Inside Women's Power
Learning from Leaders
Leaders

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women, ranging in age from their 30s to their 70s. They are at different points in their career and family formation. The variety in their backgrounds and the broad range of fields in which they have achieved prominence provide both breadth and depth to what we can learn from their experiences and perspectives.

OVERVIEW OF RESULTS

Some of our findings confirmed what other researchers had observed, such as the institutional rather than individual roadblocks to women's success, the importance of tenacity and optimism in pursuing one's passion at work, and the increasing value placed on a democratic and people-oriented style of leadership. The identification of leadership skills and metaphors for leadership with "mothering" was an unexpected finding. The following is an overview of our results.

- Overall, the leaders interviewed acknowledged that, over time, obstacles to women's leadership have diminished but have definitely not disappeared. Most of these obstacles are embedded in the general organization of work that was designed neither with women nor with the support of a family structure in mind, rather than in any so-called deficiencies women may have as leaders. Many (but not all) women reported having had to surmount these gender-based barriers in their own careers. For some, this struggle continues to be a daily aspect of work life; for others, their individual prominence and achievements now protect against incidents of gender-based inequity, while still others have benefited from the work of earlier generations of women who had blazed trails that others could follow.

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- Many of the concerns that the leaders of color articulated derived from the historical and, to some extent, continuing exclusion of minorities from positions of power. Leaders of color were more likely to report experiencing roadblocks to their success than Caucasian leaders.

- The leaders in this study achieved eminence by leading in a variety of ways, depending on the context of their work environments. Their leadership styles reflect racial and ethnic backgrounds, career trajectories, generational cohorts, and their fields' receptiveness to women leaders. While it is not possible to talk about a singular female style of leadership, the majority of these leaders combined a strong focus on results with equal attention to the growth and development of the people surrounding them. Indeed,

the descriptions of nearly every woman's leadership practice included elements of the democratic, people-oriented style.

- Whether or not it is put into actual practice, the ascendancy of the democratic, people-oriented leadership practice forms the contemporary context of leadership today. It is touted by both men and women as capturing many of the requirements for effective leadership in the contemporary fast-paced, turbulent, and innovation-driven economy. The leaders in this study described not only their own practices as including relational elements, but also the practices of the men and women they felt personified exemplary leadership.

- Throughout their careers, these women were tenacious and optimistic. They paid little attention to obstacles in their work life. Whether they stuck to their original plan in the face of obstacles or revised their strategy, optimism and a sense of mission propelled their actions. It is important to note that these personal characteristics are traits that have value in making it possible for women to break through barriers. We can speculate that if the environment were more welcoming of women's leadership, other traits might characterize successful leaders.

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- The strategy these leaders employed to gain visibility, and hence credibility, for their work can be summarized as "know and value yourself and let others know." They identified their strengths and capitalized on them, informing others about their ideas and the results that they obtained. The comment "Modesty does not create opportunity," offered by one of the leaders, captures the significance they placed on the need to be assertive in gaining visibility.

- Many of the leaders recognized and acknowledged a strong foundation of early support from family and friends, teachers, mentors, or business associates, which they parlayed into a successful focus on following their passions. But this was not a universal experience and other participants, who did not report such support, also achieved extraordinary success. While early support for leadership can be helpful, it does not appear to a requirement for later success.

- When describing their leadership practices these leaders could be placed into two categories: *adapters* and *resistors*. The *adapters* indicated varying degrees of comfort with using traditional words for leadership such as "power," "success," and "leader" to describe their practices while the *resistors* opposed using such traditional terms.

- Regardless of their stance as an adapter or a *resistor*, some of the leaders identified a framework for understanding the roots and practices of leadership as emerging from mothering. The participants spoke of mothering as both a training ground for leadership and a metaphor for describing leadership behavior.

This last item is a key finding as it represents a radical departure from the early traditional advice for women aspiring to leadership to "become more like men." These leaders were secure enough in their roles that they could describe leadership using language from their lived experiences as women, just as men often use military or sports metaphors to describe leadership.

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Many of the traditional ways of talking and thinking about leadership can continue to mask the strengths women bring to their successful lives as leaders. The results of the study show that with or without early support these women had accomplished extraordinary achievements in their respective fields. Alongside improvements in women's employment conditions, the leaders' own tenacity and optimism have played an important role in their accomplishments.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

Race and ethnicity are especially germane to our discussion of the barriers women experienced in their leadership positions, for women are not a monolithic group. As Johnnetta Cole succinctly stated in her writings, women in the United States are both bound by their similarities and divided by their differences.[21] Relevant to the similarities and differences among women, bell hooks has warned that privilege can coexist with oppression.[22] Following their lead, Bonita Betters-Reed and Lynda Moore have written about the "whitewash dilemma," which refers to the problem of attempting to achieve greater gender diversity in the workplace while using only Anglo-American perspectives to meet this goal.[23] All of these authors articulate the need to critically examine assumptions regarding the similarities among Caucasian women and women of color. Mindful of these issues, we have kept the racial and ethnic diversity that exists among women leaders in this study in the forefront of our analyses, so as not to obscure the experiences of women of color under the generic category of women. When we illustrate a finding with quotations from any of the leaders, we identify each person's race/ethnicity.

There were 16 leaders in the sample whose self-identified race/ethnicity was not Caucasian. Thus, women of color comprised 27% of the sample, which compares favorably to the representation of people of color in the population of the U.S.[24] While the numbers are not large, this sample has a larger percentage of women of color than other studies that have examined women's leadership, which makes it possible for us to look for trends regarding race/ethnicity.

