Measuring contemporary leadership success:

Women’s advancement to the upper echelons of corporate leadership

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The data and the research suggest an unhealthy professional pipeline in the United States with too many highly qualified women and minorities failing to advance in their career paths to executive-level positions (Cabrera, 2009; Carter & Silva, 2010; Catalyst, 2011; Wolfinger, Mason, & Goulden, 2008). Women today have assumed more prominent roles as leaders in the global workforce than in previous decades. According to Bureau of Labor Statistics data (2013) and U.S. Census Bureau data (2009) women represent 57% of the overall workforce and represent approximately 46% of management, professional, and related occupations in the United States, up from around 16% in the 1970s and 26% in the 1980s. Despite women’s equal representation in the workplace they are underrepresented in the upper echelons of organizations with women representing only 13% of Fortune 500 executive officers, 16% occupying board seats, 7.5% representing corporate top earners, and 3.6% in the role of CEO (Catalyst, 2011). This unhealthy leadership pipeline exists in spite of the profusion of leadership advice aimed at advancing women. This is less a factor of women failing to take leadership advice and more a result of gender inequity in social and organizational response to leadership advancement strategies.

The abundance of advice given to women leaders often perpetuates the fallacy that if women do all the right things, they can level the corporate leadership playing field. Research shows this to be largely a myth. Carter and Silva’s (2011) study of high potentials professionals on traditional career paths where both women and men had adopted a full range of advancement strategies attributed to the ideal worker uncovered distinct gender differences in the benefits of adopting the same advancement strategies. This paper will examine the efficacy of some of the most common advice given to women. The concepts of leadership outlined in Kouzes and Posner’s (2012) book *The Leadership Challenge* are highly relevant to leadership philosophies related to, and associated with, advancing women in leadership at the highest levels in corporate organizations. Kouzes and Posner’s advice on leadership has been cited in tens of thousands of scholarly articles and is a cornerstone resource in leadership graduate programs nationwide. This paper will explore the synergy between Kouzes and Posner’s (2102) exploration of the practices of exemplary leadership and the practices of women in leadership, as well as the role of leaders overall as explored in the literature on women in leadership and top leadership/top earner roles.

The relationship between Kouzes and Posner’s (2012) identified practices of exemplary leaders and how valuing these practices can help women overcome the barriers to advancement they face, while also assisting organizations in meeting the diversity goals that they so often articulate as a priority will be explored. Kouzes and Posner assert that through their review of the literature and extensive research which includes insights from top leaders and CEOs, that they have identified five practices of exemplary leadership whereby leaders; (1) Model the way, (2) Inspire a shared vision, (3) Challenge the process, (4) Enable others to act, and (5) Encourage the heart (p. 15). These practices will be discussed within the context of women’s leadership with particular focus on modeling the way, encouraging the heart and challenging the process, the practices most symbiotic with respect to women’s leadership. Additional concepts will be addressed within the context of these five practices including; walking the talk (within the context of modeling the way), power and privilege and gender barriers (within the context of encouraging the heart) as well as seizing opportunities, fostering change, exercising outsight and psychological hardiness as fundamental constructs related to women’s roles in the highest echelons of corporate leadership. At the conclusion of this analysis, Kouzes and Posner’s constructs and the related streams of literature will be summarized and linked together in terms of their relevance to fostering and retaining top female corporate talent.

**Model the Way**

Kouzes and Posner’s (2012) focus in chapter 3 is setting the example. Kouzes and Posner explain that in order to set the example, leaders need to live the shared values and teach others to model these values (p. 75). Setting the example has particular relevance in terms of credibility, but also in terms of positive organizational change in relation to walking the talk related to increasing diversity and specifically, family and work-life-balance initiatives. Many companies tout the value of diversity but then fail to implement and support policies and practices aimed at increasing diversity within the organization. This issue relates directly to an over-riding theme of Kouzes and Posner’s book which is credibility and walking the talk. As Kouzes and Posner explain “credibility is the foundation of leadership” (p. 37).

