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Joan L. Curcio

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Truths from Women about Leadership

A review of *The Female Advantage: Women's Way of Leadership*. Sally Helgesen. New York: Doubleday Currency, 1990.

By Joan L. Curcio, Assistant Professor, University of Florida

With Nietzsche's words "Suppose Truth is a woman, what then?," Sally Helgesen begins her timely and powerful work on *The Female Advantage: Women's Ways of Leadership*. Male leaders, don't reject this book; you're going to learn something more helpful than *Theory Z*. This book is not theory, hypothesizing on the differences between men and women in leadership positions; this is not psychology, explaining away why women may not be comfortable with warrior strategies; this is not an angry diatribe, or an *apologia* for the fact that many women lead differently than men. These are meticulously researched diary studies of four successful women leaders; the studies replicate Mintzberg's work on male leaders reported in *The Nature of Managerial Work*. The achievement of Helgesen's women is enviable enough to be studied. The four include: Frances Hesselbein, National Executive Director of the Girl Scouts (\$26 million operating budget); Barbara Grogan, President of Western Industrial Contractors (\$6 million annually); Nancy Badore, Director of Ford Motor Company's Executive Development Center (\$5 million budget); and Dorothy Brunson, President of Brunson Communications (company is worth \$15 million).

The real question Helgesen should have posed at the beginning of her book was not Nietzsche's but this one: Suppose Truth (about leadership) came in the form of a woman, would we listen to her voice? Sally Helgesen has chose to study the behavior of four women who have found their own leadership voices, and are using them to lead in ways that work. Each of the women, as Helgesen underscores, speaks with a distinctive voice that is "both a unique expression of her own personality and an instrument for conveying and guiding her vision of how her organization should be run . . . Each woman's management style finds expression in her voice" (p. 224). This "voice" that Helgesen alludes to is much more than words and sounds: it is dialogue and interaction; it is the tone that is set in the organization; it is the way of presenting and expressing oneself as the leader; it is modeling, encouraging rather than giving orders, teaching "lessons" and communicating values of responsibility and interconnection. "Implicit in the use of voice as an instrument of leadership is the notion that care and empowerment are leadership tasks," Helgesen says.

This book was written because of the author's realization (through her own experiences in the corporate world as well as her recognition of the corporate restructuring that is occurring at the same time that women are flooding the marketplace) that the days of women fitting into the corporate mold are over. Helgesen notes that the old hierarchical-chain of command structures in which women felt "least at

home" are crumbling. Significant change is taking place. So she has written a book that would discuss not what women should learn to make it in the corporate world, but what that world could learn from women. Specifically, she portrays four women in action, achieving success at this very moment, whose leadership is already having an effect on how business is being conducted in this country.

What are the values that these women hold that are the source of their success? They include:

an attention to process instead of a focus on the bottom line; a willingness to look at how an action will affect other people . . . a concern for the wider needs of the community; a disposition to draw on personal, private sphere experience when dealing in the public realm; an appreciation of diversity; an outsider's impatience with rituals and symbols of status that divide people who work together and so reinforce hierarchies. (p. xxi)

These are not values which belong to women alone, but they are values which in the past have been regarded as weaknesses in the work world, and not strengths. Specifically how do the women executives in Helgesen's book manifest these values, each in their own voice?—for they are very different women, and their voices are distinctive.

Frances Hesselbein, CEO of a large nonprofit organization, speaks calmly and carefully chooses her words. The leader of 750,000 volunteers will not motivate with an authoritarian style—hers must be "the voice of welcome" (p. 71). Yet she has instituted a management system that has united hundreds of local councils, put out management monographs that have been adopted by major corporations, and molded Girl Scouts USA into what Peter Drucker has described as the best-managed organization around. How has this "tough, hardworking" woman pulled this off? With caring (sympathy flowers to a young employee), attention to detail (every piece of mail in the organization answered within three days), and meticulous preparation; by constant reading and sharing ideas and information, listening, communicating respect, and building the corporate culture. Primarily she has done it with a circular organizational management structure, referred to by her staff as the "Bubble chart" and by Helgesen as a "web," and one other piece: strategic and tactical plans, which, combined with annual performance appraisals, comprise an overall corporate planning system. These are the tools through which Frances Hesselbein's "unflappable" leadership functions.