GENERATIONAL COHORT

Generational cohort[25] is relevant to a discussion of barriers, as both the extent and quality of roadblocks to women's leadership have changed over time. We have adapted Helen Astin and Carole Leland's three-fold classification of generations of women leaders to the historical period that spans the careers of our own sample.[26] We have grouped the women in our study into three cohorts: the *founders*, the *developers*, and the *successors*.[27] When we illustrate a finding with quotations from any of the leaders, we identify each person's generational cohort, in addition to her race/ethnicity

The cohort we call *founders* is composed of 24 women who have been in leadership positions for close to two decades and sometimes longer.[28] Some of them are close to retirement age; a few have already retired from the fields in which they had reached prominence. These women came of age during the second wave of the women's movement, which coincided with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Many of them were pioneers in their

fields. Many have described overt discrimination against women they have known because gender discrimination was not illegal while they were building their careers. Some (but not all) reported having personally faced considerable gender bias early in their careers. A few of these leaders started their own businesses after having been successful in an established organization.

The second cohort of women has been in leadership for more than a decade. It appears that although the *founders* made some progress for women's rights, many roadblocks for women had remained unchanged during the formative careers of the second cohort. Many of these women have, thus, developed their own niches in the struggle for women's rights, and are at the peak of their careers. They have penetrated in larger numbers into previously male-only enclaves. We call these 24 women the *developers*.

The youngest of our leadership cohorts has benefited from the foundations laid and developed by the two earlier cohorts. In the words of a Latina we placed in this cohort, this group is a successor to the efforts of the generations of women who went before them: "I'll be honest, I probably have benefited a great deal from the women who have carved through new paths and new roads." We call this younger group the *successors*. These are 11 women, all of them age 45 or younger, most of whom are in their first decade of leadership. Overt gender discrimination is not a battle for them, as it was in the early careers of many women in the two older cohorts. In this regard, the successes of previous generations of women have laid the groundwork for the *successors'* accomplishments.

As our description of the three cohorts of women makes it clear, *founders*, *developers*, and *successors* differed along not one but three significant dimensions — history, career development, and age. The history dimension refers to the fact that the women in the study came into their leadership positions at different periods in the history of this country's acceptance of women leaders. Therefore, any differences we observe among the three cohorts can be reasonably attributed to the social change that has made women's rise to top leadership less anomalous than it has been. In addition, observed differences among the generations can also be attributed to the fact that the three groups are at different points in their career development. Many of the *successors* have achieved their leadership roles relatively recently, while a few of the *founders* have already retired from the work in which they achieved prominence. In this report when we make interpretations of findings related to cohort differences, we often invoke historical trends; however, sometimes we note that career maturity appears to be the critical factor. The leaders also differ in age, which is a marker for stage of life. Many of the *successors* have dependent children while the offspring of the two older cohorts tend to be old enough to be on their own. The ages of the *successors* and *developers* overlap with the years that are referred to as midlife. Judith Gordon and Karen

Whelan have found that the needs of professional women in midlife can be different from those of younger women and midlife men.[29]

CAREER CONTEXT

We reasoned that the context of one's work would be a powerful determinant of a woman's successful leadership strategies. With respect to career context, we examined whether the current leadership was positional, based on occupying a senior position in an organization. There were 46 women in the sample whose leadership we classified as positional. The prominence of the others was not based on occupying a position in a hierarchy; rather it was based on their individual accomplishments as authors, artists, or as private philanthropists. We designated this other group to be the independents.[30] Women who hold elective office and media personalities were also classified as independents even though they work in organizational structures. This is because, similar to authors and artists, both elected officials and media personalities owe their prominence to their appeal to broad segments of the public — voters and viewers, respectively. We classified 14 women as independent leaders.

Some of the positional leaders and a couple of independents had created their own organizations. These women were additionally classified as entrepreneurs. Our entrepreneurial leaders, who numbered 19, included women who created for-profit or nonprofit organizations and also those who created an entity to practice and promote their own independent work, for example as an artist. Entrepreneurial leaders were evenly divided among the three generational cohorts.

To examine whether working primarily with other women made a difference in leadership practice, we classified the women's work environment as a women's organization (led and staffed primarily by women) versus a mixed-gender environment. Independent leaders who worked for themselves (perhaps with the help of assistants or other support staff) were also classified as working in a women's organization if their work was primarily focused on women. There were 18 leaders in the sample — they could also be positional leaders, independents, or entrepreneurs — who worked primarily with other women and/or on women's issues.

We also examined the relevance of career trajectories on a woman's success strategies. If a woman rose to a position of leadership by working her way through a system of hierarchically organized positions, we categorized her career as ascendant. There were 32 leaders in the sample whose career trajectory could be classified as ascendant. While women who currently held positional leadership roles were more likely to have had an ascendant career trajectory than independents or entrepreneurs, the correspondence was not one-to-one.

This is because people change jobs and also careers. For example, we classified a leader who started her own bank as an entrepreneur; however, her career trajectory was ascendant because she had risen from teller to CEO, working in different banks before she set up her own.

ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

Chapters 2 and 3 provide the socio-historical context of contemporary leadership. In Chapter 2 we review some of the more prominent explanations for the slow pace of progress in achieving diversity in top leadership positions over the course of the last four decades. In Chapter 3 we review the literature on the "female advantage" that has emerged as a reaction to the masculine bias in leadership studies and describe the participatory, people-oriented style as the emergent consensus on how best to lead in today's business environment. Chapter 4 contains a discussion of whether early support is essential for later leadership. In Chapter 5 we present the lessons learned from the leaders interviewed. In Chapter 6, we present a discussion of the need for a new, inclusive language of leadership that can legitimize the leadership behavior of diverse leaders. The final chapter presents a summary of the findings and their implications for aspiring leaders.