Prominent feminist legal scholar, author, and founding direct of the Center for Work Life Law, Joan C. Williams is one of the most respected and cited voices in both scholarship and the mainstream media in terms of issues related to the barriers women in the workforce face. Williams has presented the findings of her research over two decades in scholarly books and articles, as well as on popular mainstream social media video platforms. In a panel discussion on YouTube focused on what women need to know to navigate gender bias at work (Williams, 2014) explains how early in her career, she was discreet about any family responsibilities that pulled her away from work during work hours, such as doctors’ appointments for her children. Williams explains how later in her career, once she had achieved leadership roles and had professional influence, she made a point to put her family obligations openly on her work calendar for all to see. Williams point was that leaders have a responsibility, especially when they and the ability to affect change, to do so. Not only through implementing policies, but also through their actions by modeling the way.

Similarly, hip-hop mogul and author Russell Simmons (2014) espouses the value of life balance in his company, but then goes further to model the way and walk the talk, by putting his daily yoga classes on his public schedule and letting everyone know that there is no appointment or urgent business issue that he is willing to cancel his yoga class for. This models his vision of work-life balance in a very tangible way which allows others to make similar choices without fear of stigmas or unspoken repercussions.

The behaviors of the aforementioned leaders are reflected in Kouzes and Posner (2012) where the authors punctuate the importance of modeling the way asserting leaders should “make sure your calendar, your meetings, your interviews, your emails, and all other ways you spend your time reflect what you say is important” (p. 96). Certainly this relates to specific business related issues, but as noted in the aforementioned examples, it also applies to leadership values that influence attitudes and ultimately behavior. As Kouzes and Posner note in regards to leaders, “people watch your every action and they’re trying to determine if you’re serious about what you say” (p. 74). This is what is meant by living your shared values and walking the talk.

**Walk the Talk**

This concept of walking the talk is crucial in moving family-friendly and work-life-balance initiatives from theoretical policies to pragmatic practices which serve to support women’s organizational success. This offers explanation as to why there was so much public controversy and criticism when Yahoo Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Marissa Mayer announced that she would be taking two weeks of maternity leave and working throughout that truncated maternity leave after the birth of her twins. Mayer had been responsible for implementing family-friendly policies such as doubling Yahoo’s maternity leave from 8 to 16 weeks of paid time off. The controversy and criticism that has emerged regarding her public position on her maternity leave is relative to Mayer’s position as a role model within women’s advanced leadership. As such, everyone is watching her behavior and her choices which are seen as more than a women’s personal choice because of the potential impact and precedent resulting from the behavior. As Kouzes and Posner (2012) note, “The power of the leader’s personal example can’t be stressed enough” (p. 75).

Many family and work advocates expressed disappointment in Mayer’s announcement for this reason. Anne Weisberg, senior vice-president of the Families and Work Institute in New York expressed her disappointment with Mayer’s decision in a September 2015 interview with the Guardian asserting “She’s a role model and I think she should take whatever Yahoo’s parental leave is – the mark of a great leader is that they have a strong team and don’t need to be there all the time themselves”. In this example, it can be argued that the values Mayer is living are not aligned with her stated vision and policies. Not only do her actions suggest that in spite of the increased benefits she has implemented as CEO, in practice, women don’t need the time, but on a larger scale this choice affects every person’s morale in the company as it suggests that they can’t be successful or fully productive without Mayer. How demoralizing that message must be to both the men and women who support Yahoo’s initiatives and Mayer’s vision. Weisberg goes on to assert that how corporate leaders handle the issue of parental leave is “hugely symbolic” for their own employees and, in the case of a female boss, women everywhere.

**Encourage the Heart/Feel Your Passion**

**Power and Privilege**

One criticism of this book relates to the emotional ideals recommended for leaders and the significance of language within the context of practical leadership application, particularly key emotional intelligence constructs Kouzes and Posner (2012) focus on related to the heart, passion, nurturing, relationships, collaboration and cooperativeness. Kouzes and Posner oversimplify the discussion when they fail to address a well-documented history of gendered perceptions, or the way in which emotions are viewed through a gendered lens in terms of certain leadership attributes. When analyzed through the postmodernist lens of power, hierarchy, privilege, and hegemony this topic requires a more thorough and pragmatic examination of the realistic interpretation of certain leadership attributes. Hatch and Cunliffe (2013) discuss hegemony in terms of domination of one social group over others.  Evidence of the dominance by white males in top level corporate positions is indisputable.  Census data show women represent half the workforce overall, yet the numbers dwindle significantly at the highest levels with only 13% of top executive positions and 4% of CEO’s being women. The numbers for women of color are far bleaker with African-American women for example, constituting a mere 1.1% of corporate officers and top earners.

