

CHAPTER 1

Introducing Issues for "Leading Women"¹

"Experience is the best teacher"

Research Participant, 2006

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"It's Monday morning at 10:00. I have already prepared my agenda in advance of this Management Committee Team meeting – what I call, "the "Men's Hut". I have met with my staff to review the data to be presented and I have coordinated with other managers who need to attend. Copies of the agenda and back-up material have been made and put in a presentation package. As the only female manager attending this meeting, I rehearse in my mind any issues which may be controversial and prepare myself for anticipated questions. I know that in this group of six men there will be no support for any of my recommendations that may be controversial. Moreover, it is clear that as a woman, my leadership is simply not accepted. As I walk down the hall and open the heavy door to the large boardroom, I realize that it is, indeed, lonely."

¹ The term "Leading Women" was developed to describe women in leadership roles who participated in the first women's networking and learning event that I initiated in Calgary, Alberta. Like others who have adopted this term, I use it here to refer to women in supervisory, team lead, management and senior executive roles in organizations.

"The real prize is the attainment of membership, not the knowledge that objectifies that membership" (Ritti & Levy, 2010, p. 13)

I submitted my resume to a small oil and gas company because my current position was being eliminated. At the time, I worked at a mid-size hotel where I had built the human resource department from the ground up. I was given a working notice of four weeks with no severance so I started on a job search right away. I wasn't really interested in anything more than a job that would last a few months, because I was pregnant with my second daughter. As I had worked with a career coach before, I sought her advice again. She helped me to revise my resume and gave me the name of an oil and gas company that was growing and needed a consultant on a part-time basis to do some recruiting. "Perfect!" I thought.

There are always signposts along the way in life, right? Signposts are those seemingly insignificant, individual events that happen in your life that, when strung together, point to a significant learning. They help to focus your attention, and can be very revealing. The signposts are there; whether or not we choose to acknowledge them is something else.

The first signpost was the day of my interview. I arrived at the interview expecting to meet only with the President and Chairman, but there was a third man in the room. I remember distinctly that none of them offered to shake my hand. Also, I recall that the interview was difficult as there were several questions that I couldn't answer. However, they needed a consultant to recruit for several positions, so they hired me. Although the interview was a totally different experience for me, I chose to ignore the signpost and agreed to start right away.

When I started in this small company, I had absolutely no understanding of either the Oil and Gas industry or the positions for which I was recruiting. In fact, I really didn't understand how human resources supported the oil and gas business. It was a huge learning curve. But I was up for the challenge as I loved to learn and my husband and I really needed the income! Also, I was convinced that no other company would hire a woman who was five months pregnant. I spent quite a bit of time learning the requirements of each position for which I was recruiting, and I delayed going on maternity leave until the last possible moment so that I could begin to understand the business.

There was another consultant on site as well who was coaching the managers in the company. When I found out that he was being compensated significantly more than I was being paid I felt that my work was somehow diminished. I found the courage to ask for a slightly higher rate at my weekly meeting with the President, Chairman and Vice Chairman where we discussed human resource and administrative issues. Although I had not asked for much more, I do recall

that this was approved. It was my first big win! In reflecting back, I wonder how I could have been so bold to ask for this raise so early in my tenure with the company, and then as the years went by, didn't question the equity of my compensation until a year or two before I left. I had failed to read that early signpost.

We delivered my daughter early in the morning. Nevertheless, only a couple of hours after the delivery, my husband informed me that the company had left a message for me to call them, as there was a problem in the accounting department. This was the third signpost that I chose to ignore: a signpost called "balancing company needs with family needs". I was not prepared for being pulled apart by the demands of work and the need to tend to my young family. Although I had experienced pangs of guilt when I went to work after having my daughter, I had no idea of what was to come, in terms of the number of hours that I would work and the guilt that a mother feels juggling her career and family. It was another signpost that I missed.

After my daughter was born, I was hired on a permanent, part-time basis. It evolved very quickly from three days a week to a full-time job with a larger scope. I assumed responsibility for administration as well as developing the human resource function from the ground up. This was very exciting work and I loved the dynamic energy in the company. Over time, I was given additional responsibilities, including managing Information Systems and the General and Administrative Budget (also known as the G & A budget), overseeing the development of the annual report and Corporate Communications and managing facilities. My part-time recruiting job had grown to be a job with significant scope, responsibility and challenge – I couldn't have been more engaged. Yet I recall the Chairman telling me that I probably "wouldn't last" because of the pace. Here was another signpost that indicated how demanding the industry and this growing company could be. But I was so energized by the high learning curve and the opportunity to create and develop from the ground up, that I missed this signpost as well.

