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The paradox of postheroic leadership: An essay on gender, power, and transformational change

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Abstract

This essay explores a number of paradoxes embedded in new—commonly called postheroic—models of leadership. It argues that although these models emphasize leadership as a social process dependent on social networks of influence, the concepts are often presented as gender and, to a lesser degree, power neutral, not only in theory, but in practice. The essay explores this phenomenon, arguing that the concepts are not gender, power, or sex neutral but instead are rooted in a set of social interactions in which "doing gender," "doing power," and "doing leadership" are linked. It explores these dynamics and suggests that theories of leadership that fail to consider the gender/power implications of social interactions and networks of influence may lead to the cooptation of these models, resulting in their being brought into the mainstream discourse in a way that silences their radical challenge to current work practices, structures, and norms.
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In recent years, the theory and practice of leadership have undergone a significant shift. As industrial era models of effectiveness, characterized by mechanistic thinking and authoritarian systems of control, have been augmented by newer models considered more appropriate to the knowledge intensive realities of today's workplace (e.g., Kanter, 2001; Seely Brown & Duguid, 2000; Senge, 1990), the concept of leadership has shifted in response. New models of leadership recognize that effectiveness in knowledge

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based environments depends less on the heroic actions of a few individuals at the top and more on collaborative leadership practices distributed throughout an organization (Badaracco, 2002; Bass, 1998; Beer, 1999; Conger, Spreitzer, & Lawler, 1999; Hargadon, 2003; Heifitz & Laurie, 1999; Pearce & Sims, 2000; Senge & Kaeufer, 2001; Yukl, 1998). What has emerged is a less individualistic, more relational concept of leadership, one that focuses on dynamic, interactive processes of influence and learning intended to transform organizational structures, norms, and work practices (Pearce & Conger, 2003).

This essay explores a number of paradoxes embedded in these new—commonly called postheroic— models of leadership. It argues that although these models emphasize leadership as a collaborative, relational process dependent on social networks of influence, the concepts are often presented as gender and, to a lesser degree, power neutral. The essay explores this phenomenon, arguing that the concepts are not gender, power, or sex neutral but instead are rooted in a set of social interactions in which "doing gender," "doing power," and "doing leadership" are linked in complex ways. It explores these dynamics and suggests that theories of leadership that fail to consider the gender/power implications of postheroic models may unwittingly undermine organizational efforts to adopt these new models and limit their transformational potential.

1. Postheroic leadership: What is it?

As I have noted elsewhere in less detail (Fletcher, 2002; Fletcher & Kaeufer, 2003), postheroic leadership can be thought of as having three characteristics that distinguish it from more traditionally individualistic models.

1.1. Leadership as practice: shared and distributed

Rather than a single-minded focus on a set of personal characteristics and attributes required of those at the top, postheroic models conceptualize leadership as a set of shared practices that can and should be enacted by people at all levels (Kouzes & Posner, 2003; Pearce & Sims, 2000; Senge & Kaeufer, 2001). Implicit in this perspective is a recognition of the relationship between personal and positional leadership. We might see—and even need to see—figureheads at the top. But new models recognize that these visible positional "heroes" are supported by a network of personal leadership practices distributed throughout the organization. Positional leaders have been described as mere tips of icebergs (McIntosh, 1989) or whitecaps in the deep blue sea (Draft, 2001), visible and important but sustained by larger forces and the numerous, countless acts of enabling, supporting, and facilitating that make up the collaborative subtext of what is often mistakenly labeled "individual" achievement.

Frameworks and images such as these acknowledge the interdependencies inherent in leadership. They signal a shift from a single-minded focus on individual achievement and meritocracy to an emphasis on collective achievement, social networks, and the importance of teamwork and shared accountability (Conger, 1989; Hosking, Dachler, & Gergen, 1995; Lipnack & Stamps, 2000; Seely Brown & Duguid, 2000; Thompson, 2000; Yukl, 1998). Significant in this shift is a blurring of the distinction between the skills of leadership and what some have called "followership" (Berg, 1998). That is, while tasks and responsibilities differ dependent on organizational position, the notion of shared leadership practices suggests that leading and following are two sides of the same set of relational skills that everyone in an organization needs in order to work in a context of interdependence.

