

**WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP:  
Ingredients in the Recipe of Success**

**Patricia Klinck, Ph.D**

## Women in Leadership: Ingredients in the Recipe of Success

It has been nearly fifteen years since the Women in Leadership (WIL) program, which I was deeply involved in developing, began at Edith Cowan University (ECU). It is more than fifteen years since the Australian government established policy to merge universities and colleges, and among other initiatives, to provide funding for WIL programs. Having the privilege to work with many Australian academic women over the last 15 years, I would like to reflect on the past and consider the future of such programs. Four questions guided that reflection:

1. What was the rationale for the programs?
2. What have been its successes?
3. Is there still a mandate for WIL programs?
4. What are the vision and the strategies for women in tertiary institutions at this time?

However, before I address these questions, I would like to begin with a personal reflection—to share my experiences as a female senior executive, how I developed my feminist perspective, and why today I remain committed to women only leadership programs. These experiences were the foundation of my decision to accept the invitation from Edith Cowan University and my subsequent work in WIL programs across tertiary and public education institutions in Australia and in Canada. I offer my story to remind us of how it was, what we have to celebrate, and the fact that we still have an agenda for women. The current data shows much progress—and it shows how much remains to be done.

I was a late bloomer. For most of my career as an educator in the Calgary Board of Education, I was not convinced that there was a problem for any woman who wanted a leadership position. In 1990, the representation of women in upper- and senior-level positions was low to non-existent. I considered this information merely data, which was subject to change. It was a matter of learning more, applying, and succeeding. What were the dynamics that brought about the change in these beliefs?

I became the first woman in a senior executive position in the Calgary Board of Education, the second largest school board in Canada. I had worked my way up the career ladder from teacher to supervisor of second languages to director of staff development. I had brought in major change initiatives and was well-known to the senior executives who had backed the

decision to appoint me at their level. In Canada, the late 80s and early 90s were years of severe cutbacks. These were highly political times internally and externally.

It is often said that a leader's success is determined by how she or he handles crisis. It was during these first budget debates that my experience with invisibility and muteness began. In my doctoral thesis, I had studied how meaning is constructed through talk—how we cooperate, clarify, and build a mutual context. Therefore, the ways in which language is used, as both a means to communicate and to silence, were familiar to me. Yet I began to have trouble getting a word in edgewise. Of the six executives at the table and the only female, I was the one who had to raise a hand to be acknowledged, to be given a turn, and then ignored again. Doubts began to assail me. “Am I a classic example of the Peter Principle—have they raised me to my level of incompetence?” “Am I unable to present an argument with clarity?” I listened carefully, watched patterns of the male interaction, and made notes. In my doctoral thesis, I saw exactly how talk shapes social reality. It is essentially about getting your turn to speak, having enough time to say what you need to, and to introduce a topic to which others pay attention and build on (Moerman, 1991, pp. 173-178). Talk determines our roles and our status in a group. I was not given my turn willingly, was often interrupted, and my perspective was rarely referred to. So there was nothing in my observations and notes that assuaged my doubts. Until one day, the Chief Financial Officer was present. When I spoke, he referred back to what I had said. This confirmed that I had in fact said something—and even more importantly, I had been heard. I suddenly felt compassion for the women whose strident voices often shocked at meetings. Perhaps they too had experienced invisibility and muteness in their roles. Speaking loudly was a strategy to break the silence.

As the era of cutbacks continued, I became increasingly aware of the many ways talk shaped realities. When I talked with colleagues, i.e., teachers or school-based leaders, I told stories, cited experiences, probed new questions, and referred to values. These talks were rich, full of humour, and easy. They reached out and included the audience and me in making sense of teaching and learning. I felt a kinship with my audience.

In contrast when I gave talks to audiences of principals, who were part of the decision-making group, I talked about the values that guide our profession. Professional values place students and the learning environment as a priority, regardless of cuts to the budget. With these groups, I left out the stories and experiences. The common ground was the values framework.

Experiences and stories seemed too personal in a decision-making context. I eliminated them from my talks.

