

Through the Labyrinth: the truth about how women become leaders

Alice H Eagly and Linda L Carli (Harvard Business School Press, 2007)

If you wanted to read just one book about women and leadership from a business perspective, this is surely the one! The claim of the sub-title may sound a touch arrogant, but I believe it is accurate. This is a remarkable book, encompassing research from a wide variety of disciplines, and drawing on thinking in this area over the last 30 years.

The book sets out to address the question of why women are excluded from leadership. It suggests that the image of 'labyrinth' is now more accurate than that of 'glass ceiling', a term first used in 1986.

The term 'glass ceiling' suggested an absolute barrier, but this is no longer the case. Some women are now leading at the highest levels. This is remarkable progress; but what is stopping more women from progressing? The answer, the authors believe, lies in a variety of barriers, resulting in a kind of 'labyrinth' which women have to negotiate if they are to reach top leadership roles.

The chapters explore a range of questions: are men natural leaders? Do family responsibilities hold women back? Is discrimination still a problem? What is the psychology of prejudice towards female leaders? Do women lead differently from men? How do some women find their way through the labyrinth?

While Christian leaders may not identify with the book's focus on 'top' leadership: the aspiration to be a director, CEO or even US President - these questions relate remarkably well to issues in the Church. They relate both to the question of women bishops, and other issues such as the deployment of women clergy/ministers, and the opposition some women still face.

The authors draw on 'meta-studies' (studies of studies), so the conclusions drawn from social science research are, I believe, as good as it gets. While it is impossible in a short review to do justice to this book, I have included a few of its conclusions, to give a flavour of the kind of material it contains:

- The psychological portrait of good leaders is neither masculine nor feminine, but includes traits from both these domains in equal measure.
- Prejudice against women flows from the mismatch between people's mental associations about women and about leaders.
- Associations can change, and if people are shown photos of women leaders, they begin to associate 'woman' and 'leader'.
- Organisations can remove barriers to women by more flexible working, more open processes of recruitment, legitimizing women's contributions as leaders, and moving beyond women's token representation.
- Women can find their way through the labyrinth (in human terms!) by demonstrating they are both agentic (acting) and communal, by creating social capital, and finding ways to cope with family responsibilities.
- There may be a backlash at present – social change does not proceed without struggle and conflict, and women's path to leadership has been relatively swift. But women will become increasingly accepted as leaders.

While this book does not of course address theological issues, it has much to say to women leaders in the Church and to those who want to see women more widely represented at every level of leadership.