MENTORS

The source of career support most frequently mentioned was mentors. We coded for the presence of career support if a mentor was present during work life. College or graduate school mentors did not count because these were coded as indicative of significant early support, not career support, unless the relationship continued to serve a positive function during the leader's work life. By this count, 39% of the leaders received career support from mentors (had we asked a direct question, more of them might have acknowledged they had a mentor). A Caucasian *founder* gave the following example of a successful mentoring relationship, one of several she said she had had that fit the traditional definition of a mentor as someone who actively gives good advice, supports and promotes your career development in the context of an ongoing relationship.

> He sort of adopted me as his sidekick. He didn't like to write very much and there was a certain amount of writing in this job and so I sort of went along with him and wrote things for him. What that really meant was I could watch what he did and I learned a lot from that. And then he came to think I had abilities, and so then he became kind of a promoter of me, which is very nice.... He took a real interest in me...and [when] he was hired at the...Foundation, he said, "She comes with me because she does my writing."

This one also is from a Caucasian *founder*:

> One person who had a lot of influence on my career and my concept of leadership was [the man] who was running this division at the time I came here.... He selected very good people. He had a very high emphasis on getting excellent recruits. But once he got them, he very much respected what they wanted to do and he was very supportive of me and others in their research.

As these quotations indicate, mentors can also perform role-modeling functions by setting an example. While many mentors are emulated as role models, not all role models would qualify as mentors if there isn't a personal relationship in which the admired, older, and wiser person takes an active interest in the younger one's career.[128] One does not have to have a personal relationship with a role model, one can learn by observing from a distance. A few of the leaders mentioned learning by observing others, people with whom they did not necessarily have a mentoring relationship: "I learned a lot by working with them and watching them" (Caucasian *developer*).

Another example of learning by observing comes from a different Caucasian *developer*. "I saw the impact [that] specific leadership styles had on others. And when people were sincere, honest, had a lot of integrity, people in the organization would do just about anything to work for a leader that had those qualities."

> *"I had seven years of higher education without a single female faculty member. Can you imagine that? Not a single role model of my gender and not a single mentor among the male faculty members."*
>
> *Caucasian developer*

In addition to mentors and role models, the leaders also honored their relationships with supportive colleagues: "I've had some wonderful relationships with women who have supported me and given me guidance when I needed them" (Asian American *successor*) and "These men have been enormously supportive so it's been a great experience for me.... I've

never felt at all like I couldn't discuss things with them" (Caucasian *successor*). Some leaders mentioned their husbands as a significant source of career support and learning:

> My husband is great. I love him dearly. He loves me dearly. We're very supportive of each other's careers. Being both lawyers, we appreciate when the other one has to work late or can't make this meeting, or you know.... So I have that as a base, a very solid foundation (African American *developer*),

and

> My husband, he's one of the smartest people I've ever met and he's one of the most strategic and best decision makers I have ever, ever met.... Now, he was not a people-person when I met him.... I was 26 and falling in love with someone, also. I easily could have turned in my style for his style and for whatever reason...I didn't.... As a result...he's much more people oriented today and I'm much more decisive (Caucasian *successor*).

She claimed that it was easier for her to learn from him as her partner with whom she had a comfortable relationship than it would have been to learn in a formal mentor-type relationship.

Even though we did not ask a specific question about mentors, some leaders spontaneously voiced their frustration over not having had one: "You know, my biggest problem as a leader is I don't have another woman who's 20 years older than I am whom I can call and say, 'How do you do this?' " (Caucasian *successor*); "A whole new life started for me when I got elected to office.... I learned about deep-seated sexism. I really learned about how people exercise power. I learned about what men protect in this environment. So it was a whole new learning experience for me and I didn't have, in that setting, I didn't have a lot of mentors who could teach me" (African American *founder*); and

> When I was in college and law school, I don't think I was taken as seriously as my male peers. I have no doubt that I wasn't. And I have no doubt that there was something really lacking in not having female role models. I had seven years of higher education without a single female faculty member. Can you imagine that? Not a single role model of my gender and not a single mentor among the male faculty members (Caucasian *developer*).

Just like the Caucasian *successor* quoted earlier who felt she learned better from her husband than she would have from a formal mentor, not all women we interviewed were interested in a traditional mentoring relationship. As a Caucasian *founder*, put it: "At one point in my life,

probably fairly early on, I decided that I wanted to find women role models...and I became a lot more deliberate about it. It wasn't exactly mentors but trying to find people whom I could watch and emulate." Robin Ely's research in law firms suggests that this leader would have better luck in finding role models to "watch and emulate" if she worked in an organization that had a critical mass of women in the upper echelons of power.[129] That is, if there are only a few women at the top, they are not likely to be viewed as role models.

While having a mentor is generally viewed to be an asset, the research on mentoring suggests that mentor relationships may be harder to manage and may provide fewer benefits for women and minorities.[130] The mentoring experiences of some of the leaders in the study gave voice to the down side of mentoring: "We have to be careful about mentoring because I see a lot in the male world.... I think mentoring for us...must be interaction. It must be not people talking at you and saying this is what you ought to do. It should be bringing people along" (African American *founder*). Another example comes from a Caucasian *successor*: "I look back on it and realize that he was extremely undermining of me. Before I came here he said to me...'Don't ever, ever, ever for a moment think you'll get tenure.'"

Regardless of whether or not they had had successful mentoring relationships for themselves, the leaders placed a positive value on mentoring. Focusing on the growth and development of people who work for them was part of their leadership philosophy. Many reported that it was an important aspect of how they related to people who work with them. Several lamented that their workload does not allow them to take on the mentoring of junior colleagues to the extent that they would like.

