

WOMEN, MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

Speech notes for the 12th Women, Management and Employment Relations Conference, Linda Rubinstein, ACTU Senior Industrial Officer

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What is leadership?

Defining leadership is difficult, particularly for those of us who have a background of rejecting the concept altogether. Thinking about it for this talk, however, I came up with a number of possible meanings:

- Persuading people to agree with you and/or take a particular course of action;
- Running an organisation or holding a high position;
- Having ideas and influencing events, which can happen in all sorts of ways – think about the influence of writers, for instance;
- Inspiring others – standing for values, for what we all want to be, such as Joan of Arc, La Passionaria, Aung San Suu Kyi or Nelson Mandela.

What do women bring to management and leadership?

One view is that women do it differently. We are more people centred and intuitive, we have wider experience and concerns, we work more collectively and are generally kinder and gentler. The evidence seems to be that while women might lean more towards this kind of approach, many don't. Just think about Margaret Thatcher. On the other hand, Golda Meir was criticised for her reluctance to go to war in 1973, with this being put down to her fear of the bloodshed which would result.

On the other hand, there is the view that even if women's leadership style is no different than men, we have the right to equal representation in the halls of power. There is some evidence that women's success is correlated to adoption of a "masculine" approach, although I would argue that women are not given the same right to stuff it up as men.

In many cases, poor performance is not tolerated from women where it would be from men. Think about the treatment of women in politics. I'm not so worried about cartoons, which are probably fair enough. Compare the masculinised image of Jennie George, or Joan Kirner in her polka dots, with treatment of "little Johnnie" Howard or Kim Beazley as a big baby. There is no doubt that we take it harder. On the other hand, expectations of women in positions of political leadership are enormous, and the subsequent vicious treatment therefore more of a contrast, as we saw with Cheryl Kernot, Carmen Lawrence, Bronwyn Bishop and currently with Kerry Chikarovski.

Why aren't women equally represented in "top" positions?

There are various explanations for women's underrepresentation, which are not mutually exclusive.

- Straight forward discrimination.
- The difficulties of combining the demands of a senior job with family responsibilities. Oddly enough, in the US, where women occupy a greater proportion of leadership positions than in Australia or the UK, two thirds of women are back at work six weeks after birth, with the comparable time for two thirds of Australian women being 18 months. Could it be that the lack, until recently, of unpaid maternity leave in US (only minimal now), accounts for the higher proportion of women in senior positions. Undoubtedly the availability of low-paid illegal immigrant nannies is also relevant.
- Women's skills aren't of the type suited to these positions or their skills aren't recognised. As I said earlier, success for women seems to be correlated in part to the preparedness or ability of women to adopt a "masculine" approach.
- Women have too much sense to waste their lives in this way, working 80 hours per week and sacrificing family and leisure to the demands of a corporate or political ladder.

Would the world be a better place if more women ran big companies and other institutions?

There is no evidence that this would be the case, although arguably women might as well have a go, given what a mess the men have made

However, women do have very different experiences and sense of themselves and the world, which has to be of value

What happens when they get there?

Women play a role in developing "family friendly" policies in companies and the public sector at the same time as they shed thousands of jobs, deskill jobs, increasing pressure and insecurity on employees.

The Finance Sector Union recently released a research report which showed that big banks have policies which help women cope with one-off or crisis events, like childbirth or a sick child, but not with the constant pressure caused by lack of staff, which is a key issue. Flexibility is meaningless if the work still has to be done or made up, or your fellow-workers resent you having the time off because you are not replaced. This is not to say that the policies are not worth having, but they need to be backed up in practice, which requires management recognising real needs, like the ability to go home at the scheduled time.

Discrimination at every level should be opposed, but we are seeing an increasing gap between the top and the bottom, and average women are falling further behind. The key issues affecting women are growing pay inequity, cuts to services such as child

care, the GST and stress and pressure at work.

We need to ask ourselves what are our priorities. Do we want women in leadership positions just because we deserve our place at the trough, or because we want to make the world fairer, kinder and generally more civil and civilised? This might be a female stereotype, but unless we are about changing the world in a better direction, there is not a great deal of point in seeking leadership.

How do unions see women and management in the companies with which they deal?

Unions' primary dealings with management are in representing workers, although some also represent management, and are concerned about discrimination issues faced by women in management.

I have not come across any view that female managers are any better from workers' point of view, although they might be more sensitive, on occasion, to the plight of individual employees.

Sometimes women are harder to negotiate with, not only because they feel they have something to prove, but because of a deep insecurity that means they take things personally which for men would be just part of the job. The old Mafia reassurance that the impending bullet is not personal, just business, is not a line which comes easily for women.

On the other hand, women can be less locked into an ego-driven desire to be seen to have won, and are more ready to let the other party save face.

What about union management and leadership?

