Perceptions of female leadership: an exploration of the views of top university women

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Abstract
The gendered aspect of leadership remains a controversial and contested area of the management literature. Leadership is by no means a gender neutral term. Nevertheless, it is difficult to ascertain whether there is a distinctly ‘female’ style of leadership or if these qualities are part of a generic skill set possessed by all good leaders and managers. This paper explores these issues and is derived from research which explored the perceptions of 24 top women academic/administrative managers working in Australian and American universities from 1998-2005. One of the findings from this research was that many of the top women were reluctant to describe themselves as possessing a distinctive ‘female’ style of leadership. Despite this reluctance to categorise their leadership as gendered, they were happy to acknowledge a distinctive perspective that women bring to organisational life such as a willingness to be change agents and a preference for less authoritarian leadership styles within organisations. It is argued here that this still represents a divergence from prevailing managerial styles.

1. Introduction
This paper derives from the author’s experience as a senior/middle manager in a range of public sector organisations and also from doctoral research on 24 top (vice-chancellors/presidents/deputies) and senior (pro-vice-chancellors and professorial) women working in Australian and American universities. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with these women to explore, amongst other issues, their experiences of ‘life at the top’ and also their perceptions on a wide range of issues such as their personal experience of leading complex organisations, work/life balance and whether women bring a particular style of leadership to traditional male dominated organisations such as universities.

The research methodology used is qualitative, and is informed by a post-modernist feminist perspective. Twenty-four women were interviewed in 14 semi-structured interviews which were designed to capture the rich experience and expertise of women at the top levels in Australian and American universities. Interview questions covered a range of issues such as their individual family histories and early career backgrounds, the role of their partners, their work life balance and families, career highlights and set backs, whether they faced barriers or not, whether leadership is gendered and finally their ‘tips from the top’ to assist other women and minorities seeking top
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leadership positions. The length of the interviews varied from a half an hour phone interview with an American president to three and a half hours. The average interview length was two hours.

Universities selected for the study ranged from elite institutions such as the US ‘ivy league’ and research intensive institutions and the Australian ‘group of eight’ to ‘new’ and regional/state funded universities in both countries. More than half of the women interviewed were at the vice-chancellor/president and deputy vice-chancellor/provost/pro vice-chancellor executive levels. The remainder were at the head of department/division or professorial levels.

Also this paper is a direct response to the demonstrated interest from senior and top women (and men) in such issues as ‘female’ leadership styles and preferences versus the traditional leadership practices usually ascribed to men. Women leading universities were viewed by other women in these organisations as both inspirational and reassuring to aspiring women in more junior and middle management positions who were encouraged by role models ‘who look just like them’ and who experienced similar issues to them.

All the women participating in the study were supportive of well known aspects of female leadership styles such as a declared preference for participatory and inclusive styles of management (Klenke, 1996; Hall-Taylor, 1997; Sinclair, 1998:109-11; Wajcman; 1999; Priola, 2004; Burke, 2005). Yet, the majority of the women were reluctant to describe themselves as having a female style of leadership. Rather, they identified more with the concept of possessing and utilizing a generic skill set of good leadership qualities and attributes. Despite this reluctance to self-identify as female leaders, a strong theme emerged that suggested that top women were comfortable with self-descriptors as “change agents” (Kotter, 1996; Kotter & Rathgeber, 2005) and they viewed themselves as more likely to be against the “status quo” due to an outsider (Helgesen, 1995: xiv) status as a minority group at this organisational level.

It could still be argued that these are large differences in perspective. Although, it makes it more difficult to argue that there is a distinctly female style of leadership when female practitioners are
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reluctant to acknowledge this overtly for whatever reasons. Possibly this is due to their awareness of universities as remaining predominantly male led and managed at the most senior levels (Eveline, 2004; Priola, 2004; White, 2003) and a reluctance to perpetuate gender stereotypes (Bacchi, 1990; Alsop et al, 2002).

There was a definite difference between the older cohort of top women interviewed and their younger peers. These older women (55+ years) self-identified as being either “feminists” or as products of the 2nd wave of Western feminism. Throughout their early careers they had experienced significant discrimination such as being passed over for leadership positions when they had higher qualifications than their male peers, lack of superannuation opportunities (placing them at significant financial disadvantage) and no available female mentors due to the lack of women in senior and top positions. Although more of these older women classified their leadership styles as ‘female’ the majority of this age cohort did not.

