We've Broken Through the Glass Ceiling and We're Still Getting Cut: A Workshop on Women in Leadership 02.08.2023. 09:00-14:00

The Committee on Women in Science, Engineering, and Medicine hosted a workshop on women in leadership which drew attention to prevailing conceptions of leadership and cultural expectations of leaders that hinder women's advancement. Also, different pathways and experiences were shared by women leaders in academia.

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Gilda Barabino welcomed the panelists Sherry Hughes, Sonny Lee Goodman, Lee Stevenson and Allison Wynn. Moderator Dr. Katie Willard discussed with the panelists prevailing cultural assumptions about who makes a good leader and how this limits potential advancement for women as well as men who do not follow traditional norms of masculinity.

1. Defitinitons of Leadership

In a major study on 221 definitions of leadership Ross found that almost all definitions were hierarchal and based on male traits and characteristics. Our conceptions of leadership favor a narrow set of middle-aged white men. This lens of patriarchy is not restricted to men, women see things through the same patriarchal lens. Stereotypes about men tend to overlap with our assumptions about what leaders should do and what makes a good leader successful, whereas stereotypes about women do not overlap as much, which makes it harder for women to demonstrate leadership potential because people tend to assume they do not possess the traits to succeed as leaders.
Women are stereotyped as being good in a crisis, so they are often put in tough positions where there are high levels of precariousness, a high chance of failure, and ultimately, where they are not able to thrive as much. Because we are using our stereotypes of women's roles when filling in positions, women get the hard jobs, not the cushy ones.
Another stereotype is that of women being more caring, more consulted, more consensus oriented. And to a degree, some of this is borne out in the literature. But looking at bigger and more nuanced studies, using these stereotypes to pigeonhole people into roles just because of their gender ultimately doesn't lead us down a productive path.

Men are also often limited by the narrow definitions of acceptable approaches to work and leadership. The solution lies not in trying to fix people, but in changing the positions that people occupy by having conversations around definitions and conceptions of leadership. If the pervasive assumption that women lead differently than men is true, it is not due to innate differences between men and women, but rather to the structural differences in the positions that men and women tend to occupy: women need to use different strategies than men to be successful, because if they try the straightforward path, they will get blocked, so they create conditions that enable their own success, they draw on external relationships, they forge more unconventional relationships, maybe within lower status positions.
We need more women in leadership, but not because they bring a feminine touch to leadership, but because they broaden our conceptions of what leaders can do, should do, and what makes them successful.

Today, the focus in terms of women's performance evaluation is on their character. Clearly, it is much more difficult to change character than behavior. These lenses, through which women are seen, have a big impact on women and their careers. In a system in which perfection is prevailing, women leaders find it much more difficult to not make mistakes. Because they feel they are held to a higher standard, and making a mistake comes down to a character flaw in their performance evaluation.

The lenses we use are culturally specific. Most women's perceptions of what it means to be a leader did not start in college. They were long embedded in terms of who got chosen to lead groups from a young age.

Women have to navigate a labyrinth of unconscious biases, which can result in their finding themselves way off their chosen path. We need to know who is making decisions, and that is not explicit. Women's career trajectory in academic medicine is often shaped like an M, with a turn and a dip when they are faced with caring for children, elders or others outside of their work. When their situation becomes more stable and they start to rise again, they often do not reach that second peak of the M before they retire.

1.2 Culture
When we say women, we often mean white women. Pathways are going to differ depending on the culture of the woman pursuing the path. Black girls and women are stereotyped in a way that hinders them from pursuing a *STEM career (Science Technology Engineering Mathematics). This also true for Native American, Asian, Hispanic women and other minorities.
For indigenous people it's very uncomfortable to call themselves a leader, because it's not something they do. They situate leaders within their values context. This self-awareness creates a systemic impact.
*STEM equivalent CH: MINT (Mathematik, Informatik, Naturwissenschaft und Technik)

We need to cultivate opportunities for people who may not acknowledge themselves as leaders. Effective people should experience being told that they can become a leader, something that they might not even have thought about, you may be the first person to raise their awareness to this possibility.
Women are navigating complex values in a system that was not made for them. We need to create advocacy across organizations, we need to reconceptualize leadership so women can see themselves in these positions and push against the system and rebuild it.
When cultural conceptions of leadership start being questioned, there will be backlash. What will backlash mean in terms of a regression or even stagnation? How do we deal with it?

