

Cultural Narratives of Academic Leadership at the Dawn of the 21st Century

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Introduction

There's a certain hubris in setting out to chart the discourse of academic leadership as we begin the second decade of this new century. My paper doesn't have the millennial scope that is, perhaps, implied by my title. My more modest intention is to focus instead on what's being written about "leadership" at this moment—from the late 90s through the first decade of the 21st century. These narratives have a short shelf life, an appropriate metaphor because, like goods in a produce market, they spoil relatively quickly. And each appears to offer a definitive assessment of what makes a great leader; while in truth, most of us would probably agree with the three co-authors of "Discovering Your Authentic Leadership" who say that, despite thousands of analyses, "none of these studies has produced a clear profile of the ideal leader."¹

What interests me are two key terms in circulation: "leadership" and "management." I am going to explore the proposition that the terms are gendered: men lead and women manage. Aye, there's the rub. Leaders provide vision; managers implement a vision. "Followers want leaders who can not only capture their hearts, minds and spirits, but who can also change the way things get done—for the better (*HBR On Point*, advertising blurb for "choosing the Right Leadership Style"). In the words of John Kotter: "Leadership and management are two distinctive and complementary systems of action...Both are necessary for success" (38).² He adds, "Management is about coping with complexity...Leadership, by contrast, is about coping with change" (39-40) and "setting direction" (42). "Management controls people by pushing them in the right direction; leadership motivates them by satisfying basic human needs" (47). How well the two mesh depends on the ability of both the leader and manager to negotiate, because all modern organizations are increasingly interdependent (43). Kotter notes that one often ends up with "overmanaged and underled corporations."

¹ Bill George et al., "Discovering Your Authentic Leadership," *HBR's Must Reads: On Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2011), 163-177. In the same volume, Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones note that, "Last year alone, more than 2000 books on leadership were published" ("Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?", 79).

² Kotter, "What Leaders Really Do," *Harvard Business Review* (May 1990), 38. Reprinted in *HBR's Must Reads: On Leadership*, 37-55.

One could say the same of universities because, like other organizations, they frequently embrace “‘long-term planning’ as a panacea for their lack of direction and inability to adapt.”³ In their 2010 book, *The Truth About Leadership*, James Kouzes and Barry Posner—who have written for decades on the topic—argue that “leadership is an affair of the heart” informed by passion; whereas “there’s a prevailing myth that managers are supposed to divorce their emotions from a situation and approach things purely rationally.”⁴ We will return in a moment to the question of how a trait like passion may be received differently depending on whether a man or woman is displaying it.

I’m looking through you, you’re all the same. First, I want to look at who’s writing these books and articles on leadership. In the summer of 2001, I attended the University of California Management Institute, an annual workshop the focus of which was “Leadership Challenges During Economic Hard Times.” We were provided with preparatory reading material, which included a recent article from the *Harvard Business Review* that asked, by way of title, “Why Should Anyone be Led by You?,”⁵ an article from the *Harvard Business Review on Leadership*, “What Leaders Really Do,”⁶ and excerpts from *The Leadership Challenge: How To Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations*.⁷ Finally, Steven Sample, president of the University of Southern California, published one of the most recent books on leadership in the academy: *A Contrarian’s Guide to Leadership*.⁸ Note that all of these essays and books have male authors. We also received a bibliography of works on leadership; of those many works with “leader” in the title, only one was written or edited by a woman, and this book, *Leader to Leader*, was co-edited by a woman and a man.⁹

This summer, as I scanned the listings for new books on the topic, the same dominance of the market by men persisted. The *Harvard Business Review* collection I’ve cited earlier, published in 2011, includes ten seminal articles on leadership, all by men with the exception of two co-edited articles, each of which has a woman as co-author.

³ Ibid., 43.

⁴ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Truth About Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 135.

⁵ Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones, *Harvard Business Review*, September 2000, 63-70.

⁶ Kotter, 37-60.

⁷ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995), 3-5, 73-75.

⁸ Steven Sample, *A Contrarian’s Guide to Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

⁹ Frances Hesselbein and Paul M. Cohen, eds., *Leader to Leader* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999).

Would you want to read a book on leadership by a woman? If not, why not? Would there be a market for such a book? And why aren't the gutsy female leaders—whether corporate or academic—writing books that end up on recommended reading lists? Where are leadership books by the Carley Fiorinas, the Martha Stewarts, the Meg Whitmans, the Hillary Clintons, the Condoleezza Rices, the Nancy Cantors, the Ruth Simmonses? A complex question with multiple answers; so I will leave this path of our cultural narrative unexplored for now.

