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## Featured Publication

# *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders*

by Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli (Harvard Business School Press, 2007)



Alice Eagly is Professor and Department Chair of Psychology at Northwestern University. Eagly has published widely on the psychology of attitudes, especially attitude change, attitude structure, and attitudinal selectivity in information processing.

She is equally devoted to the study of gender, with a focus on the social behavior of women and men and a special emphasis on the study of leadership and on evolutionary issues. She has authored or edited several books and is also the author of over 130 journal articles and chapters in edited volumes. Eagly has received numerous distinguished awards for her work and has held several leadership positions in psychology including, among others, President of the Midwestern Psychological Association, and President of the Society of Personality and Social Psychology. Eagly received her M.A. in Psychology in 1963 and Ph.D. in Social Psychology in 1965, both from the University of Michigan.



Linda Carli received her Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where she studied gender differences in interaction and influence.

She has published and presented papers on the effects of gender on group interaction, communication and influence; leadership; and reactions to adversity and victimization. She joined the faculty at Wellesley in 1991 and teaches a variety of courses, including organizational psychology, the psychology of law, and research in applied psychology. Active in professional organizations in psychology and management, she serves on the Executive Board of the Association of Women in Psychology. In addition to her teaching and research, she has developed and conducted diversity training workshops and negotiation and conflict resolution workshops for women leaders and has lectured on gender and diversity for business, academic, and other organizations.

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**Debra DeRuyver (ILA Staff):** One of the first assertions in your book is that the glass ceiling is no longer an apt metaphor to describe women's experience of opportunity in the workplace. Instead you argue today's metaphor is the labyrinth. What led you to choose this imagery?

**Alice Eagly & Linda Carli:** Times have changed, and the labyrinth metaphor captures modern women's quest for leadership. Women

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are no longer universally excluded from top positions, not when nearly a quarter of all chief executives of U.S. organizations are women. But finding the route to leadership presents more challenges for women than men. And those challenges create the labyrinth. Whereas men seeking leadership travel down a relatively straight road, women take a more complex path. In addition to the challenges of family responsibilities, women still face a degree of prejudice and discrimination. Yet, many women successfully overcome such impediments and make their way on varied, sometimes discontinuous, paths to leadership.

The beauty of the *labyrinth* metaphor is its ability to frame the complexities of women's careers, as well as the possibilities for success. Most important, the labyrinth image implies that with thoughtful problem-solving, woman can advance. In contrast, the now outdated glass ceiling metaphor is discouraging because it presents an absolute, impenetrable and invisible barrier—one that women can't anticipate or overcome. On the contrary, women can anticipate, confront, and overcome the impediments they face to reach their career goals.

**Two popular notions that seem to creep up the most in the mainstream media are that men are genetically predisposed to lead and that women opt not to lead on their own accord.**

The idea that men are genetically predisposed to lead is based on evolutionary psychologists' claim that dominance and competitiveness are built into men's nature through sexual selection in eons past. This

controversial claim is belied by recent changes in women, who have become more assertive and dominant as opportunities have opened up for them. Even if we assume that men are inherently more dominant than women, men would be "natural" leaders only if leadership called for forceful, dominant qualities. But, quite the opposite is true. High levels of dominance generally compromise leaders' effectiveness. Instead, leadership calls for a repertoire of qualities, some culturally masculine and others culturally feminine. The best leaders are assertive, gregarious, intelligent, conscientious, trustworthy, socially skilled, and able to persuade, inspire, and motivate others.

**The book is an incredible synthesis of hundreds of studies conducted across several different disciplines, based primarily in the U.S. Even without flipping back to the extensive notes and reference sections, one can just sense the data percolating behind each clearly written and well-placed sentence. Some of the most potent moments for me in the book were when you used little tidbits of that data to illustrate or bring home a point. For example, the wage gap. I think most people know that women make about twenty percent less on the dollar than what men earn. But, I was astonished to read that over a recent 15 year period that women earned, on average, about 275 thousand dollars, com-**

**pared to men who earned about 725 thousand dollars. What does this say about women's employment patterns and what does that bode for leadership opportunity?**

That massive gap reflects women's lost earnings from dropping out of employment entirely, which women do more than men, often to take care of family members. Women's employment patterns are different in others ways, as well. They more often have part-time jobs, and even when full-time have somewhat shorter hours on the job than men.

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So, the wage gap looks huge when you don't account for these factors. However, among full-time workers, women now earn 81 cents for every dollar that men earn—a very substantial gain compared with the 63 cents that women earned in 1979. Women's labor force participation increased steadily in the 20th century, and American women have become much better educated. The majority of bachelor's and master's degrees now go to women, and women have achieved equality or near-equality to men in other advanced degrees as well.

All in all, such data present a mixed picture for women's leadership opportunities. Women's superior education gives them a leadership advantage. But taking

part-time jobs or breaks from paid work impedes women's careers.

**When people talk about racism, for example, in the US, something you will frequently hear that it is a “systemic” problem. This can be a difficult concept for some to understand. Systemic problems are often so deeply engrained, socially, historically, and culturally, that they’ve become naturalized, invisible, and thus hard to change. Your methodical depiction of how systemic gender discrimination comes about—both on a personal and an organizational level—is one of the most impressive aspects of the book.**

Discrimination against women is systemic, even in the United States, where there is virtually no support for discrimination either in law or in social values. Research conducted across the social sciences make a persuasive case that discrimination still exists. The usual counterargument to this claim is that women compromise their careers (willingly or not) to care for children. However, in studies by economists the gender gaps in wages and promotions remain, even after controlling for differences in male and female employment patterns. And in experimental studies, where people evaluate men and women with identical credentials or performance, women receive poorer evaluations than men except for clearly female-dominated positions such as clerical worker.