**Gender Barriers**

The advice given to women to overcome barriers is often focused on women leaders either behaving more masculine, or at the least being seen as less feminine in their leadership style. In spite of the presence of many positive attributes where women tend to exceed or outscore their male counterparts, such as with emotional intelligence attributes like empathy or relationship building, the outcomes for women are often negative because these attributes (at least in the case of women in leadership) tend to be in conflict with women being seen as capable or competent. Williams and Dempsey (2014) assert a pattern of distinguishable language between men and women which create barriers to success including women being described as lucky when positive outcomes result from their leadership while men with similar outcomes are described as skilled and highly competent.

Indeed, research supports a gendered bias in the way women and men are viewed for similar behavioral leadership attributes. Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb’s (2013) research confirmed that “behavior considered assertive in a man is seen as aggressive in a woman and thus is denigrated rather than rewarded (p. 5). Katila and Eriksson’s (2013) research on the gendered positioning of CEO’s in performance reviews confirms research supporting women’s leadership strengths, many of which are symbiotic with Kouzes and Posner’s (2012) constructs of encouraging the heart, but also show how this is seen in opposition to important leadership qualities of competency and control. When Kouzes and Posner (2012) espouse the importance of the softer attributes of leadership such as passion, “encourage the heart (p. 271), “nurturing”, “openness” (p. 203), “foster collaboration” (p. 215) and “show concern for others (p. 223), few can argue the logic of these important attributes. In fact these are the types of attributes commonly used to describe women leaders. While these softer attributes are valuable leadership qualities as Kouzes and Posner argue, there is a profound lack of discussion in *The Leadership Challenge* as to the gender biased lens through which women’s leadership attributes are viewed and interpreted.

Katila and Eriksson’s (2013) research confirms previous research (Ryan & Haslam, 2007) which showed that while there is little difference in the duties assigned to male and female CEOs, “the positioning of female and male CEOs construct a very different picture of their abilities as business managers and leaders of people” (Katila & Eriksson, 2013, p. 71). This can be seen when considering charismatic leadership. Katila and Eriksson found that professional women are described as “more expressive” (p. 72). This should be good news for women leaders if we consider Kouzes and Posner’s assertion that “…people who are perceived to be charismatic are simply more animated than others” (p. 147). Unfortunately the research shows these qualities don’t always manifest as positive feedback for women. Similarly, although women are described as more “caring, nurturing, communal, and emotionally expressive” (Katila & Eriksson, 2013, p. 72), and while women leaders are seen as possessing greater interpersonal sensitivity and concern for others well-being and selflessness, men are overwhelmingly described as more competent, ambitious, independent and in control (Katila & Eriksson, 2013).

**Walking the Tightrope**

Kouzes and Posner (2012) instruct leaders to stay in touch with “your deepest feelings (p. 113), and that “people don’t see possibilities when they don’t feel any passion” (p. 113), but research shows that for women, emotion often conflicts with competency. Research shows that gender can have a significant impact on how the expression of passion and emotion in leaders can be perceived (Schaubroeck & Shao, 2012). Schaurbroek and Shao explain that when men encourage the heart as Kouzes and Posner opine, it is viewed positively by employees (both male and female) and is seen as being tied to their passion, whereas with women it is often viewed or judged as overly emotional. Williams and Dempsey (2014) describe this dichotomy as walking the tightrope whereby a pattern of bias exists for women forcing women to walk a tight line between being liked but not respected, or being respected but not liked. The tightrope is prescriptive bias stemming from cultural assumptions of how women should behave. Williams (2014) explains how often high status, leadership roles are seen as requiring stereotypically masculine qualities. In other words, women seeking leadership advancement must have to constantly concern themselves with walking a tightrope between being seen as too feminine while also being seen as competent and effective.

