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Female Leaders - It's Not Just About Gender: A Case Study

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Abstract

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Keywords

female leadership, executive women, women career advancement, women career best practices, managerial gender issues

Introduction

The study of leadership has been an ongoing endeavor for many years, and the topic continues to intrigue scholars in the 21st century. As observed by Mark Safferstone, Executive Director of the Center for Leadership, Technology, and Professional Development, University of Mary Washington, "…leadership is a function of behavior – motives, competencies, and styles – within the context of the situation" (Safferstone, 2005, p. 960) and it can be learned and practiced.

Beginning in the early 1900s, a trickle of women began working outside the home. With the advent and later aftermath of the second world war, many women who had worked to support the war effort found themselves unemployed despite their desire to continue working. It was during this era that Abraham Maslow began examining human motivation and personality and posited human behavior is based on a hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). These needs range from physical, security/safety, love/belonging, to self-esteem and self-actualization. According to Maslow, if the bottom three levels are not met, the person becomes anxious; thus, these needs *form a compelling drive to survive* (Burton, 2017; Cangemi, Davis, Sand, & Lott, 2011). The need for self-esteem and self-actualization complete Maslow's model. Against this backdrop, women pushed to gain the right to remain or begin working in organizations, and they were met with societal push-backs, and denied opportunities to develop higher self-esteem and actualize their abilities.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 provided females the opportunity to enter the market for previously all male-held jobs. Five years later, *The Managerial Woman: Survival Manual for Women in Business* was published. It quickly became a best-seller. In that study, all the women interviewed had obtained their first jobs through their fathers or family connections (Hennig & Jardim, 1977) and, as Karabell (2016) pointed out, its focus was on *survival* rather than success.

Since that time, a number of studies have tracked women in top managerial positions (Baker & Cangemi, 2016; Heller, Stepp, & Thompson, 2016; Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010; Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013; International Labour Organization, 2015; Knorr, 2005; Long, 2014; Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998). All of these noted that, while the number of working women has increased

and females are running more businesses, overall women are still struggling regarding career advancement and the opportunity to actualize their potential. Of particular interest was one study which pointed out there seems to be a scarcity of female role models for successful managerial leadership (Ibarra et al., 2013).

According to Ibarra (2010), the career die is cast in the first job, depending upon whether a new employee is coached, developed, mentored, or even has a bad manager. Several studies have indicated there are still few female role models at the top of US companies (Noe, 1988; Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996: Singh, Vinnicombe, & James, 2006). In one study of female professionals, the women preferred learning from external role models rather than from females at the top of *their own* professions (Singh et al, 2006).

As of 2014, women held nearly 52% of all professional-level US jobs; yet they lagged behind their male counterparts in leadership positions with only 14.6% of senior managers and 4.6% of *Fortune* 500 CEOs (Warner, 2014). Interestingly, while we did not find any studies specifically addressing best practices for female executives or for female advancement, there were a number of articles offering career advice and tips for women in the workplace (Berhane, 2015; Gray, 2016; Heller et al., 2016; Karabell, 2016; Zarya, 2016). Several of these were targeted for millennial women (Crichlow, 2014; Healy, 2015; Pierson, 2016; Zarya, 2015). This recent number of articles would seem logical since, as of 2016, *80% of the workforce represents millennials* (PwC, 2016). Of these, many of the females are quite aware that despite outperforming their male counterparts, their advancement rate has not been as stellar.

Therefore, this article attempts to suggest some practical lessons learned for women managers from one of the authors, the first female director of manufacturing at a *Fortune* 500 company. Her experiences are written in first person, followed by a summary of her learning.

From "Managerial Woman" to Female Leader

The First Job Out of College

My male peers were struggling to get one job offer. I stopped my job search after offer number six. I was an affirmative action hire. The offer I accepted was Project Manager in a unionized plant in Chicago. I was the first female manager. Although my engineering degree prepared me for the technical challenges, it did nothing to prepare me for the workplace prior to Title 7 of the Civil Rights Act of 1986. The easy part was first female manager; the hard part was female leader. I was on my own to create my own rules.

Leading Without Rules, "Accepting Hazing"

The male managers were all in the vernacular "factory hearty." This meant they were not concerned about broken fingernails, loud noises, obnoxious smells, climbing ladders, angry employees, assignments on the night shift, swearing, sweating, etc. They could tolerate and thrive in this environment. A female was assumed to lack heartiness until proven otherwise. Faint of heart need not apply.

