

Rethinking Outdated Conceptions of Leadership

Rosemary O’Leary, Director and Edwin O. Stene Distinguished Professor
School of Public Affairs, University of Kansas¹

Outdated conceptions of leadership pose a fundamental challenge for individuals and organizations. The public administration literature concerning leadership has long ignored issues of gender. While gender has in part been tackled by those who observed the phenomenon of women not making it to top positions of leadership in business (Sandberg 2013), the public administration literature on women and leadership is sparse. This is at least partially a function of how leadership is conceived, recognized and rewarded. Leadership is a *social process*, and public administration has missed the boat by not researching women’s *perceptions* of leadership, as well as their *experience* of both others and themselves as leaders. The challenge of increasing representation of women in visible positions of leadership is as much a challenge of addressing and adjusting the way roles are structured and operative leadership prototypes, as it is preparing and supporting women to compete in existing structures.

“Women leading” has long been a widespread occurrence but it is not widely recognized or rewarded by most societies or organizations. This is in part because many women, according to research I carried out from 2013 to 2018 with Rita Hilton,² tend to view leadership as a behavior, rather than a position. This is also due to our organization systems and cultures that are based on

¹ The ideas in this concept paper are drawn from the new book: Rita Hilton and Rosemary O’Leary. Leading in Place: Leadership Through Different Eyes. (New York: Routledge, 186 pp. (2018).

² After a 20 year career with the World Bank, Rita Hilton (Maxwell Ph.D.) became an ICF-certified executive coach. She currently serves as Director of Talent and Organizational Development for the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation.

stereotypical male prototypes of leadership, and are implemented (by men and women) in ways that are biased toward a traditional male perspective.

Rita and I coined the term ‘Leading in Place’ to describe a phenomenon of leadership that unfolds beneath the CEO and top executive team level, without positional authority (or over and beyond positional authority), that keeps teams and organizations moving towards mission achievement in the workplace. Outside the workplace, it unfolds across community and volunteer organizations, typically without formal designated position. Leading in place is a spectrum of behaviors proactively enacted in response to observed need, whether in response to gaps left by those with designated positions of leadership or in response to perceived opportunities beyond existing boundaries and practice. Leading in place is a pro-actively self-selected activity. Women, and men, “leading in place”, with or without position, is beneficial not only to all places of work, but to society as a whole. “Leading in place” needs to be rewarded as a desired form of leadership around the world.

To be clear, I am NOT suggesting that women are or ought to be restricted to leading in place. I am an ardent supporter of women in formal positions of leadership, as I know you are. Rita and I have found evidence that appears to support the notion, however, that some women have tended to lead in place. This may be partially attributable to a range of factors: personal life balancing choices; pervasiveness of unintentional and unrecognized bias in leadership assessment, development, and selection; and the failure of organizations to create missions, cultures, and results that motivate appreciable numbers of women to prioritize commitment to those organizations.

In our research, we had not anticipated hearing quite so many stories about the limitations of leadership and position, of opting to lead without or beyond position. The 274 women from 4

countries whom we surveyed, as well as the 20 with whom we held in-depth interviews, whether they aspired to senior leadership positions or not, reported experiencing themselves as adept at exercising non-positional leadership. Many are motivated and willing to step into leadership roles; many in fact are already leading in place. Many are motivated towards positions of higher leadership. Others are not interested in taking up such positions – or have stepped away because of a misfit between organization/position with individual values.

In order to describe and operationalize a robust conception of leadership, women’s voices have to be integrated into mainstream views, not treated as if they are a niche perspective. Organization leaders, and researchers, need to critically examine whether their model of leadership assumes a stereotypic, traditional, male prototype, and consciously make room for other styles of leadership. If organizations are not providing transparent access to leadership roles for people of varying styles of leadership, or if women are not seeing themselves as leaders, or if we as a society are not seeing the problem, then the ‘women’ part of the equation is not the place to start. An out-of-whack view of leadership has to be looked at first.

In sum, Rita and I predict that organizations will increasingly evolve towards holacracies, requiring significant numbers of adaptive workers who are willing to lead in place. This will require redefining roles and structures to recognize and reward different styles of leadership. Moving forward in the 21st century, the most innovative organizations will embrace the phenomenon of leading in place—and those who embody it. We as a society need to validate and reward those who lead in place, as well as those who lead well in formal positions of leadership. Public administration needs to meet its outdated conceptions of leadership head on.