1.2. Leadership as social process: interactions

Another important aspect of postheroic leadership is its emphasis on leadership as a social process. Postheroic leadership is portrayed as a dynamic, multidirectional, collective activity—an emergent process more than an achieved state. Human interactions are key in this concept as leadership is seen as something that occurs in and through relationships and networks of influence. There are many images used to describe these leadership interactions, from bottom-up images of influence such as power up (Bradford & Cohen, 1998) and leading up (Useem, 2001) to "servant" (Block, 1993; Greenleaf, 1977), "quiet" (Badaracco, 2002), or "connective" (Lipman Blumen, 1996) leadership. What these images have in common is their emphasis on the egalitarian, more mutual, less hierarchical nature of leader–follower interactions. In contrast to traditional models, which emphasize a positional leader's effect on others, the relational interactions that make up postheroic leadership are understood as collaborative and fluid, with influence flowing in two directions (Aaltio-Marjosola, 2001; Harrington, 2000).

This focus on the egalitarian nature of interactions in which leadership occurs suggests that the role of leader and follower is itself more fluid and will vary within interactions depending on what Mary Parker Follett—a woman recognized as the earliest advocate of postheroic leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2003)—calls the "law of the situation" (Follett, 1924). That is, in addition to the recognition that leading and following are two sides of the same set of relational practices, this focus on specific interactions suggests that positional leaders and followers must have the ability to use the full range of skills and move easily from one role to the other even while their positional authority remains constant. Thus, positional leaders in addition to having skills in advocating their ideas must also have skills in inquiry and must be open to "being led" by others. Those with less positional authority must have skills in advocating their ideas, speaking up rather than being silent (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Perlow, 2003), and assuming responsibility for the whole (Kaeufer, Scharmer, & Versteegen, 2003).

This focus on the fluidity, mutuality, and two-directional nature of leadership interactions suggests a subtle but significant shift in the notion of self, underlying images of postheroic leadership. Rather than the traditional image of self as an independent entity, postheroic models recast the relationship between self and other, evoking a more relational concept of self as an interdependent entity. This entity, something closer perhaps to the psychological concept of self-in-relation (Miller, 1984; Surrey, 1985), suggests a more fluid boundary between self and other as well as a more welcoming, less competitive stance toward others.

1.3. Leadership as learning: outcomes

A third important aspect of postheroic leadership has to do with its expected outcomes. The kinds of social interactions that can be called leadership result in learning and growth for the organization as well as the people involved (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Beer, 1999; Isaacs, 1999; Marsick & Watkins, 1999; Palmer, 1993; Senge, 1990). In other words, the kinds of human interactions that comprise the ideal of postheroic leadership are differentiated from other, less positive social interactions by virtue of their outcomes. These outcomes include mutual learning, greater collective understanding, and ultimately, positive action.

Leadership depends on creating a learning environment where these outcomes can be achieved not only for oneself, but for the larger community. That is, it depends on the ability to create conditions where new knowledge—collective learning—can be cocreated and implemented. Again, this requires a

particular kind of competence. Creating a context in which growth-fostering, high-quality connections (Dutton, 2003) and social interactions can occur and mutual learning—especially learning across difference—can take place requires relational skills and emotional intelligence such as self-awareness, empathy, vulnerability, an openness to learning from others regardless of their positional authority, and the ability to operate within more fluid power dynamics, reenvisioning the very notion of power from "power over" to "power with" (Debebe, 2002; Fletcher, 1994, 1999; Follett, 1924; Goleman, 1998; Miller & Stiver, 1997).

In summary, postheroic leadership reenvisions the "who" and "where" of leadership by focusing on the need to distribute the tasks and responsibilities of leadership up, down, and across the hierarchy. It reenvisions the "what" of leadership by articulating leadership as a social process that occurs in and through human interactions, and it articulates the "how" of leadership by focusing on the more mutual, less hierarchical leadership practices and skills needed to engage collaborative, collective learning.

