POSITIONING THEORY: A FRAMEWORK FOR WOMEN LEADERSHIP TRAINING

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Abstract

Women have the potential to excel in management and leadership positions. However, change is needed in the way we approach leadership development if we want to increase their numbers among senior executive positions and board of directors. A significant obstacle related to delivering leadership programs for women is the lack of a theoretical framework for curriculum development. This paper looks at the potential for approaching training from the perspective of positioning theory, one that looks at how people use words in order to locate themselves within their discourse thus enabling them to negotiate their gender-related position in conversations. In short, we believe training should be focused on helping future leaders look at the language they use and the corresponding consequences of using it so they can make judicious choices that result in strong leadership. Grounded in the belief that we construct our own social reality with our discourse, we argue that a curriculum built upon the tenets of positioning theory should not only increase awareness of conversational choices but also enable women to be better skilled when stepping into managerial and leadership positions and so they may better navigate the reality of the workplace.

Keywords: Women’s Leadership Training, Positioning Theory.

1 INTRODUCTION

Despite increasing evidence that women might actually be better suited to leadership positions than many of their male counterparts, little progress is being made when it comes to increasing their numbers among the senior ranks of organizations [1]. It has been argued that a change is needed in the way we approach leadership development [2] [3] [4]. While some argue that we must paint a more realistic picture of the personal and professional challenges women leaders face, others believe we need to train them to develop the right skills set. Ranging from emphasizing the need to “lean in” [5] to helping women develop negotiation skills, arguments about curriculum content are meant to better enable women to earn high-level positions and the corresponding financial rewards. Indeed, there currently is a push for a form of transformational learning, namely a form of learning that creates deep changes and discontinuity with previous patterns of interaction, that results in women’s increased awareness of problematic habitual patterns [3]. In short, by accepting that management and leadership education holds the potential to unlock solutions to societal challenges [6], it appears warranted to take a closer look at management and leadership development programs for women.

1.1 Rationale

Some researchers believe that one of the barriers to enabling women to reach their full potential is a lack of realistic preparation within university education. The scope of obstacles women can expect to encounter when they graduate and enter the workforce are rarely discussed [7]. For instance, we don’t do justice to issues related to the glass ceiling, discriminatory pay, bosses who care too little for women’s advancement, the lack of role models and mentors, women’s propensity to volunteer for maintenance-level roles, and the gendered nature of organizations, to name a few [3] [8] [7] [9]. In other words, most universities don’t prepare women to deal with the inequities of the job market [7]. Add to this problem a limited understanding of the differences regarding how men and women re-define roles at home, and the result is students who have little understanding of the context they will experience post-graduation; consequently, they are left inadequately prepared to deal with that reality.

Beyond the wide variety of problematic issues mentioned above, another significant obstacle in preparing women managers and leaders is the lack of a theoretical framework for curriculum development [2]. Accordingly, the few universities that offer women-only leadership programs remain limited due to a lack of a “coherent, theoretically based, and actionable framework for designing and delivering leadership programs for women” [2] p. 475. In an effort to fill this gap, Ely et al. [2] offer a
framework for women leadership development grounded in leadership identity development. They argue that women would benefit from learning to construct and internalize a leader identity, a requirement to the process of becoming a leader, and identify key topics to be included in such programs. These core topics include negotiation skills, change leadership, and 360-degree feedback and networking.

1.2 Critical Assessment

Though we believe that Ely et al. [2] contribute legitimate arguments, we disagree with how to tackle leadership training for women. Indeed, we believe a framework from an alternative paradigm would be better suited to the task, namely one from a social construction perspective. More specifically, this paper argues for the need to further develop curriculum from the perspective of positioning theory, one that looks at how people use words in order to locate themselves and others within their discourse and thus enables them to negotiate their gender-related position in conversations [16][17]. Grounded in the belief that we construct our own social reality with our discourse, we argue that a curriculum built upon the tenets of positioning theory should not only increase awareness of conversational choices but also enable women to be better skilled when stepping into managerial and leadership positions and so they may better navigate the reality of the workplace.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In a study conducted over 2011 and 2012 including just under 16,000 leaders, two-thirds of whom were male and one-third female, women rated better than men on 12 out of 16 competencies linked to effective leadership, namely on 'takes initiative', 'drives for results' and 'stretches for results'. Women also scored better than men on relational competencies such as 'practices self-development', 'develops others', 'motivates and inspires others', 'builds relationships', and 'collaboration and teamwork' [18]. Moreover, according to this study, as women move up the ladder in an organization, they are perceived all the more positively. Clearly organizations stand to benefit from women in leadership positions.

