

“WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: EARNING THE RIGHT”

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By

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You have asked me to address the issue of women in leadership. And I am glad you have done so, as I have been thinking a great deal about this subject of late. For it seems that almost everywhere I go these days, almost every newspaper I pick up, I see evidence of women in leadership behaving badly – or at least what *I* would call badly. I see women elbowing their way into top positions, and then acting in uninhibitedly aggressive ways to make even the most macho of men cringe.

Now I may have authority because of my position. But how do I *exercise* that authority, and how do others *react* to my authority? If people listen to me, is it *willingly*, because I have earned the *right* to the position, by dint of *merit*, and because I *act* authoritatively?

Even before we get to that, and not disconnected from it, what led to me being handed my authority in the first place? Affirmative action in favour of gender balance? Me manipulatively pleading that I was being discriminated against, that I was a persecuted victim, unless I got selected instead of competing male candidates? Was it tribalism, or nepotism? Or were there more legitimate selection criteria?

Then another question: who are our role models of women in authority? I guess one has to say they are the leading women politicians, or ‘leaders’ as only they seem to be labeled. In their tough competitive world, I suppose these women feel they have to be extremely aggressive to survive. Otherwise, so these female warriors believe, they will simply not be listened to. They will just be swept aside as ‘just’ women.

Maybe it’s why I have not become a politician. But certainly I have never felt that the more aggressive I am the more people will choose to put me in positions of authority. Or that once in such a position it is aggressiveness that will bring home the bacon.

I suggest that you too should think of other styles of behaviour if you are to be effective in the fulfillment of your authority.

Why do I say that? What are the problems, the disadvantages, of going flat out on the attack?

Let me ask you this: if I go for a win-lose outcome, and even assuming I succeed, what will be the reaction of the person who has lost? They will either feel intimidated and withdraw, or their instinct will be to seek revenge. If their reaction is the first one, I will have lost the benefit of their energy, for it is no longer available – whatever notional authority I have over that person. And if it is revenge they seek, I have only stimulated them to use their energy *against* me and my authority.

A win-lose strategy is at best only likely to be effective in the short term. In the long term it must degenerate to lose-lose. For there are only two long-term sustainable outcomes: lose-lose and win-win. But our aggressive role models too rarely consider a strategy whose objective is win-win. It takes an altogether different kind of strength, a different level of imagination and creativity, to make progress not at someone else’s expense but for mutual benefit. It requires a particular type of intelligence, different from intellectual intelligence, one that has come to be known as Emotional Intelligence.

Those with high Emotional Intelligence have the maturity to get along well with those around them, and in a purposeful way, one that achieves the goals of the group in question. Whether they possess formal authority over the group or not.

What do people with high Emotional Intelligence have in common? What characteristics do mature people share? They live by certain *values* that cause them to behave in certain ways. They are open and honest; they are reliable, responsible and responsive; they are trustworthy; and they are humble.

It is unfortunate but inevitable that our media enjoy giving prominence to our noisier, more aggressive and confrontational 'leaders' – and this typically means our political leaders... including the women among them. These macho characters wittingly or unwittingly become the role models the ambitious seek to emulate. And so the cycle continues, as the culture reinforces itself.

We see it everywhere, and most starkly in the Matatu Culture that dominates behaviour on the road. Sometimes their highly skilled drivers manage to cut in front of us and shave a few seconds off the time of their trip – but often as not their very aggressiveness clogs everyone up... including themselves.

The good news though is that the world is looking for new leadership models, ones that do not involve trampling on others, that do not require us to gloat over the blood and bruises of those we have vanquished in order to reassure ourselves of our own victories.

The world is looking for leaders who can build high performance teams, where their energy is gathered around common visions and values. In such teams the leader is said to act more as 'servant' to the group than as the traditional 'big man' model of an all-knowing, all-powerful boss. Such leaders are there to remove obstacles, help people fulfill their potential, and all in order to satisfy the needs of their customers.

It is no coincidence that the subset of our human race which is well known for displaying precisely the characteristics needed for such an enabling leadership style is the subset called 'women'! For women are said to possess the 'feminine' qualities of caring and nurturing. We are meant to be less selfish, less political, more supportive of family values. The roles we play in our families at home are carried forward into the workplace, and the styles that are appropriate for such roles come as part of the package.

These 'feminine' qualities are increasingly valued as our organisations become flatter, with smaller power gaps between levels. The traditional steep pyramids are no longer there to be climbed, at least not in the private sector. And we are dealing with smaller numbers of educated knowledge workers rather than large numbers of manual labourers. Today's technical professional and managerial staff know their worth. They are in short supply. And they simply will not stick around unless they are handled with dignity and respect. By the way, even if they do stay in a macho culture, their productivity will be awful.