It is generally recognized that this shift—from individual to collective, from control to learning, from "self" to "self-in-relation," and from power over to power with—is a paradigm shift in what it means to be a positional leader. I argue that this shift is even more profound and difficult to achieve than the leadership literature would have us believe because it is a shift that is related in complex ways to systemic gender and power dynamics in the workplace.

2. Postheroic leadership: What do gender and power have to do with it?

Many have noted that the traits associated with traditional, heroic leadership are masculine. Men or women can display them, but the traits themselves—such as individualism, control, assertiveness, and skills of advocacy and domination—are socially ascribed to men in our culture and generally understood as masculine (Acker, 1990; Calás & Smircich, 1993; Collinson & Hearn, 1996). In contrast, the traits associated with new, postheroic leadership are feminine (Calvert & Ramsey, 1992; Fine & Buzzanell, 2000; Fletcher, 1994; Fondas, 1997). Again, men or women can display them, but the traits themselves—such as empathy, community, vulnerability, and skills of inquiry and collaboration—are socially ascribed to women in our culture and generally understood as feminine.

It is important to underscore that these traits, skills, and abilities are not essential aspects of masculinity or femininity and indeed may not reflect the behavior of many men and women. Nonetheless, these idealized images exert subtle but very real pressure on women and men to "do gender" by defining themselves in relation to these stereotypes. The recognition of a shift in models of leadership to include attributes socially ascribed to femininity has given rise to a body of literature in the popular press that is commonly called the "female advantage" (Helgeson, 1990; see also Fondas, 1997; Peters, 2003; Rosener, 1995; Sharpe, 2000). That is, the alignment of stereotypical feminine behavior with new leadership practices is assumed to give women an advantage in today's business environment.

This essay argues that the gender implications of postheroic leadership go far beyond the question of sex differences in how men and women practice leadership. To make the paradigm shift to postheroic models depends not simply on a shift in sex-linked attributes. It depends also on a shift in the very belief system or "logic of effectiveness" underlying business practice, a belief system that also is linked to gender and power dynamics. More specifically, I argue that the logic of effectiveness underlying heroic images of leadership is a logic deeply rooted in masculine-linked images and wisdom about how to "produce things" in the work sphere of life, while the logic of effectiveness underlying postheroic

leadership is a logic deeply rooted in feminine-linked images and wisdom about how to "grow people" in the domestic sphere.

These two spheres or bodies of knowledge, like the separate spheres of work and family (Acker, 1990; Bailyn, 1993; Fletcher, 1999; Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher, & Pruitt, 2002; Williams, 2000) have three distinguishing characteristics: they are socially constructed as separate and adversarial (i.e., skills in one are assumed to be inappropriate to the other), sex linked (i.e., men and images of idealized masculinity are associated with one and women and images of idealized femininity are associated with the other), and unequally valued (i.e., labor in the work sphere is assumed to be skilled, complex, and dependent on training, whereas labor in the domestic sphere is assumed to be unskilled, innate, and dependent on personal characteristics). Together, these three characteristics interact and reinforce each other such that the spheres themselves can be considered gendered.

While this notion of separate spheres is important for an understanding of the gender implications of postheroic leadership, it is also important to note that in practice, the sex-linked separation and dichotomous relationship of the two spheres of work life and domestic life is more myth—a social construction—than reality. That is, at the level of individual experience, the spheres are neither separate nor inextricably sex linked. Men are active participants in the domestic family sphere and women are active participants in the work sphere. We all live in both and find ways to integrate our experience. Nonetheless, these idealized images of sex-linked attributes and inclinations, while they may not match reality, operate at the level of discourse to have a powerful effect on how we enact—and are expected to enact—our gender identities. Indeed, our very definitions of masculinity and femininity in the Western world are rooted in a set of beliefs—or what poststructuralists might call an ideological world view (Foucault, 1980; Lukes, 1974)—about the characteristics of these two spheres of life. One might argue that were it not for the social construction of these two separate spheres and the discourse around it, society would have few criteria to use in attributing the labels "feminine" and "masculine" to certain attributes.