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LEARNING FROM LEADERS

Mary Parker Follett made major contributions to leadership that were later repeated by male researchers; Follett has been all but forgotten. Variations on this theme were told by many of the leaders we interviewed. So much so that it seems to be an encapsulation of one of the prototypical challenges of women's ascent to leadership: If women are to increase their representation in top leadership positions, their accomplishments need to be seen and heard, and women need to receive the appropriate credit for their good work. One of the topics covered in the interview was strategies for increasing one's visibility. A Caucasian *founder* we interviewed gave this advice:

> If I'm in a meeting and...I've given an idea out, it's a good idea that kind of falls...clunk on the floor, in a couple of minutes I will come back and I will repeat the idea. And/or if one of the men picks up my idea, which happens not infrequently, and then proffers it as his own, I will say, "Isn't it nice that Mr. Smith agrees with me; how nice that he agrees with me," bringing people's attention to the fact that yes, indeed, it was my idea. I find repetition extraordinarily important.

STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING VISIBILITY

When we examined the many strategies for increasing one's visibility that were suggested, a simple, three-part approach emerged: Get to know and value who you are and let others know. The quotation immediately above encompasses all three components. She knew she had ideas, she valued her ideas, and used repetition and reclaiming authorship strategies to get the credit due her.

"I just kept telling myself that I had to stand apart. I'm not [one] of the old boys, obviously, so I just do everything I can to market myself as being different."

Asian American developer

KNOW YOURSELF

Beyond the obvious value of self-knowledge, two strategies built on self-knowledge were observed. One was the suggestion to know one's area of expertise and to speak from that vantage point: "I haven't scattered my shots. I've sort of focused my efforts on things that I think are important.... I don't think people are rewarded very much for pursuit of trying to talk on

subjects in which they haven't been able to do their own individual creative work." This advice from an academic (Caucasian *founder*) can be translated into other lines of work as leading with one's strength, which requires knowing what one's strengths are. The second strategy of carving out one's niche (or capitalizing on being different) can be illustrated by this Asian American *developer*'s comments: "You have to make the best of what you are, who you are, and what you have," which also requires self-knowledge. For her, this meant recognizing that she's not a man, she has not had the traditional training in her field, nor does she look the part. She decided to use being different as a strategic advantage: "I just kept telling myself that I had to stand apart. I'm not [one] of the old boys, obviously, so I just do everything I can to market myself as being different."

VALUE YOURSELF

That anyone who wants to be taken seriously needs to first take herself seriously was a fundamental tenet often repeated in the interviews. An Asian American *successor* put it this way: "When I go out into the field and talk to people about certain things, they always give me...respect.... I do come across confidently and, therefore, people react in kind." Along these lines, a Caucasian *founder* illustrated the same lesson with a negative example: "If women begin a sentence with 'I'm not sure about this but—' or 'I'm thinking out loud,'...you're beginning a sentence saying nobody should pay attention to you." She added, "I think people should pay attention to you." Her strategy was to highlight her expertise so that as she said, "It's harder to discount me, not impossible, but harder.... I think those kinds of...subtle ways of discounting the views of women are quite pervasive.... My personal strategies are usually to challenge it and to do it nicely but firmly." The same leader elaborated on the implications of valuing one's expertise in communicating one's ideas to others as an attractive package.

> *"[To] get your work out in the world...you have to have a lot of belief in yourself. You have to believe that what you're doing has meaning and value and worth."*
>
> *Caucasian founder*

> I'm a proven quantity. I've delivered, I can be trusted, and you're not going to find yourself compromised by me. I'm telling you something that both makes sense and how to get there is plausible, so when you take the package together, [you win]. And if I disagree, I'll do it in a way that's not going to make mincemeat out of you. I'll leave you whole. So you call me tomorrow.

Another Caucasian *founder* also emphasized the importance of valuing one's self. "[To] get your work out in the world...you have to have a lot of belief in yourself. You have to believe

that what you're doing has meaning and value and worth." The basic message was that believing in your own worth not only makes it possible to withstand being ignored or criticized, but is also essential for communicating to others that your contribution is worth paying attention to.

LET OTHERS KNOW

The job is not finished if only you know your strengths and value them. The critical last step is to let others know. A Caucasian *developer* pointed out that "Modesty doesn't create opportunity.... It's very difficult for an awful lot of women to talk about their accomplishments, to say, 'I did this and it was good.' " She insisted that it is essential for women not to wait to be noticed but to speak up. Another Caucasian *developer* elaborated on the need to overcome modesty:

> You have to toot your own horn.... Most of the guys who are doing things didn't wait to be asked. They either moved to the front of the room and raised their hand or they stood beside someone, tugged on their coattail and said, "I'm willing, I'm able, I'm interested." And I have encouraged women who have interests and feel frustrated that they have not been asked, to learn from those skills. Step up to the front of the room and say I'll do this.

An African American *developer* gave this advice on how to put the word out: "[You need] the ability to express ideas clearly in a way that is engaging." Others emphasized that once you have expressed your ideas, you need to be persistent and repeat your message over and over. A Caucasian *developer* explained why she has been persistent:

> I have succeeded because of my background and because of who I am by just stating my capabilities, my abilities, and sometimes I appear to be too insistent. But I don't know what else to do, you know. It would be nice to be able to accomplish everything without saying much. But when you are trying to be bold in your scientific pursuits as well as in your ambitions, then it's difficult doing it subtly.

