Cheryl Beckwith — Organizational Communication

WOMEN IN POWER: RUNNING TWO TRACKS IN COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

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During the past thirty years leaders in organizations have begun to realize the value of good community relations for the success of their business, group, or political life. Women business owners and professionals are accepting community leadership roles that were traditionally held by men. Officers or trustees of such organizations as Rotary, Chamber of Commerce, school boards, community councils and business associations are positions being filled by women who aspire to succeed in their careers and to influence the quality of community life in powerful and positive ways.

Wishful thinking alone will not bring these women to fulfillment of their goals. Leadership requires that women run in two tracks; the inside track of relating to, and being accepted as colleagues by the men who have traditionally provided all the community leadership, and the outside track of being accepted and supported by the women’s network. The challenge is to master the communication of both networks in a way that not only draws support from the networks but also places women in respected roles of leadership. The dualistic nature of a woman’s success in community leadership is dependent upon building two slightly differing aspects of trust and personal worth.

This paper will examine ways to develop trust in both networks and discuss communicative methods of metaphor, language strategies, humor, and nonverbal techniques that women can use effectively to establish themselves as cosmopolites, opinion leaders, and mentors in the networks of community infrastructure. In addition, the author will expand on her experiences and observations of how women limit themselves through poor communication techniques.

Male and Female Leadership

Hundreds of thousand of journal articles, books, magazine, and newspaper stories have been written about the differences between men and women in socialization, communication, business, and emotional, psychological, and mental perspectives. The topic is well-researched. Leadership styles and management techniques have often been neatly categorized into compartments of male, transactional, control and command versus female, transformational, interactive process methods. Despite Deborah Tannen’s
assertion that cross-cultural differences exist in communication between genders, pigeonholing simply does not work (Tannen 42). Linking interactive leadership directly to being female ignores the men who use transformational styles. Claiming that all women leaders thrive in participatory, horizontal and interrelational groups draws doubt from persons of both genders who hold an objective and formal view of organizations. Studies have recently shown results that indicate "gender is not as significant as personality factors and organizational culture in discussion of leadership styles" (Kazemek 16).

One such study is The International Women’s Forum Survey of Men and Women Leaders conducted in 1989 by Judy Rosener, faculty member of the University of California Graduate School of Management. She reported that “both men and women respondents described themselves with an equal mix of ‘feminine’ traits, ‘masculine’ traits, and ‘gender neutral’ traits,” (Rosener 123). Using the descriptive words below to identify these traits, those who were interviewed may have perceived themselves as achieving the best of all worlds.

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<th>Feminine Traits</th>
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Testing four theoretical perspectives in the organizational power hierarchy, Ellen Fagenson, George Mason University, wrote that

"..individuals' perceptions of their attributes will vary according to the position they occupy in the organizational power hierarchy,” and, “the perception of the amount of masculine and feminine characteristics possessed by men and women in organizations can differ at each level within the organization” (Fagenson 208).

Possession of both gender traits is mutable and fluid. Citing the research of developmental psychologist Eleanor Maccoby, Carol Tavris concludes that “men and women do not have a set of fixed masculine or feminine traits; the qualities and behaviors expected of women and men
vary, depending on the situation the person is in," (Tarvis 292). Expressing styles of leadership as gender specific is limiting in the sense that a dualistic approach demands an either/or, us/them perspective. Leaders must be sensitive and responsive to their audiences; everyone with whom they work and network. Opponents to the necessity of flexibility may use the words chameleonic and Machiavellian to describe such leaders. Tarvis feels otherwise,

“This flexibility has proven to be a good thing. People who are rigidly masculine or feminine across all situations are less healthy, mentally and physically, than people who can adopt the best qualities associated with both extremes. Under some conditions the qualities we label feminine are good for both sexes, and under some conditions the qualities we label masculine are good for both sexes,” (Tarvis 293).

