Women's Leadership

Valerie Stead and Carole Elliott (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)

Why focus on women leaders? The authors of this book provide three answers: a paucity of critical work, a persistent lack of equality for women, and personal motivation to contribute to women's progress. Three very good reasons. And the result of their recent research (they are both lecturers at Lancaster University Management School) is a closely argued exploration of leadership and leadership development, highlighting how much the 'male as leader' model persists, and how unhelpful it is for women when models of leadership and leadership development ignore gender.

In exploring models of 'leadership', the authors explore the difference between 'heroic' and 'post-heroic' models; the former being more leader-centric and the latter recognising both the significance of followers and also of shared practice, collaboration and connection. One of the observations early in the book is that while leadership theory has increasingly moved from 'heroic' to 'post-heroic', most models of leadership development work with what the authors call a human capital approach, which is a throwback to 'heroic', rather than with a social capital approach which more closely reflects post-heroic understandings.

After a chapter exploring understandings of leadership and leadership development , the second looks at more closely at women's leadership, and stereotypes and metaphors: glass ceilings, glass walls and glass cliffs; queen bee, iron maiden (eg Margaret Thatcher) and selfless heroine. These images all 'illustrate the durability of beliefs that associate being a leader with being male', and mean that women leaders are often seen as 'out of place', and travellers in a male world.

In the absence of much research on women's experience of becoming leaders, this is the subject of chapter 3, which looks at how women become and sustain their role as leaders, using a number of in-depth interviews. One common theme was women leaders' relationships—to others, to place and to work. A 'leadership web' diagram shows how these three interact.

The next chapter is on 'gender', exploring how the women's accounts of their leadership practice are shaped by their gender. I was fascinated by the insight that to see organisations as 'gender neutral' is problematic when the 'ideal worker' is someone who has minimal commitments, no obligations to dependents and who can therefore devote long hours to work and socialise with colleagues after work. The ideal worker is thus more likely to be a man—or a woman who is unmarried. In addition, stereotypes of women as soft and caring and men as tough and dominant make it difficult for women leaders, who are either seen as being less suitable as leaders (because soft and caring) or being 'unfeminine' because tough and dominant. Women are often perceived to be less ambitious than men, and this also impacts on women leaders. The conclusion that it is 'social capital' rather than 'human capital' (experience, knowledge, skills and education) which gives greater opportunity for achievement at senior levels is worth pondering, as many books and reports seem to focus more on the latter than the former. In the light of their conclusion, the authors highlight the importance of sponsorship, and of women building relationships within existing male social networks as well as in separate women-only networks, as ways of building social capital.

The last part of the book looks at how women's leadership can be progressed, including a description of a workshop as a developmental tool. This enables women to 'story' themselves as leaders and work with each other, identifying actions to take forward.

This is a scholarly book, and I found that in places I needed to read sentences several times to be sure I understood. At £55 it's not likely to be widely read. But I hope its important insights will reach a wide audience—hence, in part, this review.

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