1.1. Role of women in senior positions encouraging women leaders

Most women in the study overwhelmingly believed that the role models of more women in top and senior positions would encourage more women to attempt to move into these careers. This reflects conclusions reached by the women in management literature (Marshall, 1984, 1995; Davidson & Burke (eds.) 1994, 2000); however, the comments of some of the women illustrate the complexity of the issue (Hewlett, 2002; Eagly and Carli, 2007). For example, the US president of a campus within a large California state university stated that:

Oh, there’s no question in being able to see somebody who looks like you or has had you think...problems similar to yours...how do I deal with my husband, how do I deal with my children ... I think that they ... feel there’s somebody who has been through that and has come out the other end without ... collapsing and that I think has been very helpful to women along the way ... (Interview: US 10: 6; Chesterman et al, 2004).
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Here she acknowledged the multiplicity of female societal roles, whilst also commenting on the importance of female role-models for other women. Another Australian deputy vice-chancellor agreed with this sentiment, however, she suggested that, despite the growing numbers of women executives, there were complex social and political reasons to explain why many women and some men still shied away from senior management lifestyles (Interview: AUS 7: 33). For her, any solution was more philosophical and had to be related to the fundamental complexities of how work was structured:

...it is a real pity that we’re dividing society into those who have jobs and those who haven’t...I’d rather see us re-construct all the work...so that both men and women can aspire to be a chief executive or, or a VC or DVC without feeling that it automatically means they’ve got to be stressed...and there aren’t only women who are opting out, there are some men (Interview: AUS 7: 33).

Consequently, her response involved a critique of top management as a construct that required hard choices and involved considerable levels of stress for both men and women.

Despite the complexities of globalisation (Waters, 2001), reduced government funding and declining full-time positions (see contributors in Brooks and Mackinnon (eds.), 2001; Currie and Newson (eds.), 2002; Harman, 2002), there was considerable evidence in the study that women at the presidential and vice-chancellor levels were actively encouraging and mentoring senior women within the universities they were leading (Interviews: AUS 6: 17; AUS 10: 7; AUS 11: 13; AUS 12: 39-40; US 3: 9, 17; US 10: 6). Several Australia vice-chancellors and American presidents quoted equity figures in their interviews and gave numerical evidence of the restructuring of their management teams that had increased the number of women at deputy and pro vice-chancellor/assistant president/provost levels (Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 6; AUS 10: 7; AUS 11: 13; US 3: 19; US 8: 12).

Often competent senior women were viewed by university presidents/vice-chancellors as potential change agents (Interviews: AUS 2: 11; AUS 6: 5, 15; AUS 11: 17). This confirms research on women in
Perceptions of female leadership: an exploration of the views of top university women leadership roles by Yeatman, (1993, 1995), Ramsay, (2001) and Chesterman et al (2004). It is argued that these change agents are vitally necessary in turbulent university times (Blackmore and Sachs, 2001). As one vice-chancellor commented: “…to get somebody who might do the job in a different way [from the status quo]… that very commonly is a woman…” (AUS 2: 11). This was a recurrent theme throughout the interviews and reflects the positive role of senior women as activists within their organisations.

Sometimes the structural impact of the female vice-chancellor is difficult to measure (Interviews: AUS 2: 11; AUS 6; US 8), because of the complexities of a large organisation, although the attitudinal changes can be more obvious. For example, one very successful Australian vice-chancellor stated: “… because I’m in charge I think it makes more men question their assumptions”. This is because it is more difficult for them to say “well, you’re a freak” (Interview: AUS 2: 12).

The presence of senior women in universities did function in most cases as a career affirmation for the women interviewed. A vice-chancellor of a regional Australian university concluded that, although women “are no less racist than men”, she believed “that women in positions like ours are more aware of the diversity because they are part of a minority group themselves, at that level [i.e. CEO], not overall” (Interview: AUS 11: 16). Whilst this comment conflates the complexities of identity and gender and perhaps over simplifies the issue of ‘women’ as a political ‘category’ (Flax, 1990a, 1990b; Bacchi, 1996; Segal, 1999; Wajcman, 1999: 60; Connell, 2002), it acknowledges the extra awareness of diversity due to top women having a continuing minority status in top leadership positions.

Of course, the crux of this sentiment is whether women in leadership roles have promoted and given opportunities to women and other minority groups. Anecdotally, the senior women in the study mentioned that they had actively mentored or promoted other women and minority groups, nevertheless a longitudinal study would be necessary to evaluate whether these claims are in fact supported statistically.

