



21st Century Women's Leadership

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**Research Center for
Leadership in Action**
NYUWagner

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About the Research Center for Leadership in Action

As the research and development hub for leadership in public service, the Research Center for Leadership in Action partners with organizations on the ground to tackle ambitious questions and strengthen their ability to resolve tough social issues.

Housed within the NYU Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, RCLA is pioneering new approaches to contemporary global leadership that integrate research with practice, bridge individual pursuits and collective endeavors, and connect local efforts with global trends. RCLA's scholars are at the forefront of developing innovative social science research methodologies and building new knowledge about leadership practices that make change possible.

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About the White House Project

The White House Project, a national, nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization, 501(c)(3), aims to advance women's leadership in all communities and sectors, up to the U.S. presidency. By filling the leadership pipeline with a richly diverse, critical mass of women, we make American institutions, businesses and government truly representative. Through multi-platform programs, The White House Project creates a culture where America's most valuable untapped resource—women—can succeed in all realms.

To advance this mission, The White House Project strives to support women and the issues that allow women to lead in their own lives and in the world. When women leaders bring their voices, vision and leadership to the table alongside men, the debate is more robust and the policy is more inclusive and sustainable. By supporting women and the values that allow women to succeed—the full range of health options, security platforms that utilize all our resources, economic stability for all—we work to create an equitable culture.

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INTRODUCTION

The 21st Century Women's Leadership Project was a Cooperative Inquiry designed in collaboration by the NYU Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service's Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA) and The White House Project (WHP). Launched in 2007, the project was designed to explore what it takes to create a shift in the discourse about leadership – from a heroic, masculine, often white view, to a more collective, relational and inclusive view. Over the seven-month inquiry, the participants focused on the influence of these mental models on professional and personal life, among themselves as well as in the lives of their peers, senior supervisors and junior colleagues.

This project was structured as a **Cooperative Inquiry ("CI")**, defined in the literature as a "systematic process of action and reflection among co-inquirers who are tackling a common concern of burning interest." CI "gives equal value to learning and research in the service of action, giving primacy to practice as a source of knowing."¹ Cooperative Inquiry is embedded with the belief that theory and practice are inextricably linked. As such, the process was well suited to participants in the 21st Century Women's Leadership Project who agreed to explore their own "practice" as leaders through CI's repeated cycles of action and reflection.

The participants in this Cooperative Inquiry were women leaders in very high-level positions with considerable responsibility and authority over large areas of their organizations. They were drawn from the private, nonprofit, and public sectors. Two-thirds of the participants were white; one-third were women of color. Their ages ranged from 40 to 67.

For the WHP/RCLA Cooperative Inquiry, the participants considered the influence of gender on perceptions of leadership and jointly engaged in reflection about their experiences as leaders. The co-inquirers developed the central question of their inquiry as follows:

What would it take to transform the mental models held about women and leadership?

The women met three times in 2007 to explore this question from their multiple perspectives as individuals and as leaders in their sectors. Each meeting started with an evening session of three hours followed by a morning session of three hours. Between meetings, the participants were asked to observe their own behaviors, experiment with new behaviors and bring their observations back to the group for synthesis.

¹ Ospina, Sonia, El Hadidy, Waad and Hoffmann-Pinilla, Amparo. "Cooperative Inquiry For Learning And Connectedness." *Action Learning: Research and Practice.* (2008) 5:2, 131-147.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14767330802185673>

THE LABYRINTH OF LEADERSHIP: INSIGHTS AND OBSERVATIONS

During the Cooperative Inquiry, the women shared experiences from their personal lives, from family events and transitions, to the challenges of their work lives and the changing public landscape; from their ambitions, plans and questions about their professional futures, to their discovery of other interesting parts of themselves.