The aforementioned critique is not meant to take away from sound insights from Kouzes and Posner regarding “the importance of recognizing personal contributions” (p. 275), or providing “personal recognition” (p. 285), or the advice to “get close to people” (p. 287), but rather it is meant to illustrate how this advice when taken by men will often have different outcomes than when the same advice is taken by women. This is an essential point because the advice given to women leaders often perpetuates the fallacy that if women do all the right things, they can level the corporate leadership playing field. Again, research shows this to be largely a myth. Carter and Silva’s (2011) study of 3,345 high potentials professionals on traditional career paths following graduation from full time MBA programs, of which both women and men had adopted the full range of advancement strategies attributed to an ideal worker, there were distinct gender differences in the benefits of adopting the same advancement strategies. Carter and Silva found that men benefitted more than women when they adopted the proactive strategies of the proverbial “ideal worker” (Carter & Silva, 2011, p. 2). The study showed that even when women used the same career advancement strategies to help them get ahead, they advanced less than their male counterparts and had slower pay growth.

**Seizing Opportunities versus Opting-Out**

In discussing the practice of encouraging the heart, Kouzes and Posner (2012) assert “the climb to the top is arduous and steep. People become exhausted, frustrated, and disenchanted, and are often tempted to give up” (p. 23). In today’s complex, global, fast-paced business environment, burnout and exhaustion are common and as such, strategies for this highly demanding environment are pragmatic. In theory, and when considered outside of the gendered lens in terms of leadership advancement advice, women certainly should benefit when leadership focuses on encouraging the heart and recognizing people’s hard work. Kouzes and Posner’s assertions in chapter 6 related to searching for opportunities, seizing initiative, challenging with purpose, and designing work that is intrinsically interesting are important because the construct of purposeful and interesting work is also principle to any discussion linked to retaining top female talent.

One of the variables most highly correlated in the research on women’s turnover, intent to quit, and career slow-tracking is motherhood. The grand narrative related to women exiting the workforce in favor of motherhood too often focuses on personal choice and women opting-out of the workforce. The opt-out story line refers to media reports that women leave the workforce by choice rather than being forced or pushed out by powerful corporate and social systems (Cossman, 2009). The “moms stay home” story has caused penalties for many women in the workforce, even those without children. Williams’ (2006) study, which examined women’s exit from the workforce showed that there are serious consequences on women’s financial stability over the long term, even once they have returned to the workforce. The effects can be seen over time with women often being unable to catch up to their male counterparts, even years later in their careers. Williams and Dempsey (2012) explain that when women have children “they can find themselves suddenly shunted from the career woman category into the mother category, leading to a ramping up of negative competence and commitment assumptions” (p. 135).

Organizations tend to cling to the “opt-out” storyline as it absolves the organizational role in contributing to the problem.  If you dig further into the research it becomes evident that this is only part of the explanation and that Kouzes and Posner’s (2012) assertions of the importance of purposeful and interesting work are well-substantiated.  Subramaniam et al., (2010) conducted a quantitative study with almost 200 women leaders and found that in cases in which women reported that their jobs were not challenging or equitable, transitioning from the workforce often represented a preferable choice rather than continuing to work in environments where their work was not appreciated and their talent not maximized or rewarded.  This relates nicely to Kouzes and Posner’s focus on challenging with purpose, pushing people outside comfort zones and designing intrinsically interesting work. It also relates to the practice Kouzes and Posner prioritize of encouraging others to act. As Kouzes and Posner state “constituents neither perform at their best nor stick around for very long if you make them feel weak, dependent, or alienated” (p. 22). This focus on fostering personal power is critical for women, particularly as it relates to developing competency and trust. Given the challenges women face in the workforce and the breadth of research suggesting much of what works for men’s success does not work for women, empowerment is of paramount importance. As Kouzes and Posner explain, to enable others to act leaders must “take actions that make people feel powerful and in control of their circumstances” (p. 268).

