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developing women in leadership

According to one of the most recent summaries of issues facing women leaders in businessⁱ, women are often less direct about what they want than men and more likely to answer questions in the way they think the questioner wants them to, rather than saying what they'd really like.

'Some think they are delivering clear messages to their colleagues but are in fact couching what they want to say in such veiled terms that the messages do not get through.' It seems that many women have a tendency to engage in self-defeating behaviour which impedes their leadership. 'Overcoming self-defeating behaviour in work and ministry' is the subtitle of Kate Coleman's book, *7 Deadly Sins of Women in Leadership*ⁱⁱ, and encapsulates some of the challenges which face women leaders, such as limiting self-perceptions, failure to draw the line, and colluding not confronting.

Some may ask, 'why do we need to ask about women's leadership?' I believe that God calls and gifts women for leadership as well as men. I'm one of the first to claim that most differences between the way men and women lead have more to do with personality than with gender. But whether I look at the Church, or at business and the professions (where far more research has been done), there is clearly a lack of women in senior leadership roles. The reasons for this seem to be a mixture of internal factors and external factors such as the context in which they lead. For women in the Church there are also theological issues.

These differences are enough to suggest the need to consider women's leadership separately. While women, like men, value training to develop their leadership, women often need additional help to acknowledge their strengths and achievements, to develop an appropriate presence and authority, and to negotiate theological and organisational challenges. Coaching or mentoring can play an important role here.

Twenty years on

It's now over 20 years since the first women were ordained priest in the Church of England. In 20 years much has changed. No longer is women's competence as preachers or leaders of worship on trial. No longer do I have to worry that if I have an off day, it will prove that women are really not up to the job. Being the only woman in a meeting is less frequent these days too.

But there are plenty of other challenges which I face as a woman in leadership. We used to talk about a 'stained glass ceiling'. Women have now reached senior levels of leadership in the Church, but getting there can still be a 'labyrinth', with twists and turns and many barriers on the way. We often lack role models and find it more difficult to negotiate the 'system'. Sometimes women find it hard to break into social networks, which can be dominated by male banter, and topics which are less than welcoming to women.

Confidence and culture

The Church can learn much about women's leadership development from the experience of

ⁱ Jane Stephens, 'Women in Business: highlights from coaching', Hay Hill Partners, 2013

ⁱⁱ Kate Coleman, *7 Deadly Sins of Women in Leadership*, Next Leadership, 2010



secular organisations, some of which have been trying for many years to develop women as leaders and increase the number of women at senior levels. There is a wonderful cartoon in the book *A Woman's Place is in the Boardroom*ⁱⁱⁱ, showing three men standing on the top of a cake, looking around, and saying 'Y'see, there's just no women around to choose from.' Underneath this top layer is a large group of women who are waving and trying to climb up. No women to choose from? An important piece of research conducted in 2008 by Jane Hedges (now Dean of Norwich) found that around three quarters of those women surveyed (over 1000) would be willing to take up a senior post. But only 5% of them would respond to an open advertisement. Not everyone realises how important confidence and encouragement are to women's leadership development.

At the same time, organisations also have a responsibility to further women's development as leaders, paying attention to the recruitment process, the operating culture and ways of working, to see if these inadvertently disadvantage women.

Serving the servant king

We serve a master who took 'the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness ... humbled himself.' Women, historically used to 'serving' men, often find it difficult to balance leadership with service and to be appropriately assertive. In addition, while assertiveness can be seen as normal in men, in women it is often seen as inappropriate 'bossiness'. Women may also find it difficult to have the 'presence' needed in leadership, partly because the same behaviour is perceived differently in men and women. 'Ambition' is another difficult area for women – and again, doubly difficult for *Christian* women. Another theological conundrum revolves around strengths and shortcomings; we are often more aware of the latter than the former. Among

Christians this may be out of a desire to 'not think of yourself more highly than you ought' (Romans 12:3). But thinking 'lower', undervaluing our abilities and achievements, can be just as sinful. Developing as a leader may involve 'owning' and developing our abilities – and giving the glory to God.

Leadership *skills* can be learnt, taught and honed. Some women miss out on opportunities to learn and develop skills, perhaps because they are self-supporting or part-time, they are overlooked, or they don't rise to the challenge. If you sense yourself in this category, then I encourage you to pray about where to go to find the training or opportunities you need.

What is more common, in my experience, are the internal and organisational barriers which I have briefly explored in this article. I have the privilege of mentoring a younger Christian leader, and it reminds me of how important mentoring can be. I know it's great for all leaders, but I think for women it is particularly important. So if you've identified yourself as facing some of these issues, find someone you can work with, and allow the Holy Spirit to take you to a new stage in your leadership adventure.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Peninah Thomson and Jacey Graham, *A Woman's Place is in the Boardroom*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005

For reflection

- (for women) In the light of this article, in what area do you sense the need to develop? How can you access appropriate training or mentoring?
- (for men) Think about your women colleagues. Are there ways in which their potential as leaders is being held back? How might you encourage them or further their development as leaders?

