# Leading in Place: Leadership Through Different Eyes

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by

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**Abstract**

Out-dated conceptions of leadership pose a fundamental challenge for individuals and organizations. We coin the term 'Leading in Place' to describe a gender-neutral 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.

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We suggest that the observed phenomenon of women not making it to top positions of leadership (Sandberg 2013) is at least partially a function of how leadership is conceived, recognized and rewarded. 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.

*Examples of leading* in place that emerge from our data include the following:

- Challenging the status quo,
- Volunteering to write a report in order to influence the outcome,
- Speaking truth to power,
- Calling out inappropriate behavior,
- Having difficult conversations,
- Describing reality without laying blame,
- Bringing in objective data to change the conversation,
- Pinning down exact dates to promote better project management,
- Seeking out the perspectives of a wide variety of stakeholders in order to build trust,
- Strategically building relationships,
- Catalyzing clear communication including clarifying what is needed to get the job done,
- Managing around problem managers,
- Being a positive voice,
- Advocating for and empowering others,
- Working outside the organization to unseat one's boss,
- Providing information and the free flow of ideas,
- Encouraging a board to nudge the CEO in a particular direction,
- Pushing change,
- Helping others make sense of complexities,
- Articulating a vision,
- Reframing a situation ,
- Energizing others,
- Supporting others in need,
- Asking "where do we all agree?", and

- Facilitating around a common goal.

Also evident in our data were concrete examples of some gaps that were targeted by those we interviewed who led in place, including:

- An "absence of common sense" among those in charge,
- A lack of supervision,
- A lack of trust,
- Unprofessional behavior of colleagues,
- Bosses that did not know what to do,
- Clients who did not know what to do,
- Filling in gaps in an inter-organizational task where colleagues have other "regular" jobs pulling them in multiple directions,
- Compensating for other's lack of knowledge,
- Weighing in when no one is in charge, and
- Covering for a leader who turns people off.

Again, these are not components of an exhaustive list, but merely examples.

The reasons for leading in place articulated by those we interviewed included:

- A high comfort level with being a behind-the-scenes player,
- A high energy or dedication concerning the work they are doing/passion,
- Trying to right a wrong,
- Getting the work done that someone else is supposed to be doing,
- Wanting to influence direction,
- Attempting to catalyze team work,
- Trying to build a unified direction,
- Wanting to do what you enjoy the most,
- Desiring to make oneself irreplaceable,
- Hoping to be noticed,
- Seeking work-life balance,
- Personal family situations,
- Not wanting the stress of the top position,
- Not wanting to be isolated as one might be in a CEO slot,
- Not wanting the spotlight,
- Not wanting the burden of the bottom line,
- Lifestyle choices, and
- Not being promoted into a position of leadership.

*Abbreviated literature review.* (See Hilton and O'Leary, 2018, for a full analysis of the leadership literature.) If one examines the evolution of leadership research as well as organizational practice, it is possible to see a revolution unfolding for the 21st century. The bulk of research on leadership comes from disciplines of psychology and business, with less arising from researchers interested in the public sector until relatively recently. Over the past two decades, there have been concerted pushes to redress perceived gaps (Gabris, Golembiewski, & Ihrke, 2001; Hansen & Villadsen, 2010; Van Wart 2013, 2014) in knowledge around leadership in the public sector. Threads of both revolution and increasingly judicious reflection on how concepts translate across sectors are traceable in the public sector literature. Researchers have pushed thinking in several directions. Among these are efforts to: differentiate which leadership practices beneficial in the private sector may generate counterproductive consequences in a public sector mileu (Vogel & Masal, 2012); identify and refine lenses through which leadership in the public sector is conceived (Vogel & Masal 2015; Chapman et al. 2016); better specify sector-appropriate competencies (Getha-Taylor et al., 2011); and develop assessment of leadership profiles specific to the public sector (Tummers & Knies 2013).

*Methods*. The first third of our book is a critical analysis of leadership theory (including the interpersonal, perceptual and psychological aspects). After that analysis, we present the findings of an original survey we conducted of 274 women. 203 reside outside the U.S. – the rest are from France, Australia, and New Zealand. Since leadership is a social process, the survey probed respondents *perceptions* of leadership, as well as their *experience* of both others and themselves as leaders. We then conducted 1 to 2 hour interviews with 20 women, who taken together represented a deep and broad pool of leadership experience. Finally, we conducted validation

interviews with six "C-suite" executives (representing an even mix of experience across public and private sectors) who provided valuable feedback on our findings.

*Major Findings*:

1. In her book, *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg suggested that women have to learn to lean towards leadership, not lean away from it. The argument presented in our book is that "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 most women (correctly) view leadership as a behavior, rather than a position.  This is also due to our organization systems and cultures that are based on stereotypical male prototypes of leadership, and are implemented (by men and women) in ways that are biased toward a traditional male perspective.  We argue that 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.

2. To be clear, we are <u>NOT</u> suggesting that women are or ought to be restricted to leading in place. We are ardent supporters of women in formal positions of leadership, as we know you are. We have found evidence that appears to support the notion, however, that some 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.

3. 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 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 and priorities.

4. A disturbingly significant minority of our respondents perceive that organizations are biased against recognizing women's emergent leadership and providing opportunities. What we heard from a broad cross-section of women reveals a clear disconnect. Many women have stories of organizations failing to recognize or develop them as leaders if they display collaborative behaviors such as promoting team over individual (i.e., promoting results, not personal profile), encouraging information-sharing, structuring processes that welcome broad input, and emphasizing constructive communication. Ironically, if well-executed, and consistent with organizational objectives, all of these behaviors contribute to engaged workforces and effective organizations.

5. The dated stereotype that women are poor bets for leadership positions because of family obligations was not borne out by our pool of respondents.

6. We argue that 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 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.

*Implications for Practice.* Based on our analysis of leadership research, our survey, our in-depth interviews, and our "reality check" with six CEOs, the following implications for practice can be gleaned.

1. We need to build performance practices that recognize and reward leading in place.

2. We need to ensure that access to development/stretch opportunities are widely and fairly distributed. This includes considering whether patterns of mentorship and sponsorship are gender/race neutral.

3. We need to review the alignment of competency models and their application with organizational values and objectives. We need to ask, for example, whether implicit proto-types are valid and whether our application processes produce skewed outcomes.

*Implications for Research.*  Based on our analysis of leadership research, our survey, our in-depth interviews, and our "reality check" with six CEOs, the following implications for research are apparent:

1. Leadership research is highly fragmented across disciplines and off-base with regard to practice, particularly with reference to women.

2. We need to start from the understanding that leadership is an interpersonal, perceptual phenomenon.

3. We need to build new leadership theories by understanding a cross section of women's stories, rather than focusing on the "great woman stories" of the elite.

4. When research is conceptualized, we need to examine and promote transparency in likely biases, fidelity of assumptions with reality, and be clear about level/unit of analysis.

5. In framing findings, we need to accept and analyze the complexity of the phenomenon because human behavior is influenced by myriad factors.  For example, informal norms and culture (politics, influence, and power) always matter.  We need to analyze data within evolving society and organizational paradigms, as well as cognitive and affective effects.

In sum, we 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.