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Foreword

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Foreword

Rosabeth Moss Kanter

Two significant facts are apparent from reading this volume. First, the authors are themselves examples of women overcoming barriers, breaking into formerly all-male domains, succeeding against the odds, and exercising economic, political, and educational leadership — on behalf of other women as well as on behalf of the institutions they serve. Thus their own lives are eloquent rebuke to anyone who still thinks that women cannot manage effectively in any realm, or that women must always take second place to men, or that family responsibilities make women less serious about public responsibilities, or that women fail to help one another; none of those old excuses for discrimination can carry any weight in light of the impressive achievements of the authors.

Second, however, their articles make equally clear that *individual trickle-up is not enough*. The statistics marshaled and the experiences examined throughout this book show that the whole social system must be changed if women in general, not just a hardy, pioneering few, are to gain economic power. The apparent openness of American society to the overachiever from an underprivileged minority group who can pull herself up by the panty hose and succeed makes it too easy to assume that the problems and solutions are all individual ones. It makes it easy for those in power to point to the token overachiever as an example for the rest of the group's members who are struggling merely to survive; "Why can't you be more like her?" is today's version of Henry Higgins's lament, "Why can't a woman be more like a man?" And then, having applauded the token, the majority can turn their backs on the rest.

Some individual trickle-up is helpful, even though it is not enough to have token women leaders dotting the economic landscape. Certainly role models count. One Sandra Day O'Connor is worth more than her weight on the Supreme Court in female applications to law school, or in female high school students who enter into their civics class discussions more vociferously. One Sally Ride in the astronaut corps, and suddenly even the stars are open to women. But even when role models provide inspiration and motivation, there is so much more involved in achievement of economic power than knowing that *someone else* can do it. Each woman has to feel that she *herself* can do it, and then she needs the coaching, the education, the opportunity, the support, the time, and the tools to do it.

Coaching, education, opportunity, support, time, and tools are not individual matters, they are social system issues. They have to do with patterns in a society that have system-

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atically made it harder for women than for men to attain economic independence and economic power. The articles in this volume document a large number of such patterns, ranging from eye contact with male versus female students in the elementary school classroom to the greater difficulties encountered by female than male MBAs.

Thus the next step in the women's movement, as reflected in the comments of the women leaders represented here, involves strategies for societal change. Societal change means change in every institution, from education to business to government to the family; it means the creation of new programs and new institutions, voluntary or philanthropic or public-private partnerships, that offer innovative alternatives for helping people over hurdles; and it means grassroots, local actions, city by city and sphere by sphere, that open opportunity and remove barriers to success. The articles collected here share that focus on societal change. While inspirational in many cases, they are not oriented toward self-help for women. They are not showing women how to break into male worlds or to fit into the mainstream establishment. Nor are they aimed at attacking the imagined prejudice of individual men. Instead, they wonder how to make fundamental changes in social institutions that will facilitate, if not necessitate, women's attainment of economic power.

Strategies for Change

Women face a range of issues, and they are not all the same for all women. Ethnicity, minority status, and sexual orientation add complications to "straightforward" issues of getting training or advancing on the job. Lifting oneself out of poverty is considerably different from lifting oneself out of middle management. New concerns are introduced at various points in the life cycle; problems of computer literacy for schoolgirls at age eight have little in common with problems of reentry into the work force for displaced homemakers at age forty-eight. Furthermore, the labor market (and thus women's prospects) in Silicon Valley is different from that in Flint, Michigan, or in New England.

Therefore, many strategies for change are inherently issue-specific and inherently local. Even those issues such as reproductive freedom (the debate over "choice") which affect all women as women must often be dealt with on a local basis — differently for Catholic women than for Jewish women, differently for pregnant teenagers than for victims of rape or abuse. This very fact has made it easy for the press in recent years to fail to see a national women's movement when in fact there has been a great deal of grassroots action and support for local feminist causes, even when they did not carry an overt feminist banner. The reproductive rights debate certainly has the potential to again energize a significant, visible national movement uniting many groups of women — to be the one issue that stands for every other issue affecting the lives of women. But other strategies for change are manifested through scores and scores of local action groups, each one addressing specific issues.

Change is inherently organizational, then. It consists of creating new organizations — some permanent, some temporary alliances — and changing the policies of existing ones. Now we are on my territory. I have devoted many years of my professional life to the study of organizational change, and I have identified the steps and skills required for effective "change mastery." Many of these are reflected in the programs and approaches to women's economic empowerment contained in this volume. Two are especially significant: vision and coalition building.

Vision

An inspiring vision that challenges conventional wisdom and opens new possibilities is one of the central tools of leadership. Leaders articulate and communicate a compelling vision of a different kind of future, and the vision of what is possible encourages people to move forward to change circumstances. A vision of a different future for Hispanic girls, for example, was the inspiration for the Regis College program to train future female leaders. A vision provides a picture of a destination or a goal toward which we can strive.

