learn. By encouraging dialogue, taking chances and giving team members opportunities for new skills, buy-in will be smoother and more lasting.

Finally, in Chapter 5, the authors discuss the last challenge: making a difference. "Women want to make a difference. To do this their contributions have to be recognized and their value then becomes visible to others" (p. 15). Common traps in achieving this strategy included needing more expertise in an area, believing that performance speaks for itself, instead of understanding the need to call attention to successes, and setting the bar too high on their

expectations of success. Women need to believe in themselves first, and set reachable goals.

Strategies to avoid these traps included looking for opportunities within the organization's priorities where leaders can show incremental wins. Also, leaders should look to fill unmet needs and should make their value visible to the team. "By being seen as a leader who is trying new things, who has a vision for how work can be done, you make your value visible" (p. 232).

Discussion

The authors do a good job in providing pragmatic advice for women about to begin or aspiring to executive leadership positions. Although they acknowledge that it is unfair to women to be faced with these five challenges, they focus their attention on how to work within the system rather than change it. They do, however, challenge organizations to recognize the challenges so that organizational leaders can help women succeed.

Sometimes, the advice presented in the book is contradictory. Although organizations benefit from a feminine leadership style, women can be penalized for being too feminine. However, women can't be too masculine or they risks being blocked and their efforts resisted. Yoder (2001) acknowledged that this challenge is present in the research on women in leadership as well, and stated that "what emerges in scholarship on leadership may appear contradictory at times, arguing that women should do one thing as well as the opposite." The authors were aware of the dilemma, but their advice seemed difficult to execute while maintaining one's sense of self. For example, in describing the double-bind test, the authors advised women to "enact the 'masculine' requirements of leadership but in an authentic way that draws on 'feminine' abilities" (p. 7).

The case studies presented to highlight what to do and what not to do in each challenge assist the reader in applying the advice to actual work situations. Some, however, serve as a cautionary tale of what not to do, and there is no advice for women on how to salvage a leadership opportunity if a common trap has not been avoided. Readers who realize that they have not negotiated the challenges well in their current position may feel that their best option is to move to a new position and try again.

Although the focus of the book is on corporate leadership, educational administrators were included in the sample. The advice is clearly transferable to the educational arena and a helpful road map as women begin to prepare for their next opportunity. Although the gender gap in educational is not as great as within the corporate world, there is still great disparity. In higher education, according to Tenenbaum (2000), only 20% of college presidents

are women. In the K-12 arena, 75% of education degrees are earned by women, but only 35% of principals and 12% of superintendents are women. Educational administrators, then, can take advantage of both the advice for their own personal advancement and incorporate the organizational solutions in their own workplace. The advantages for the educational organization are great. While discussing the higher education gender gap, Chliwniak (1997) discussed the advantages of increased female leadership and stated that

> several scholars contend that a leader with an emerging, inclusive style of leadership could provide an institution with new values and ethics grounded in cooperation, community and relationships within the community. Higher education's leadership also needs to become more reflective of the constituents it serves. (p. 3)

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Her Place at the Table: A Woman's Guide to Negotiating Five Key Challenges to Leadership Success* provided sound advice for middle managers looking to move to executive leadership positions. The book also is useful for organizations looking for ways to change their climate to one where women leaders are more likely to succeed. The authors acknowledged that more women are needed at the leadership table, and that through no fault of women, they continue to experience challenges based solely on their gender. The authors acknowledge that "doing leadership differs for women and men and that leadership does not take place in a genderless vacuum" (Yoder, 2001). The case studies brought to life the challenges women face and the strategies women can employ to overcome them. I recommend it highly for educational administrators to use for their own professional growth as well to help affect change in their organizations.

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