At the level of a logic of effectiveness underlying each sphere (i.e., beliefs and assumptions about what constitutes "good work"), the gender implications of the discourse of separate spheres are even more significant. Society, especially Western society, has located in men the knowledge of what it means to produce things in the work sphere and has conflated images of "doing work" with displays of idealized masculinity (Collinson & Hearn, 1996; Martin, 1996; Martin & Collinson, 1998; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000; Schein, 2001). In a similar fashion, the knowledge of what it means to "grow" people and living systems is located in women and is conflated with displays of idealized femininity (Fairbairn, 1952; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Winnicott, 1958). Thus, the fact that postheroic models of leadership recognize leadership as a relational process dependent on creating conditions under which people can learn, grow, achieve, and produce together has significant gender implications. It means that adopting the relational stance and putting into practice the relational wisdom required to enact postheroic leadership may be associated subconsciously with femininity.

In addition to this association with femininity, there is a more general power dynamic that may be engaged as well. Practicing the new leadership requires relational skills and knowledge and a more mutual, self-in-relation stance toward social interactions. However, in systems of unequal power (e.g., inequities based on race, class, organizational level, sex), it behooves those with less power to distort their sense of self-in-relation to be ultrasensitive and attuned to the needs, desires, and implicit requests of the more powerful (Jost, 1997; Miller, 1976). In other words, in systems of unequal power, one of the markers of the more powerful is the entitlement of having others adopt a self-in-relation stance that

allows them to anticipate your needs and respond to them without being asked; what marks one as less powerful is being required to do the anticipating and accommodating without any expectation of reciprocity. The fact that those with less power need to develop a distorted, nonmutual self-in-relation stance in order to survive may inappropriately associate the stance and the relational practices it takes to engage it with powerlessness (Miller, 1976).

In the rest of this essay, I explore how using this analysis of gender and power dynamics can inform three paradoxical issues inherent in the paradigm shift to postheroic models of leadership: Why, if there is general agreement on the need for new leadership practices, are heroic models of leadership so resilient? Why, if new models of leadership are aligned with the feminine, are not more women making it to the top? And finally, what is likely to happen to the transformational potential in these new models as the practices are adopted?

2.1. The resiliency of heroic individualism

While the rhetoric about leadership has changed at the macro level, the everyday narrative about leadership and leadership practices—the stories people tell about leadership, the mythical legends that get passed on as exemplars of leadership behavior—remains stuck in old images of heroic individualism. Heifitz and Laurie (1999), for example, note that despite all the data supporting the need for new leadership practices to facilitate organizational learning, "managers and leaders rarely receive promotions for providing the leadership required to do (this) adaptive work" (p. 65). Beer (1999) observes that in recounting the story of their success, leaders themselves tend to ignore the relational practices and social networks of influence that accounted for that success and instead focus almost exclusively on individual actions and decision points. Khuruna (2003) in support of these findings notes that despite documented evidence to the contrary, people consistently exaggerate the effect the individual actions of heroic, charismatic leaders have on the success—or failure—of an organization.

What is going on? What accounts for the invisibility of many postheroic leadership practices and the resiliency of heroic individualism? Beer (1999) suggests that because of the nature of identity and ego, once we have achieved a goal and some prominence for having achieved it, it is natural to overlook the help we have been given and reconstruct our behavior—in our own minds as well as in the perception of others—as individual action. Others suggest causality in the other direction: that followers' need for heroes exerts pressure on both formal and informal leaders to comply and retell their stories to meet this implicit expectation and need (Hirschorn, 1990; Sinclair, 1998). The work of Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich (1985) suggest as explanation a related form of social construction they call the "romanticizing" of leadership. This romanticizing occurs when a series of causally unrelated, ambiguous events are reconstructed in retrospect as intentional action and then described as "leadership."

A gender/power lens suggests that there are additional phenomena at play and that conventional explanations, while important, do not go far enough in exploring the issues underlying the invisibility of postheroic leadership. Those who emphasize the social construction of identity (e.g., Goffman, 1959) note that whenever we interact with others, we enact our self-image and social identity, a good part of which is our gender identity (Foldy, 2002). Thus, all social interactions, including those at work, become occasions to "do gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1991), whereby we convey our gender identity in the way we respond and react to others or in how we choose to do our work.