The hazing was a rite of passage, a way to establish my heartiness. Fortunately, most of the hazing was, at least in hindsight, rather funny. The wrench I was sent to get was too heavy to lift; I dragged it. The flagpole I was sent to grease; I learned flagpoles don't need greasing. The gift I was given; a sculpture of a male body part. I said thank you. *There were no rules*. I chose my response to each situation. The hazing eventually ended. Yes, I hazed back, as turnabout is fair play.

A Sense of Humor

I believe my boss agonized over my first project as project engineer, as we were both in the spotlight. I was the first female manager, and he was the boss of the first female manager. He selected a project for me that had already passed the necessary first steps of financial justifications, approvals, and engineering work.

After much deliberation, he handed me a set of drawings and an approved project. The project title was "Renovate the Male Managers' Locker Room." Hourly employees were assigned to satellite male and female locker rooms spread throughout the 32-acre plant. On the other hand, the management, all males up until that time, had been assigned the Managers' Locker Room. Office employees, all females, were assigned the Women's Locker Room. My locker was in the Women's Locker Room. Thus, assigning me to renovate the male Managers' Locker Room could have been perceived as rubbing my nose in the fact I was not allowed to use the locker room previously assigned to "managers."

The project was designated as a plant project. This meant outside contracting firms would not be utilized. The plant's unionized crafts—carpenters, sheet metal, plumbers, etc., would supply the necessary labor to complete the

project and, as the project engineer, I was responsible for supervising the craft employees assigned to this project. Since a carpenter was needed for the project, I scheduled a meeting with Ed, the plant carpenter. I was convinced Ed would ask me a technical question I would not be able to answer. Instead, he asked me if I was a Women's Libber. I had to stop and think. I pointed out that we were standing in an all-male locker room next to the urinals. In this case, it was clear that launching into a lengthy discussion of women's rights would have been a disaster. In hindsight, I realized that the selected project provided me with the opportunity to establish myself and develop higher self-esteem in the perception of my male colleagues (Maslow, 1954).

"One of the 'Guys" - Earning Respect and Acceptance as the Female Leader

In 1974, as the first female manager in a union factory, I quickly learned there is a fine line between normal and dysfunctional. Separating the normal difficulties experienced by anyone, regardless of gender, from problems that were specifically female was not always easy. Some issues were clearly "over the line" regarding sexual harassment, and these were easy to recognize; yet often they were hard to deal with effectively. During that time period, there were really no guidelines as to what was considered an effective or an ineffective approach. I wondered whether success was defined as having no repeat offenders. Additionally, I often thought, "this wouldn't be happening if I were a guy. What do I do?"

Lacking sexual harassment law, I was provided the opportunity to handle things alone. In fact, had sexual harassment policies been fully implemented at the time of my hire, this likely would have limited my opportunity to succeed. While I recognize the power of law is needed to protect females from egregious acts, unfortunately political correctness and trivial issues have minimized the real value of female leadership. In my opinion, *we still lack the wisdom to separate true sexual harassment from normal male/female interaction*.

One of the issues I faced was teasing, which could be dangerous. I had the opportunity to challenge interactions as sexually harassing, and I solved these problems alone with no sexual harassment forms or human resource intervention. There were no legal issues only one female manager facing the male offender alone. Since I could make my own rules, my determinant was: did he violate the policy or not. If he did, I told him to stop.

Males could voice their opinions without fear their careers would be limited and they would be branded as chauvinists, a word we do not hear much today. It was refreshing for all to have the freedom to speak and respect different points of view. Conversations were hearty and often bordered on crude; yet we could finish any debates at the plant tavern on Friday afternoon where we talked 'shop.' It was truly an opportunity to listen and learn the ropes from the experienced male-only management team. I knew I was trying to enter their world, build relationships, and earn their trust and respect.

Male Leaders Testing Female Leaders

I thought my male colleagues were helping me when they suggested I ask for an additional machinist for my staff. Little did I realize the machinist I would get was an infamous trouble maker. His abilities were not questioned. The quality of his work was excellent. The quantity of work was sadly lacking due to his frequent "absences" from the job site. He was the master at disappearing. In a 32-acre plant this is not difficult to do. He had learned through the years to play the system. He had the labor union and management dancing with fear of a discrimination suit-a bad back coupled with seniority status. He conspicuously parked his white Cadillac at the front entrance to the plant. I learned when he disappeared his Cadillac also disappeared. How do I hold him accountable for actually not working when he is supposed to work? This was a challenge even the most experienced manager could not tackle. I was determined to deal with him. I studied the union contract and disciplinary procedures. I knew the rules, and I was ready.