The importance of communicating one's ideas or publicizing one's accomplishments insistently, persistently, and repeatedly was a clear message. Some preferred to persist quietly. One Caucasian *founder* said, "I don't fight it, I just keep doing things"; while another emphasized the importance of being loud, "I raised my voice quite a bit.... I didn't want to hide my light under a bushel." It appeared that personal style and comfort level played a role in choosing the quiet or the loud route to persistence. One leader (a Caucasian *successor*)

regarded the quiet versus loud issue as a strategic decision. She decided not to attack but to explain how others' actions made her feel, which worked for her:

> So as opposed to sort of attacking them and saying, "You know, you're sexist, this is stupid, no man would ever be treated this way," I just talked about how I felt.... I just said, "I'm going to tell you what I'm feeling when you...said that." And upon describing it they were very responsive.

An African American *developer*'s actions illustrated a preemptive approach to getting everyone's attention: "When I was doing this report, there were times people didn't listen to me. They would ignore me. I started... taking actions with the people who were listening and letting the people who weren't listening know that we'd done it and we're sorry we didn't hear from them." She reported that "eventually they all listened."

A Caucasian *developer* noted that success builds on success: "You have to succeed enough to get a platform.... But you have to get through some hurdles before you can get to that kind of context in which it would be very hard to deny that you were an effective advocate, a good speaker, a good writer." This strategy required patience. An African American *developer* who had been treated harshly explained that she wasn't willing to wait:

> What forced me into being an entrepreneur was that my skills and talents were not only [not] recognized,...I was persecuted for them. It was a situation where I often had said that not only was I not appreciated, I was beaten. And so my whole motivation in working for myself was tied very much to being able to reap the benefits and receive the satisfaction of knowing that I had done a job well and I had developed a certain set of skills.

The hostile environment she faced working in a traditional hierarchy created her motivation to strike out on her own. This motive has been documented by other researchers as one of the significant reasons women become entrepreneurs.[132]

Finally, a Caucasian *developer* addressed a widespread concern that certain aspects of women's work, especially the work they do to support other women, remains invisible and unrewarded. She described her strategy of getting credit for her good work on behalf of women by insisting that it become an integral part of her job description for which she would be held accountable. When she was being considered to be the vice provost of a university that had recently become co-educational, she refused to take responsibility for women's issues on campus unless it became a part of her job:

> Celebrating co-education, looking at women in the curriculum, that's not going to be a hobby for me. I'm not doing that after hours or because I have a

> special interest.... That's part of my job. Make it my job description. You're hiring me for that.... Put it on the page so that I can be evaluated for how well I do [that], too.

She went on to make the general observation that, "Sometimes we are afraid to say things like that because it sounds either self-serving or it's out of the mainstream and we are afraid to challenge the mainstream. But if we don't do that, then we don't get value for it either."

The lessons to be learned about how to let others know of one's worth were to take initiative, to persist, to build a platform or a reputation so that you cannot be easily ignored, and to incorporate your good work into your job description

FINDINGS

BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S RISE TO TOP LEADERSHIP

Explanations for the lack of diversity in top leadership that are based on so-called women's internal barriers are inadequate for explaining the slow pace of change over time; neither the existing literature nor the results of this study support gender differences in qualities, skills, or styles of leadership. Our results lend credence to findings that there are no gender differences in leadership style that can account for the scarcity of women in top leadership positions. The women we interviewed did take risks, engaged in confrontations, and duly exercised their power and influence as leaders.

By all accounts, external barriers to women's rise to leadership continue to exist. The results of this study support the view that external barriers, although diminishing in strength and becoming more subtle than overt, continue to carry the blame for the slow pace of progress in increasing women's representation in top leadership. External barriers continue to be severe especially for leaders of color.

EARLY SUPPORT

We examined whether early experiences distinguished these accomplished leaders from other women. We wondered whether they had been groomed to become leaders by receiving exceptional support in their formative development. We examined both the early years, up through the completion of their education, and also a later period, the beginning of their work life. The results showed that self-reported exceptional support and inspirational role models while growing up certainly helped but they were not required for later success.

Having career support during one's early work life appeared to be more important for successful leadership development than support while growing up. However, similar to not having had early exceptional support or inspirational role models during one's upbringing, not having career support did not make it impossible to rise to top echelons of leadership. A third of our leaders did not report having significant support in their career development. Another significant finding was that early support as well as career support could come from a variety of sources.

STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING VISIBILITY

In this report, we have characterized the prototypical challenge to women's rise to leadership as encapsulated by what happened to Mary Parker Follett's ideas about the benefits of a participatory leadership style. They were credited to the men who came after her who articulated similar ideas. When we examined the many strategies for increasing one's visibility that were offered by the leaders interviewed, a simple, three-part approach emerged: (1) get to know and (2) value one's self and (3) let others know. Strategies about knowing one's self emphasized learning about one's strengths and capitalizing on them. The basic message about believing in one's own worth was that this not only made it possible to withstand being ignored or criticized, it was also essential for communicating to others that one's contributions were worth paying attention to. With respect to letting others know, the importance of repeatedly stating one's ideas was a clear message. In the words of one of the leaders in the study, "Modesty does not create opportunity."

STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING ROADBLOCKS

With respect to dealing with career setbacks, the leaders proposed two different strategies. One was to change the course of action that led to the adversity, the other was to persevere. At the outset, making changes versus persevering may seem to be opposite strategies. However, in the many cases described by the leaders, persevering to uphold a deeply held conviction also involved changes and some changes were undertaken to stay true to one's self. The general lesson to be learned from both the change and the persistence strategies was the importance of knowing one's own values, convictions, strengths, and weaknesses. It also helped to accurately assess the circumstances one is facing to be able to judge when to change and when to persist.

An equally important lesson was the value of optimism. In their responses to what they learned from dealing with setbacks, several leaders specifically singled out their optimistic nature to explain their strategy, whether it was to make changes or to persevere. When faced with adversity, both making changes and staying the course required a good measure of optimism. This sentiment echoed how most of the leaders dealt with career roadblocks. They did not dwell on them.