An example of this dynamic is found in the work of Patricia Yancy Martin and David Collinson (Martin, 1996; Martin & Collinson, 1998), who note that many men use work as an occasion to display

stereotypical masculine attributes such as toughness and physicality even when those attributes are not required of the work itself. Further, they suggest that because men have dominated spheres of influence in the work world for so long, doing masculinity and doing work have gotten conflated, such that everyone (men and women) experience subtle pressure to "do masculinity" at work in order to be perceived as competent. Indeed, some of the seminal self-help books for women such as *Games Mother Never Taught You* (Harragan, 1977) or the *Managerial Woman* (Hennig & Jardin, 1978) implicitly acknowledge this phenomenon by warning women not to display stereotypical feminine attributes in their approach to work because that is not how the game is played.

The concept of doing gender at work adds another layer of complexity to the context in which leadership is practiced. As noted in the previous section, the skills and attributes needed to enact postheroic leadership—things like collaboration, sharing, and teamwork—are aligned in our mind's eye with displays of femininity. This alignment may engage some unconscious processes that can help explain why images of heroic leadership are so resilient: It is not just that new images of leadership violate traditional assumptions about individualism and business success, it is that they violate gender-linked assumptions about these concepts and practices. Although new models of postheroic leadership implicitly acknowledge that relational wisdom about growing people (i.e., wisdom about creating conditions in which people can learn, achieve, and produce) is critical to business success, they do not take into account how enacting these relational principles is linked—inappropriately but surely—to displays of femininity that have been devalued historically in leadership narratives.

But gender is not the only dynamic present in the disappearing of postheroic leadership. Enacting the practices of postheroic leadership requires enacting a model of "power with" as opposed to the more common association of leadership with "power over." Again, the relational skills, attributes, and stance required to enact a model of "power with" leadership, such as fluid expertise, the willingness to show, and acknowledge interdependence or need for input, are likely to be associated incorrectly with powerlessness rather than with a new, more adaptive exercise of power.

What this analysis highlights is that the social interactions that make up leadership are opportunities not only to "do gender" but to "do power." However, because the skills, beliefs, and self-in-relation stance needed to enact postheroic leadership are incorrectly associated with femininity and power-lessness, these occasions translate into "doing femininity" and "doing powerlessness," displays which are not, to put it mildly, commonly associated with leaders. Thus, these gender and power dynamics may complicate the story of leadership that both followers and leaders tell, exerting pressure to reconstruct the story to maintain the status quo association of leadership with individual action, masculinity, and static, hierarchical notions of power and control.

These dynamics suggest that it is not enough for organizational theorists to call for new types of leadership or write books about the need for change. Gender- and power-linked aspects of self-identity are highly charged emotional issues. Cognitive attempts to change behavior without a recognition of these deeply embedded, emotional issues are unlikely to succeed because gender- and power-linked images may exert potent—albeit unrecognized—influence on leader and follower behavior, experience, and expectations. Indeed, it is the hidden underexplored nature of these gender/power dynamics that may account for many of the paradoxes people experience in trying to implement postheroic leadership and may account for how long it is taking for this model to achieve widespread adoption at the level of everyday practice. Theorizing leadership as a social process embedded in networks of influence without acknowledging these effects—and some practical help on how to address them—is likely to result in theories that are inadequate to the transformational task and promise of the new models.

2.2. Postheroic leadership and the "female advantage"

One of the most interesting paradoxes made visible in recognizing the gender dynamics underlying the move to postheroic leadership is the question of the so-called female advantage. We might expect that since "doing gender" and "doing postheroic leadership" are aligned for women, they would stand to benefit from this move to new models of leadership. If not catapulted to the top of organizational life (Catalyst, 2000; Merrill Sands & Kolb, 2001), we might at least expect that they would be the new leadership's most prominent proponents. And yet, if we look at the architects and spokespersons of postheroic leadership, there are few women among them.