There are plenty of people who are uncomfortable with change. In terms of getting them on board for change management, it is a good idea to upscale their social skills and add to their finesse about how they address behavioral biases, for example when dealing with difficult conversations. Peoples' skills in having difficult conversations are not great. Whether you are dealing with bias, sexual harassment or just very poor interactions between people, a good leader knows how to address it and is willing to address it.

Feminism doesn't always provide women credit for the leadership they have in their own homes and families, although it is equally vital and challenging. How can women help correct this undervaluation?
How do we acknowledge that women take on more childcare, elder care and care for other family members, especially when child-caring years overlap into elder care? To talk to colleagues about this and putting it out in the open is important. What can institutions and institutional leaders do to support caregivers of all kinds who for now happen to be disproportionately female?

One panelist saw herself as leading from the margins because from the margins you can throw rocks. But suddenly she became an official leader, was put in the center and had to listen to two sides and perspectives, realizing she couldn't establish balance if she came in with an agenda. That was quite an adjustment.

Another panelist told of her opportunity to visit a prestigious healthcare system. She spent the first day on the medical school site full of a diverse workforce of medical students, residents and faculty. The second day she took the elevator to the top floor of the hospital site. Every office was occupied by a white man except for one white woman. She met the CEO, who was very proud of his team and their advancement decisions for everybody in the organization. He said the best thing about his team was that they played golf together every Saturday. The entire suite. So every big decision in the organization was happening on Saturday mornings, and they were not choosing people who did not look like them to advance.

In every organization, there's a system in place, with certain ideas behind it. Policies and practices are built on those ideas. This leads to particular outcomes, and so the cycle continues. Climates can be chilly. One speaker says she was "navigating whiteness", something she was not aware of at first. People around her were enacting privilege and were capitalizing on her demise. For black women, there is a lack of sponsorship.

You need to be watching for certain things as you build your career. Also, you need to be watching your reputation. The hybrid environment has modified our perception of leadership, but it is not yet clear who has the most leverage, employers or employees. It is expected that you be available online all the time, but if you are fully remote or miss the day in which most of your colleagues are in, you are seen as not being committed enough. When companies give their employees unlimited annual leave, the employees are punished for taking that leave: thinking carefully about policies when it comes to hybrid and remote work is important.

Women are not kind to other women, and there are generational issues that arise when women of a more senior generation feel the need to tough it out because that's how they got to where they were. This causes harm to individuals and the career advancement of potential leaders.
Bias can be reduced with training about unconscious bias, procedure interactions, team meetings with discussions about what we do when people expand micro aggressions, sexual harassment in the workplace or other disturbing behavior.

When you engage in systems that are governed by logics of whiteness, anti-blackness, anti-women and anti-LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer), you get shaped by that system. We need to be mindful how we interact and navigate it. We talk a lot about mentorship. But who is advocating when you are not in the room and who may be sabotaging you the instance you leave the room?

The US is currently ranked 43rd on the US economic gender gap list (note: Switzerland is on position 21 and Germany on 6). An issue in the HR field is the reintegration of women coming back to work. There are very few policies on that, but there are hidden or unwritten rules which make up systemic issues for people who would like to return.

1.3 Leaders
The main reason to consider a leadership role is because there is something you can and want to accomplish in order to make academia a better place. Women are more apt to be inclusive and collaborative and bring different instincts to the table which are desperately needed right now. It is very satisfying to say you have taken an organization and made it better. A vital aspect is having a conversation with your board chair about what kind of vision you stand for, what the role of the board is and how the board will run this vision.

Leaders by their choices create culture. It does not matter what the mission statement says, it doesn't matter what your value system says: if people are not living it, it's not happening.