Where have all the mentors gone? Instead, let's take another path: Kotter's assessment of what conditions produce leaders. "Individuals who are effective in large leadership roles often share a number of career experiences. Perhaps the most typical and most important is significant challenge early in a career. Leaders almost always have had opportunities during their twenties and thirties to actually try to lead, to take a risk, and to learn from both triumphs and failures. Such learning seems essential," he writes (50). Those opportunities, early in a career, depend on mentors, people in a position to recognize leadership potential and who have the power to cultivate it. By this point, it's easier to see the many ways that gender is going to enter into this utopian narrative of upward organizational mobility.

It is the rare woman, in my experience (obviously a limited data set), who has been mentored by either a man or a woman¹⁰. I've discussed this phenomenon with a fellow female academic in engineering, who first formulated this hypothesis and conjectured, further, that mentoring among women academics in preceding generations was much more common. Peers in our generation have enjoyed either no or little mentoring. Her comments led me to speculate that the opening up of the academy to women and underrepresented minorities has had a corollary effect of closing down certain routes to advancement.

But, let's suppose that you are lucky and emerge from a cocoon of mentoring, no longer an earthbound caterpillar but a beautiful butterfly ready to soar. There's still the problem of Niccolo Machiavelli.

What's Machiavelli got to do with it? He's the pragmatic leadership mentor par excellence for the postmodern world. In his *Contrarian's Guide to Leadership*, Steven Sample frequently references Machiavelli's *The Prince*. I single out Sample, but he is only one of many

¹⁰ One distinguishing aspect of the ascent narrative of Condoleezza Rice is the number of powerful mentors she found early in her career. But that seems the exception rather than the rule.

for whom Machiavelli has become the mentor du jour for prospective leaders. And, Sample's book has enjoyed wide circulation, especially in the academy, which is our concern today.

Joseph Badacco, writing on the "Discipline of Building Character" for the purpose of becoming a leader, cites Machiavelli to caution that "idealism untempered by realism often does little to improve the world...the critical questions become, "*What combination of shrewdness and expediency, coupled with imagination and boldness, will help me implement my personal understanding of what is right?*" (97) and "*What combination of shrewdness, creativity, and tenacity will make my vision a reality*" (109).¹¹ He adds: "Machiavelli put it more succinctly: 'Should I play the lion or the fox?'" (109).

Sample turns to Machiavelli precisely because he implicitly acknowledges that the Renaissance thinker's "primary contribution was not a static set of leadership principles, but rather his painfully honest observations about human nature" (96). Sample quotes Machiavelli more extensively and dispenses his wisdom more freely: "'Minds are of three kinds,' Machiavelli wrote, 'One is capable of thinking for itself; another is able to understand the thinking of others; and a third can neither think for itself nor understand the thinking of others. The first is of the highest excellence. . .'" (21). Sample agrees that the first is excellent, but he believes that the best leaders not only think for themselves but also grasp how others think.

As a further guarantor of his success, this leader/prince surrounds himself with "'the wise men of the state," who "are instructed to speak honestly and candidly" and therefore become what Machiavelli terms a "safeguard against flatterers" (23). Machiavelli also claims that "Fortune (i.e. luck) plays the greatest role in determining the success of any leader, and fortune favors the bold" (97). This sentiment is echoed frequently in Sample's book, which decides that, "It helps to be smart and creative . . . but the two most important ingredients for successful leadership are energy and luck" (169). Finally, if forced to make an exclusive choice, a leader, says Machiavelli, "should prefer to be feared rather than loved by his subjects" (94)—or, in the modern context, "if a leader must choose between being sensitive to others and being able to stay on course, he should prefer the latter" (197).

That's when I fell for the leader of the pack. Sample begins his book with an important observation: "Of all the different kinds of human capital, leadership may well be the most rare

¹¹ Joseph Badacco, "The Discipline of Building Character," *Harvard Business Review on Leadership* (Cambridge: Harvard Business Review Press, 1990), 89-113.

and precious” (2). This observation is important on several levels, not least because it sharply limits the field of discussion. We are not talking about styles or modes or types; what we must identify is something “elusive and tricky” (1). Sample distinguishes: “Effective management may be a science (although I have my doubts) but effective leadership is purely an art. . . more akin to music, painting and poetry than it is to more routinized endeavors” (18).