Some suggest that the reason the female advantage has not materialized has to do with the fact that hypothesized differences in how women and men enact leadership have not borne out empirically (Vecchio, 2002). Others note that even those differences that have been documented such as women being more likely to enact a transformational leadership style and men a transactional style (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001) have not advantaged women perhaps because of bias and institutionalized sexism. And others observe that even those women who have made it to the top are unlikely to claim that a feminine leadership style contributed to their effectiveness (Burrows & Berg, 2003). I would like to offer an additional perspective not related to sex differences in leadership style per se. I suggest that the failure of the female advantage to materialize may be further understood by exploring the way the association of relational practices with femininity and powerlessness is likely to play out for women in the workplace.

Descriptions of the behavior, skills, and organizational principles associated with postheroic leadership are generally presented as gender neutral in practice, i.e., as if the sex of the actor is irrelevant in how the behavior is understood, perceived, and experienced by leaders and followers. At a practical level, we all know this to be untrue. The body in which we do something influences how it will be perceived. Indeed, as social cognition theorists (Fiske & Taylor, 1991) remind us, the interpretation of events is always contextual and is influenced by many factors, including the social identity (sex, race, class, organizational title, etc.) of the actor as well as that of the observer. A boss saying "drop by my office" is interpreted quite differently from a peer saying the same thing. A White man slamming his fist on the table during a meeting is likely to be perceived quite differently from a man of color—or any woman—doing the same thing. We filter behavior through schema that influence and determine what we see, what we expect to see, and how we interpret it.

Gender schema (Valian, 1998) are particularly powerful and suggest that the experience of putting postheroic leadership into practice is likely to be different for women and men (Babcock & Laschever, 2003; Rudman & Glick, 2001; Wade, 2001). Because of gender schema, men who do the new leadership, while they may be in danger of being perceived as wimps, might have an easier time being seen as doing something new. Women, on the other hand, may have a harder time distinguishing what they do as something new because it looks like they are just doing what women do (Fletcher, 1999).

I suggest there may be another, even thornier problem women encounter related to gendered expectations and postheroic leadership. As the earlier discussion of separate spheres of knowledge suggests, in Western society women are expected to be the carriers of relational skills and attributes. More important, they are expected not only to provide the collaborative subtext of life that enables individual achievement but to do it invisibly, so the "myth" of individual achievement is not challenged (Miller, 1976; Miller & Stiver, 1997). Thus, at a deep perhaps even unconscious level, we tend to associate these practices with invisibility and the kind of selfless giving associated with mothering and

other "labors of love." Indeed, it is the invisibility, the not calling attention to what is being done, that marks one as especially worthy and womanly (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Welter, 1966).

What this means is that when women enact the kind of leadership practices that share power or enable and contribute to the development of others, they are likely to be seen as selfless givers who "like helping" and expect nothing in return. In other words, when women use their relational skills to lead, their behavior is likely to be conflated not only with femininity but with selfless giving and motherhood.

This confusion is problematic. Selfless giving is, by definition, nonmutual. And postheroic leadership—whether practiced by men or women—depends on conditions of mutuality and reciprocal influence (Zaccaro, Rittman, & Marks, 2001). People who put postheroic leadership into practice have every right to expect that this stance of mutuality will be met and matched by others, i.e., that others will join them in cocreating the kind of environment where these conditions can prevail. In fact, the positive outcomes of postheroic leadership such as collective learning, mutual engagement, learning across difference, and mutual empowerment cannot occur under conditions of nonmutuality (Jordan, 1986). On the contrary, postheroic leadership must have embedded within it an invitation to reciprocate in kind. But gender expectations—and more explicitly the conflation of postheroic leadership with mothering and selfless giving—constrain this possibility for women.