Context, then, is more significant than gender. And yet, Rosener found that women who described themselves as predominantly “feminine” or “gender-neutral” reported a higher level of followership among their female subordinates than women who described themselves as “masculine.” It seems that there is a glitch in the hypothesis. Why would women respond negatively to another woman, perhaps a competent and respected leader, because she happens to be more “masculine” than others? It may just be her personality. The burden of proof, however, lies with the superior if one agrees with clinical psychologist David Keirsey, “So if a leader accepts the primacy of appreciation he then has the task of learning about his own temperament and that of his subordinates,” (Keirsey 130). Know thyself and everyone around you and act accordingly could be the rule of thumb for women in power; women who run both the inside and outside tracks in leadership.

Language as Liberator

The problem lies in the discrepancy between the theory and what actually occurs in practice. Courting both networks may result in belonging to neither; “...the lesson we might have learned form the real careers of Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi, and Margaret Thatcher namely, that a powerful woman is bound to be isolated from other women,” is a sad commentary on the resistance of some women to accept and support their own as leaders (Kaye 51). According to feminist scholar, Carolyn Heilbrun, we lack images of women in power because power is defined in terms that apply to males. If power is the ability to take part in the discussions that matter, then language plays a key role in rising to positions of leadership. Men’s language, the language of the powerful, is spoken by “people who are in charge of making observable changes in the real world,” (Tavris 297). By employing the language of the powerful, a person who is culturally cast
into a subordinate role may be able to break free of hierarchical constraints, challenge the status quo, and become a leader/mentor. The controversy of the Sapir Whorf linguistic relativity thesis, “we adopt the view of the world that is fashioned and portrayed by our language,” finds fertile ground for consideration in the field of community leadership (Vander Zanden 100).

Community leadership groups called T.A.P. (Talk About Potential) were begun in 1990 by a State Representative in areas of his district. They are visionary groups more than task groups, although there are committees that work on projects such as community survey, Adopt-A-Highway, retaining the local rail system, community center, etc. One TAP group is comprised of local political and business leaders, school board members, police chiefs, township trustees, village mayor, Chamber of Commerce trustees, and civic organization officers. There are more men than women involved in this consensus group, with the chairperson and most committee heads being male. During a recent meeting, C., a newcomer to TAP, gave her insights regarding the community’s rejection of a water and sewer line. Her ideas were accepted and repeated by some of the men who spoke later. After the meeting, several women gathered around her and voiced their relief that a woman had finally been taken seriously by the men. They indicated that the men in the group didn’t seem to be very enthusiastic about doing anything, and were especially hesitant to pick up on a woman’s ideas. C. was pleased to have the feminine support, but seemed puzzled by the level of intimidation that the other ladies experienced, since they were all either successful business women in the community, or leaders in their civic organizations. Upon reflection of the TAP group’s meetings, she noticed that when the women spoke they projected some uncertainty, used powerless talk, and subservient nonverbals. Many times they began their comments with a disclaimer, “I don’t understand...”, “This may be a dumb question...”, or hedges, “I guess,” “I think.” They were hesitant and almost seemed to fidget as they spoke, using excessive hand movements. C. had naturally used a strong and firm tone of voice, stating her thoughts in a concise manner with minimal hand and head movement. By utilizing the language of the powerful, she was regarded as powerful.

Breaking out of the stereotypical mold begins with language. If women use words that historically belong to the male metaphor, change in perception and attitude follow. With hindsight it can be noted that, “the sweeping social shifts in the second half of this century, primarily feminism, but also civil rights—promoted a growing sensitivity to the power of words to exclude, to trivialize, to marginalize, even to render others invisible,” (Hughes 1). Women are visible, but are they heard? During an interview, Deborah Tannen gave voice to the value of crossing language boundaries,
“Often a woman at a meeting will make a comment that is ignored; later a male colleague makes the same point and it’s discussed, taken seriously, and ultimately attributed to him. Part of the reason may be that the woman presented her point in a stereotypically feminine way she spoke briefly, phrased it as a question, spoke at a low volume and a high pitch. If the man who followed her used a stereotypically masculine style of speaking, he spoke at length in a loud, declamatory voice—his message was the same, but the meta message was different,” (Lusardi 93).