When I was hired full time, I assumed a contingent of staff that I needed to manage. This was a surprise as I had not expected to be put into any kind of supervisory role. I had managed volunteers quite successfully in my previous career in the non-profit world, and because I had experience in the helping profession, I felt that not only could I manage, but that I could do a good job. Another surprise occurred early on, when we established a Human Resource (HR) and Administration component to the management committee. This meant that I had entered what Rutti (2010) refers to as the "men's hut"! He describes it thus:

Picture the aboriginal men's hut. Then imagine one of the tribal leaders bringing in a group of young boys through the sacrosanct interior and

saying: 'See? What did I tell you? There's nothing but this old hut, and there's a bunch of masks that we wear, and here's the Chief's official seat. It's just a chair with some feathers and a bear skin wrapped around it. Really, there's nothing special at all about the men's hut'....Everybody knows: It's the men's hut. A company office bespeaks privilege and achievement. It is an important symbol of leadership authority in the hierarchy of the company. (2010, pp. 196-197)

I understand the Men's Hut to be an exclusive group who have decision-making power, shared rituals, unspoken words, and secret understandings. It's more than a group of guys sitting around a campfire commiserating. It's all about having a shared perspective, a common understanding and view of the world. Entering the boardroom is more than just participating at the same table. It's about having the same kind of power, position and authority as the boys. Well, I hadn't really attained that part, but my foot was in the door of the hut and I was really proud of that.

Thus, it was me and the boys discussing the evolution and development of the company culture, and ensuring that staff that was hired fit into the corporate culture. In those early days when the company was small, this was critical. So I took my responsibility and role in the boardroom quite seriously. But my social work days did not prepare me for the dynamics of the boardroom.

I think my biggest struggle was being given credit and credibility for my talents, and striving to be accepted as a professional who belonged in that boardroom; to be seen as an equal. I was in the Men's Hut, but I wasn't really a member. Hence, entering the boardroom is more than just participating at the same table. It's about having the same kind of power, position and authority as the people present.

As a woman and developing leader, I needed a strong support system. As time went on, the excitement and energy I felt when working in the company was replaced with my diminishing self-confidence. In a room full of engineers and accountants, I began to question my credibility. More and more, I felt misunderstood by the management committee. I felt like I was in a no-man's land, sandwiched between the executives who didn't understand me and my staff who needed a strong leader. I felt I had no one in the company with whom to share my concerns who would appreciate my perspective as the only woman on the management team. Further, I thought that my issues were unique to this fast paced company.

Looking back, I see that I had significant influence and power to implement initiatives created by my teams. However, the only problem was that I really was on my own in terms of learning. I was given a lot of rope, so to speak, and I really could have used a mentor to prevent me from getting caught in a noose.

Creating a safety net of resources for support has been a significant learning for me.

I was doing a good job managing my teams and the HR function in the company, but I really thought that I could enhance my credibility, confidence and competence if I had more credentials. While I was enjoying the learning that I was doing on my own, I believed that having academic qualifications to back up my role would not only enhance my credibility, but also that of the company's in the HR community. I decided to resolve this by going back to school to get a graduate degree. As part of my degree, I was exposed to a number of writers and theorists in the field of Women in Leadership and I discovered through a review of the literature that I wasn't alone in my experiences. In fact, I also discovered that the company I worked for wasn't the only company with these issues – it wasn't me and it wasn't the company. I came to realize that there are structural issues within society in general that can help or hinder women who advance as leaders. In addition, my newfound knowledge was a catalyst for me to leave the company. After taking the graduate degree, I was no longer the same. I had been injected with self-awareness that began the moment I started the graduate program and continued long past the completion of the course work. The program was instrumental in me examining my values, and it provided an opportunity to make sense of what I had experienced without assigning either judgement or blame. In short, I was armed with new perspectives, ideas and tools, and I was ready to move forward. Consequently, I developed a training program that was designed to help women navigate around the barriers and to face the leadership challenges that are created by societal structures that impact women's advancement.

This book is a combination of several perspectives. First, there is the academic perspective, which incorporates data and theories and findings from an ongoing review of the literature on women and leadership that I have pursued since 1998 with my own research. Second, there are personal stories which are intended to illustrate key lessons. Third, and most important, there is data from women executives and managers in Calgary, Canada who shared their experiences and insights. My intention is to weave real life, practical information with real stories and feelings, with academic theory.

One purpose of this book is to share my experiences with women. When you are in the trenches, in the midst of activity, it's easy to feel that you are alone if you are not aware of the resources that can support you. For this reason, I include personal stories, excerpts from some of my early journal entries and the section on Tips from the Trenches to illustrate the leadership issues.

The second purpose of the book is for it to act as a catalyst for you, the reader, to gain some insight into what you can do to manage and advance your leadership career. During my graduate work, I developed a model of leadership for women

that included an assessment tool for the five core competencies identified as success factors. The model, and the concomitant self-assessment tool, became part of an executive leadership program that I offered initially as a training program, and more recently in individual leadership coaching. Over the years, with further research, the model was refined. For example, I conducted a second research project with women executives in Calgary where the five success factors were explored in much more depth. It is my hope that by attending to the insights and wisdom provided by the women who participated in the research, using the leadership model with its five success factors as a foundation and completing the self-assessment exercises, you will find the tools needed to continue your leadership development.

This book focuses on just one piece of the work that I've done with women in a coaching capacity. Additional elements such as communication strategies, negotiation tactics, managing power issues, and connecting values with vision could be topics of a future book. In particular, networking is a significant area to explore as having a solid network in place is really critical for any leader's success.

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"It's noon. Two hours of probing questions, review of reports and recommendations end on a low ebb. Some recommendations presented for approval today may in fact require more information – a 'bring forward' for the next session. Controversial issues brought interruptions and often a tone in the discussion that lends itself to some self-doubt and deflating my self-esteem. But today, the lack of support did not get in the way: one recommendation was approved. Leaving the boardroom, the feeling remains the same though It is indeed, a lonely experience."