Finally, with the senior executive group whether in a meeting or in front of an audience, I was silent on stories, kinship, and values. While all too often I believed that as a group we had contravened, contradicted, and omitted values from our decisions, still, politics was the name of the game. In the world of senior-executive politics, I soon learned not to show vulnerability and to keep my stand on issues to myself. I built a smooth surface against which my talk divulged nothing. As a woman presenter once said to me, “You don’t bleed when you swim with sharks!” I sought to keep my position on the Teflon-like surface. What I have described was a way of making sense of how silence informed my public stance on issues. It was the cradle that nurtured my understanding of my role and responsibilities. When I censored the stories, they hung in the silence behind my words, available only to my ears. My path through the senior-executive world was one of isolation and a sense of not belonging.

I searched constantly for clarity and understanding of these experiences. Husserl’s concept of the life world (cited in Abram, 1996, p. 126) was one which offered much. He maintains that all of our experiences are available to us—although they are mostly in our subconscious. This approach explained how my memories, images, and bits of conversation would come back unbidden in moments of debate and reflection.

I contrasted the talk of the executive arena to the work of Freire (1970) on dialogue, in his literacy work with oppressed peasants of Brazil. Freire’s work motivated and compelled me to search for, and to build, contexts where dialogue could happen. When I worked and there appeared no possibility of dialogue, I felt I lived in a two-dimensional world. His explanation, that hope, faith, and naming the world, together, are the *sine qua non* of change, was like a handrail up a steep staircase. They moderated the times of deep discouragement.

After two years of being the sole female voice, a second woman joined the group. I was anxious to know how we would work together and how the senior executive group would respond to the shift in gender balance. She set up her first meeting with me. At the meeting, she looked at me intently and asked “How is it for us as women in this group? My impression is its hard work.” I was shocked at the question and felt the profound desire to confide, to talk, to strategize—and the fear that she might not be a colleague, an ally. I took a chance and walked

the middle road. I answered, honestly that it was not easy, but that I still had hope of affecting change. I offered no stories and only touched on values. Over time, as we worked more and more closely together, we formed a deep alliance. It was my first experience of strategizing with a female colleague at that level. We talked over agendas, agreed on how to handle confrontation, to align ourselves with political players, and to move with the changing field of action.

Over the four years that I held that senior-executive position, I talked to many women in senior positions in the public and private sector. Through our talk we began to recognize some commonly-shared experiences. I decided to set up a week-long retreat for senior executive women. We had no sponsors. We had no facilitator. We paid our own way and set our agenda when we got together on location. We agreed to summarize notes from our discussions, to sum up the benefits and disadvantages of a women only program as we experienced them.

As I recall those times while writing this paper, I am reminded of how much those days and our first retreat influenced my thinking about leadership, tacit knowledge, about fear and ethics. As we claimed the topics, lived and named our understanding of leadership, I became committed to women only leadership programs. For most of us our life experiences—physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually—stand apart from those of men. Yet what was often taken for granted previously is that the difference is irrelevant. A leader is a leader is a leader regardless of how they see and experience the world. Yet to me—and the many women I have worked with, it has become self-evident that time and space together to explore leadership is key to women’s success. Once that has happened, as women we move more easily and with greater confidence into mixed groups and discussions on leadership.

Although the paradigm for writing and research into leadership has changed, there remains an implicit belief that logic and numbers define leaders. However, in a recent article, Sinclair (2002) challenges us to put our personal histories back into leadership discussions. She says

I hold to the unfashionable view that leaders can’t be separated from their history and their stories. ... What makes them leaders is ... the day-to-day interactions not the great deeds. Who they are and where they come from, how they have got there are all critical parts of their leadership. (sec. 3, ¶ 1)

During our program, we did just that! We included power and fear as topics in our agenda. We opened up our childhood experiences, marriages, friendship, travel, sexuality. We acknowledged the impostor syndrome, what it means to be a “good girl,” and how this influences us when we are in a leadership position.

When I gave an overview of the retreat to a group of male colleagues, one of them said “It would have to be a group of women. We men would never talk about fear or power.”