Metaphor as Strategy

Meta messages are similar to the root metaphor concept, “Root metaphors can be recognized by their ability to undergird a broad area of meaning,” in that “metaphors play a crucial role in the productivity, understanding, and communication of human thought and action,” (Smith 369). If women are linguistically excluded from organizations, then “metaphors are an essential medium through which reality is constructed,” and are functional in bringing about new ways of thinking and a new order (Wilson 883). Metaphors are not necessarily language neutral; notice the extensive use of war, religion, and sports metaphors in corporate America. Phrases and words like *bite the bullet, shafted, pain, exhaust, destroyed, mission, get a grip, spread the word, trouble-shooting, project mission, smash the roadblocks, crusade, prophetic vision, total believer, screwing it up, run with it, shooting blanks, challenge existing beliefs, you’ve got two strikes and we’re in the last inning, and score*, are examples of language that highlight men’s experiences and hide women’s. Religious metaphors bring the greatest burden of exclusion and marginalization to women, for they are the most illusory. During a 1991 presentation entitled, “Theological Integrity and Human Relationships” given to the Society for Study of Theology, D. Hampson asserted that,

“Religion has been fundamental to the conceptualization of gender in the west. So deeply is gender woven into Western religion, that to step outside the gender position dictated by one’s sex is fundamentally questioning the religious order. That God has been seen in the image of one sex and not another has skewed western culture” (Wilson 894).

Religious metaphors strengthen the old order, with women in the second position, unless it is the women who use them. If women at the conference table and in their mostly male work groups speak the metaphors of war, sports, and religion, then they can break the established hold
of hierarchical status and begin to change the culture of the company, the organization, and the community. Using male metaphors occasionally in their female networks, they may simultaneously earn respect of the women and help other women ease into the language of the powerful. Certainly, words alone will not catapult a woman to power and influence. Knowledge, ability, and expertise are prerequisites. But to run victoriously on both the inside and outside tracks of leadership and power, metaphor is the necessary footwear.

Male metaphors were evident in the speech of successful women interviewed by Judy Rosener for the International Women's Forum Survey: „I'm sort of evangelistic about it...You have to have a head of steam...I have to take the bull by the horns...I know the territories shift, so I'm not preoccupied with turf.” Metaphor as a catalyst for change may be most effective when the speaker is a man using feminine metaphors or a woman using the male metaphors. But women leaders should not limit themselves to male metaphors. It is equally important to introduce neutral and female metaphors into the discussion to broaden the concepts of the entire group. Family metaphors like “you are one of the family, no one is divorced from each other” and gender-neutral language, “Not everyone has a flame that can be lit, it's a real gem, are as effective as feminine analogies, “Without their input I'd be working in an ivory tower, let it simmer, put it on a back burner, bring this to a boil” in triggering a perceptual shift and initiating the process of change. “The use of different metaphors may lead to different behaviors,” (Wilson 899).

Women’s Leadership Roles

A change in perception and behavior is necessary for both men and women. In “The Dilemma of Being Nice,” Victor Klimoski, dean of the School of Divinity at the University of St. Thomas, cautions about caricaturing being nice.

“It would not be helpful to conclude that women tend to be the ones fostering niceness while men are the standard bearers for honesty. At issue is the realization that there is no single way to analyze, plan, evaluate, or reach a decision. The issues of group relations and group tasks have a symbiotic quality for which all members of a group bear some measure of responsibility,” (Klimoski 45).

Women must come to the bargaining and planning tables with new strategies that do not include niceness, which is a “powerful trap,” asserts award-winning journalist, Patricia O'Brien, “One of the most frustrating realities women face at the conference table is the fact that they won't get attention by smiling and waiting their turn. Plagued with the hesitancy of
niceness, for which there is no reward,” they are left out of the discussion. Compelled to become tacticians, women as outsiders “must either remap the terrain of the Inside or adopt guerilla tactics” (O’Brien 58).

But it does not have to be a battle. Women on Capitol Hill say “that the challenge is to retain an outsider's view while building relationship and a reputation with colleagues inside the system” (Huckshorn A14). The role of cosmopolite is ideal for women who are blocked in their trek; linking with a larger pool of knowledge positions them as outsiders with information important to the insiders. It succeeds with both the feminine and masculine networks and can lead to emergence as an opinion leader; one who, without a formal position, is sought out for his or her opinions and influences. In the communication network of an organization,

“A cosmopolitan person is one who belongs to all the world or one who is free from local, provincial, or national ideas, prejudices, or attachment. A cosmopolite is an individual who has contact with the outside world, with individuals beyond the organization. Cosmopolites link organization members with people and events beyond the confines of the organization structure. Organization members who travel a lot, are active in professional associations, and read regional, national, and international publications tend to be more cosmopolitan” (Pace 143).