There is a tendency to become your role no matter how much you don't want to. Many people agonize when their self-esteem is wrapped up in their role. We should ask ourselves, are we living our values authentically, are we on the right pathway for who we are as a person and who we are within our community?
People's notions of top-down leadership include an attitude that says "I know what I'm doing and I'm never wrong." But asking for help is not a sign of weakness, rather of strength and self-confidence.

1.4 Intersectional Leadership
The word "intersectionality" went viral after having been printed in the Oxford English Dictionary in 2015. Today,

understanding intersectionality as a leader can be vital to the success of an organization. Intersectional leadership is both anti-racist and anti-sexist, while also acknowledging the "multiple influences of marginalization centering race and gender, and across planes of identity." For example, someone living at the intersection of being Black and being disabled would have a unique perspective on both of these identities. Intersectional leaders can leverage their authority to bring out the best in their colleagues.

2. Braided River

We should distance ourselves from the idea of linear leadership paths, because those are mostly patriarchal and prescriptive. We should reconsider the use of the word "pipeline" because career paths are seldom linear, nor do they always lead to the originally assumed goal. But using the pipeline-mataphor is also out date for other reasons, including offensiveness to indigenous people. A more fitting metaphor is that of a braided river. The pieces of the braid are unique for every individual.

2.1 Pathways to Leadership
In a national qualitative study 50 native women leaders were interviewed, and one of the things that transpired is that there is no pathway, not a prescriptive pathway in any case. We need to move away from fixing the woman to fixing the system.
We also need to be thoughtful about how to engage men in these conversations: it takes a group effort to fix the systems. In academic medicine we all start out the same, whether we are in postdoc training, or residency or a fellowship. But over time women move into support roles or educational roles, and men more frequently move into roles where they have resource allocation power. The dean of research versus the dean of faculty. When we choose deans, we look for people with the service line pathway. It's especially difficult to become a leader at the top if you followed an educational path.

What we forget is that the education faculty development roles are absolutely essential to creating the workforce that does the clinical care and research. It is curious that we undervalue leaders who exist in the faculty development and education space compared to clinical and research areas.

Everybody wants diverse candidates, women with intersectionality in particular, but they are still not chosen in the end. And that is exhausting. Women who want to become a dean often need to put their hat in the ring seven times compared to men's three times. Women get very discouraged when they are asked over and over to apply for different positions, which they do, but they don't get the job. Women in academic medicine are more likely to be asked to step in when there is a crisis or a problem, they will take on the interim role, but are passed over for the permanent role.

2.2 Midcareer women
Midcareer women are very vulnerable. During the pandemic, women were taking care of everything, including fixing lab issues, fixing clinics, and taking care of things at home. Now they are tired and burnt out, and many are moving out of academic medicine. There's been a lot written about the great resignation. In medicine we call it the great reshuffling. People are moving around, a lot of women in academic medicine are moving into industry as scientists or clinician scientists, or into support group type work like coaching, or simply leaving the field. Many choose part time work over the original career plan.

One panel member wrote a paper about the invisibility of the midcareer woman. She said: "When they start out, women are our superstars, everyone wants to work with them, but when they get into midcareer and start to compete with men and other people, they sort of get pushed aside and younger people get supported.
There is also concern in terms of vulnerability about what women achieve in top spots of leadership, because they are very visible and vulnerable, and if they misstep, it is catastrophic – women lose their job and can't get another one, while men often get promoted.
The midcareer faculty feel left out because they are not engaged for meaningful committee work and activities where their visibility will rise, also giving them skills and networks that will help them sustain them through challenging times."
Being a mid-career single woman does not make things easier; one woman speaks about the way that her institution used her and leaned on her, and she believes a lot of the expectations were there, albeit unspoken, because she was single. Another woman said that being single and a caregiver meant she couldn't always say yes.

3. How to bring change

Be advocates, throw stones.
The responsibility to fix the world should not focus on the next generation, this only shifts the burden down the field and dismisses the opportunities we have right now. A good leader may not be able to change the rules, but he sees them and knows how to get around them. Mentors and coaches are important here.