1.2. Overview of the research on whether there is a ‘female’ leadership style?
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During the mid 1980s, and in the early 1990s, the concept of a particularly female or ‘feminine’ management style received considerable attention in the quest for ‘new’ flexible styles of entrepreneurial management suited to globalisation and economic uncertainty (see Peters, 1990, 1991; Aburdene and Naisbitt, 1992). Sometimes this difference was lauded as superior and ‘transformational’ (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985a, 1985b; Bass, Avalio and Googheim, 1987) in comparison to the traditional ‘command-and-control’ or ‘transactional’ (Burns, 1978) leadership styles that were ascribed more to men.

During the 1990s, the concept of women as ‘marked’ or suffering a ‘deficit’ from a superior male norm (see Spender, 1987) was being replaced by a reappraisal of women’s skills and ‘ways of leadership’ as superior, particularly in the more specialised women in management literature (Helgesen, 1995; Rosener, 1990, 1995). This theme was also amplified by more mainstream writers such as Peters (1991) as part of the recognition of the need for the ‘new management’ to match the newer more fluid emerging organisational forms and structures (Handy, 1994; Klenke, 1996: 245). Often the new management was being heralded as a composite of traditionally female values such as teamwork, greater empathy, minimising status differences, valuing workers as people rather than merely dispensable human resources, and valuing diversity (see Opportunity 2000, 1992 in Britain; the Hansard Society's Report, 1990; The Karpin Report, 1995; Smith and Hutchinson, 1995).

Yet it is not as simple as it first appears. Researchers such as Wajcman (1999: 77) have suggested that, rather than embracing women’s styles, men have merely commandeered them into their existing repertoire of skills. Wajcman (1999: 77) argues persuasively that men are still “best placed to lay claim to whatever [managerial] characteristics are seen to be the desirable ones” and she concludes that: “[i]nstead of producing an influx of women into senior management, it is just as likely that men will appropriate this rediscovered ‘feminine’ style and add it to their traditionally male repertoire”. Likewise, earlier work by Linstead (1995: 200, cited in Sinclair, 1998: 67) suggests the ‘new man’ adds sensitivity and caring towards partners and children to the panoply of male virtues,
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not overturning male domination but extending it. The continued under-representation of women leading large public and private organisations suggests that this phenomenon is indeed the case. For other more recent treatments of this phenomenon see Sinclair (2007), Burke (2005), and Hearn (2001).

1.3. Characteristics of female leadership

Numerous popular and academic writers have written about female or ‘feminine’ management styles within the women in management literature (Marshall, 1984, 1995; see also the volumes by Davidson and Burke (eds.), 1994, 2000) and also as part of a more general response to government initiatives aiming for greater professionalism and diversity in management and inquiries regarding the continued under-representation of women (see The Hansard Report, 1990; the US Dept. of Labor, 1987, Workplace 2000; US Dept. of Labor, 1991, A Report on the Glass Ceiling Initiative; the Australian Karpin Report, 1995).

Yet much of this work tends to endorse a stereotypic gender based division of managerial styles which deliberately ignores the possibility of a range of socially constructed subjectivities (Flax, 1990a, 1990b; Segal, 1999; Wajcman, 1999: 60; Connell, 2002) and the permutations of various masculinities (Connell, 1987, 1995, 2002; Kerfoot and Knights, 1996) and femininities within an individual’s given managerial style.

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This is not to deny how resonant these images are to many women with their prevailing overtones of inclusiveness, valuing of relationships, people centredness and preference for flexibility. Nevertheless, it is argued here that, although these values are held by many women, they are also part of a generic successful management style that values excellence in performance, teamwork and people skills - a point repeated by many women in the study (Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 3; AUS 6; AUS 7; AUS 8; AUS 11; AUS 12; US 2; US 3; US 6; US 7; US 8; US 9; US 10; US 11; see also Brown, 1992; Bryson, 1993; Chesterman et al, 2004).

Furthermore, it should be noted that, excellence in managerial/executive performance was rated as more important than any particular gender-based style by the majority of women interviewed for this study (see also Wajcman, 1999; Chesterman et al, 2004).