Once I discovered my male peers had "set me up," I was fearless to a fault. My attitude changed to one of "I'm going to castrate you. I have an in with the plant manager, and he listens to me." The reason was the plant manager realized he had a supervisor with the intestinal fortitude and strong self-worth/confidence to deal with the insidious Houdini (Maslow, 1965).

Followers Developing Their Female Leaders

The title of female manager should not be confused with female leadership. The job is just that-manager. On the other hand, followers play a role in determining the success of the female leader. For example, the real female leader is both able and willing to use a rope ladder to climb down

into the inside of a giant tank. The female manager would likely delegate that role.

The Wisdom to Know When Males Should Be the Leaders

Friday afternoon at the tavern. A well-liked hourly employee was retiring. His department was planning a celebration, and both managers and hourly employees were planning to celebrate at the local tavern. I supervised all of the employees including Mel, the pipefitter, who planned to attend. While he was one of the best pipefitters in the plant, he was a thorn in my side and my harshest critic.

At the tavern the alcohol flowed freely. One very intoxicated male employee approached me with unwelcome and aggressive advances. Although the situation was getting out of hand, I was confident and rather determined to handle him myself. Suddenly, like the knight in shining armor, Mel came to defend me. Sometimes there is wisdom in not leading.

When the Female Should Be the Leader

Jackie, the first female electrician. Jackie, an experienced electrician, was the first female to become a member of the maintenance department. My boss was pleased she was joining the company and asked me to handle her orientation and mentoring.

Jackie's high school diploma was from a local all-male trade school. After helping her with a work uniform and locker assignment, it was clear to both of us she would be facing tremendous teasing and hazing. Although I was ever confident I could handle my own such incidents, I was unsure about my ability to help another female through this phase since I typically relied on hardiness and resilience. This new teaching role challenge required a softness and compassion.

Toughness

The hotel room assault. It was my first opportunity to travel for business, and the thought of a travel expense account and a week of company sponsored training was exciting. Several of my peers were attending a different training program for more experienced managers. Since we were booked at different hotels, I was grateful when a peer phoned and suggested I join their group for dinner. One of the managers was to pick me up at the hotel. Finally, my peers are accepting me, I thought.

That thought ended when I opened the door to my hotel room and, without words or hesitation, he began assaulting me. *It was frightening and it was wrong.* It definitely should not have happened, but it did. Fortunately, I was not physically harmed and decided not to report the incident. I concluded I was responsible for protecting myself and I would be facing a "she said/he said." Reporting the incident could do harm to my management reputation. Looking back, I admit I did not consider protecting other women from this person.

Passing the Baton – What I Learned

Early on my boss told me to hire "for what could not be taught"– qualities such as a sense of humor, resiliency, "earning your way in" and fitting in, not allowing a chip on the shoulder to develop, and having a passion for the work. Technical competence could be learned. I learned to appreciate his wisdom the more I encountered challenges on the job.

One of the biggest things I learned was it was not always about me. I was expected to be part of the team, part of the group. At the end of the day I still had to resolve the issues. I learned the Rs of leadership included being resourceful, resilient, an expert "reframer," a reality checker, and able to relegate the rules of relationships. I had to become resourceful at getting people to do things they really didn't want to do and not let anything get in the way of accomplishing things for the company or team.

I had the chance to make rules to govern the relationships at work since there was no precedent. There was no sexual harassment policy; the EEOC was just coming into being. I wondered if I was simply an Affirmative Action hire rather than hiring for "me" and what I could offer.

In my relationships with colleagues and subordinates, I could draw the line or not–and I often used humor to smooth over awkward situations. Often there was "political incorrectness," and I could let it go if I chose to. Finally, the men started thinking of their own kids and wives–would they really want THEM to be treated the way they were treating me? The lack of rules, structures, and laws worked to my advantage. This is an example of my reframing these various situations.

These experiences occurred a number of years ago. While some may view these experiences as "war stories" of an experienced woman, they shaped me and became a part of who I am today. Each person's experiences will similarly shape her/him as a leader.

There is certainly no shortage of books and articles on leadership today, and hopefully we are wise enough

to recognize the good leaders from the bad. Perhaps we are not as wise in recognizing the inherent uniqueness in leadership. Leadership is as unique as fingerprints–adapted to personality, situation, and style. In order to touch the lives of others–which leaders will do–it is necessary to embrace the unique contributions only each leader can make. As someone once said, the purpose of leadership is to create starts not become one.

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