Around the world people are giving a great deal of thought to building organisations that live by far healthier values than the present norm. And they hope, they really really hope, that the rise of more and more women into positions of senior leadership will accelerate this trend.

That is our challenge. As we are called to take on positions of greater and greater authority, let us do better than blindly stumble into emulating traditional styles of leadership. We've

surely had enough of win-lose; of I'm OK, You're not OK; of stress, demotivation, burn out and absenteeism; of low motivation and poor productivity.

Let us not fall into the trap of copying the most aggressive among our existing women leaders. Let us not be tempted to whip ourselves up into a 'victim' mentality, where we blame our woes, including our lack of promotions on those awful men. For the unwanted baggage that accompanies that mindset is filled with self-righteousness and anger, two most unproductive emotions.

When it is said that 'Men are from Mars', it doesn't mean that Mars is such a great place to be from – certainly not for me. And when it is said that 'Women are from Venus', I certainly don't interpret that to mean we're just a bunch of wimps, weaklings to be trampled over by some steel-armoured fellow.

No. We must definitely be strong. Strong enough to be assertive. Strong enough to stand up for our rights, to stand up to aggressive people – of either gender. And strong enough to hold back from becoming aggressive, from behaving insensitively and selfishly, from undermining others and generally playing nasty politics. There's too much of that. And there's too little condemnation of it.

If we are to be respected people of real authority, then we must behave in certain ways, which reflect certain attitudes. You know what they are, for they fully reflect our traditional African values. I know I do not need to spell them out more than I have already done.

Take heart from my journey. From when I started my personnel selection agency forty years ago. I didn't know about gender discrimination and glass ceilings. I just went about my business. And somehow, I faced the bank manager, I faced my senior clients and the business was done. Of course there were challenges, as any business person, any leader, faces. But I wasn't particularly conscious of doing business as a woman, or of leading as one. I was just doing business as a Kenyan. Just like my great grandmother Wanjiru used to generations before me, as she managed her properties and operated as a classic entrepreneur.

Since those early days in business I have sat on many boards, Kenyan, African and global. I don't think that being a woman was ever a particular advantage or disadvantage. I didn't look at it that way and I don't think others did either. If I was able to make a contribution, including as chairman, I was happy to do so, and I still am.

My first major leadership position was as chairman of the Nairobi Business and Professional Women's Club. I was 32 years of age, and the second African to lead the Club, following on from the late Mary Kamau. As I saw myself handling that first challenge without falling flat on my face, it encouraged me to be available for other leadership positions. It was a turning point in my life, and many other opportunities to lead followed.

One I am particularly proud of was the Vice Chairmanship of the Africa Business Roundtable of the African Development Bank, where I rubbed shoulders with some of the more successful business leaders on the continent.

In 1992 I became the first woman member of the Rotary Club of Nairobi, until then a bastion of male chauvinism. I was elected the first woman Chairman some years later, and what an exhausting year that was, balancing nearly 100 over-healthy egos, belonging to people all of whom were leaders in their own right outside of Rotary.

Leading Rotarians brings particular challenges: we are all professionals, all volunteers, and the pyramid of power is exceedingly flat. Then we can't hire or fire, promote or demote, or raise and lower remuneration. So what's left? The over-riding need to inspire and motivate, for which the possession of very high Emotional Intelligence is of course required.

My disappointment is that there are too few women who are identified as potential board members – and of course this is not just a Kenyan problem. Those who are known become overburdened with appointments. Other highly competent ones remain invisible to those responsible for talent spotting. And that is why our All Africa Businesswomen's Association has been putting together a data base of senior women in this country, so as to increase the visibility of the great managerial and leadership talent that exists among our women.

Finally then, what does it take to lead? Let me quote from the recently elected president of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf: 'I owe my success to my perseverance and hard, honest work,' she told the world, and it's easy to agree that these are essential ingredients. What else?

- Believe in yourself and in your abilities
- Be curious, very curious... and keep learning, always, including from mentors
- Grab opportunities when they arise, and see them through
- Dream big, but don't stop at dreaming: turn the dreams into reality
- Develop your Emotional Intelligence; be graceful and dignified; and go for win-win outcomes
- Network, network... and network – including at the highest levels

You will note that I have not said 'be aggressive'. I have not said 'elbow your way to the top'. That is not what 21st century leadership is about. Neither for men nor for women. We must work together and support each other – including and not least among women. Each one of you should think of yourselves as role models. In the home, in the workplace and in society at large.