The group responded strongly to the metaphor of the **labyrinth of leadership**, which they discovered in a recently published article in the *Harvard Business Review*.² By reframing the obstacles for women as a labyrinth rather than the traditional “glass ceiling,” the authors emphasize that the route to leadership is complex and circuitous at every career stage. The participants explored this concept’s application to their own lives and identified a set of distinct features and barriers, including:

- The narrow band of women’s leadership: The participants spoke of the impossibility of “getting leadership right”; whether they practiced command-and-control or facilitative leadership, their behavior was often perceived in a distorted way by colleagues and superiors.
- Ambivalence about ambition: While ambition was identified as a critical element of the leadership trajectory, fueling accomplishment and driving results, the participants spoke of the conflicts aroused by ambitious women.
- Challenges of transition: The participants spoke of being valued one day and the next day failing to be recognized for actual achievement. This sense of disequilibrium, intensified during career transitions, found common voice even among these highly accomplished women.
- Race and gender: Race often trumps gender as a factor in the way women are perceived as leaders.
- Expanding the conversation and supporting each other: Over the course of the inquiry, some participants experimented with new behaviors and conversations and then reported back to the group. The women also drew closer to each other by offering counsel and support around current professional challenges.

While the ambitious question that launched the inquiry could not be answered in the timeframe of the Cooperative Inquiry, the group felt that they made some inroads in identifying key issues, which in their own experience, represent the pieces which might contribute to the puzzle of this transformation.

² Eagly, Alice H. and Linda L. Carli. “Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership.” *Harvard Business Review*, September 2007.

CURRENT CONDITIONS – WHERE ARE WE?

Context

The research about women's leadership demonstrates that most sectors continue to move at a glacial pace in terms of bringing women into the highest positions. This is especially true in fields that offer significant financial compensation. Among Fortune 500 companies, only 2% of CEOs are women. Women number only 16% of members of Congress. Academia and the not-for-profit sector have made more rapid and substantive progress at advancing women to the top leadership of their institutions. Overall, however, the gender gap continues, with men holding 80% of all national leadership posts.³

Given the many programs and initiatives designed to advance women over the past three decades, why has there been such limited progress?

Some of the current literature examines the persistent gender gap in leadership from new angles. While the “glass ceiling” has been the traditional metaphor used to describe barriers for women, researchers Alice Eagly and Linda Carli have articulated a new framework they name as the “labyrinth of leadership.” In their *Harvard Business Review* article, “Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership,” which was shared with the CI participants, the obstacles to leadership are seen as cumulative and complex for women at every career stage. “The routes exist, but are full of twists and turns.”⁴

The authors describe the assumptions underlying gender bias as “a set of widely shared conscious and unconscious mental associations about women, men and leaders. People associate women and men with different traits and link men with most of the traits that connote leadership ... Women are associated with communal qualities, which convey a concern for the compassionate treatment of others ... men are associated with agentic qualities which convey assertion and control.”⁵

During the Cooperative Inquiry, the participants explored the complexities of navigating through this labyrinth of leadership. While their conversations ranged among several themes, they consistently returned to the question of what it would take to dismantle the assumptions – or mental models – for themselves, within their organizations and throughout the culture.

³ Benchmarking Women's Leadership: A Report Card on the Leadership Gap In America. Forthcoming in 2008, The White House Project.

⁴ Eagly and Carli. “Women....” *Harvard Business Review*, September 2007.

⁵ Ibid.

The Narrow Band of Leadership

“Women have had to lead from the foot of the table because of what society has allowed in terms of our authority. When you lead from the foot of the table, you have to gain trust and get people together. You have to collaborate to get decisions made. This is actually the way our organizations and our country need to be led now.”

“I don’t know whether it’s changing the scope of leadership or whether I need to change to fit different situations.”

The two gender-stereotyped leadership styles are often translated as “command and control” versus “facilitative and collaborative.”

The women participants in the Cooperative Inquiry affirmed that 21st century leadership requires both facilitation and firm decision-making. As one woman said, “I am very collaborative, but I’m also a boss at the end of the day. My leadership style is situational and I exercise both.” Others concurred about the necessity of drawing upon “a diverse bag of skills ... in order to navigate multiple systems. People who live in multiple systems are more fluent.”

However, when discussing their personal experience, many of the women said that, regardless of which leadership style they practiced, their behavior was perceived in a distorted way by colleagues and superiors. They spoke of feeling confined to a “narrow band” of women’s leadership, which one corporate executive described as “the small area between too wimpy or too bitchy.”