It bears repeating that external barriers form the backdrop of these leaders' accomplishments. Tenacity, optimism, and not dwelling on set backs are traits that have value in making it possible for women to break through barriers. We can speculate that if the environment were more welcoming of women's leadership, other traits might characterize successful women leaders.

STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING VISIBILITY

In this report, we have characterized the prototypical challenge to women's rise to leadership as encapsulated by what happened to Mary Parker Follett's ideas about the benefits of a participatory leadership style. They were credited to the men who came after her who articulated similar ideas. When we examined the many strategies for increasing one's visibility that were offered by the leaders interviewed, a simple, three-part approach emerged: (1) get to know and (2) value one's self and (3) let others know. Strategies about knowing one's self emphasized learning about one's strengths and capitalizing on them. The basic message about believing in one's own worth was that this not only made it possible to withstand being ignored or criticized, it was also essential for communicating to others that one's contributions were worth paying attention to. With respect to letting others know, the importance of repeatedly stating one's ideas was a clear message. In the words of one of the leaders in the study, "Modesty does not create opportunity."

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RELATIONAL PRACTICE

Whether or not it is put into actual practice, the ascendancy of the democratic, people-oriented leadership style forms the contemporary context of leadership today. It is touted by both men and women as capturing many of the requirements for effective leadership in the contemporary, fast-paced, turbulent, and innovation-driven economy. Most of the leaders described their own leadership practice as informed by the contingencies they perceived in their work environment. Alongside a commitment to consensus building, they articulated a need to be decisive and to make hard choices. Yet, there was a strong undercurrent of a parallel need to cultivate and maintain strong relationships with one's colleagues, subordinates, patients, clients, customers, or audience. The leaders identified that their leadership practices required a sense of responsibility alongside a sense of humor, fairness, and mutual respect. The leaders in this study described not only their own practices as including relational elements, but also the practices of the men and women who they felt personified exemplary leadership.

RISK AND CONFRONTATION

When we examined the risk-taking and confrontation dimensions of the leadership practices of the women interviewed, we found that while every one of the leaders engaged in these behaviors, there were differences in how comfortable they felt about them. Yet, regardless of whether they found it stimulating or scary, they had all found a strategy that worked for them to take risks and to communicate their disagreements and conflicts to those with whom they worked. Most of these strategies incorporated relational elements.

ADAPTERS AND RESISTORS

The leaders could be placed into two categories, *adapters* and *resistors*, on the basis of their descriptions of their leadership practices. The *adapters* indicated varying degrees of comfort with using traditional words for leadership such as "power," "success," and "leader" to describe their practices while the *resistors* opposed using such traditional terms. Regardless of their stance as an *adapter* or a *resistor*, some of the leaders identified a framework for understanding the roots and practices of leadership as emerging from mothering when they spoke of honoring mothering as both a training ground for leadership and a metaphor for describing leadership behavior.

LEADER AS THE "GOOD MOTHER"

Leaders from both the *adapters* and *resistors* groups described exemplary leadership and also their own leadership practice using family terms, most often the mother role. While mothering as metaphor most often referred to relational practices in leadership such as being

warm and nurturing, mothering as training for leadership emphasized the learning of specific leadership skills such as time management, setting priorities, multitasking, and managing teams.

Recognizing good mothering as a metaphor and training for leadership is a key finding because it represents a radical departure from the early traditional advice for women aspiring to leadership to "become more like men." Some of the leaders in this study were secure enough in their work roles that they could describe leadership using language derived from their lived experience as women. It appeared that, at least among women who have reached top levels of leadership, there is a level of comfort that allowed them to bring a more integrated sense of being a woman and a leader to their work. This is a positive development that contrasts with many anecdotal stories of women feeling the pressure to leave behind their motherhood and other aspects of being a woman when they enter the world of paid employment.

Our highlighting this finding is not about glorifying motherhood — although crediting good mothering with leadership qualities has been overdue. Rather, it is about drawing attention to the "ownership" some women bring to their leader roles. Thus, we are not advancing a new way to conceptualize leadership as primarily maternal behavior. More than anything else, this finding suggests that in the traditionally masculine realm of leadership there are the beginnings of female strongholds where women feel comfortable. Just as men have used military and sports metaphors to talk about their leadership, so women leaders in these strongholds are talking about it from a decidedly female perspective by using female language.

PATTERNS IN LEADERSHIP

Employing a life course developmental perspective we examined patterns in leadership practice that could be attributed to differences in race or ethnicity, generational cohort, and career context. The patterns that emerged need to be viewed as tentative and suggestive, rather than definitive, until validated by larger samples.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

The scarcity of women of color in top leadership continues to be the single most challenging aspect of diversifying leadership. Many of the concerns that the leaders of color articulated derived from the historical and, to some extent, continuing exclusion of minorities from positions of power. Women of color described such ramifications of being newcomers to top leadership as the burden of being a symbol of success in their communities, the difficulty in judging whether one is being confronted by racism or sexism, and the pain of discrimination.

The extra burdens placed on leaders of color based on being both a female and a minority were borne out by the finding that more leaders of color reported they currently faced roadblocks than did Caucasian leaders. These additional burdens were also corroborated by some of the Caucasian leaders who reported being cognizant of their own unearned white privilege relative to the barriers faced by people of color.

While there were no appreciable differences between leaders of color and Caucasian leaders in their comfort level with taking risks, we did note that there were differences in reporting comfort with confrontation. Fewer women of color than Caucasian women said they were comfortable with confrontations. It may be that the added challenge of being a different race from the majority can make direct confrontations more dangerous for women of color.