**Challenge the Process**

Kouzes and Posner (2012) identify challenging the process as one of the five practices of exemplary leadership noting that “Every single personal-best leadership case involved a change from the status quo” (p. 19). Although Kouzes and Posner focus on seizing opportunities, innovation, and risk-taking within the more traditional business context of creating innovative new products and services, they note its importance in finding solutions for a host of large scale economic, political, technological and social-cultural problems. Challenging the status quo is essential in considering the leaky or clogged pipeline which exists for women in leadership in Corporate America. Within the context of the postmodern lens, it is clear that a deconstruction of the status quo is needed as it relates to women in leadership positions.

The shortcomings within organizations to retain female talent are evident. Despite women’s equal representation in the workplace they are underrepresented in the upper echelons of organizations with women representing only 13% of Fortune 500 executive officers, 16% occupying board seats, 7.5% representing corporate top earners, and 3.6% in the role of CEO (Catalyst, 2011). The data and the research show an unhealthy professional pipeline in the United States with too many highly qualified women and minorities failing to advance in their career paths to executive-level positions (Cabrera, 2009; Carter & Silva, 2010; Catalyst, 2011; Wolfinger, Mason, & Goulden, 2008).

**Radical Change: Deconstructing Power and Hegemony**

Understanding the complexities of why women leave requires epistemology which questions truth claims and the power structure.  With half of middle management being women and only 13% of top level management being women in Fortune 500 companies, as Hatch and Cunliffe (2013) explain the relationship between knowledge and power, organizations have to a degree regulated “what will be perceived as normal” (p. 43). In spite of widespread diversity initiatives, the pipeline for women from middle management to leadership at the highest levels remains broken. Challenging the current processes not only increases the likeliness of change, it sends a message that women are valued in the hierarchy and that women in power can be part of the cultural norm. Radical change is needed. Kouzes and Posner explain that “challenge is the crucible for greatness” (p. 19). Research shows organizations who value women in the hierarchy move closer towards greatness. Fortune 500 companies with the best records of promoting women outperform their counterparts anywhere from 50 to 100%; conversely, companies that have poorer records are lagging behind the Fortune 500 companies with the most women in leadership roles in terms of higher financial returns and overall earnings (Adler, 2001).

**Think Leader Think Male**

Research shows the presence of a grand narrative in organizations regarding the attributes of ideal workers whereby masculine attributes tend to associated with leadership (Jay, 2003). This narrative supports the dominant leadership power that exists in most corporate organizations. According to postmodernism and enactment theory “deconstructing distasteful social construction is necessary in advancing radical change” (p. 78). Too often expectations serve the privileged, that is, those in power. These beliefs in organizations about what makes an ideal employee are examples of institutional myth where “often certain structural characteristics, such as bureaucracy in government, or matrix structures become institutionalized standards by which organizations are judged as appropriate and thus granted social legitimacy regardless of their performance” (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013, p. 75). This has led to the male work ethos as the prevailing standard in most corporate structures.  When structures and bureaucracy’s exist which enforce the “think leader think male” (TLTM), male centered work ethos, the pecking order or “hierarchy of authority” (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013, p. 92) in organizations favors the status quo.

**Exercising Outsight**

Feminist scholars have deconstructed bureaucracy to show it as a “male-gendered and typically white male-dominated form of organization” (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013, p. 119). Structures and reward policies in many corporations tend to secure the white male power structure. In most corporate environments for example, the male work ethos of “presenteeism” is solidly part of the institutionalized, accepted standard of the model employee and especially, the ideal leader.  Presenteeism is defined as employees going to work despite any medical illness or familial needs and where employee evaluation is based primarily on presence at work (Widera, Chang, & Chen, 2010). The “long work hours culture” (Hewlett and Luce, 2007) has been studied extensively. Presenteeism focuses on the value of being physically present in the work setting, and the belief that prioritization of work above all other responsibilities, including family, should be the norm (Watts, 2009).  This focus on input versus output is interesting and unintuitive given corporate objectives which tend to focus on outcomes. This social construction regarding constant availability has been cited in the research in explanation of women’s exit from the workforce, especially at the highest levels.