For one nonprofit CEO, leadership felt more authentic and less narrow because, as a lesbian and a woman of color, she was already so different from the predominant culture and did not fit the traditional profile for leadership. During a period of turbulence, she was recruited to head her agency by board members who recognized what she could bring to an organization facing fiscal crisis and political divides. “Everything was at stake, so I had nothing to lose.”

With the 2008 Democratic primaries as the backdrop of this inquiry, a frequent topic of conversation was the impossibility of “getting leadership right.” For some in the group, the public scrutiny of Hillary Clinton’s gestures, clothing and laughter seemed to exemplify the resistance that these women face in being accepted as leaders.

The women saw the need for a range of leadership styles, depending on the situation and embraced this flexibility rather than being forced into any one mold. Two women, one in the corporate sector and one in the nonprofit field, asserted that this range in leadership styles will be acceptable only when there are enough women at the helm.

This conversation in the Cooperative Inquiry echoes current scholarship about post-heroic leadership, specifically the work by Joyce Fletcher who writes that “the traits associated with traditional heroic leadership are masculine. Men or women can display them, but the traits themselves – such as individualism, control, assertiveness and skills of advocacy and domination – are socially ascribed to men in our culture... In contrast, the traits associated with new post-heroic leadership are feminine. Again, men or women can display them but the traits themselves – such as empathy, community, vulnerability, and skills of inquiry and collaboration – are socially ascribed to women in our culture...”⁶

Fletcher notes the paradox that, even as traits associated with women are being celebrated as a new model of leadership, women have yet to benefit from practicing those behaviors. Moreover, those behaviors have yet to become the norm for leaders in most workplaces, perhaps because they are associated with women.

These discussions, about the challenge of leading effectively within the narrow band, suggest two parallel approaches for changing the mental models of women and leadership. One is for women to exercise a range of leadership styles. The other is to increase the number of women leaders, so that the association with gender is neutralized.

Ambivalence around Women’s Ambition

Ambition also figured as a recurring theme in the Cooperative Inquiry. One corporate leader in the group expressed frustration about how ambitious women are viewed in a negative light, as in, “It’s all about her.” By contrast, men are allowed to let “ambition be their tailwind.” This corporate executive talked about the strain of constantly demonstrating to her peers that her agenda is not “all about her” but about getting the work done.

An African-American corporate leader noted that, because so few corporations have had African-American women as leaders, she is seen as a complete anomaly. Therefore, she is not treated as an ambitious woman with a self-serving agenda. As a “blip in the system,” she is not considered a threat.

A nonprofit leader speculated that in the business world, ambition might be perceived more negatively because the focus of corporate leaders is to make money. In the nonprofit world and political sectors, the goal is to change the world for the better. In

⁶ Fletcher, Joyce K. “The Paradox of Post Heroic Leadership: An Essay on Gender, Power and Transformational Change.” *Leadership Quarterly* 2004; 15(5): 647-661.

this context, ambitious women leaders might be seen in a more positive light since this aligns with the perception that women are communally oriented.

The participants in the group coalesced around the idea that, in every sector, women are concerned about the exercise of responsible power.

“We want to know what the impact is going to be, as opposed to just having power for power’s sake. We have a desire to be more intentional about what the outcome is going to be when we exercise power.”

Over the course of the CI, many women linked their professional trajectory to their values and vision. For most of them, the engine fueling their ambition for leadership was the desire to make a positive difference in the world.

The women discussed the ways in which the ambivalence about their ambition can be internalized. Two corporate executives in the group joined forces to teach young women professionals about strategic networking to advance their careers. They described the resistance of these young women and their discomfort in being so intentional about their ambition that they would strategize how to meet the right people.

This internal ambivalence affects women at the highest levels as well. “Despite our confidence, we still need approval from men,” said a participant. Many women felt that this approval was hard to obtain. The women explored the currency they use to make their ambitions and strong leadership more acceptable. A public sector official reported that, after directing a meeting of male managers in a forceful way, she stopped afterwards to sew a button on one of the men’s shirts.

A nonprofit CEO who is comfortable with her ambition to lead social change, described how she “submerges” her ambition at home by being overly solicitous of her family’s desires. “Is it possible that many powerful women hold back and give up their leadership qualities at home to win acceptance from their families?” She speculated that this behavior might reinforce traditional mental models about women’s leadership potential.