One of the dangers of valorising a defined female or feminine style of management is encouraging an essentialist female style derived from gender based socialisation differences and sex based difference (see Bacchi, 1990, 1996; Cox, 1996; Kanter, 1996: xi and Nichols, 1996: xv in Nichols (ed.); Klenke, 1996; Wajcman, 1999; Chesterman et al, 2004). Unfortunately, this can lead back to a stereotypic view of men and women within management which ignores the range of managerial styles deriving from individual history, contextual factors, race, class and other factors (Wajcman, 1999; Alsop et al, 2002). This engendered style can, in turn, revert back to deficits from a male norm.

1.4. Was there evidence of a distinctive female leadership style?

Despite the popular concept of a distinctly ‘female’ or ‘feminine management’ style (Peters, 1990, 1991; see also Rosener, 1990, 1995; Helgesen, 1995; Sinclair, 1998, 2007), only a minority of the women interviewed in both Australia and America readily identified themselves as possessing a definite ‘female’ style. The question of whether women manage differently from men provoked a greater variety of responses than the researcher anticipated. Overall, the responses by the women in the study on this issue were reflective, especially when they considered their individual managerial styles. For some women, particularly those in chief executive and deputy chief executive roles, this
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was a question they had given detailed consideration to over many years (Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 6; AUS 7; AUS 8; AUS 11; AUS 12; US 3; US 6; US 7; US 9; US 10). As one American president commented, it is also a question that is often asked in executive searches and during interviews for presidential positions (Interview: US 9: 9).

The range of responses varied considerably among the women interviewed. Three Australian women, two vice-chancellors (Interviews: AUS 6: 22; AUS 10: 5), and a pro vice-chancellor (Interview: AUS 8: 5), and also two American senior administrators (Interviews: US 7: 26; US 11: 14) held the view that they definitely had more of what was generally referred to as “female managerial styles”. This was an interesting result given that more than three-quarters of the women self-identified as feminists and several Australian vice-chancellors were well known feminist activists in policy and research fora (Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 6; AUS 10: 5). On the other hand, an American dean disagreed that management styles could be distinguished on the basis of gender:

*I don’t ...I haven’t seen it. I mean I’ve read the literature and I’ve actually done research on the area of ... women and management, particularly in education, and have done interviews myself ... and I couldn’t find any difference at all* (Interview: US 1: 5).

The majority of the women, regardless of managerial level, suggested that they had some characteristics traditionally, and often stereotypically, described as being ‘feminine’ such as a preference for ‘collegiality’, ‘consensual management’, ‘collaborative work’, ‘caring’ or ‘nurturing’ (Chesterman et al, 2004). But even then, these self-descriptions were cautious on the gender issue, with one Australian professor describing her style as more “parental” (Interview: AUS 1: 3), with the added qualifier later in her interview that “I purposefully didn’t say paternal or maternal” (Interview: AUS 1: 6). This finding was slightly different from research by Chesterman et al (2004: 17) where these researchers found that both “women and men presented quite stereotypical views as to what constituted male and female management styles”. The university women were much more cautious in identifying a gendered leadership role for either men or women. Possibly this finding was due to
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the women working in an environment where self reflection on their leadership qualities was encouraged and it also reflected the number of women who identified themselves as ‘feminists’.

Apart from the American dean previously described, who gave no allowance for gendered management styles, all of the women in the study accepted, to varying degrees, the possibility of female styles or managerial preferences, or at the very least, characteristics readily described as female. Despite this, there was a realistic unwillingness by the women interviewed to be limited by gender stereotypes.

In response to a question regarding the putative belief that women often demonstrated more participative styles than male managers, an Australian professor replied: “No, no. I’ve seen men more wonderfully participative and women who were absolutely dogmatic and narrow and didn’t listen to anybody” (Interview: US 1: 6). This was a similar response to the Australian vice-chancellor who concluded that:

\[
\text{I no longer know whether it is gendered} \ldots \text{I thought} \ldots \text{that a style which placed a high value on relationships and interactivity and consultation and those kinds of things was gendered. Was a more female style} \ldots \text{I now no longer am sure} \ldots \text{I know men who are like that} \ldots \text{and I know women who are} \ldots \text{not very flexible} \text{ (Interview: AUS 12: 24-5).}
\]

This comment was very similar to the Australian deputy vice-chancellor who earlier had reflected on the difficulty of separating a “strong” personality from gender considerations (Interview: AUS 7: 7) and who also stated:

\[
\text{I think the only} \ldots \text{aspect of the} \ldots \text{gender related managerial style that I give a lot of credence to is the, the tendency of women to prefer consultative mechanisms [pause] to authoritarian ones. But that’s not a universal state either} \ldots \text{and I’m still not as good at it as I’d like to be} \text{ (Interview: AUS 7: 18).}
\]
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Of course this stated preference for less authoritarian and more consultative managerial styles is still a significant difference from the dominant ‘heroic’ management discourse (Sinclair, 1998, 2003, 2007) and signals a movement towards a more inclusive ‘post-heroic’ (Fletcher, 2004) positioning of leadership. Yet these comments reveal considerable ambivalence towards a simplistic or essentialist gendered view of leadership.

