mentoring women leaders: a guide for mentors

Introduction

The subject of whether there are significant differences between the way men and women lead continues to be controversial. However, the lived professional experiences of male and female leaders are different. Women will encounter much unconscious or conscious bias, and recent research (see the book *Coaching Women to Lead*) sets out a clear case for treating women differently in coaching/mentoring.

Women face additional challenges as leaders in the church or in Christian organisations, and this article, based on an 'Arrow paper', aims to help you to be aware of some of these, areas which might be explored in a mentoring relationship. Research also shows that it's in the early 30s when most damage is done to the women's pool of potential leaders, as women face greater challenges in their leadership; around this time they may face greater opposition to their progress, or have career breaks and struggle to juggle motherhood and ministry. As a mentor, it is important to have some awareness of what it's like to be female in a male-designed organisation, such as the church can feel to many women.

Issues for women

In Carson Pue's book *Mentoring Leaders*, Gretchen Englund, who works with *Arrow* in the US, writes this:

> 'Even the most confident-appearing woman can struggle with a sense of low self-esteem. Stemming from one's skewed view of God's acceptance and delight in her, she questions her own worth and with questions of self-doubt, personal shame, and quietly wonders whether God's delight in her is really true…
>
> Women leaders – again because of the many layers of a woman's life – need to address their inner anxiety before they can freely move to the next level... Women can have an internal tornado, full of questions and unfinished business: Am I okay? Am I really competent? What about being single? Are my kids doing well? Does my husband find delight in me? Am I doing life right?...'

Coaching Women to Lead identifies a variety of factors which women leaders think have contributed to their 'success':

- networking, confidence, role models and awareness of their strengths
- determination to succeed, involving long hours, hard work and delivery
- resilence and the ability to bounce back from adversity
- accepting challenges and taking opportunities offered
- relationship, influencing and communication skills
- combined focus and multitasking
- curiosity, willingness to learn and continuing education
- understanding corporate structure and processes
- flexibility in self and organisation
- balancing work with enormous demands outside work
- finding something you enjoy and are good at.

Some of these are gender-neutral and some are women-specific.

In addition, the authors found that support from senior women was crucial to increasing the number of women leaders – and some women also found support from senior men.

The book also identifies the following as specific areas of coaching intervention for women:

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- Confidence, from a woman's perspective
- Building active, supportive networks
- Looking for role models
- Balancing home and work life effectively
- Becoming resilient with the capacity to bounce back from difficulties
- Navigating the 'labyrinth'
- Playing with the big boys/entering the 'boys' club
- Developing presence
- Turning into a leader rather than a 'doer' - ie more leadership and less ministry

One chapter of the book gives a summary of each of these issues, the psychological underpinnings, and some coaching exercises.

Variations between women are greater than variations between the sexes; we need to beware of stereotypes, but the areas above, and some additional areas specific to women leaders in the church, may alert us to issues which might otherwise be overlooked, especially when they don't appear in most books on mentoring.

Possible questions on each subject are suggested.

Lack of confidence

Research about women as leaders – and *Arrow* applications – routinely report that women leaders lack confidence. This may be connected with the discrimination that some women experience, or the fact that often women struggle to be themselves. There is also research to suggest that many women downplay their achievements and underestimate their abilities. 'While covering for insufficient confidence, women may come across as aggressive, self-effacing or unapproachable.... Women may also compensate by micromanaging, by working excessively hard or being racked by doubts about their right to be where they are.' (Leimon, et al, p 110-11).

Psychologists perceive confidence as a mixture of processes: self-efficacy (belief in one's ability to perform the behaviours and tasks necessary for the required outcomes) and perceived competence (resulting more from successful past experiences). Rosabeth Moss Kanter of Harvard Business School says: 'Confidence consists of positive expectations of favourable outcomes.'

For the *Christian* leader, confidence ultimately comes from God, and part of building confidence in Christian women must include helping them find security in and dependence on God.

- When did you first realise you were a leader? How do you feel (at a gut level) about the word 'leader'?
- What are you afraid of?
- Have there been times when you've been told that Christian women can't be leaders? How have you dealt with people who've said that? How could you build confidence in your interpretation of scripture?
- Think of a time when you did something at your best. What strengths did you demonstrate?
- In ministry, what do you always avoid if you can? Finance? Buildings? Admin? Conflict? Chairing meetings? By not taking responsibility in these areas, how might you be missing out on opportunities to grow?
- What do you tell yourself when something good happens as a result of your leadership? And something bad? (Women often attribute success to luck, and blame themselves for failure.)
- What were you born to tell the world? What's stopping you?