Competition among women emerged as another aspect of the ambivalence around ambition. The participants spoke honestly about both wanting their colleagues and peers to succeed and sometimes experiencing envy when they do.

Ambition is a necessary element of achieving leadership that fuels professional accomplishment and drives results. Untangling the ambivalence around ambition – both internally and externally – is essential to creating more receptivity to women’s leadership.

The Challenge of Transition

Despite their elevated status, the women in this Cooperative Inquiry spoke of being daunted by professional transitions, both within their organizations and during their own careers. As a corporate executive observed, “While women occupy more flexible positions in life and society, they still do not benefit from an equal playing field.” This disadvantage presents itself most acutely during transitions. Several of the participants could not see how to transfer their credentials and experiences with a new boss, a new job or a new career.

One high-level corporate executive said that her new CEO seemed oblivious to the significance of her revenue-generating experience in the company, despite frequent reminders. Another corporate executive reported on her interview process for a top-line position. Despite being wooed for months by this company, her male interviewers posed questions that challenged her basic credentials, making her accomplishments seem almost invisible. This was especially surprising because she had prepared for this transition for several years, supplementing her professional experience with prominent roles in the philanthropic and political arenas.

Others in the group shared their experiences of feeling “invisible” during transitions. The government officials, driven by their passion for public service, worried about losing their positions because of term limits. They did not have confidence that they would be pursued for high-level positions in other sectors nor were they sanguine about climbing the next rungs in public service.

This sense of disequilibrium, of being valued one day and the next day failing to be recognized for actual achievements, highlights the struggles of even the most accomplished women leaders. The anxiety around career transition underscores the reality that, for women, the road to leadership is a labyrinth rather than a linear path to the top.

Race and Gender

“All human beings have an authenticity struggle. It’s not that men don’t have an authenticity struggle. But when you’re in the minority, other people’s views of you interfere with your struggle to be authentic. So, what we’re talking about here is the extra burden of black women, being seen in a way that complicates.”

For several women in this Cooperative Inquiry, race affected the leadership trajectory more than gender. An African-American participant commented that “being a woman is almost secondary” in the leadership context. Another woman said that the way people respond to her when she takes an opposing stand is exacerbated by her race, citing remarks that wouldn’t be addressed to her if she were a white woman. For a third

woman of color, the influence of race was so decisive that the issue of gender was virtually irrelevant.

However, the women of color in the group spoke of positive cultural influences from their communities and families. One participant said that African-American women are accustomed to being powerful figures in their homes, families and communities. Another woman talked about how comfortable she is with her leadership when she is in familiar settings, such as her community, her church and among other women of color, all part of a supportive constituency with whom she can say what she feels and continue to receive their protection as long-term supporters.

Paradoxically, race emerged as an aspect of identity that was the source of both challenge and support for women as leaders.

HOW TO ACCELERATE CHANGE

Having explored the narrow band of leadership, the ambivalence around ambition, and the circuitous routes women must navigate if they seek to lead, the Cooperative Inquiry then turned to the next cycle of action and reflection. The participants brainstormed about ways that they could be agents of change in shifting the mental models that limit their potential.

Expanding the Conversation

“How do we replicate this process in other people’s lives? What are the points of intervention?”

As the Cooperative Inquiry progressed, several participants decided that they wanted to extend their own group experience to others, to facilitate conversations about women and leadership.

The women shared ideas that would bring both peers and junior-level colleagues into such discussions. A social change leader proposed the creation of Purpose Circles, as a format for women to explore their aspirations, ambitions, and challenges. An elected official wanted to convene her political colleagues – many of whom are affected by term limits – to discuss the impact of these transitions. A third woman decided to meet with the women grantees of her foundation to help them become more “fully present” in their leadership. The goal of these efforts would be to support women in moving beyond the narrow band of leadership.

The first experiment demonstrated the challenge of raising the gender issue. One woman convened her team of managers to explore the impact of gender on their

leadership; her team said that being a woman did not feel like a decisive influence in their work. “I asked them if it was hard to lead as a woman,” she reflected and wondered whether she would have heard a different response if she had asked about the positive aspect of leading as a woman.

