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Gender and Leadership

Powell, G. N. (2020). *Gender and Leadership*. Sage Publications Ltd: UK. 100 pages. ISBN: 9781529709117 (hardback) £45.00; ISBN: 9781529738049 (e-book) £13.99

This book, as the author proffers upfront, provides a personal perspective on Gender and Leadership, whilst highlighting key issues on the topic of gender and leadership. However, it is thoroughly supported by a vast amount of theory and research, which you will see broken down in each chapter. This book provides a historical perspective of developments in understanding the linkages and issues of gender and leadership. Gary Powell has had an extensive career, later moving into academic and specialising in Leadership, specifically on gender and diversity, so is well placed to provide an in-depth insight into the varying concerns in the field. Powell is Professor Emeritus of Management at the University of Connecticut and therefore this is largely US centric, based around much of his own research. However, it does cover relevant concepts for anyone interesting in issues in the linkages between gender and leadership.

There is a lot here to interest the action learning practitioner. Action learning has more recently been used to support women's leadership opportunities (Box and Ellis, 2018, Kraft and Culver, 2020) or in progressing issues of gender equality (REF). The wicked problem of the linkage between gender and leadership, which as Powell states arise from a mix of personal, social and situational system factors, requires undoing which lend itself to an action learning approach (Brook et al. 2017). Therefore, this book can provide practitioners insight into the linkages of gender and leadership to support reflective thinking to progress inequalities and opportunities by asking new questions.

To start with, the authors notes that there appears to be a certain level of 'gender fatigue' that exists around examining issues of, either due to a feeling of this issue being 'solved' or the delegitimisation of these issues. Although, like others such as Dashper (2017) and Dick and Nadin, (2006), Powell advises that there is "something troubling and problematic still going on regarding [the] linkage" (pg.7) between gender and leadership. This book is positioned to highlight the ongoing struggles and challenges from many positions within an organisation which places gender and leadership as an issue still needing scrutiny. This is important for both practitioners and academics to acknowledge this pervasive issue still needs to be challenged.

In the first chapter, Powell identifies that his work, and consequently this book, stems from a class taught in 1970's entitled, 'Women and Men in Leadership', although for several reasons this highlights how we do not usually hear 'women and men' in this order. This is something that continues throughout the entire book when referring to women and men, which, in addition to the theoretical discussions, constantly and inconspicuously has the reader re-examining their own constructions of gender. I point this out not only out of interest but as an example of how this book constantly challenges the reader to consider how pervasive these issues still are, which is the aim of this book.

Four key questions are asked within this book; 'Why do leader stereotypes emphasize masculinity?'; 'Why are there so few women in top management positions?'; 'Is there a female advantage or disadvantage in the managerial ranks?' and 'Why do (some) men in top management feel free to sexually harass women?.' These make up the four following main chapters of the book, which look to uncover some of the invisible or unchallenged linkages that exist between gender and leadership. Finally, Powell reflects on 'what actions would work toward undoing the linkage between gender and leadership?.'

Chapter 2 examines female and male gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes, the cognitive activity of identifying distinctions between groups of people, in this case women and men represent the belief about the traits of females and males. Therefore their capabilities as leaders. Men are seen to possess more masculine traits, whilst women more feminine. Whilst Powell first hypothesised that androgyny theories of leadership, leaders possession of both masculine and feminine traits would be considered more effective, this was rejected on multiple occasions. It appears through multiple studies that stereotypes about leaders that place women at a disadvantage are still withstanding in workplaces. This appears to remain due to an incongruity between the role of a leader and gender roles. In fact, the old adage 'think manager – think male' still inhabits thinking around the linkages of gender and leadership. However, just because these stereotypes still exist, it does not mean that these traits are actually what makes an effective leader or not, just the expectations individuals still hold.