Helgesen describes the leadership approach of Barbara Grogan, who emerging from being devastated by divorce at 35 to being founder and president of Western Industrial Contractors eight years later, as a "structure of spontaneity." She plans her heavy schedule to the minute, then proceeds through the day with enjoyment and "unusual responsiveness." One of less than a dozen women among thousands of millwrighting contractors in the country, she built her business in a tough market during Denver's oil-recession days. She succeeded, Helgesen says, "because of her company's commitment to excellence, attentive service, and a policy of nurturing client relationships with the long term in mind." The bottom line is not the goal; getting the job done and maintaining a high level of integrity are. The warmth and enthusiasm of this woman pulls those around her in and belies her meticulous organizational abilities: greeting colleagues with hugs and kisses, proclaiming her successes to be triumphs for everyone, encouraging, pushing, teaching, "flowing . . . not stuffy and by-the-book." She lives the mantra on the dashboard of her van, "I am powerful, beautiful, creative, and I can handle it!"

Different still, the style of Nancy Badore in directing Ford's Executive Development Center offers a prototype for leading today's organization, given the changing nature of work and of people who work. In Helgesen's words:

Nancy Badore is constantly modeling behavior that breaks down status distinctions and confounds expectations of executive attitudes and comportment. She seeks to empower those around her by being direct and natural in a way that minimizes her own ego and strips herself of the trappings of power that emphasize boundaries and hierarchical divisions.

She is responsible for training top company managers internally in Ford's "new culture" values based on quality and customer orientation. She played a significant role in Ford's turn-around, and created the model for the Development Center which trains executives to "talk up the ladder." She is confident enough to bring her baby to work, serve health foods to the executives, be "crazy," and to trust her staff. She recognizes her weaknesses: intuitive and extroverted, she has trouble bringing closure and imposing structure. So she works on them and compensates with the staff she chooses, but doesn't try to "fit in." Realizing she has something important to contribute, she glories in her difference.

Dorothy Brunson, owner of Brunson Communications, sees herself as a transmitter, "gathering information from everywhere, making sense of it, rearranging it in patterns, and then beaming it to wherever it needs to go" (p. 179). Brunson succeeds in a business where constant change is the norm by adapting to the occasion while maintaining a strong, direct image; by taking risks like buying a radio station in a dire financial state and turning it around; by equalizing the pecking order in her business ("this is a black orga-

nization, so it's common for people to have a strong need for self-esteem" (p. 182); by teasing, cajoling, and above all, negotiating with relish and obvious enjoyment. She works out of two adjoining offices, carrying a large paper coffee cup, dressed simply; she drives an old Escort. What she values are her three radio towers on prime real estate behind her station, her clients, and her staff. For employees she wants thinking people who will make a commitment and bring their whole self to a problem. In return, she will give time, freedom to think, honesty, and respect.

For male leaders, Helgesen's book is a fresh look at leadership, another perspective, another opportunity to learn new strategies at a time when leadership abilities are being challenged from every direction. For female leaders, it is an affirmation and an invitation to continue the search for their "voice," remembering Sally Helgesen's admonition:

Leading with a voice is only possible when one has reached a certain level of development as a person; otherwise the voice will not ring true. (p. 230)

This book is about power, persuasion, empowerment, and negotiation. The analogies that can be drawn from this book of the business world to schools are unmistakable. As Helgesen points out, "Given the changing nature both of work and of people who work, there emerges a need for leaders who can stimulate employees to work with zest and spirit" (p. 235). There is something in this book that speaks to help in easing the public's loss of confidence in schools, to the threat of choice, and waves and waves of reform,—something to enrich all leaders who can hear its "voice."

Joan L. Curcio is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of Florida.