In summary, the leadership retreat answered the questions: What is the impact of a women only leadership program? Does being in a group of women only make a difference?

Just prior to my resignation from the Calgary Board of Education, a third woman joined the senior executive group. The patterns of interaction reflected the almost equal numbers of men and women senior executives (three out of seven). Within several meetings, I could see that debate, humour, and questioning were becoming the norm. The talk was collegial and inclusive.

At the last senior-executive meeting, I observed and reflected on the changes. Throughout the four years of my tenure, I had been on a steep learning curve. The experiences had challenged my beliefs in education and my courage. My sense of identities had grown, as I understood myself as a leader, as a woman, and as a colleague. Clearly, the dynamic between power, position, and fear formed the reality of how we worked together. The dynamic could be shaped and redirected.

Leadership is essentially about change and movement towards a vision of the future. For this reason, learning is always on the agenda although not always named. The leader’s position, on learning and the conditions to maximize it, is key to how the organisational culture functions. Learning often happens without conscious, deliberate thought. It can also benefit from being interwoven with theory and research. Both provide a framework for conscious action, exploration, and reflection.

In the 90s, research and writings on leadership became more liberal. Ancient sages, such as Lao Tzu (as cited in Heider, 1978), who predate the Christian era became valued for their insights and wisdom. The research paradigm into change, leadership, and organisations has grown substantially. Methodology has moved beyond statistics and abstract logic. Philosophers and thinkers, such as Polanyi (1958) and Freire (1970), are often cited, as are artists and composers. In his book, Senge (1992) challenged the understanding of leadership, by talking

about learning organisations and leadership as teaching. He opened up the possibility of all change being about learning and learning as being the heart of organisations and leadership. If these ideas were valid, then power and leadership were socially constructed. They depended upon the hard work of talk and dialogue.

When the invitation came from Edith Cowan University to design and coordinate their new Women in Leadership program, I faced a dilemma. My employers would not grant me a six-month leave. My top priority was my commitment to working on issues for girls and women. For many personal reasons: aging parents, the stage of my career, financial implications, and so forth, I was torn. However, there are situations that you know will never come by again, and the potential to make a difference in the lives of women was compelling. I knew that my experiences as a senior executive were grist for program design—and I saw the potential to make a difference in the lives of women. Slowly, with much patience on the part of ECU and angst on my part, the decision was taken; I resigned and packed up my life.

The year prior to my arrival, ECU had begun a year long search into research and writing on leadership. They canvassed groups of women to identify the factors of leadership that women saw as critical for women leaders. Four dimensions of leadership were identified and named: creator of environments, strategist, public voice, and self. When I arrived, they were now ready to begin program design and to implement the project.

My colleagues in the project were Deborah Pearson, who is closely involved in identifying leadership dimensions, and Marie Finlay, who is a well known storyteller. Both are consultants based in Perth. Together, through much debate, reflection, and consensus we began to form the program. The leadership model was called the Dimensions of Leadership. Our first task was to design a model. What form would it take? We were acutely aware of the importance of the representation and its symbolism. Until that point, the mathematical axis was often used in leadership theory, e.g., Situational Leadership. I was determined that we break away from the mathematical model with its attendant abstract logic and numbers. After much debate, we chose the Venn diagram (see Appendix A). It offers a circular form. The eye is drawn to the overlapping lines, the central place, and the context around it. Questions form immediately—Why is there overlap? How does the Self influence the different Dimensions? The diagram shows how pervasive the sense of Self is to leadership. The Dimensions are united in the Self. It

is a seamless reality. At first, as we worked through each Dimension, we saw only the overlap with Self. However, with time, the complexity built up layer upon layer. The three Dimensions were also intertwined with each other. The model was subject to organisational and societal cultural influences. However, as the program progressed, our understandings deepened. The first participants still talk about those moments of seeing leadership as a whole, greater than the sum of the parts.