Chapter 3 addresses why there are still so few women in top management positions. Powell notes that "it is not simply a matter of time until women assume their fair share of positions – something has to change." Therefore, the leadership programmes supported by action learning (for example see: Box and Ellis, 2018 and Kraft and Culver, 2020) may have a key role to play in supporting this. The commonly known glass ceiling theories are presented through three lenses; person, situation and social system approaches. Person centred focus on whether women choose to opt out or are pushed out of top management. Situation theories suggest that organisational context play a role in the discrimination of women, building on ideas of stereotypes. However, women that do break through may contribute to keeping others out. Finally, social system theories focus on the gendered processes found in society. For example, Dick and Nadin (2006) suggests that we still occupy a world built for men. Largely, there is a need to find ways of shattering the glass ceiling. Taking a questioning insight from an action learning approach appears to lend itself to exposing taken for granted assumptions.

Chapter 4 discusses whether there is a female advantage or disadvantage in leadership positions. In support of there being a female advantage, women have been found to demonstrate more effective leadership styles than men. However, in support of a female disadvantage is that employees appear to prefer a male boss as opposed to female given the choice. Although over time this does appear to be changing, with younger employees slightly favouring female bosses. This chapter also touches on Equal Employment Opportunity laws, which aim to stop discrimination in organisations, however there are issues around how these are applied.

Chapter 5 touches on the highly emotive and current topic of some men in top management positions feeling they are free to sexually harass women. Centred around Harvey Weinstein as a case of such action, Powell breaks down why this may exist within top management. As well as examining personal and legal definitions of sexual harassment, personal, social and situational theories are examined. These reflect on whether it is a biological instinct men have? Is the organisational environments that all this sort of behaviour? Or is it due to the patriarchal society where men expected to be dominant? This chapter raises some interesting and important questions, which require uncovering in organisations with Powell finally reflecting – if women in top leadership positions do we think it would possibly lead to less cases of sexual harassment?

In summary, Powell projects his hope for the future that individuals will be treated based on what they bring to a role and their potential to be a leader regardless of their gender. The final chapter outlines the need for the linkages between gender and leadership to be undone. Powell offers multiple ways this could be addressed for example; de-biasing, leadership training, reconstruction of organisational cultures and selection processes. Each of the suggestions require uncovering what is

ignored or invisible and challenging common practices, which an action learning approach lends itself too.

A perhaps surprising concept not touched upon which the is often heard when discussing leadership, specifically around gender, is power relations (Sturm, Herz and Antonakis, 2021). Other than a couple of mentions of 'positions of power' in the first few chapter, this concept is only touched upon more apparently when examining why men in leadership positions sexually harass women. Although similar concepts are discussed, such as, women who do pass through the glass ceiling creating barriers for other women to follow, in other sections of the book the term power is not used in relation to this. The issue of power is highly relevant in conversations of leadership, as seen by the 2021 special issue in *Leadership Quarterly*. For example, London et al (2019), suggest that even when organisations put in place policies to manage inequalities, these do not work as leaders seek to retain power and therefore reproduce gender inequalities. Consequently, this concept does appear to be pertinent to discuss further in relation to gender than this book has sought to.

An important issue raised throughout the book, that is essential to moving issues of equality in gender and leadership, is the consideration intersectionality. In each chapter, Powell identifies how issues of intersectionality in gender, class, ethnicity, race etc. are critical for understanding the deeper linkages between gender and leadership, noting for example that this may "offer explanation of why there are especially small numbers of women in color in top management" (pg. 32). It is therefore not enough just to focus on gender alone. As Acker (2012) posed an "essential component of studying inequality... is to use research questions that relate to the intersection of gender, race and class" (pg.220).

This books moves beyond simply being a textbook, which presents key theories and ideas in gender and leadership. In a relatively short book, practical workplace examples, along with insights into some of the many research projects Powell has conducted in this field bring the theoretical discussions to life. This book is both engaging and insightful. This will help practitioners and early career academics in the application of theory into real world experience and highlight some critical questions that need untangling to undo the linkages between gender and leadership.

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