How the leaders felt about describing their work using the traditional words of leadership was a topic on which we found race/ethnicity differences. With varying degrees of ambivalence, more leaders of color than Caucasian leaders were able to adapt to the traditional language. Women of color were not necessarily more comfortable with these traditional words; for example, many leaders of color expressed their ambivalence by talking about having power as a responsibility. We interpreted the finding that more leaders of color were classified as *adapters* in light of the compromises required of women of color to navigate in the majority-culture world of work. The adaptation to using traditional language may not have stood out as an additional burden in this context.

There were racial and ethnic differences in the tendency to recognize mothering in leadership. Among leaders who honored mothering, more women of color were likely to refer to mothering as a metaphor for leadership and more Caucasian women recognized it as a training ground. We have speculated that for leaders of color, mothering metaphors for leadership alluded to their community-based experiences of maternal figures' transformative power to bring people along. We acknowledge this interpretation as speculative because there is very little research on women from different racial and ethnic groups who are in top leadership positions.

In this study we created the artificial category of "leaders of color" to compare minority leaders' experiences with the experiences of leaders from the majority culture. By doing so we were able to highlight that race and ethnicity continue to play a role in the work lives of even highly prominent and eminent women. Consequently, we overcame the general tendency in research of rendering minority women invisible behind the generic category of "woman." However, at the same time, we were not able to honor the diversity that exists across and within different racial and ethnic groups of women. That task requires a much larger sample.

GENERATIONAL COHORT

The life course developmental perspective places the lives of the leaders in socio-historical context of larger society by membership in cohorts that undergo the socio-historical developments at the same time. We have grouped the women in our study into three cohorts: the *founders*, the *developers*, and the *successors*. The cohort we called *founders* was composed of women who had been in leadership positions for close to two decades and sometimes longer. They came of age during the second wave of the women's movement. Some of the *founders* are close to retirement age; a few have already retired from the fields in which they reached prominence. The second cohort of women has been in leadership for more than a decade. They have penetrated in larger numbers into previously male-only enclaves. We called these women the *developers*. The youngest of our leadership cohorts has benefited from the foundations laid and developed by the two earlier cohorts. In this regard, the successes of previous generations of women have laid the groundwork for the *successors'* accomplishments.

Leaders in the *founders* cohort were less likely than leaders in the two younger cohorts to report current roadblocks to success in their field. Why would *founders*, many of whom related vivid examples of gender discrimination in general, be less likely to report roadblocks? We have several interpretations of this finding. One, women's opportunities have improved during the course of the *founders'* work lives such that barriers that currently exist pale in comparison to what women had to endure previously. Two, what the *founders* have been able to accomplish in their careers — the eminence and prominence that they have achieved — protects them from discrimination. Three, the harsh circumstances facing the *founders* cohort early in their careers were so severe at that time that not seeing nor acknowledging barriers served as an asset, a habit they continue to practice to this day.

In terms of strategies for overcoming roadblocks, more *successors* were likely to report that in the face of adversity, they learned to make changes, rather than persist with a course of action. The only *successors* whose strategies fit the description of persistence were those who talked about making changes in order to stay true to their passion. Their relative youth and where they are in their career trajectory may explain the greater appeal of change to the younger cohort compared to the two older ones.

Women in the *founders* cohort were almost as likely as the younger *successors* cohort to report being comfortable with confrontation. In contrast, more women in the *developers* cohort were uncomfortable with confrontation. We interpret the *founders'* ease with confrontation to reflect that they are so well established that they are immune to potential reprisals from those they confront, which may have made them more relaxed about following the strictures of proper female behavior as non-confrontational. The *successors*, we believe,

are comfortable with confrontation because they have come of age in a business environment that values candor in handling conflicts. That fewer women from the *developers* cohort expressed comfort, on the other hand, can indicate a fear of reprisal or a belief that confrontational behavior is unbecoming of a thoughtful woman — or a combination of both.

With respect to using the traditional words of "power," "leader," and "success," fewer *successors* than *developers* or *founders* were classified as *resistors*. We interpret this cohort difference in terms of the younger cohort feeling safer to claim their power, leadership, or success at work and the older cohorts having had more experience with the negative aspects of these terms.

There were also cohort differences among the leaders with respect to recognizing mothering. Nearly half of the *successors* honored the maternal/sibling roles as a training ground, while only a few of the *founders* and *developers* did so. Why were the younger women, who have had many different types of opportunities to train for their current positions relative to the older cohorts, more likely to mention family roles as good training? Perhaps because they are younger, family roles, as siblings or as mothers, are more salient (fresher in their memory) for the *successors* cohort; therefore, they can more readily recall the lessons they learned in these roles. Perhaps, more importantly, their greater sense of security and comfort in the world of leadership plays a role here. The *successors* cohort was subjected to less severe gender discrimination. They appear to be more at home in their leadership roles.

We need to reiterate that in the context of this cross-sectional study, the generational cohorts differed along three important dimensions: history, career development, and age. The history dimension refers to the fact that the women in the study came into their leadership positions at different periods in the recent history of this country's acceptance of women's paid employment. The three cohorts were at different points in their career development. Many of the *successors* have achieved their leadership roles relatively recently, while a few of the *founders* have already retired from the work in which they achieved prominence. The leaders also differed in age, which is a marker for stage of life. The ages of the *successors* and *developers* overlapped with the years that are referred to as midlife and the needs of professional women in midlife can be different from those of younger women and midlife men. In this report when we make interpretations of findings related to cohort differences, we have often invoked historical trends; however, sometimes we noted that career maturity or stage of life appears to be the critical factor. Multi-cohort, longitudinal studies in which the careers of different age-cohorts of women are followed over time are required to untangle which of the cohort-related interpretations hold more explanatory power for different findings.

