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Women in History

Mary Parker Follett: A Leadership Theorist Ahead of Her Time

Sandy Gaspar

As a management and leadership voice in the 1920s and 30s, Mary Parker Follett was far ahead of her time (Burnier, 2003; Business Strategy Review, 2002; Harrington, 1999; Smith, 2002). Follett was born in 1868 in Quincy, Massachusetts and was educated at Radcliffe. She began her professional life as a social worker in Roxbury, an ethnically and socio-economically diverse neighborhood outside Boston. She believed strongly in the power of diversity to enrich society and advocated the grass roots development of community-based organizations and adult education (Smith, 2002, p. 3). After 1908, she became involved in a movement to establish community centers in public schools and contributed to many community-based and governmental organizations, including the Women's Municipal League, the Massachusetts Minimum Wage Board, and the National Community Center Association.

Throughout her lifetime, she refused to accept the dualities and dichotomies that threatened to divide individuals and organizations. In her book, *The New State*, she argued that group organization and local networks were keys to the advancement of democratic societies (1918). She delineated crucial elements of her philosophy: (a) individual and groups are not antitheses, (b) there is no necessary contradiction between the citizen and the state, (c) freedom and determinism are not opposites, and (d) self and others are not opposites (Smith, 2002, p. 5). She advocated and practiced group processing techniques and, as Boom (2002) noted, she believed in the constructive use of conflict for organizational growth (p. 17). She wrote *Creative Experience* in 1924 as the result of a growing interest in industrial relations and management. Until the end of her life, she wrote, lectured, and served as a management consultant for organizations in the United States and Britain.

Her management theories were in stark contrast to Frederick Taylor's scientific management principles, which emphasized productivity and efficiency. Follett, instead, advocated shared power among management and labor, who together cooperate "to define not only productivity but situations of social justice" (Smith, 2002, p. 8). Her work, like contemporary leadership studies, stressed the importance of collaboration, shared decision-making and

About the Authors

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human relations. In addition, she was among the first to describe leaders who “saw the whole rather than the particular, organized the experiences of the group, offered a vision of the future and trained followers to become leaders (Business Strategy Review, 2002).

Follett disagreed with the prevailing belief that leaders had to be “aggressive, masterful, dominating . . . these characteristics are not the qualities essential to leadership but, on the contrary . . . they often mitigate directly against leadership” (Nation's Business, 1997, p. 24). She described the kind of leader that motivated her:

The skillful leader then does not rely on personal force; he controls his group not by dominating but by expressing it. He stimulates what is best in us, he unifies and concentrates what we feel only gropingly and scatteringly, but he never gets away from the current of which he and we are both an integral part. He is a leader who gives form to the inchoate energy in every man. The person who influences me most is not he who does great deeds but he who makes me feel I can do great deeds.

Above all, Follett believed that the role of the leader was to transform group experience into power: “And that is what experience is for, to be made into power. The great leader creates as well as directs power” (Nation's Business, 1997, p. 24).

Of her writings on leadership Bennis said, “It makes you wince when you sincerely believe, as I do, that what you have written about leadership was already literally bespoken by another 40 years before your precious and 'prescient' sentences saw the light of day” (p. 24).

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