

## UNDERSTANDING LEADERSHIP: GENERAL AND GENDER PERSPECTIVES

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**“Leadership is the art of getting someone  
else to do something you want done  
because he wants to do it.”**

Dwight Eisenhower

**“A leader is a dealer in hope.”**

Napoleon Bonaparte

### INTRODUCTION

Leadership is both a significant phenomenon and a process. It is an area of research interest as well as practical application. It pertains to the ability required for running organizations successfully minimizing friction creating forces. Leadership encompasses factors like qualities and skills that are common to the concept of leadership. However, we find that the similar qualities and skills when observed closely are also evaluated through gender lenses. This write-up tries to understand leadership as a concept both in general and gendered perspective.

### CONCEPT OF LEADERSHIP: A GENERAL PERSPECTIVE

From the aforementioned quotes of Eisenhower and Napoleon, who were popular for their leadership qualities, some features of leaders can be deduced. According to Eisenhower a leader should be capable of forcing his followers to do something which they would have not done otherwise. Same definition is used while defining power in political science. Thus,

a leader is one who is powerful. In other words, the leaders' voice predominates others voices.

Similarly, according to Napoleon a leader is the wave of last hope. When everything collapses including the state system, the leader stands. These features, domination and capacity to confront the most difficult situations make a leader extraordinary in a society or in a system. However, in order to be so powerful and optimistic a leader has to possess certain more qualities. Three such qualities can be identified. First, the leader should have the ability to understand the present and build the future i.e. a leader should be visionary. Second leader should have the clarity of the objective which s/he wants to be fulfilled through others. Finally, they should possess good communication skills which in turn can lead to the fulfillment of hopes of people.

A far sighted leader with definite aim and good communication skills is confident and able to gather supporters for their and common cause giving good reasons for why to support and follow them. In this context leadership can also be defined as the process of influencing people to understand what has to be done in the first place. Secondly, how it could be done effectively to accomplish the shared objectives by facilitating individual and collective efforts.

However, the concept of leadership is not limited to the influence alone. Rather, it is in consonance with constructive development of the collective as a whole. Consequently, a leader should not always be concerned with dominance and influence. Rather, the term leader or leadership would sound more meaningful if it's socially meaningful or makes sense socially, as it's then it

could lead to constructive development. A leader is seen as an individual who acts to change the behavior of his followers. It is difficult to change others' behavior without having a good understanding of the ongoing events. In other words, in order to be a strong leader one should also have the capability to explain the ongoing events. An understanding of both will help the leader in explaining what may take place. Thus an effective leadership requires an ability to construct knowledge of the world.

However, the perspectives on leadership as a process of social influence assign it a key role in the success of any machinery, be it a state or any organization. Henceforth, a leader is viewed as a person who within a certain pattern of social relationships, exercises influence over actions of others and over the social processes.

A leader may also be the individual who changes the pattern of relationship that exists or he may fight against the tendencies to change in order to maintain the established traditional pattern. The basic point is that when someone thus influences others, as well as the path the people might be following, a person becomes a leader in that situation. From this view point, all individuals exercise leadership once in a while. Even housewives who live under complete domination of their husbands exercise certain influence, even though limited, over the conduct of their children.

There are, however, certain persons who exercise an extraordinary influence over the way in which a society carries out its function. These appear very important when compared with those who are passive in the same situations. In the process of change scholars are mostly interested in the actions and social relations of those persons who exercise influence over many people rather than these passive ones.

## LEADERSHIP, CULTURE AND POWER: A CORRELATION

Individuals are embedded in cultures as they receive their food habits, clothing, language and lifestyle from their respective communities and its cultures. It is from the culture that we start our life with certain characteristic ways of understanding the world. Culture reflects the experience of oneself with others. In undergoing such experience, people draw on a common book of given ways of knowing- which constitute the culture. Culture makes a society socially meaningful which denotes that culture is the most general tool for meaning making in society. Social influence plays an important role in the success of any leadership. Social influence would be rather incomplete if a mention of culture is not made in this regard.

Therefore, the processes of leadership are connected to the larger cultural frame within which they occur. Leadership and its style also vary according to the culture in which it has to function. Culture is a kind of grandparent of all leadership. Culture building is the process that deals with what is really happening. In other words it is the primary process of meaning making in collective experience and therefore the primary leadership process.

The harsh reality about culture is that it cannot be changed quickly or easily as certain basic assumptions and values are embedded in different cultures. Therefore firstly, the form that leadership needs to take in different cultural settings and secondly, the role of leadership in dealing with culture becomes important. To exercise a certain role in a society embedded in a particular culture, a leader has to be powerful to access people to raise his voice. Hence, power becomes another important factor in leadership studies in addition to culture. This is because power is needed to overcome friction and confusion that is frequent in any society and culture.

A noticeable fact here is that culture is a significant determinant of leadership skills too.. This is so, because a society of which a leader is a part has people from divergent cultures. This difference in culture and ideology gives rise to conflicts, which demands an ability and skill in a leader to calm tense situations where differences dominate and

communication has broken down- and bring people from divergent cultures towards constructive engagement.