2.1 Making the Case for Improving Leadership Education for Women

It is believed that the lack of realistic preparation within university education might be one of the obstacles that prevent women from climbing the corporate ladder [7]. Moreover, it is argued that women need to be trained in negotiation skills in order to decrease the gender gap in the workplace [2][3]. When we turn to prominent universities (e.g. top business schools like Harvard, Stanford, UCLA, Duke and INSEAD), we see they have started focusing on a highly significant issue, namely the development of women managers and leaders. These programs appear to fill an important gap in university education for women. The reality is that, though women represent a large percentage of business school graduates, as of 2011 only 3.6% of Fortune 500 CEOs were women [1]. This seems counter-intuitive given that women are often more effective leaders than men.

The main argument is that the significance of leadership has increased and that requirements for excellence have changed [19]. Some are adamant that a change is needed in the way we tackle leadership development, as our current approaches result in 1) the reproduction of the same types of male leaders we saw in previous generations and 2) many women failing to develop to their full potential [4]. Accordingly, this topic is as important for men as it is for women because it seeks to bridge the gender gap and elevate the potential for all of our students to excel, no matter what their gender is. It is thus believed that we are currently short-changing women resulting in a serious waste in the war for talent [4]. In sum, a change is needed in the way we approach management and leadership development both in terms of painting a more realistic picture of the personal and professional challenges women leaders face, as well as with the goal of training them to develop the right skills set [20][2][3].

There is agreement among scholars that business schools need to address the different sets of concerns that students from all genders can expect to encounter when they graduate and enter the workforce. These concerns include issues such as role expectations in the home and in the workplace [7], and the fact that women are still the ones who interrupt their career development to manage work and family responsibilities [9]. Whether we are discussing the need to earn social capital (an essential element for career advancement) or highlighting the paucity of mentors for women, it appears that we are not preparing young women adequately [9]. Moreover, some argue that we must not only train women to “lean in” [5], but we must help them develop the negotiation skills needed to earn high-level
positions and be paid the corresponding salary. Furthermore, it is important that leadership training includes work/life balance issues and developing policies and practices that allow working parents to manage their careers and their family responsibilities.

Williams and Dempsey [1] summarize the scope of the problems women leaders face into four categories, namely 1) Prove it again, where women are called upon to continually prove themselves in order to be seen as equally competent as men, 2) The tightrope which represents a double bind for women who either display more traditional feminine skills (and are then relegated back to ‘prove it again’ patterns) or instead choose to display masculine skills and are then perceived as lacking social skills. They also discuss 3) the maternal wall where women with children are pushed to the margins at work, and finally 4) Tug of war where women who choose a more masculine approach to leadership are pitted against those who prefer a more feminine style. In short, there is currently room for only a few women at the top, so while competing for these rare spots women are often not supportive of each other.

A further challenge with regard to gender equity is that training programs remain limited due to a lack of a “coherent, theoretically based framework for designing and delivering leadership programs for women” p. 475 [2]. In an effort to address this problem, these authors created a framework for women’s leadership development grounded in leadership identity development. They argue that, given requirements to the process of becoming a leader, women would benefit from learning to construct and internalize a leader identity. Accordingly, they proceed to identify key topics to be included in such programs, namely leading change, 360-degree feedback, networking, and negotiation skills [2]. Indeed, negotiation skills are often hailed as a key part of bridging the gender gap [21]. Women face a dilemma when negotiating, namely weighing the benefits of negotiating against the corresponding social consequences of doing so (i.e. often due to expectations of social backlash); however, awareness in the use of these skills, along with competence in displaying them, appears to be a solid starting point for training purposes [21] [2].

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Though we believe that scholars identify legitimate problems, we disagree with how to tackle these within leadership training programs. Indeed, we prefer to stay away from the fix-the-women approach [19] and instead look at how we can help women better position themselves as leaders. We contend that the problem with teaching negotiation and leading change is not with the topics themselves but rather the perspective from which they are taught. This paper advocates for a framework from an alternative paradigm, namely from a social construction perspective, and the extension of this framework into practical applications. More specifically, we argue for the need to further develop curriculum from the perspective of positioning theory; one that looks at how people use words in order to locate themselves and others within their discourse and thus enables them to negotiate their gender-related position in conversations [16][17].