They’re writing songs of leadership, but not for me. So what is the discourse in circulation for women in educational administration? The publication *Women in Higher Education* routinely addresses the question of leadership in higher education, and in 2003, argued that it “is beginning to reflect the student body . . . From 1986 to 2001, the percentage of women who are presidents of colleges and universities has more than doubled, from 9.5% to 21.1%, while minority presidents have increased from 8.1% to 12.8%.”¹² But is only 21.1% of the student population female? Especially notable is the fact that the majority of female presidents—76.4%—serve at women’s colleges, where 100% of the students are women.

The statistics have barely budged today, more than a decade later. Among the leadership positions at top institutions, women rarely account for more than ten to fifteen percent of the group. This June, I received a copy of a letter to our legislative leaders in Washington, D.C., signed by the presidents of the major research universities in the United States. Only eight of the seventy-seven signers were women. A recent note in the online version of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* laments that “women are still underrepresented as medical-school deans,” just 7% from 1980 to 2006.¹³ In her much cited article in a recent *Atlantic*, “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,” Anne-Marie Slaughter marches out another flock of discouraging statistics. Quoting Facebook’s Sheryl Sandberg, Slaughter summarizes, “women are not making it to the top. A hundred and ninety heads of state; nine are women. Of all the people in parliament in the world, 13 percent are women. In the corporate sector, [the share of] women at the top—C-level jobs, board seats—tops out at 15, 16 percent.”¹⁴

A 2001 report from the American Council on Education (*American College President*, 2002) ends on a melancholy note. The report concludes that “it’s especially lonely at the top for female presidents, many of whom have chosen to put their hearts and souls in to their careers in higher education at the cost of marriage and personal relationships” (2). And here’s the further

¹² *Women in Higher Education* 12, no. 1 (January 2003), 1.

¹³ *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 28, 2012

¹⁴ Anne-Marie Slaughter, “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,” *The Atlantic*, June/July 2012, 9.

rub: “If the stereotype of women as more collaborative, cooperative, relationship-oriented leaders is true, higher education will benefit from an increase in the number of women at the head of the tables” (2). All of these women leaders without their own personal relationships who are, purportedly, relationship-oriented—one might be excused for suffering from cognitive dissonance.¹⁵

Benefit higher education it might, but this image of women as simultaneously relationship-oriented and lacking in personal commitments will not get women hired if a university is looking for leadership potential, especially because many of those on the hiring committee will proceed with a commonly shared assumption, one articulated by Steven Sample, “that the overwhelming majority of successful corporate CEOs and other leaders . . . were involved in very stable long-term marriages, and that these leaders felt their spouses were major factors in their success” (23). In fact, the skills *women* are purported to bring to the table are those valorized in *managers*. So, it’s a problem that a publication by women and for women has characterized women’s strengths in ways that promise to limit their ability to climb.

In this same issue of *Women in Higher Education*, there is an article entitled “Who Says Women Lead Differently?” Now I’m as willing as the next guy to recognize that leadership is an empty signifier waiting to be filled, but we’ve lost the battle if we start arguing about *different* leadership styles when popular consensus (and look at the books on leadership) have already tacitly agreed that what women call “leadership” is more commonly in the literature called “management.” To assert—as the article does—that, “Studies have found that women are more nurturing, flexible, emotional, caring, sensitive and cooperative than men” (6) doesn’t address the point at the which the argument needs to be made. Machiavelli’s Prince has beat a hasty retreat. “Nurturing?” What happened to fear as a motivator? What happened to vision, energy, boldness, the capacity to produce change?

This same article on women leading differently notes wisely that, “Unfortunately, many studies in which others rate the leader’s style don’t ask for data on the person doing the rating” (7). It then queries: “Which women succeed? Are they the ones who adopt the male or gender-

¹⁵ The most recent report from the ACE, published online, summarizes the situation in this way: “**Los Angeles, CA (March 12, 2012)**—According to data released today by the American Council on Education (ACE), the typical American college or university president is a married white male who is 61 years old, holds a doctorate in education and has served in his current position for seven years—a profile that has not varied greatly over the previous 25 years.” http://www.acenet.edu/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Press_Releases2&CONTENTID=44469&TEMPLATE=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm (Accessed July 16, 2012).

neutral styles traditionalists expect in their leaders? Or are they the women who successfully live up to the nurturing image the people around them expect from a woman?” (7).