However, it is significant to mention here that power should not be confused with dominance. It is so because the job of a leader is to make people follow him or her through the art of convincing and not through force or domination. For leadership to be effective, the leaders should practice 'power with' and not 'power over'. Here, 'power with' refers to shared assertiveness and reciprocity. 'Power over' on the other hand indicates the practice of power as domination.

Consequently, in leadership, leader power is the ability to impose one's will in a constructive and democratic way. Therefore, power becomes a linking factor between leadership and the will of the follower. Although, power is often said to be a foundation of leadership that influences and motivates a group of individuals towards achieving a common goal, it is often considered to be neither necessary nor a sufficient condition for the emergence of an effective leadership. This is so, because the co-relation between power and leadership lies in the fact how power affects psychologically.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF LEADERSHIP

Crystal L. Hoyt emphasizes the psychological properties of power like optimism, abstract thinking, action, risk taking, and confidence. He argues that these properties can be seen as a part and parcel of effective leadership. Thus leadership proves to be effective when a leader is able to harness the positive psychological effects of power while mitigating the negative ones, that is, when leader involves in constructive development and meaning making. Thus, the best leaders are action-oriented, optimistic perspective takers who see the big picture. And power combined with perspective taking can be a constructive force that allows for the emergence of effective leadership.

This means that power relates to leadership through its ability to alter individuals' cognition and behaviour. In addition to this, the emergence of effective leadership depends on whether the positive psychological effects of power engulf the more deleterious effects.

## LEADERSHIP SKILLS AND STYLES

For a balanced use of power a leader has to be skilled at whatever s/he does. Therefore leaders from this viewpoint are individuals who make future in the world of uncertainty through their various leadership skills. Through these skills leaders make and remake the machinery of which they are a part. So, an instinct to 'make' becomes a basic skill to leadership. In order to be a maker, a leader should have the ability to see through the contradictions and complexities of the future that others cannot yet see.

Leaders should be very clear about what they are making and also about how it gets made. This clarity about the future making in turn demands an ability to overcome dilemmas. Dilemmas could be overcome only when a leader has the ability to involve himself deeply in unfamiliar environments to learn from them in a first person way.

Leaders are not foretellers. They cannot predict, but they can make the future. They can ready themselves for the future. Here the role of people becomes important as it is they who can decide what kind of future they want to create and go for it. Consequently, leader should be skilled at mobilizing people. It means that he should have the ability to create, nurture and engage with purposeful social change networks.

Acting in self-interest will not be enough as they need to broaden their concept of self to include the larger systems of which they are a part. Effective leadership requires leaders to link and organize people for action-simultaneously protecting against dangerous connectivity. Consequently, leaders by acting in an organized manner could enable themselves to make the future, cutting through

chaos with the appropriate use of skills. Without them they will be groping in the darkness.

Skills thus denote capabilities of leaders and the underlying element of effective performance. An effective leadership could be acquired if a person is capable of learning from his experience. To put it in other words, leaders need a learn-as-you-go-style of leadership that denotes how to learn from early setbacks and failures.

An influential leadership which is carried out in a set cultural pattern possessing power and skills gives birth to certain styles of functioning to a person who is called a leader. "There is no particular style of leadership which can be said universal. As leadership is one of the most observed, yet least understood phenomena on earth."

Leadership styles basically are the manner and approach of providing direction, motivating people and implementing plans. In 1939, a management thinker named Kurt Lewin in his research identified three major styles of leadership and his study proved to be very influential. The three major styles of leadership are (U.S Army handbook 1973):

- Authoritarian or autocratic
- Participative or democratic
- Delegative

In his research he mentioned that although successful leaders use all three styles, with one of them normally dominant, unsuccessful leaders tend to stick with one style.

The above styles of leadership put forward by the management thinkers are true not only for management and industrial studies but also for political studies. This means that a good leader be it a manager or a politician can perform effectively only if he has an assortment of all these styles in the performance of his job. What is meant by the assortment of the styles is that different situations call for different styles and, great leaders are the one who adapt themselves at using the mix which is appropriate to a given situation. Consequently, there

is no single leadership style that would be effective at all institutions.

Institutional culture, tradition, governance structures, and the particular demands of time and place help determine what style would be most effective. But style becomes important because it can either promote or hinder a leader's ability to make meaningful change. Perceptions of leadership style are also often linked to expectations based on personal attributes such as gender, race, ethnicity, age and cultural and religious traditions.

## GENDER AND LEADERSHIP STYLES

For the holistic understanding of any system its analysis from gender perspective plays an important role. This is because studying gender means learning about both men and women owing to their interdependent nature. While sex is natural, gender is learned. Gender is socially constructed and is reflected in masculine and feminine identities. Also cultures have a greater role to play in reflecting what it means to be masculine and feminine, explaining that these identities are socially built, brought up, understood and learned.