Most organizations have implemented a host of programs for employees related to career development and planning, training and mentoring, and talent management. Often these initiatives are viewed as a panacea for lack of diversity when there are deep-rooted hegemony issues that are not easily solved. From a postmodernist perspective, these programs aren’t worthwhile if they don’t result in positive change for employees as it relates to power (and who has it). It is programs combined with outcomes such as increased numbers of top earners and high level executives emerging from diverse and frequently marginalized groups that prove whether or not an organization is able to model the way or walk the talk as Kouzes and Posner suggest. Challenging existing processes that have failed to move the needle for women at the highest levels is needed. As Kouzes and Posner espouse “Change is the work of leaders. It’s no longer business as usual and exemplary leaders know that they have to transform the way things are done” (p. 158). Historically, business as usual has worked for maintaining men at the highest levels of leadership in corporate organizations. As such, we need both men and the few women in leadership roles to take seriously Kouzes and Posner’s (2012) advice to challenge the process as it relates to retaining top female talent and in “exercising outsight” in searching for opportunities to “get extraordinary things done” (p. 159).

**Psychological Hardiness**

Kouzes and Posner (2012) emphasize the importance of psychological hardiness in leadership. This may be the most important takeaway for women in leadership roles and those seeking leadership at the highest levels given the many unique barriers women face. While change is critical and necessary, it is also slow. In spite of efforts to more towards a more equal and diverse workforce, realistically this will take time and women who can be resilient in the face of corporate workforce obstacles and barriers will likely find this attribute advantageous. As Kouzes and Posner explain “Instead of being debilitated by the stress of difficult experience, exemplary leaders said they were challenged and energized by it (p. 271).

Research shows that turnover among top level women can be attributed to forces at the individual, organizational, and environmental levels (Krishnan, Park, & Kilbourne, 2006). The external organizational variables in particular can hinder women’s feeling of empowerment and control of their own professional destiny. The most frequent variables identified in the literature associated with pushing women out of the workforce include: lack of mentoring and sponsorship (Hom, Roberson, & Ellis, 2007; Meyers, 2015; McCartney-Kilian, 2009) exclusion from informal networks (Cook & Glass, 2014; Fain, 2011; Kulich, Lorenzi-Cioldi, Iacoviello, Faniko, & Ryan, 2015; Lyness & Thompson, 2000), lack of flexibility (Hewlett, 2007; Subramaniam, Iyer, & Maniam, 2010; Waumsley, & Houston, 2009), motherhood penalties (Anderson, Binder, & Kraus, 2003; Hewlett, 2007; Kmec, Huffman, & Penner, 2013; Kricheli-Katz, 2012), gender stereotyping (Branson, Chen, & Redenbaugh, 2013; Cabrera, 2009; Lyness & Thompson, 2000), the male-centered work ethos (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Cabrera, 2009; Hewlett & Luce, 2007; Widera, Chang & Chen, 2010) and the glass ceiling (Adler, 2007; Cook & Glass, 2014; Fain, 2011; Kulich et al., 2015; Ryan and Haslam, 2005; Sabharwal, 2015).

Kouzes and Posner (2012) suggest that psychological hardiness can be critical in terms of coping with stress and transforming negatives in the work environment into positive opportunities for personal and professional growth. While much change is needed, deconstructing the status quo takes time and coping within the current environment is an important part of the process. Foster and Dion’s (2003) research findings support the importance of hardiness. They found that hardy women encountering both a laboratory simulation and a hypothetical scenario of discrimination showed greater self-esteem and less negative affect than low hardy women. Breaking the glass ceiling requires psychological hardiness. As Kouzes and Posner explain, researchers over the last forty years have discovered that leaders are much more likely to withstand serious challenges if they are psychologically hardy.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this analysis was to explore the synergies between Kouzes and Posner’s (2102) exploration of the practices of exemplary leadership and the practices of women in corporate leadership. Emphasis was placed on the role of corporate leaders overall as explored within the context of the literature on women in leadership and top leadership/top earner roles. Focus was given to the role of Kouzes and Posner’s five practices; model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart in relation to women’s leadership success and the barriers to women’s leadership success as exemplified in the literature. Exploring the effects of these practices and challenging these practices is essential given the current corporate leadership environment where the professional pipeline in the United States has become clogged with far too many highly qualified women and minorities failing to advance in their career paths to executive-level positions, in part due the role gender, power and hegemony play in how corporate leadership success is measured.

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