The struggle to find an appropriate representation for leadership is still a challenge. Regan (1990) describes her struggles as she enters the leadership level. For her, it is a triangle which broke as she crossed into a position of leadership. She describes how language and meaning shift and how colleagues feel distanced. Her quest took her to the image of the DND molecule. It has two strands, which are continuously in motion and joined to each other by bars and to the movements and strands. This she says is what leadership feels like—a world of motion and contacts. The double strands remind her that her membership encompasses her role as a leader and her kinship with teachers and students.

The leadership program model we followed is called the Collegial Support Group designed by I/D/E/A (Bahner & LaPlant, 1980) of the Charles Kettering Association in the United States. This model is designed to continue for two years. The groups of 8-10 meet monthly with a facilitator. They shape their agenda within a common framework. By the end of the first year each participant is capable of facilitating the group. At the last session, the facilitator reverts to “group member.” It is based philosophically on the “*primus inter pares*” model, which means “first among equals” (Greenleaf, 1982, p. 61). At ECU the program lasted six months. The first session was a residential two-day program. It incorporated parts of the first women only program I had designed. For example, we acknowledged autobiography as professional reflection, professional in the sense that each autobiography is key to leadership. Our goal was to “lift” the tacit knowledge, the life world, out of its cocoon of silence into the dialogue of the group. This goal was a constant component of each session’s activities. As the silence was broken, fear became a topic. Fear was often behind many of the stories told, the nervous laughter, and the heightened anxiety. As we worked together, fears were named. The talk of fear was no longer a personal concern at coffee break. It became an integral aspect of the

professional development. We worked with many processes: scenarios, playback theatre, case studies, and so forth. Alienation prompted by fear is the starting point of mediation, of learning.

Heron (1989) has incorporated how to deal with fear and trauma into his facilitator training approach. This training was immensely beneficial. Although, for most, trauma was not an experience, heightened anxiety was common. It was startling to see the difference in both behaviour and voice once the fear was faced. For some it represented a new lease on their careers, the balance of work, and leisure.

We invited women guest speakers to talk about each of the Dimensions. They came from different professions, sometimes from different countries. The Human Resources Division of ECU had decided to build an excellent context for the WIL program. The program was set within two other activities. First, a series of internationally-known women gave a public lectures. As ECU's program was one of the first in Australia, it was a unique opportunity for women to come together, to listen, to celebrate, to hear the stories of other women—in a public arena. Grumet (1988) says, “We are, at least partially, constituted by the stories we tell to others and to ourselves about experience” (p. 78). Second, at the end of the first year, they held the first annual conference on Women in Leadership.

Consultants were called to do the project evaluation. It was affirming to see the how the culture of the university had changed. Women expressed confidence, talked about their networks, and recommended the experience to other women. Months before there had been silence and isolation. A colleague at another university in Perth made a video of the collegial support-group model. However, none of these evaluative works equalled the last meeting of all the women and the collages that they constructed. Although long since lost, the memories are indelible.

The second phase of six months was a leadership program for new heads of school at ECU. Both men and women were involved. The program was based on the Dimensions of Leadership and the collegial support-group model. It was impressive to see how former WIL women entered confidently into debates with male colleagues. Their lack of defensiveness was an unwritten testimony to their growth.

Since 1994, I have continued to work with women in leadership programs in public and tertiary education in Australia. Several aspects remain constant. First, I continue to use the

Dimensions of Leadership—with women only programs and with mixed programs. Second, the themes I identified, when I first talked to women in Canada, are still present, although less acute and pervasive than in the early years. There is still the need for women only programs to continue addressing these themes. Furthermore I am convinced that leadership is learned and that the women only programs present a context that maximises our learning.

At the organisational level, data show that progress has been made. There are female Vice Chancellors in at least five universities at the time of writing. At ECU, 38 % of middle- and upper-level managers are female.

The situation is improved but the questions still remain: What more can be done? What are the emerging arenas for concerted action?

There are new challenges and they fall within a field of action where work has already begun. Policies are family-friendly, provide financial support to female PhD students, and are ready to address other challenges and barriers to female academics. Maternity leave and child care are only two of the well known strategies to retain female academics.

