

## The Language of Female Leadership

Baxter Judith

Palgrave

Basingstoke

2010

Review DOI 10.1108/EDI-10-2010-0059

### Talking leadership, talking gender

It is now a widely known fact that there is a scarcity of women in leadership positions. Every year the Female FTSE shows how few women sit on the boards of publicly listed companies (Sealy *et al.*, 2009). Other research has found that most organizations follow the 50:30:10 rule (Gratton *et al.*, 2007). While women enter organizations as graduate in about equal numbers to men, only 30 percent of mid and only 10 percent of top managers are women. Organizations as well as academic scholars have tried to identify why the pipeline to the top is leaking.

The book *The Language of Female Leadership* offers a refreshingly new perspective on why there are so few female leaders: the use of language. Popular accounts of gender differences in language often speak of a divide between men and women that makes it difficult for men and women to communicate effectively at work (Tannen, 1998). Whilst women's language style is often seen as from Venus, men's language style is constructed as from Mars which can be seen as a way to essentialize gender differences (Cameron, 2007). Judith Baxter's book is notable for avoiding such essentialized notions when discussing gender, language and leadership by offering a much more nuanced analysis.

Her book explores two questions: first, is there a language of female leadership and second, how can female leaders use language to achieve success in business. The book is divided into two main parts: a theoretical overview and empirical examples. The first chapter of the book outlines Baxter's approach to gender, leadership and language and introduces three kinds of organizations: the male-dominated corporation, the gender-divided corporation and the gender-multiple corporation. These three kinds of organizations are then explored in the three following chapters in greater detail. These three chapters conclude the first part of the book. The second part of the book entails two case studies on the language of female leadership in action. Chapter 7 offers some practical strategies that seek to develop women as leaders through the language they use. The final chapter draws the different theoretical and applied sections together to conclude the book.

Chapter 1 provides the necessary background to set the scene for the rest of the book and points to the fact that demography plays an important role for women in organizations. Research on demography highlights that gender relations are influenced by gender majorities and minorities (Ely, 1995). Following this line of thought Baxter defines three kinds of organizations that are explored in the following chapters.

Chapter 2 tackles the male-dominated organization. It describes how such organizations, while being male-dominated often operate under the cover of gender neutrality. Baxter analyzes for instance how stereotypical female role models are often used to show that the organization is gender aware. Chapter 3 explores the gender-divided organization, which builds on the idea that women are different from men and

that this difference should be valued. In this type of organization men and women are seen as different and as contributing different strengths to the daily running of the business.

Chapter 4 then explores discourse theory and how discourse theory becomes manifest in the gender-multiple corporation. This chapter is based on the idea that in postfeminist times, people no longer rely on a primary identity such as gender or “race” to define themselves. Instead they construct their identities as multiple and contingent. Whilst identities are multiple, it is recognized that certain identities are more prone to discrimination. She explores the gender-multiple organization based on different aspects such as discourses in organizations, the social construction of gendered identities and communities of practice. This is clearly the area Baxter feels most passionate about.

The next two chapters represent case studies. The first case study in Chapter 5 explores the language strategies women leaders use in male-dominated and in gender-multiple organizations. In particular, the chapter highlights how female leaders tailor language carefully to navigate the double bind of being a woman and being a leader. The second case study in Chapter 6 explores the specific language strategies one single female leader uses to lead a business. In this fascinating analysis, we are witnessing meetings the female leader is chairing and how she manages those meetings. The analysis in both chapters is intriguing and insightful.

The book then offers some strategies of how the gender-multiple organization might become a reality. Baxter offers individual strategies for women such as “doing authority”, “doing politeness” and “doing humour” and organizational-level strategies for organizations such as contesting the use of sexist language, using different terms to describe women and changing the use of masculinized metaphors. This part of the book shifts to being much more self-help-book-like and it can be expected that business leaders themselves would find this insight useful. It is very unusual that an academic book tries to offer such practical advice and the effort Baxter has taken in making her research relevant for practice is laudable. The book closes by offering some conclusions on the language of female leadership.

One of the major shortcomings of the book is the lack of comparisons and contrasts. The book often claims that women have a sophisticated way of navigating being seen as a leader yet it is not really discussed how male leaders navigate their leadership interactions. It would have been useful to compare and contrast more men and women with each other to see differences as well as similarities. In that vein, it might be useful to consider how ethnic minority leaders deal with some of those dilemmas around leadership and gender. Whilst a piece of research is rarely ever able to explore all facets and this text is explicitly about women leaders, some reflection on those elements would have enriched the analysis.

The book is written in a lively language and is accessible for a range of readers. It is of interest for scholars of gender theory, language and leadership, while some of the final chapters might be of use for existing or emerging female leaders in organizations. It makes an important contribution to scholarship on gender, leadership and language by combining a thorough academic analysis with a view to practice. The book offers its own explanation for the scarcity of women in leadership and provides a unique analysis of the problem through focusing on language.

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## About the reviewer

Elisabeth K. Kelan was a Lecturer in the Department of Management at King's College London at the time this book review was submitted (19 October 2010). The review reflects the state of research in 2010. Elisabeth K. Kelan is currently Professor of Leadership and Director of the Global Centre for Gender and Leadership at Cranfield University Elisabeth K. Kelan can be contacted at: [elisabeth.kelan@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:elisabeth.kelan@kcl.ac.uk)

## Man-Made: Why So Few Women Are in Positions of Power

*Edited by Eva Tutchell and John Edmonds*

Gower

Surrey and Burlington, VT

2015

304pp.

£45.00/\$80,

ISBN (hbk) 978-1-4724-3212-4

ISBN (ebk-PDF) 978-1-4724-3213-1

ISBN (ebk-ePUB) 978-1-4724-3214-8

**Keywords** Leadership, Feminism, Equality, Sex discrimination,

Gender issues, Male domination, Qualitative gender studies

**Review DOI** 10.1108/EDI-01-2016-0002

This title is a very timely one stating the history and present of working women in Great Britain. Eva Tutchell and John Edmonds offer a comprehensive overview of the challenges women in the UK have faced and are facing still today in society and the workplace. It addresses particularly the issues for those women who show ambitions and who want to be successful in a world mainly designed and organised by men. The authors, a man and a woman, have interviewed more than 100 successful women and a handful of men, both in positions of power in the UK. The authors offer the account of women in Great Britain who succeeded in organisations and system that were initially created and preserved for the convenience of men (man-made!). Those women decided how they can best obtain success to move up in the organisation to a position of power. Power is about equality. More women want to decide how they can best contribute to organisations and systems in order to fit in, having a career and go to the top, some are