There are certainly issues of expectations that should be addressed by some more intrepid soul—leadership, like beauty, may well be in the eye of the beholder. This is a serious concern because hiring committees may well tend toward conventional gender stereotyping in assessing the traits of candidates. Key articles in the *Harvard Business Review* collection note that leadership is not a personality trait or a tangible disposition. It is, for example, an orientation toward effective action¹⁶ or an ability to “instill confidence in people,”¹⁷ or at the very highest level, a distinctive blending of the “modest and willful,” the “shy and fearless.”¹⁸ It’s hard to imagine that a woman would fare well in an interview if she appeared shy and modest. And, would her manner, seen through the prism of gender, communicate an ability to instill confidence or an orientation to action? Goffee and Jones note that “gender differences can be used to either positive or negative effect. Women, in particular, are prone to being stereotyped according to differences—albeit usually not the ones that they would choose” (91). They add that this stereotyping is virtually unavoidable “if a group’s representation falls below 20%” in a given social subset (91).

What we, in fact, end up with is leadership as an unmarked trait whose ready referent, predictably, is male. But you will recall that Steven Sample did not stoop to gender leadership styles at all. For him and other current commentators on the subject, leadership is not a style but an intangible quality, a rare and precious human capital. This is a discursive strategy long familiar to feminist critics, and it strongly motivated a move for many feminists from women’s studies to gender studies, where maleness and masculinity could be studied on an equal footing with femaleness and femininity.

Always the manager, never the leader. More important to us today is the effect of Sample’s strategy—that of identifying leadership as an essence rather than a style. It implicitly relegates discussions of styles or types to a discourse of management. You will recall that the article entitled “Who Says Women Lead Differently” focused on issues of style: “Women leaders describe themselves as oriented toward teamwork and empowerment, more

¹⁶ Peter F. Drucker, “What Makes an Effective Executive,” in *HBR’s Must Reads: On Leadership*, 23-36.

¹⁷ Ronald A. Heifetz and Donald L. Laurie, “The Work of Leadership,” in *HBR’s Must Reads: On Leadership*, 69.

¹⁸ Jim Collins, “Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve,” in *HBR’s Must Reads: On Leadership*, 123.

transformative than transactional” (7). But these are not leadership styles; these are management strategies. Ironically, too, the article notes that, “men aren’t included in many studies of women’s leadership styles, especially the qualitative ones. A woman conducting interviews to research women leaders’ styles rarely interviews men” (7). Something has gone radically wrong when one is studying the role of gender in leadership and is interviewing only one gender.

Researchers can also derail the real issues and questions by making essentialist assumptions at the outset. Another issue of *Women in Higher Education* presents a piece entitled “Today’s Brave New World Gives Women the Advantage.”¹⁹ The essay, indeed, sets out bravely: “Natural communicators, women are reaping the benefits of today’s 24/7 world. Intuitive at building both personal and professional relationships, women are thriving in this era of e-mail, cell phones and pagers” (7). With friends like this, who needs enemies? The article focuses on a new book by Sally Helgesen entitled *Thriving in 24/7: Six Strategies for Taming the New World of Work*. Helgesen’s conclusion is that women have “many unique strengths to bring to leadership positions. . . . Today’s reality is that success comes not to hierarchies built on the chain-of-command military thinking, but rather to those based on inclusive webs that value each person’s contributions.”²⁰

It is not difficult to discern which gender is presumably drawn to “chain-of-command military thinking” and which to inclusive webs. Sadly, for my purposes it is pointless to argue about the accuracy of these stereotypes, because neither of them describes leadership as it circulates in our culture today; they both inadvertently participate in a discourse of management, describing ways of implementing policies, strategies for getting things done.

Meanwhile, the discussion of “real” leadership is always already elsewhere.

What should you do? Should you run out and sign up for a workshop coming soon to a location near you? If you believe that’s the answer, you’ll be happy to learn that Enlightened Leadership International has just the ticket: a powerful one-day seminar entitled “Making Managers into Leaders: Bridging the Gap,” where you can learn from the lips of none other than Herb Kelleher, renowned and admired CEO of Southwest Airlines, that “attitude equals altitude.” If anyone knows about altitude, it should be Herb.

¹⁹ Anne Connor, “Today’s Brave New World Gives Women the Advantage,” *Women in Higher Education* 11, no. 12 (December 2002), 7.

²⁰ Sally Helgesen, *Thriving in 24/7: Six Strategies for Taming the New World of Work* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 7.

I hate to end on a sarcastic note, but it does reflect the difficulty of changing cultural narratives, especially when they are grounded in deeply held convictions about human nature and essence and informed by a Renaissance leadership text titled *The Prince*.

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