One of the key challenges is to develop an organisational culture, which goes beyond the current policies and practices to support and retain female academics. In a recent *Australian Financial Review*, Fox (2006) notes that recent studies show the main reasons for declining labour-force participation rates among women appear to be the weakness of the labour market. The traditional concerns of child bearing or setting up small companies are no longer the main reasons for leaving work. She points out retention quickly improves with the right policies and attitudes by employers. Di Grady (as cited in Fox, 2006), company director and former president of the organisation Chief Executive Women, agrees “Companies ... need to get a lot more creative in providing intelligent part-time work and job sharing. It’s very difficult to go back into the same path you had before children. And companies that don’t want to waste that talent find they can be more flexible to meet those needs” (¶ 27).

In a recent report from the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2006), four universities and one vice-chancellor were commended for making tertiary education a better workplace for women.

It is important to note that not only are the policies and benefits important, but the culture makes a critical difference. For example, the flexibility in some programs looks good on paper,

but in reality leaves much to be desired. Thus the key aspect of this new approach is the combination of family-friendly policies, with the absolute certainty that women know that they are wanted back in the organisation, that the organisation can and will organise work to fit their schedule.

Recent trends in Canada have expanded child-care policies to include “caring policies.” These policies are addressing the demands of caring for elderly parents, sick partners, and so forth. The focus of these policies will again answer only a part of the question. As female academics enter the workplace, they are met by a culture that is well-established and not necessarily welcoming. With transition programs and activities those initial feelings of disorientation, loss, and anxiety can be alleviated.

Another aspect of the answer is strategic HR planning, so that women are in a position to apply for leadership positions. A well-designed HR strategic plan addresses the “pipeline” of women and the gender balance at entry level positions, i.e., course coordinators. By so doing, the policy ensures that women are experienced and ready for future leadership responsibilities as they arise. Professional development programs need to balance the leadership program with ancillary mentoring and job shadowing programs. Peer learning in the form of networks and career planning has proven effective.

A recent study, by the Conference Board of Canada (Orser, 2001), shows that the most important factor in effecting changes for women is the commitment of the chief executive to making a difference. Unfortunately the chief executive is often unaware of the depth or the pervasiveness of the issues for women. Their first recommendation is to establish a women’s committee reporting directly to the chief executive.

To conclude on a personal reflection, my interests often take me into new approaches to leadership—sometimes in reality, sometimes in media. I see clearly the two broad traditions of leadership: first, the military model and its talk of strategies, goals, and heroic leaders facing insurmountable challenges; and second the spiritual tradition, which asks about mission, vision, values, and realities. In both of these traditions and in modern times and ancient legends, we see examples of men and women offering leadership.

Recently I have turned to the fine arts to explore the act of creation and how it fulfils a vision for the artist and the beholders. Producing a work of art is a creative act, whose influence

may endure for centuries. Furthermore art brings insights and inspires passion in those who come in contact with it. For us as women, this model of creativity is compelling. It offers us a collaborative and communicative way of defining reality—what Berger and Luckmann (as cited in Fishman, 1983) would call “power” (p. 89). Fine arts sees the eccentric nature of the artist as a quality, even celebrates this aspect. In effect, the fine arts do not idealize the leader, expecting flawless behaviour at all times. They accept Sinclair’s (2002) challenge and take the good with the bad.

Michael Jones (2000), a Canadian pianist and composer, says there is something extraordinary about having a “gift,” something which we may not recognize—and yet it is something that we can all aspire to. He says that each gift brings something with it, something which is extraordinary, “the domain of the imagination ... it will take us on an adventure into a dimension of life ... larger and more profound than we could possibly envision” (¶ 11).

We know that the leader has immense capacity to influence the culture by consciously bringing all the aspects of her or his life to work. The personal is professional. So their well-being, physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual capacity gives us something to which we can aspire. Given the politics of organisation there are many barriers. No one knows this better than leaders—unless it is the minorities, including women, who have an intimate knowledge of that reality as well.