Consequently, it becomes pertinent to examine how female leadership styles differ from their male counterparts.

David Andrew (2004) argues that a feminine style of leadership is more empowerment based. This refers to a political, economic and social strength of individuals and communities together with developing confidence in their own capacities. In the process of empowerment they also want to ascertain that they have a decision making power of their own and also have proper access to information and resources for taking proper decisions.

They also try to ensure their ability to exercise assertiveness in collective decision making. Consequently, their styles of leadership could be viewed as transformational, collaborative, interpersonal and interactive. A transformational style of functioning denotes a change in individuals

and social systems where leaders connect followers' sense of identity and self to the mission and the collective identity of the organization, being a role model for the followers that inspires them.

These styles usually concentrate on creating an open, honest and inclusive atmosphere or a feeling of being on a "team" which leads to the avoidance of a strict sense of hierarchy and subordination to a great extent, if not completely.

In contrast to this-the masculine style of leadership is usually transactional in nature. This denotes directing and motivating followers through appealing to their own self-interest. To be more specific it is command and control oriented authoritarian style that depends on one individual having power over and giving orders to others. This style is indicative of hierarchies, where one individual is allowed to make the decision for many.

Women leaders have a stronger need to get things done. They are considered to be more empathetic and flexible. They are stronger in interpersonal skills than their male counterparts and are particular about reading situations more accurately and take information in from all sides.

Women leaders particularly are meticulous about how well they behave and carry themselves. Being particular of their social styles such as tone of voice and active listening is dominant in their interpersonal skills. This is so, because responses to women and men in their roles as leaders are conditioned by a social structure traditionally dominated by men.

Traditionally, people think "male" when they think "leader" in any cultural set up. Even in the advanced cultural set up of countries like the United States of America people respond differently to women and men who are leaders. To cite an example-during the presidential campaign in America an excessive amount of attention was paid to frivolous observation about the "low-cut" neckline of an outfit worn by Hillary Clinton (one of the contenders for the presidential post) during a speech given by her on the senate floor. This makes it clear that people still have a rigid approach

towards women in powerful public and political roles and that, women in leadership roles draw out different reactions than men do.

Now, this kind of differential response is particular in case of women leaders because leadership goes hand-in-hand with power which in turn is co-related with the social structure. Power operates as a social structure made up of number of practices that maintain a cultural system of dominance. The practices that maintain a power system include patterns of discourse, shared understandings about the set of values and also participation in such values, the norms and roles and the expectations prevailing in such system.

This social structure transcends, in certain respects, the wishes and behaviour of any particular individual and has a tendency to shape decisions, interactions and social relations to fit it. Therefore, responses to women and men in leadership roles are conditioned by a social structure traditionally dominated by men.

It is because of the learned expectations that are shaped and supported by the surrounding social structure that have invalidated and undercut women's attempts to be powerful, effective and influential, due to which a woman leader elicits different reaction than a male leader.

Another important fact is that, because of the perceived incompatibility between the requirements of femininity and those of leadership, women are often required to "soften" their leadership styles to gain the approval of their constituents.

Women who do not try to make the situations in their agencies/organizations less extreme, as well as temper their competence and agency with warmth and friendliness risk being disliked and less influential. Men face no such necessity to be agreeable while exercising power. Women who lead with an autocratic style are the targets of more disapproval than those who enact a more democratic style. Men may choose the autocratic style with relative impunity, if they are effective leaders. But, when women demonstrate

competent leadership with an explicitly masculine arena- something that often requires the application of a “harder” leadership style, they are disliked and disparaged.

Therefore, women typically seek consensus building and try to involve many key people in making important decisions. This shows that women require external validation more than men do. Merely leadership potential or expertise does not guarantee a woman’s success unless accompanied by legitimation by another established leader. This means that often a woman’s leadership credibility is recognized when it is provided by some established high status leader.

A worthwhile noticing fact is that context plays a very important role in these leadership experiences. Specifically, social structure is the foundation of all the reactions and behaviour that women undergo. For instance, some women leaders were interviewed in Norway and France. The Norwegian women expressed joy and a sense of efficacy in their leadership roles. The French women, on the other hand spoke of difficulties, conflicts, loneliness and marginality.

The fact is that, in Norway, with its long and deep-rooted history of women’s involvement in political leadership, women in such positions felt a strong sense of legitimacy in their leadership roles. In France, where women’s leadership was relatively new and rare, that sense of legitimacy was absent and women were called upon to prove themselves repeatedly.

It is not only the case of France but world over women undergo such problems on being placed at high positions and otherwise. It is also evident that as in the case of France the case is no better in India as well. Highlighting on the Indian case and its specificities on cultural leanings one would certainly witness the differing responses to men and women. Looking at Indian culture through the lens of gender,

one understands that their location in the larger cultural context points out to the particularity of their situation, a situation where they find themselves in an unstated boundary that keeps them from moving into upper echelons.

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