CAREER CONTEXT

The context of a career also seemed to play a role in leadership. We looked for patterns of leadership practice among leaders whose careers could be classified in different ways: positional versus independent leaders, entrepreneurs, leaders who worked in predominantly women's organizations (which included independent leaders whose work focuses on women), and women with an ascendant career trajectory who worked their way up an organizational hierarchy. The contrast between positional and independent leaders referred to the differences between holding a position of authority within a structured work hierarchy versus independent work. Other career contexts overlapped in that entrepreneurs might work in an organization or alone; the same was true of leaders whose work we identified as women-centered. Finally, while an ascendant career trajectory required having been a positional leader, due to career changes, some leaders who had an ascendant trajectory were currently working independently.

Leaders who worked independently and those who had an ascendant career trajectory were more likely to say they experienced roadblocks to success in their fields compared to entrepreneurs, leaders who worked in women's organizations, and positional leaders. It is likely that working one's way up an organizational hierarchy remains a harsh experience for women, which may have left a bitter residue among leaders with an ascendant trajectory even when they reached the top. But then why did more independent leaders report experiencing roadblocks to their success, also? Perhaps it continues to be hard for women to work independently, where their success depends on a more distant but highly changeable public, such as viewers, readers, or voters. This interpretation suggests that corporate organizational structures may be affording women leaders some degree of protection. This was borne out by our finding that higher percentages of leaders who worked in women's organizations and those who were positional leaders reported no roadblocks.

Women with an ascendant career trajectory were the least likely to report comfort with risk-taking. We can speculate about the meaning of this finding in terms of the costs of taking risks. Risks that turn out to have negative outcomes may have greater costs for women who have worked their way up the corporate ladder than for women who have had other career trajectories.

Entrepreneurs were the least likely to view roadblocks to their success because so many of them were driven with a single-minded focus to forge ahead. This single-mindedness was also evident in the greater number of entrepreneurs than leaders in other work contexts who talked about persevering in pursuit of their convictions in the face of opposition. Such persistence does fit the stereotype of an entrepreneur who takes risks to follow her own

course. More entrepreneurs than leaders in other career contexts were likely to report that they were comfortable with and even enjoyed taking risks.

Leaders who worked in women's organizations were least likely to report comfort with confrontations. Why would a leader who works in the relative safety of a women's organization feel uncomfortable about confrontations? We speculate that the issue here is not one of safety but conformity to a "women's culture" that places a high value on relational practices. Resolving conflicts through a two-way conversation may be more of the norm in women-centered workplaces rather than through direct confrontation.

Our interpretation of the results of career context remains tentative because there isn't a body of research on women in different types of work contexts to guide us. This lack is most evident for understanding the difference that working in a woman-centered organization can make. Theory and research on the alienating effects on women of working in hierarchically organized, traditional work settings designed by and for men exists; however, we have no systematic knowledge on organizations designed by and for women.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ASPIRING YOUNG LEADERS

The results of our study showed that with or without early support these women accomplished extraordinary achievements in their respective fields. Alongside improvements in women's employment conditions, the leaders' own tenacity and optimism played an important role in their accomplishments. Yet, many of the traditional ways of talking and thinking about leadership continue to mask the strengths women bring to their successful lives as leaders.

Despite the fact that barriers to women's leadership success continue to exist, over the course of the last three or four decades there have been major improvements in women's opportunities in the world of paid employment. That some of the leaders who participated in this study were comfortable enough in their positions to talk about their leadership in purely female terms by invoking motherhood suggests that today it is possible for women to bring a more integrated sense of themselves to their leadership. This is a hopeful sign for young women who aspire to leadership but do not want to disconnect with their "female side" to become leaders: it is possible to be a prominent leader and remain a whole and integrated woman.

Another implication for young women aspiring to leadership is that the absence of significant support and inspiring role models while growing up may not necessarily hold them back. It is highly recommended to seek and receive support in the beginning of a career, but even that may not be absolutely required for later success as a leader. Young women can be inspired to

seek leadership roles by being inspired by distant role models (for example, Sojourner Truth or Eleanor Roosevelt) or out of sheer necessity as was the case for some of the leaders in this study. Self-knowledge, on the other hand, along with valuing one's self, appear to be necessary ingredients for success, supplemented by a strong dose of optimism. Alongside optimism, tenacity and not dwelling on setbacks appear to be important for succeeding in an environment that is not fully welcoming of women's rise to leadership. It is instructive to note that even these accomplished leaders who were selected for having visible leadership roles experienced obstacles to their success. If these prominent women needed to overcome barriers, the challenge for young women seeking leadership can be formidable. However, as the lessons learned from these leaders suggest, the challenge is surmountable.

A democratic and people-oriented leadership style is favored by both men and women today and widely extolled in contemporary scholars' and practitioners' writings. Even though the vast majority of the leaders in this study reported that their leadership contains many elements of this type of relational practice, the results showed that there is not a singular female leadership style. The leaders' practices varied by their race and ethnicity, generational cohort, and the context of their work. The implication for an aspiring leader is that there is no fixed blueprint she needs to follow. She can combine the elements of relational practice with her strengths, the needs of the people with whom she works, and the changing demands of her chosen field in a package that feels authentic to her.

Finally, the results of this study corroborated other research that shows that it is not enough for aspiring leaders to develop and practice exemplary leadership skills. Barriers to women's rise to top leadership positions remain largely outside of individual women's sphere of influence. Society as a whole needs to recognize that the continuing existence of these barriers inevitably results in a loss of talent. Viewing top leadership as a masculine endeavor is a social fossil that does not mesh with reality. The outstanding achievements of the 60 leaders in our study point clearly to this emerging reality.