People approached their experiments differently, depending on their context. One corporate leader asserted that she was “always experimenting,” in order to move forward in her male-dominated environment.

During the course of the inquiry, the refrain of connecting to the next generation surfaced frequently. There was a lot of discussion about whether or not young women would experience the same challenges that these more senior women faced in their professions as they aged. Could women in their 40’s, 50’s and 60’s play a role in preparing younger women to navigate the labyrinth? How likely is it that the next generation will embrace leadership?

Consulting and Supporting One Another

“How do we keep inspiring each other? How do we keep encouraging each other? How do we keep emboldening each other? How do we keep working together so we’re not out there on a limb?”

Over the course of the Cooperative Inquiry, the women moved from discussing ways to reach out to others, to confronting their own professional challenges in the “labyrinth of leadership.” Each participant spoke candidly about a significant work issue and received guidance from the group. Having benefited from each other’s counsel and support, they talked about how they might continue to trust, encourage and stand up for each other.

Several women noted that the Cooperative Inquiry was the only setting where they felt comfortable revealing how demoralized they were about particular problems they were facing. “My husband did not even know what I was going through at work for the last two years,” one woman said, demonstrating the isolation that leaders often feel, even from their own families. Other women in the group relished the opportunity to give and receive practical advice but said that they considered their families as havens where problems could be freely discussed.

REFLECTIONS ON THE COOPERATIVE INQUIRY

According to a new nationwide Pew Research Center Social and Demographic Trends survey (August 2008), Americans believe women are equipped to be political leaders. In this survey of 2,250 adults, the public rates women superior to men on seven of eight leadership attributes, including honesty and intelligence as the most highly valued traits in political leaders.

Nevertheless, only 6% of respondents say that, overall, women make better political leaders than men. About 21% say men make the better leaders, while the vast majority – 69% – say men and women make equally good leaders. Despite these numbers indicating receptivity, about half of all survey respondents explained the actual gender gap in the political realm by saying that “many Americans are not ready to elect a woman to high office.”⁷

The paradox around gender and leadership embedded in these new survey findings reinforces the motivating question at the heart of the WHP-RCLA Cooperative Inquiry. We asked what it would take to shift the mental models about women and leadership, and we explored the effects of these assumptions on the self, on organizations and on society.

The women in this Cooperative Inquiry often noted the importance of authenticity as leaders. However, their personal stories revealed the very real challenges of being fully present as a leader and a woman in a predominantly white, male culture. Therefore, women make strategic choices about when and how it is safe to reveal multiple aspects of themselves and their leadership attributes.

One of the consequences of making these strategic choices is that women absorb the prevailing mental models about what it takes to be effective. They bracket aspects of themselves in order to navigate their public worlds.

The Cooperative Inquiry offered a place and time where these women leaders could unbracket themselves and be more present. The meetings took place in the President’s House at NYU, a warm and gracious environment, and this contributed to the sense of comfort and affirmation. Over time, this process created a safe context that allowed the women to explore a wider spectrum of how they think, feel, behave and present themselves.

⁷ Pew Research Center. *Men or Women: Who’s The Better Leader? A Paradox in Public Attitudes*. August 25, 2008. <http://pewsocialtrends.org/pubs/708/gender-leadership>

In their full-length work on women and leadership, *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders*, authors Eagly and Carli articulate two key principles for women who are seeking pathways to top positions. The first principle is to “blend agency with communion.” Women must demonstrate extraordinary competence on difficult tasks, infusing the decisiveness required of leaders with the warmth expected of women. The second principle is to “create social capital through good relationships with colleagues both within and outside their organizations.”⁸ Both of these principles are reflected in the experiences and ideas of the women in this Cooperative Inquiry.

The outcomes of Cooperative Inquiry methodology typically include new practical knowledge for the participants and often a transformative experience as well. Witnessing the significant connections made and the confidences exchanged among these women encourages us to think about extending this modest inquiry deeper into the labyrinth of leadership.

⁸ Eagly, Alice H. and Linda L. Carli. *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders*. Pp. 163-174. Harvard Business School Publishing, 2007.