A woman intentionally enacting the new rhetoric and putting new leadership behaviors into practice is not, of course, mothering or giving selflessly. She is attempting to create an environment where collective learning and mutual engagement can occur. When her attempts to "do leadership" are misunderstood as "doing mothering," the expectation of reciprocity embedded in the practice is rendered invisible. This puts her in a bind. First, she is in danger of being exploited. If someone enjoys giving selflessly, why would anyone deny her that opportunity? Or do it for her in return? Thus, as I note elsewhere (Fletcher, 1999), women often experience being expected to teach, enable, and empower others without getting anything in return, expected to work interdependently while others do not adopt a similar stance, expected to work mutually in nonmutual situations, and expected to practice less hierarchical forms of interacting even in traditionally hierarchical contexts. In other words, the conflation of relational practices with mothering may serve to "disappear" the invitation to reciprocity embedded in the practice. Thus, women may find they are expected and even relied on to practice many of the relational aspects of postheroic leadership but to do it without a recognition that this is leadership behavior and without an expectation of similar behavior from others.

This analysis helps us understand why women are not as visible as we might expect and why they are not benefiting more from the move away from masculine models of heroic leadership. It suggests that when men practice postheroic leadership, they may be able to do so in a way that carries with it subtle expectations of reciprocity, i.e., the expectation that this type of self-in-relation stance in interactions is one that should be distributed throughout the workplace. When the behavior is conflated with mothering, the notion of reciprocity is much more difficult to communicate.

2.3. Postheroic leadership and its transformational potential

Postheroic leadership is touted as a vehicle for transformation, a way to create learning organizations that are able to manage dynamic processes, leverage the learning from diverse perspectives, and accommodate the interests of multiple stakeholders. Indeed, the essence of the new organization, transformed by postheroic leadership, is one in which potential is unleashed by tapping into the expertise

of the collective, establishing more fluid, two-directional patterns of influence and power and using difference—whether on cross functional teams or difference that comes from social identity—to challenge assumptions, learn, grow, and innovate (Bailyn, 1993; Ely & Thomas, 2001; Holvino & Sheridan, 2003; Meyerson, 2000; Thomas & Ely, 1996).

The transformational piece of the new model is embedded in its notions of mutuality and more fluid power relations, where leadership practices—and influence—are distributed throughout the organization rather than located in a few at the top. But as we have noted, postheroic leadership is largely invisible in the leadership narratives of both leaders and followers, with leaders themselves ignoring many of the postheroic practices that account for their own success and effectiveness. While the rhetoric has been around for nearly two decades, old, stereotypical images of leadership continue to dominate the unconscious (Rudman & Glick, 2001; Schein, 2001). Moreover, although the field of action research offers case-based models of how to deal with unconscious processes and assumptions during culture change efforts (e.g., Rapoport et al., 2002; Schein, 1987), theories of postheroic leadership rarely reference this literature nor do they give enough practical information on how to engage transformational processes in a way that would address these deeper issues (Fletcher & Kaeufer, 2003).

This essay argues that the reasons postheroic leadership may not live up to its transformation potential are related to the complex gender and power dynamics we have been exploring. More specifically, it suggests that the transformative potential of postheroic leadership is in danger of being incorporated into the discourse in a way that co-opts and silences (Diamond & Quinby, 1988) its most radical challenges: the challenge to organizational systems of power (Walker, 2002), to the privileging of managerial and hierarchical knowledge (Calás & Smircich, 1993), and to the distribution of rewards based in beliefs about meritocracy (Scully, 2002) and individual achievement (Jordan, 1999).

The current discourse on leadership in the wake of terrorist attacks and corporate scandals is a good example of these dynamics. The ambivalence and contradictory images we as a society hold about leadership are especially apparent in articles and books in the popular press where postheroic principles are simultaneously reinforced and undermined. On the one hand, there is evidence of a resurgence in the reification of traditionally heroic behavior (Giuliani, 2002) and the shame associated with not assuming this role (Useem & Wheat, 2001). On the other hand, there is a recognition that the individualism, bravado, and assumed invincibility that are characteristics of charismatic leaders have contributed to scandalous corporate behavior (Byers, 2002; Simons, Mintzberg, & Basu, 2002). This has resulted in the search for a different kind of hero, a postheroic hero, if you will, who leads quietly and who displays fewer of the characteristics associated with heroic leadership (Badaracco, 2002; Sellers, 2002), but who, interestingly, continues to enjoy the same hierarchical powers and godlike reverence for individualism associated with traditional models. This essay argues that continuing to focus solely on the individual characteristics of hierarchical leaders—regardless of their particular personal style—is problematic because it obscures the complementary shift that is needed: a shift in the very belief system—the logic of effectiveness—that underlies traditional organizational practices.