One important part of the formulation of a vision is the careful choice of language with which to convey it. For example, the political struggle for reproductive rights is in part a battle for control of language; the words used, “pro-choice” or “pro-life,” stimulate emotions and change the public’s responses. So the group that defines the situation in the most attractive, compelling terms is likely to win the battle. In the case of this volume, “economic empowerment for women” is a more potent rallying cry than “women’s rights” and more descriptive of concrete outcomes than “equality.”

Dissatisfaction with the status quo is not enough to trigger change. Awareness of problems may create readiness for mobilization among the disadvantaged, but it may also absorb so much of people’s energy that their ability to fight for change is dulled. A vision of what is possible, a source of hope and inspiration, is the necessary ingredient for energizing change.

Coalition Building

A second major piece of change mastery is the ability to sell the vision to supporters, to forge alliances with those who have the power to move the idea forward or stop it in its tracks. Leaders begin with their own team; indeed, if the core group initiating a change effort does not function as a team, the effort can fall apart from in-fighting, dissension, sabotage, or loss of key staff. But next, the initial team needs to identify whose support will be essential to making the change and how to get them involved or get them to invest in the change effort.

There are some powerful examples of excellent coalition building in this book. Mary Jane Gibson describes the coalition behind pioneering legislation to increase economic security for new working parents and the ways the core group reached out across institutions. Marilyn Swartz Lloyd describes the sales process used for an innovation in Boston zoning that would retain well-paid manufacturing jobs. Through a well-managed team process for interactive learning, the core group built a coalition of supporters (converting potential opponents into allies) by approaching each stakeholder group, listening to their reactions, and modifying their approach to take the reactions into account. They also made their vision concrete by developing themes each week. The cooperation involved is comparable to the kind of collaborative learning in the classroom advocated by Sherry Penney. Moreover, it works.

Resistance to Change

Any discussion of strategies for change must take into account the resistance that inevitably accompanies change. Sometimes resistance must be overcome to initiate something new, to break new ground; sometimes it must be overcome to ensure that changes already made will stick. Social change is inherently fragile and unstable.

Some forms of resistance are individual matters, rooted in human factors, some are political, and some are organizational.

People may resist change out of anxiety about uncertainty, out of discomfort with the unknown. Battered women who remain in abusive situations may do so out of fear and insecurity. Organizational leaders who fail to take action on child care may do so out of concerns that they are dealing with matters that will move into realms beyond their knowledge or control, or they may worry about how other constituencies will view it. Certainly self-interest is a reason that those with power resist change that threatens their dominance or even their feelings of mastery over a tidy world. But inertia often characterizes even those who might benefit from change. “Why do anything if I don’t have to?” people may say to themselves. “Why do anything if the action might make the situation worse, not better?”

Those advocating and leading change must be prepared to counter uncertainty with information that increases comfort with change. For example, demonstration projects that show how someone else did it; blow-by-blow descriptions of the action steps involved with assurance of careful monitoring of each before one has gone too far; abundant communication; and acknowledgment of the discomfort itself as a legitimate accompaniment to change.

Some resistance to change is political in that change threatens the power and control of some groups, or that resisting the women’s movement is a way for some people to make political capital (e.g., Phyllis Schlafly). Loss of somebody’s control always accompanies change, in that change disturbs an established order. While the winners and losers may not always be immediately apparent, savvy politicians interested in their own power can find them, as in specious arguments that equal employment opportunity “takes jobs away from men.” All change has a political dimension. Leaders of change must anticipate the mobilization of opposition and be prepared to counter it.

Strategies, of course, are situation specific, but they include co-opting potential opposition by inviting other leaders into the decision-making process; bypassing or ignoring potential opposition by establishing quiet beachheads in favorable areas until they become strongholds that can be made public; or using power to remove opponents from the scene (such as embarrassing a company into firing a biased manager or defeating anti-choice candidates at the polls). Direct confrontational battles are best used as a last resort, because the polarization and devastation that ensues makes for hollow victories.

Finally, there is systemic resistance to change, resistance rooted in the organization of complex systems. When change requires the cooperation of different institutions (for example, business and government or education and business or even a set of companies in the same community), resistance may be triggered not by the *idea* of change, which may even be received favorably by individual leaders, but by the difficulties of getting organizations to collaborate. Public sector leaders such as Evelyn Murphy and Mary Jane Gibson have experienced this first hand. A relationship of trust and cooperation between organizations must precede any action to make change that lies across their boundaries, such as business-government cooperation for child-care facilities.

Resistance to change can sometimes be daunting. Luckily, however, the pioneers and change entrepreneurs represented in this book have not been discouraged. Their energy and their enthusiasm are inspirations to all of us.

Anyway, when the enormity of the task of societal change threatens to overwhelm us, we can always turn to a simpler strategy for change: direct individual action. If the personal is political, then so is the economic. Every time we open our wallets to buy a product or write a check, to pay for a service, we can empower ourselves to provide economic opportunity for women. 🍌