Developing powerful networks

Women leaders can feel lonely, and don't always feel comfortable or included in male-dominated networks. Sometimes opportunities for networking occur at times when women have to attend

to family responsibilities. What are appropriate expectations in this area and how can women find others who might support and encourage them and whom they in turn can support?

- What support networks do you have? Where do you turn to for advice when you need professional advice or when you feel the pressures of leadership are overwhelming?
- How do you like to relate to people?
- How do you feel about meeting new people, and what do you think are your strengths?
- Do you prefer one to one conversations or larger groups? (Follow on questions could focus on strong areas, and then strategies for doing more difficult things, eg getting started in conversations, breaking into a group, and moving away again.)

Finding role models and mentors

Many women suffer from a lack of role models. There are still very few women leading larger churches, for example, in senior posts in the church, or held up as models of leading in evangelism or pioneering. Women are not homogeneous and may need a wider range of role models than men, according to whether they are married or single, with children or without, and what kind of role they currently have and aspirations they hold. Some women may find good role models in church history, but these are no substitute for 'live' women! They may need confidence to approach real women, and ask for their help, opinion and insight.

- Who are your heroes and heroines? What is it about them that appeals to you?
- Have you encountered any women who stand out in ways you admire? In what ways could they be role models for you?

Juggling home and work responsibilities

In many families women still tend to shoulder a disproportionate amount of the burden of housework, childcare and responsibility for home life. This means they often have more to juggle than male leaders. Much blame is put on women: 'if you work, you damage your children [and this can be much worse in a Christian context than in a secular one]; if you stay at home, you limit their intelligence and waste your talent and training.' Working long hours is still seen by some as a sign of commitment, and unlike women in highly-paid employment, most women in Christian leadership can't afford childcare. For ordained women the desire for flexible work often means having to be non-stipendiary, with loss of both status and pension as well as income, so for many women it's 'all or nothing'. There is often limited time for the things women need to replenish their energy.

Coaching/mentoring needs to take account of the difficult decisions women have to make: being married, having children, how to care for children...;and the emotional toll women face.

- What things in your life are most important to you at the moment? Do they get the attention they deserve/need?
- What are your priorities at the moment? How can you organise your life so these become priorities in how you live and minister?
- What aspects of life seem most pressured at the moment?
- What do you enjoy doing for relaxation?
- What would a blended life look like for you? (Better to avoid the work 'balance', as this is not about 'balancing' life and work when work is part of life.)
- How will life change over the next 5-10 years? What style of working would suit you best over these years?

Resilience and the capacity to bounce back from difficulties

Women leaders deal with constant pressure, long hours, daily challenges and difficult people. Work life spills into home life, and living in the vicarage brings its own pressures. 'Resilience is the process by which an individual functions well under pressure, recovers quickly from adversity and develops adaptive coping behaviours.' Women need cognitive, emotional and behavioural

resilience. Often women try to cope by themselves, and find it hard to ask for help.

For women in the church, difficulties may include discrimination, open or hidden. Given the different legitimate views in the Church towards women as leaders, all women leaders will experience discrimination at some time or other. Some women will cope with this well, others will have had their self-esteem knocked, or will feel undermined by wondering, 'should I really be doing this?' For some women, their very existence in their ministry context is confrontational. Discrimination may be encountered in the way women are percieved, when ordained women are looking for a job move, and for a whole variety of other reasons.

- What do you feel are the most difficult challenges you're facing at the moment? How are you dealing with them?
- What sources of help do you draw on, or could you draw on?
- What strategies could you use to cope with the things you can't change?
- What opposition have you faced because you're a woman? How do you think this has affected your ministry?
- What help could you draw on to equip you for continued opposition and challenge?
- How do you balance a desire to be treated fairly with the sacrifices and suffering that ministry and leadership inevitably entail?

Navigating the labyrinth
The term 'glass ceiling', coined in the 1980s, has now been replaced by the term 'labyrinth', developed in a book published in 2007. The 'ceiling' has been broken, women have made it to more senior posts, but there are many twists and turns on the way. The 'labyrinth' consists of a number of obstacles, including prejudices which favour men and penalise women, resistance to women's leadership style which tends to be more transformational, and balancing work with family responsibilities.

Because of recent advances for women in the world and the church, younger women in particular may think the playing field is now level. It may not be until something happens that they realise the problem.
- Tell me what happened... How do you feel about that?
- What do you feel you want to do? Is that the best option? What other things could you do?
- If you can step back and take the long view, what do you need to do to proceed?