3.1 The Paradigm of Social Construction

The paradigm of social construction [10][11] holds that reality is not objective or external to the human experience. Rather, it is intersubjectively created in the interaction between people in social groups. This movement has been instrumental in founding a constitutive view of organizational communication [12][13][14], holding that communication is not the simple exchange of messages from sender to receiver, rather that communication itself constructs meanings, identities, relationships, and institutions [15]. The paradigm of social construction argues organizations themselves are created in discourse, and is part of “the communication perspective,” advocating the value of examining communication directly as the primary social process that makes the social worlds we inhabit [15].

In general, postmodern approaches, and specifically approaches that focus on the constitutive nature of discourse, have tremendous potential to contribute significantly to the study of organizations [23][25]. Social construction can contribute a reflexive awareness of everyday activity and conversation in the workplace that can translate directly into guiding practice [24]. More specifically, a social construction orientation can advance our thinking about organizations and offer organizational theory a focus on dialogic communication. Overall, social constructionist contributions to organizational theory, especially in their examination of discourse, have the potential to “challenge guiding assumptions, fixed meanings and relationships, and reopen the formative capacity of human beings in relation to others and the world” p. 37 [23].
Given that “women’s attempts to remain authentic undermine their ability to internalize identities that are congruent with leadership positions” p. 478 [2], then the answer is not to teach them that their identities are wrong. Instead, the solution is likely grounded in a deeper, richer, and more complex understanding of patterns of interaction that construct meanings, identities, relationships, and organizations [22]. Harré and van Langenhove’s [22] positioning theory is a particularly articulate expression of the social construction paradigm which we argue has considerable utility in transforming leadership training. We believe in the necessity of teaching discursive practices enabling participants to manage how they might position themselves in conversation.

3.2 Positioning Theory

As an expression of the social constructionist paradigm, positioning theory holds that individuals are shaped by powerful discourses in the social world, but are also active participants in producing and reproducing that discourse [22] [26]. This also implies that each speech act establishes moment-by-moment moral structures that establish a sense of “oughtness” that guides each turn in a conversation. In saying each of these utterances, speakers attempt to establish particular positions for themselves, both in relationship to the other speaker but also in relationship patterns of discourse in the larger social world. Each utterance carries frameworks of meanings, establishes positions, and creates an “implicit platform” for the other to respond p. 353 [26]. In that sense, each conversational turn is an invitation to the other to take a particular relational position, that the other may then accept, resist, reject, or offer an alternative.

For example, in a leader-member exchange, a leader may invite a member to take a cooperative, equal position in an interaction, and the member may reply with an utterance that cooperates equally, or takes a one-down subordinate position, or competing response, or any number of other possible positions; this then serves as an invitation back to the first party, and so on. As the interlocutors exchange conversational turns, they may achieve a well-coordinated interaction or they might experience discord, incoherence, or relational dissonance [15]. The communicative competence of one, the other, or both interlocutors will then influence the degree to which this offering, accepting, resisting, or rejecting positioning results in a satisfying productive exchange, or one in which the exchange is discordant.

From the viewpoint of positioning theory, an individual may enact a “multiplicity of selves” p. 36 [22] that play out in conversations. In any given conversational interaction, one’s position is “a complex cluster of generic personal attributes,” that are enacted in that conversation p. 1 [22]. Positioning, then, would refer to the dynamic process of communicatively negotiating the definition of the self and other in interaction with another person [22]. Further, there is a strong connection between dominant or pervasive discourse in society and an individual’s local conversational exchange. Any utterance contains multiple meanings, including a particular “discursive background” p. 354 [26]. Utterances contain remnants of the social context, patterns of meaning, and relational information. Every speech act, in some way, reinforces certain meanings and excludes others. In any context, multiple meanings exist and compete – some meanings become dominant in that context [22] [26]. Accordingly, positioning becomes a resource through which all persons involved can negotiate new positions. Hence, training from positioning theory takes the focus away from gender and offers “a dynamic alternative to the more static concept of role” p. 14 [22]. This way, negotiators are taught to use fluid positioning rather than fixed roles in order to cope with situations. In other words,

“A position in a conversation is a metaphorical concept: one can position oneself as powerful or powerless, confident or apologetic, dominant or submissive, definitive or tentative, authorized or unauthorized” p. 17 [22].