The older presidents and vice-chancellors were particularly reflective on the issue of gendered management styles. These women have enjoyed high public visibility, and the longest duration in their roles as chief executive officers and institutional leaders of large universities (Interviews: AUS 6; US 3; US 6; US 10), giving them the opportunity of observing a wide range of managerial styles exemplified by women and men. Yet their conclusions were still ambivalent on the issue of the typical female management style (this is somewhat different to Wajcman’s findings (1999: 56)). Although the women believed that universities were predominantly male led, they also acknowledged the possibility of a wider range of leadership perspectives emerging due to increasing diversity in the university sector (Eveline, 2004).

All of these women were the first presidents/vice-chancellors of their institutions which engendered comparisons with their predecessors. Several of these women had concluded, after much reflection over the years on gendered management styles, that “I don’t know” (Interviews: US 4: 18; US 6: 19; US 10: 7-8), or that they were “not sure how I would characterise” (Interview: US 8: 10) their styles, other than to say that they were adaptive to the circumstances. Yet, two of these women also described their managerial styles as being totally different to their male predecessors who exemplified an authoritarian command-and-control style of leadership (Interviews: US 6: 16; US 8: 9).

Another important issue, which is closely related to the issue of gendered managerial styles, is whether women leaders bring a particular contribution as ‘women’ to the organisations they lead. On this topic the women in the study (including the older chief executives mentioned previously) were much more definite in their responses that women, when compared to men, due to their
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“outsider” (Davidson and Cooper, 1992; Helgesen, 1995: xiv) position or minority status in public life and their slightly different socialisation from men, do bring a distinctly different perspective (Cox, 1995 Boyer Lecture, 1997: 3, 1996; Chesterman et al, 2004; Hewlett, 2002; Wilson, 2005) coupled with differing needs.

As previously mentioned, one Australian vice-chancellor of a large technology university stated that she had found that if she needed someone “who might do the job in a different kind of way … that very commonly is a woman” (Interview: AUS 2: 11; Wyn et al, 2000; Chesterman et al, 2004). Another Australian retired vice-chancellor referred to the different “teamwork” perspective that women bring to organisations and also their differing needs in these top jobs due to family responsibilities, elder care or single marital status, combined with less domestic support than their male peers (Interview: AUS 6: 22). Often this “difference” from the male norm complicates and makes their experience in top managerial positions “harder” (Interview: AUS 6: 22; Hewlett, 2002), due to much less ‘backstage’ (Hochschild, 1997; Eagly and Carli, 2007) support. For as one former Australian vice-chancellor commented: “you do bigger jobs with less support” (Interview: AUS 6: 22; see Bittman and Pixley, 1997; Bittman et al, 2004; Chesterman et al, 2004).

1.5 Conclusion

Overall, the majority of women interviewed for this study, whilst giving credence to the possibility of a specific female leadership style, were careful to define and differentiate what they considered as good managerial styles rather than specifically gendered ones. An interesting departure from this was that all the women interviewed, who were parents, considered that raising children had further enhanced their managerial skills by giving them considerable on-going practice in interpersonal and negotiating skills, as well as multi-tasking (Interviews: AUS 1: 3; AUS 2: 1; AUS 12: 52; US 9: 2).

These women enthusiastically argued that women in top leadership positions were active change agents and functioned as important role models to other less senior women. This was viewed by the women as an important difference from the traditional leadership qualities often ascribed to men.
There was almost unanimous agreement that women do prefer a more participative style of leadership and this was considered a most worthwhile ideal to pursue. Consequently, the reflections from the women in the study on the concept of ‘female leadership’ suggest an intelligent wariness of the dangers of travelling down the well worn road of gender stereotyping (Bacchi, 1990; Korac-Kakabadse & Kouzmin, 1997).
References


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