

Title

The voice of the reasonable man: A reflection on leadership as a masculine paradigm

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The voice of the reasonable man: A reflection on leadership as a masculine paradigm

In today's global economy and climate of complexity and change there is no ideal structure, strategy, or management approach that guarantees business success. The difference between a mediocre and great organisation is leadership (Collins 2001, Kotter 1995, Senge 1990). Leadership is a scarce resource and the global market is paying handsomely, and in certain arenas obscenely, to attract the 'right' leadership talent. Indeed a whole industry has been spawned to recruit and develop 'the right' leaders. Despite market demand for leadership talent, market failure is rife. The level playing field that prides itself on freedom, opportunity, and meritocracy, and that serves as a foundation for competition and economic growth does not exist in the leadership market. Barriers to entry thwart the invisible hand such that options and opportunities are closed to those who do not fit into societal mental models of leadership. The result is a narrow leadership incumbency that mirrors societal stereotypes. .

Given restrictive practices are anomalous with the rhetoric of an economically liberalising world, exploration of forces that sustain a narrow leadership base is required. Understanding the nature of these forces involves unpacking conscious and unconscious factors that shape authority and power agendas, underpin values, and determine what is manifest in leadership practice. I draw on my experience as a woman and a consultant to organisations to present a number of vignettes to elucidate on the nature of organisational dynamics that perpetuate narrow and idealised notions of leadership. In exploring these issues I use gender as a prism, drawing on the metaphor of 'the voice of the reasonable man', to critique imposed and received notions of leadership. Identifying gendered processes (Acker 1990), although not exhaustive, is one attempt to interrogate leadership.

Whilst not ignoring the implications of gender as a biological construct, which has seen leadership as a male domain, introducing gender as identity allows for a broader exploration of the forces, which promote the ascendancy of masculine over feminine values, and cultivate narrow notions of organisational success, as in 'compete or perish' (Sinclair 2004, Billing and Alvesson 2000, Collinson and Hearn 1994).

Failure to integrate the masculine and the feminine reflects a failure to integrate component parts of self, creating dynamics, which set men and women apart from themselves and others. Splitting and projective activity, as in narcissism and omnipotence, are manifestations of this imbalance with outcomes that have destroyed organisations such as Andersen and some of its high-profile clients, including WorldCom, Enron and HIH. To address chronic imbalance is to make explicit values that are deeply rooted and implicit, as in authoritarianism, rationalism, materialism, and rising militarism in market economies. This is a difficult task, as it disturbs the very foundations of today's corporate climate, which relies heavily on primitive imagery of survival and historical and symbolic leadership archetypes, which tend to be masculine. To challenge entrenched authority structures creates disturbances, which is anxiety producing evoking basic assumption activity (Bion 1961).

Key words: leadership, markets, gender, masculine and feminine values, integration, splitting, projective activity

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