Most discrimination these days passes under the radar. People have no idea that they are discriminating. Yet their evaluations are colored by cultural stereotypes painting women as the nicer, kinder sex, and men as the assertive, directive sex. Because the qualities that are ascribed to men are also the qualities generally ascribed to leaders, women are viewed as less qualified to lead.

Organizations contribute to discrimi-

nation in myriad ways. Their high level positions often demand an extreme time commitment that deny job holders the right to “have a life” outside of the workplace. This is a particular burden for women because of their greater family responsibilities. Decision makers also tend to favor people similar to themselves in sex and social background, despite the contemporary call for diversity in management ranks. Where managerial positions have long been filled by men, a masculine organizational culture can develop that is unwelcoming or even downright hostile to women. And male-dominated networks often exclude women. In such circumstances, women generally don’t win the visible desirable assignments that allow them to gain recognition as potentially “fast-track” employees.

**One question that always seems to come up when talking about women and leadership is this: Do women lead differently than men? If so, how are they different and do their differences offer them particular advantages or disadvantages in the work place?**

Differences in male and female leadership styles are fairly small on average, but the differences that do exist certainly do not hurt women. Research demonstrates that women have a somewhat more democratic and participative style than men, perhaps because people resist women who take charge in a particularly assertive manner. More important, women leaders are more transformational, especially in mentoring and developing workplace colleagues. And compared with men, women adopt a somewhat more positive, rewarding approach as leaders rather than a more negative one. All of these tendencies have been captured in meta-analyses of studies of leadership style.

And what’s the impact of these differences? Notably, the ways that women lead are precisely the leadership styles that are associated with good managerial practices in current-day organizations. In most contexts, top-down, command and control leaders no longer offer the most effective or admired type of leadership.

**How do race and class impact the leadership labyrinth?**

Race and class further complicate the labyrinth for those with origins in groups that have traditionally been excluded from leadership opportunities. People stereotype all sorts of disadvantaged groups as lacking leadership ability. Research shows that women generally have to meet higher standards than men do to prove themselves capable of leadership. And the double whammy of both gender and race or class disadvantage can create even higher hurdles to overcome.

**Are young women receiving adequate preparation to negotiate the labyrinth? And, if not, what can we do to better prepare them?**

Many young women today hear that they can “do anything they want” and that sex discrimination is ancient history. It’s a message they get from parents, educators, and the media, a message that depicts the world as free of discrimination, where everyone has an equal chance for career success. But that’s not the real world. At the same time, we should not tell young women that their progress will be blocked by a glass ceiling. Instead, young women should be given an accurate picture of the special challenges that women face to prepare them to attain successful careers and negotiate a satisfactory work-life balance. Our book does this with realism tempered by a



positive, can-do spirit.

### **What about for women who are already out there in the workforce, what practical advice can you offer them?**

8. In the book, we point out that neither emulating men nor relying on femininity is all that helpful. Instead, it is usually best for female managers to blend culturally masculine and culturally feminine behaviors. In the workplace, this translates into a directive, assertive approach that incorporates a good measure of warmth and concern for others. We also advise women to create social capital by joining networks, mentoring others and being mentored, both inside and outside their organizations. The time demands of building relationships can be a serious obstacle, especially for mothers. And male-dominated networks can make women feel unwelcome. But the investment in social capital is worth the time and effort. Finally, we caution women about the long-term costs of surrendering their careers, even temporarily. Re-entry can prove difficult and sometimes impossible. And research shows the long-term advantages of having multiple roles. Employed women overall have better health and well-being.

Of course, women can't resolve all the challenges presented in the labyrinth by themselves. Men can share more of the domestic responsibilities. And organizations can become more family friendly and give women more access to leadership.

**Aside from the basic fairness issue, why should organizations care about how many women they have in leadership positions? Is there an effect on the**

### **bottom line?**

There are many ways that organizations benefit from more diverse leadership. Most obviously, including women increases the size of the pool of potential leaders, and the bigger the pool, the greater the chance of finding talent. Having people of diverse backgrounds brings the new ideas and points of view needed to fuel creative and synergistic outcomes. And, as far as the bottom line is concerned, recent research shows that corporations with more women executives have somewhat higher profits. Although diversity brings stresses as well as benefits, there is no evidence that including women leaders threatens the bottom line.

**It's inevitable that reading a book about women and leadership today would lead one to reflect on Hillary Clinton's current campaign. How has the political leadership landscape for women changed since Elizabeth Dole ran for the 2000 Republican nomination? What obstacles loom in Clinton's labyrinth? And, is 9/11, which some have argued has led to a desire for leaders who are father-figures or hyper masculine, a particularly large obstacle to any woman seeking office today?**

For the first time in American history, we have a female presidential candidate who is taken seriously and who has a good chance of attaining

the prize of the presidency. Hillary Clinton's candidacy, regardless of whether she wins, symbolizes the replacement of the glass ceiling by the more negotiable labyrinth. At the same time, the labyrinth reflects the skepticism Clinton faces when people wonder whether a woman could possibly have "what it takes" to lead the United States. It's fascinating to watch how the demand to be both feminine and masculine is uniquely placed on Clinton, and not the male candidates. The demand to seem warm and nice yet strong and competent poses a challenge, one that is particularly acute for a nation threatened by the "war on terror" as well as the challenges of the difficult war in Iraq. These conditions may well make many citizens lean toward the conventional choice of a male leader.

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**Would you like to add to anything we haven't covered?**

Knowledge is power. Social scientists have put forth a very large amount of research that enables us to understand the situation for women leaders and women hoping someday to lead. Our book conveys this knowledge. Armed with this understanding, women and men can come together to ensure equal opportunity and a world where everyone may benefit from the talent of women leaders.