In short, we believe training should be focused on helping future leaders focus on the language they use and the corresponding consequences of using it so they can make judicious choices that result in positioning them as strong managers and leaders. In other words, we argue that we must teach women to be aware of how communication constructs relationships so they may better understand the complexities of building these relationships. We should avoid teaching women prescriptive formulas. Not only are these insufficient given that different women face different types of problems, but no formula can do justice to the scope of issues one woman will face over the course of her career. In short, women must display political savviness [1]. Awareness of positioning theory will contribute to that effort.

In practical terms, positioning theory provides a framework for developing and applying course content. For instance, grounded in the belief that women need to be trained in negotiation skills in
order to decrease the gender gap in the workplace, we argue for an alternative way to teach negotiation skills [2] [3]. Indeed, given that displaying competence with negotiation skills is often hailed as key to bridging the gender gap then we must provide students with the required tools [21]. Despite the reality that women still face a dilemma when negotiating, namely weighing the benefits of negotiating versus living with the likely corresponding social consequences of doing so (i.e. often due to expectations of social backlash), awareness in the use of the skills—along with competence in displaying them—appears to be a solid starting point for training purposes [21] [2].

Women do not always recognize when they are negotiating due to the many types of issues they deal with at work [2]. In fact, women often engage in different forms of negotiations, namely “asking for expanded roles and job opportunities, seeking support to move ahead, securing the resources to get work done, setting reasonable goals and objectives, and claiming credit for their work” (p. 482). In fact, women already negotiate for time and flexibility, they will also do so in order to connect with what is good for them and what is good for their group and the organization. Finally, women negotiate on behalf of others and to overcome unfair treatment [2].

With their training program, the goal is to enable women to develop a sense of agency so that they feel empowered while negotiating [2]. They aim to get women to:

“push back when they identify a pattern of behavior, policy, or work/practice that excludes them or causes others to overlook them” p. 483 [2].

This goal is thus accomplished by first broadening the scope of what negotiation entails, thereby preparing women to deal with a wide variety of issues they are likely to encounter. Moreover, their training provides opportunities for women to practice using a ‘shadow negotiation’ framework build on making strategic ‘moves and turns’ to help women position themselves to feel legitimate to ask for something and to better understand potential sources of resistance.

“The negotiator must come to see her own value and find ways to make it visible, to learn about how others have fared in similar circumstances, and explore possible alternatives to agreement… to turn the discussion to quickly regain one’s footing” p. 483 [2].

Instead, by approaching negotiation for women and leadership training from the perspective of positioning theory, women are empowered to analyze consciously what positions they are being invited to occupy and what positions they seek to invite others to take in their communication. They may more deeply contemplate what positions they and others are offering, accepting, resisting, or rejecting. Ultimately, they are more empowered to understand the positioning choices they and others make, become more mindful of the relational and systemic consequences of positioning decisions, and have an increased ability make more wise, choiceful decisions at critical moments.

In short, we believe training should be focused on helping future leaders examine the language they use and the corresponding consequences of using it so they can make judicious choices that result in strong leadership. In other words, we argue that we must teach women to be aware of how communication constructs relationships and social worlds so they may better understand the complexities of their place in the communicative constitution of organizations [12][13].

4 CONCLUSION

The goal of this paper is to contribute to women’s leadership training by arguing that curriculum development should be done from the perspective of positioning theory. If we can train students to be aware of (and make conscious choices with) the way they use language in the organization, they will have the power to position themselves and others within their discourse. This conversational strategy will empower them to negotiate their gender-related position in conversations and to display strong leadership.

Certainly women (as well as men) need training and development that will help them successfully navigate their professional lives, and part of that may include leadership and negotiation skills. At the same time that we focus on women’s professional development, should it not also be incumbent on other professionals to accept leadership from women, in other words to engage in followership? Is it not the responsibility of those in positions of power and privilege to eschew bias against women in situations of, for example, salary negotiation? As a practical matter, in the short term, modifying and extending existing women’s leadership training curricula to integrate positioning theory could be an immediate solution countering the “fix the woman” approach. However, in the long term, the broader social systems that privilege masculine patterns of communication and masculine leadership styles
need to be addressed and countered. Ultimately, it is not productive to teach historically patriarchal leadership skills as “leadership,” and relegate other leadership styles to a separate, special, and therefore subordinate thing called “women’s leadership.” In the long term, and as a broader movement toward societal change, we must take a critical approach to all leadership training and ensure that we are not just training women to lead, but also teaching everyone to accept leadership from women.

REFERENCES