Perhaps as women we could begin this change by recognizing a different model of leadership—one which is both vulnerable and visionary, the artist and her creation.

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**Appendix A**

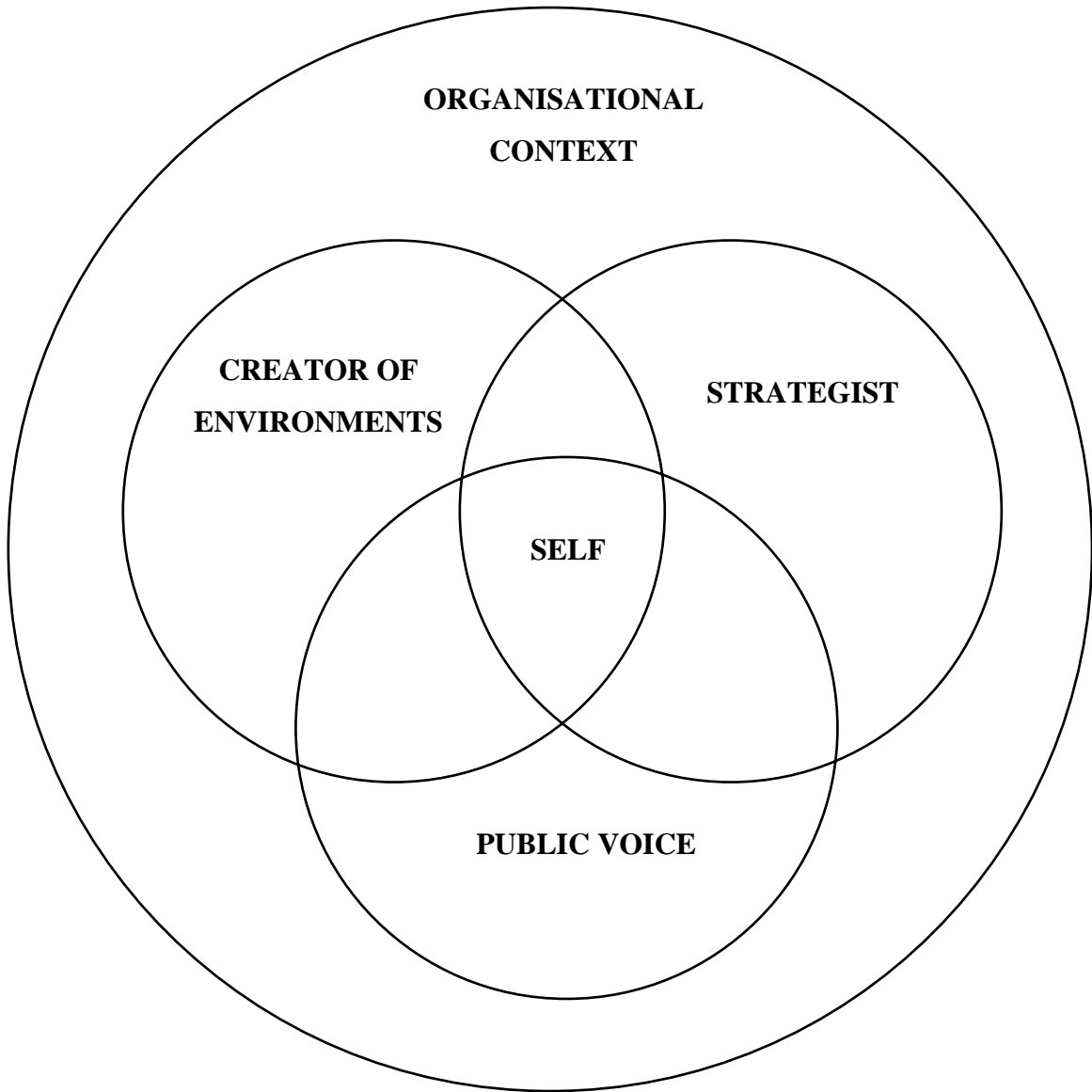


Figure 1. Dimensions of leadership: Societal context