Cosmopolites find that both networks are open to them because their contract with the larger world “helps uncover information executives need to know” (Mandelker 13). The flow of information, collected and released by the cosmopolite, opens inlets leading to the new lands and vistas as she or he becomes a source for new ideas and a channel for fresh insights. Establishing oneself in the binary role of cosmopolite may also allow for practice in developing a sense of humor; it is easier to be forgiven if the joke flops. Humor as a way of conveying authority and self-confidence is worth cultivating, but it must be relevant and not self-deprecating. “A person who has a sense of humor is one who reacts with lightness,” explains humorist and professional speaker, Jeanne Robertson. “Someone who is hysterically funny doesn’t necessarily exhibit grace under pressure” (Russell 75).

Grace under pressure is one quality women need to attain in mastering both tracks of leadership; it is recognized and appreciated by men and women. Carol Moseley-Braun, the first black women in the Senate, challenged and persuaded colleagues to reverse a vote protecting a patent logo, the confederate flag, for the Daughters of the Confederacy. “If I have to stand here until this room freezes over, I am going to do so,” she said.
"As Moseley-Braun spoke, Senator Diane Feinstein looked up and saw a tear forming in the corner of her friend’s eye. She stood and took Moseley-Braun’s hand. The image became a symbol for the women’s presence here,” (Huckshorn A14).

The strength in that symbol is indicative of the wave of solidarity that can swell from among the network of women and turn the tide of “male as the norm” into acceptance and appreciation of all persons. If it sounds too idealistic to be true, consider dramas played out daily in organizations across the country:

The Executive Board of a small town Parent Teacher Organization recently called an emergency meeting because the treasurer had made some recording errors in the checkbook and a balance of less than $30 was left, rather than the $3,000 that the board thought was available. Although no money was missing, some members of the organization reacted very negatively to the news. The purpose of the meeting was twofold: 1) reassure everyone that the errors had been discovered in time to prevent overdrafts, and 2) elect a new treasurer. The executive board consisted of women, many of whom had worked together for a number of years. Twenty-four of the 34-member board were present for the meeting. When the nominating chairperson opened the floor for nominations for treasurer, one of the dissenters accusingly pointed to the past president and indicated that she should not be trusted because the error occurred during her term. The nominating chairperson interjected that,

"While you raise a valid concern regarding trust, B., I think it is important to note that there is a previously established level of trust that exists in this group. It is true that voting in E. as treasurer could be construed as a mistake by those outside this decision-making body, but there is another value that can be seen by backing E. as treasurer. That is, our decision to stand by her with confidence and support. By voting in E. we send the message that we believe in her, we trust her, and that we as an organization are not going to fall into bickering and infighting when dealing with mistakes. Retaining E. as treasurer is redemptive not only for her, but for all of us. Many of the committees that we chair handle money. Perhaps this is the time to realize that we all share in the responsibility of being aware of the financial statements."

The nominating chairperson was voicing the group’s horizontal communication process. The dissenters were blaming the person who sat at the top of the hierarchical order, not realizing that although there are hierarchical
positions, the organization operates as a flat structure. The final vote, 24-1, placed the former president as treasurer. This is an example of strength and support that the feminine network gives, placing a high value on the relationships of its members. One could speculate about the exchange and decisions of the group if it were all male; it is possible that the same result would have taken place.

As the paradigm shifts and the glass ceiling begins to crack, more women will become role models and mentors to other women—and to men. The fear that women would compete, win, and take over has passed with the second stage of feminism which asserted the superiority of women. The journey is still a marathon, the wall has been hit several times, and now the vision is clear; two parallel tracks that challenge and complement each other, moving together in synchronization, with benefits for both. Male and female networks will continue to exist, but without the superiority of hierarchical status. Organizations will function differently, more humanely. People of both genders will bridge the networks, enabling those on each track to communicate effectively with the hope that prejudice will be eliminated. Leadership in America has passed the first leg.

Works Cited