Shifting the way how many women are perceived in our culture gets done by making the local environment change the local definitions, expectations and stereotypes about leadership and about employees. A good leader knows how to address biases that show up and is willing to address them.

We should ask what the cultural ideas are that we foster in our local environment and how to link them to broader ideas of culture. One speaker suggested a "small wins model of change". Her lab is a big fan of creating a series of small wins until they generate momentum, in time leading to a bigger win.

To raise awareness at an individual level is the most basic thing you can do. As your policies are changing, as you are finding bias in your procedures, as this is being revealed and managed and changed, the attitude of your workers in terms of accepting how the consequences of biases lead to people being discriminated should change through understanding. Because resistance is real and it's behavioral.

Listen to all the voices in your organization. People have a sense of belonging if they know they have a voice and that their voice matters. During the pandemic, the leaders who reached out to their people, connected with them, spent time to ask how things were going, are the most successful ones because their teams are still together.

These are the kind of leaders who say "I trust you to do your job, get the work done, however that might look." Ironically, being away from the office created a need to be more connected with employees.

Retention is also a huge issue, it's not just the leaky river, it's not that women and girls are not interested in STEM, they are interested, but they'd like a workplace where they will be supported as a whole human.

What is the role of HR in an exit conversation? Reporting quantitatively is not enough, but for a qualitative report the person leaving needs to be in a position to unpack. People may leave because of trauma and it's up to the individual to want to talk about it. Leaning on HR is an opportunity when somebody leaves – does the system trigger opportunities to get to know and talk to people? Where does the data go? To have a conversation about why people are leaving and what they experienced is important so that we are better informed and able to understand the culture of our institution.

An office of institutional diversity can help lean into that process and partner with HR to have a conversation about why people are leaving and what their experiences were. If an institution is not willing to make a change to bring people back, then we should not invite those who left back unless we were able to change something for them to want to work there.

For a long time we thought it was mortifying to report on adverse events in healthcare, because we don't want anyone to think horrible things might be happening in our workplace. But sometimes we have to dig deep to understand the uncomfortable truth of how we function within our organizations and how our organization functions.

A good starting point is data collection. HR should get to know the people who are going to leave their jobs, both quantitatively and qualitatively, and to capture that data. Targets can be introduced to improve representation, reduce the pay gap, and introduce policies to reduce sexual harassment. We need to broaden our conceptions of leadership to include a wider variety of traits and people to really understand what makes a leader effective, not just efficient.

What does it mean to be a leader? How should people be (re)positioned to have influence? An influence on what? Let's also be mindful of what power is and how we think about power. Sometimes it is the administrative assistants who could shut down a university.

"If you are a good guide, you need a burning stick because you are blazing a trail, and yes, you will get burned a bit, it will get hot, but that may be your role right now because it will not be helpful if you don't do any of that because it will not get better otherwise", says one speaker.

"I encourage my colleagues and students to remember that it is always about honoring who we are and being whole as a person when navigating these spaces", says another speaker.

What are the differences between networks of support and mentorship? Who has the opportunity to be a mentor, and to understand the hidden curriculum? How do we achieve quiet positions of influence – which women have inhabited for some time – but also the visible ones that serve as an inspiration for the next generation? There are many places along a braided river, along the pathway to leadership, where women may leave or be pushed out: where do we need to direct the most attention to women not trickling out of the braided river altogether?

Building networks of support for those aligned with us in their thinking is not helpful in the long run. One panelist explained that in terms of employing and supporting her, enabling her to do different things and pushing her at what she was good at, she was always looking for the person who would give her a way of looking at a question or a problem differently than she understood it herself.

How we can support midcareer women in meeting goals that will help sustain them? How can we provide them with opportunities to do work that will allow them to apply skills to help them grow and increase their network? One advantage of remaining at same university for 40 years is that you are supported by a group of people who have known you since you were assistant professor. These informal networks can be crucial.

A subject we don't touch in academic medicine is retirement to emeritus status or retirement in general – why not?

Last tip: whenever possible, translate obstacles into facilitators.