Playing the game with the big boys
Girls do better than boys at school and university, but further up the 'ladder' of leadership (even though we might not see it like this in the church), there are fewer and fewer women in positions of leadership. The culture which encourages boys to seek attention and break rules at school seems to permeate even the church at times. Different norms apply to women in demonstrating vulnerability, and assertive behaviour which is acceptable for men may be perceived as bossiness in women. Many women dislike the politics and attention seeking which seems to go on, believing that good work will pay off and be noticed. Sometimes, for example, a woman may be passed over for a post, while a man with the same level of experience is encouraged to apply. How do women respond to such situations?
- How do you feel about what happened? Did it surprise you?
- What have you learnt, and how could things be different on another occasion?
- What help do you need in preparing applications and for interviews?

Developing presence
Presence and gravitas are essential aspects of more senior leadership. What women look like, how they sound, are all part of this, and the lack of role models can mean that women find it more difficult to be themselves while cultivating appropriate behaviours. Women's clothing and

appearance receives more attention than men's, and some women lose out by not 'looking the part'. There is no right way to dress, but women might be encouraged to reflect on how they are perceived and how they'd like to be seen. How do women make their presence felt (for example when entering a room)? And how do they avoid setting themselves up for failure? This is where it might be helpful for the mentor to see the mentee in action and to be able to give feedback.

- How do you like to dress? Do you dress differently for different occasions (eg funerals, meeting the bishop, leading informal worship...) As a leader, what image do you want to convey?
- Do you know how your voice is perceived? (if negatively) What could you do to strengthen your communication?

Developing into a leader rather than always 'doing'

When there are relatively few models around, some women find it hard to 'own' being a leader. Leadership feels male, many leaders in the Church and in Christian organisations are men, so how do women fulfil the expectations of being 'a leader' *and* of being themselves? Male models of power may not be attractive, and women are often drawn to just getting on with the job of ministry – there is always plenty to do!

Sometimes women's capacity to multi-task backfires, when they say, 'Here, I'll do it'. To develop into effective leaders, or leaders at all, women may need to learn to delegate more effectively, and to step up into a leadership role, able to lead from the front on occasion as well as directing a collaborative team.

- What are the characteristics of good leaders? How do you compare?
- What are your leadership strengths?
- What will it take for you to become an effective leader?
- What should you be reading? What CME/courses should you be doing?
- If using power, or the concept of 'servant leadership', are uncomfortable for you, how might you see them differently?
- Write down everything you do in a typical day. How much is ministry and how much is leadership?
- If you had to take a 3-month break from the parish, what would not happen? Who could do some of the things you currently do? Who could do more if they were helped? If they did those things *now* (or soon), what would that free you up to do?

Sexual misconduct, harassment or abuse

Workplace surveys reveal that around 50-60% of women have been sexually harassed, and in a recent survey of Christian women (in the USA), more than a quarter reported personal experience of sexually inappropriate behaviour, often in a church context. Many women don't know how to define sexual harassment, and often do not report it. Sometimes discrimination can take the form of harassment, while other women may be carrying the burden of abuse which they have never been able to disclose but which inevitably affects their life and ministry.

- Have you ever encountered behaviour towards you that you felt was inappropriate?
- What is holding you back right now?

Singleness

For single women, being single can feel more of a problem/issue than being a woman. Loneliness can be compounded; there is no one at home with whom to share the burdens of ministry and spend one's day off. In some areas women who are ordained may feel vulnerable just answering the door, or out and about when they know there's no one at home to know if they don't return safely. Some single women may feel, or may have been told, that being ordained or even in full-time Christian work will end their marriage chances. How does one cope as a single woman in some churches (and on *Arrow*!) with the fact that the church seems to revolve around the nuclear family, and everyone seems to have loads of children?

- How are your friendships going?
- What do you do for relaxation?
- What do you enjoy doing on your day off?

A final dilemma for the mentor or coach: 'Do you coach women to fit male-designed and male-dominated organizations [such as the church] or do you work with them to be authentic and successful in their own way?' (Leimon et al, p 151)

Further resources

Mary Ellen Ashcroft, *Temptations Women Face* (IVP)
Nancy Beach, *Gifted to Lead* (Zondervan)
Gerard Egan, *The Skilled Helper* (Wadworth Publishing Company)
Bob Hopkins and Freddy Hedley, *Coaching for Missional Leadership* (ACPI Books)
Emma Ineson, *Busy Living: blessing not burden* (Continuum)
Nancy Kline, *Time to Think* (Cassell)
Karen Lee-Thorp, *Peeking into a Box of Chocolates* (NavPress)
Averil Leimon, Francois Moscovici and Helen Goodier, *Coaching Women to Lead* (Routledge)
Carson Pue, *Mentoring Leaders* (Zondervan)
Rosie Ward, *Growing Women Leaders* (BRF/CPAS)

'Mentoring Questions', available as a monthly email from Arrow Leadership Ministries, Washington; www.arrowleadership.org

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