It would be difficult to make out a case that leadership in the labour movement has been more accessible for women than other institutions. I was surprised to hear Barry Jones say the other night that Joan Child was the first female member of the federal ALP Caucus in 1974, although this is better than the ACTU – Jennie George was the first female member of the ACTU Executive in 1983.

As you probably know, the ACTU has a commitment to 50 per cent representation for women on its executive. There are a number of positive benefits to this, which I'll get to, but it should be noted that we have a much larger executive than would otherwise be the case, because the overwhelming majority of unions nominate a man as their first representative (some because they know they will get a second female position), three out of four of the full-time ACTU officers are male and five of the six state union representatives are male. We get to our 50 per cent by allowing unions to nominate a second representative so long as it's a woman. Some of the women nominated to these "second positions" are key leaders in their unions; other are not. Many of them say that being on the executive is useful because it gives them access to information and knowledge which they would not otherwise have, and assists them to play an active role across the whole range of issues in their union. In some ways it's an extension of the role of women's committees in unions and at the ACTU level – a means for women to get into the structure as well as to promote the issues. Similarly,

programs like the Anna Stewart Memorial Program (work experience with unions for active female delegates) and TUTA training have been important.

National female union leaders are to be found in all-female professional unions – nurses, teachers, flight attendants, as well as in the public sector. There are many women in elected positions other than the national secretary – women can be found as national presidents (not always a significant position), national assistant secretaries, branch secretaries and assistant secretaries. There is, not everywhere, but significantly, a recognition that where there are two or three senior positions, one of these needs to be a woman.

This is occurring partly as unions realise that if they are to survive they need to reach out to the largely ununionised sectors of the workforce, much of which is female-dominated; for example, call centres, hospitality, personal services. In some unions, however, this has simply meant that women are employed as organisers, on the principle that “like recruits like” and that, as I have often heard, women are the best organisers, but, it is implied, not the best leaders or managers.

It is interesting to note that recruiting women can require a different emphasis – not just “belt the boss” – particularly for women in service industries, like health and education, where employees care about the quality of the service and are committed to the industry. Women are working a lot of unpaid overtime because of this concern for their clients and fellow workers. There is evidence from the US, as well as in Australia, that women are more successful union organisers, particularly amongst women.

The “blokey” image of unions is often raised as a reason for women not joining in larger numbers, and for female members not playing a more active part. To some extent, the image reflects the reality of power – the maritime workers, power and resource industry workers, building workers and most manufacturing workers – especially the ones involved in industrial disputes are male. While it is hard for women to get to run all-female or mixed unions, it is virtually impossible in these key areas of the economy. However, even though they get the headlines, these areas of the workforce are shrinking – they might have industrial muscle, but they don’t give us the numbers and the social breadth that we need.

Is there a difference between male and female union leaders, apart from the different industries? There is some evidence, such as in Barbara’s Pocock’s book about sex and politics in labour unions, that women are more likely to have a collective approach, and also to give a priority to management of people, rather than seeing the role of leadership as laying down the line to the troops. Traditionally, particularly in blue-collar unions, the leadership would have as its only management model the autocratic style which existed in the factory where they did their apprenticeship 20 years ago.

This is less the case now, with greater recognition of the need for training in managing a union, like any other organisation. Every study of women leaders, including union leaders, finds them reluctant to describe themselves as leaders – women are more prepared to acknowledge and admit that they don’t know it all.

Women in emerging industries

Women have always found it easier to get a job in new industries and occupations – from the early aeroplane pilots to some of today's dot coms.

Thinking about this, it has struck me what a key role women have played in the industry super funds – although financial services are not new, they had traditionally been built around a model of male career employment, and largely male commission agents. The industry funds were new, they were committed to values of low-cost and taking on the established ways of doing things – being run solely in the interests of members and with strong links to unions.

Women became involved in running these funds who had no experience of superannuation or financial services, no knowledge of investment - and we now have a number of women running two and three billion dollar funds. And I think they do it differently. They are more focussed on what really matters, they understand the importance of smooth administration and of clear and honest communication. They see through the nonsense of funds managers and others trying to get their hands on the investment funds.

The industry funds have representative boards, half employer and half employee/union, which have given a significant number of women the opportunity to become involved in an area which they would never have thought they were equipped to handle. There are some early signs that women's involvement is having an influence on investment policies, in responding to women's concerns about environment and other aspects of socially responsible investment.

Conclusion

I'm not one who believes that women in management positions changes the world, although I do think we need management and leadership of our companies, our institutions and our country which is far more attuned to the needs of real people, whether in the workforce or the community generally.

We need women (and men) in those positions who say that they are not going to work 60 or 70 hour weeks; who have lives outside work, whether or not this revolves around family, and who understand that the workers they manage need the same.

And if there is an inherent difference between female and male leadership (and I suspect there is) we need the benefit of the best of both – we all lose by continuing to crush one and force it into the mould of the other.