Achieving the transformational outcomes of postheroic leadership requires putting into practice a set of beliefs and principles, indeed a different mental model of how to exercise power and how to achieve workplace success and effectiveness. Putting these beliefs about the essentially interdependent nature of individual achievement into practice does, of course, require skills and competence at the individual level. Moreover, it is important to focus on this individual level because the skills and the relational

intelligence it takes to adopt a stance of self-in-relation in one's workplace interactions are different from the skills and intelligence it takes to enact the traditional stance of self-as-independent entity. But focusing on this individual level skill set alone is problematic because there is a danger that the fundamental shift in the belief system about the nature of good work and achievement might be obscured.

For example, at the individual level, effectively practicing postheroic leadership depends on adopting a different, more relational stance toward others in one's workplace interactions: a stance of "self-as interdependent entity" as opposed to "self-as-independent-entity." Enacting this self-in-relation stance in one's interactions with others requires relational skills. But not only skills: It requires a fundamentally different way of conceptualizing the importance of relationship and relational interactions as well as a different way of conceptualizing growth, achievement, success, and effectiveness. When this alternative logic of effectiveness is ignored, the essence of postheroic leadership is in danger of being coopted and its transformational aspects castrated (Fletcher, 1994). That is, the skills and behaviors may be described, but the basic, relational beliefs about human growth and interdependence that would present the most serious challenge to individualistic notions of human development and achievement may be cut off.

If the new leadership model is understood as simply a new approach that requires integrating relational skills with traditional skills at the individual level, it is likely to be incorporated into the dominant discourse according to the rules of traditional individualism, without an awareness of the deeper changes to structures, systems, and work practices that would be needed to make it work. The result may be that we are left with yet another idealized image of heroic leadership—postheroic heroes— but without an exploration of the systemic changes that would foster relational leadership practices throughout an organization.

This analysis suggests that to truly capture the transformational promise of postheroic leadership would require theoretical framings that acknowledge, recognize, and name the radical nature of its challenge and the gender and power dynamics inherent in it (e.g., Fletcher & Kaeufer, 2003). This would mean acknowledging and further theorizing the way postheroic leadership challenges current power dynamics, the way it threatens the myth of individual achievement and related beliefs about meritocracy, the way it highlights the collaborative subtext of life that we have all been taught to ignore, and the way it engages displays of one's gender identity. Without such an explicit recognition, I suggest that the transformational potential of this new model of leadership is unlikely to be realized.

3. Conclusion

There are three issues that a gender/power lens highlights about new models of leadership. First, although the move to postheroic leadership is often presented as a gender-neutral concept, it is not. On the contrary, it is a shift that engages significant gender- and power-linked aspects of self-identity. These dynamics are highly charged, emotional issues that may unwittingly undermine organizational efforts to move to these new models of leadership, despite general agreement that such models are key to success in today's competitive, knowledge-intensive business environment.

Second, the new leadership is not gender (or more accurately, sex) neutral in practice. The body matters. Because gender schema are powerful filters that influence how behavior is understood and interpreted, the experience of practicing postheroic leadership is likely to be different for men and

women and have a differential impact on their ability to have their leadership behavior seen as such. This is one possible reason the female advantage is not advantaging females.

Third, the transformation promise of postheroic leadership is in danger of being coopted. New models of leadership that are rooted in a different, more relational and interdependent belief system—or logic of effectiveness—about what leads to business success cannot flourish in structures and systems organized around beliefs in individualistic meritocracy. Without acknowledging and further theorizing the powerful shift in the underlying belief system inherent in these new concepts, there is a danger that this new model will be coopted and brought into the mainstream discourse on leadership in a way that will silence its radical challenge to current work practices, structures, norms, and operating systems. The result may be a simple reconstitution of the old model with new language.

4. Uncited references

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