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Leadership for social transformation: some ideas and questions on institutions and feminist leadership

Aruna Rao and David Kelleher

This article affirms the importance of changing the rules, not playing by them, if we are to transform institutions so that they reflect and promote gender equality. It describes how institutions block efforts to promote gender equality, and suggests that recent efforts to ‘professionalise’ NGOs have exacerbated this tendency. However, NGOs are also currently concerned with ‘organisational learning’, and this may offer them a ‘third way’ which combines professionalisation with feminist ideals, including devolution of power. The article finishes with a discussion of the kind of leadership required to challenge institutional inequality, and suggests directions for learning.

We recently saw the details of a new training course being offered by an American business school, called ‘Strategic Leadership for Women’. It was intended for existing and aspiring women leaders in the non-profit and corporate world. It focused primarily on improving women’s presentation of themselves, building their negotiating skills, enhancing their ability to read their organisational context, and showing them how to chart a road to success for themselves within their particular environment, playing by the existing rules.

This course is not unique in its emphases – in fact, it is representative of a whole genre. This is valuable work, but the vision of leadership underpinning such courses is strikingly different from the way we understand it in our work. We are interested in changing the rules of the game, not playing by them. That is the challenge of the feminist movement, the challenge of social change, the challenge of the work we do. In this short article, we intend to look briefly at some of the institutional challenges we face, and to relate these to the question of leadership in NGOs involved in development and human rights. Finally, we will look at how we need to work to transform ourselves in order to transform our institutions.

The need to transform institutions

Institutions are ‘structures that humans impose on human interaction’ (North 1999). But how are institutions structured, and how do they operate? Further, how can we make institutions serve our purpose? The scope for individuals inside organisations to push a particular agenda is limited by the formal institutional systems and procedures – the ‘rules of the game’, and the degree to which the formal rules are enforced. Key insights into the underlying nature of modern organisations come from the realisation that organisations are founded on a nineteenth-century mixture of beliefs from patriarchal visions of the world, militarism, theories of
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social Darwinism, and the metaphor of the machine bequeathed by Newtonian physics. Clearly, this type of organisation is not designed to transform social relations; it is intended to reinforce them. Such thinking led to hierarchical structures underpinned by a world-view that sees power as a limited commodity, held by the few, to control the behaviour of the many.

Over the past decade, leading feminist researchers have explored organisational culture, structure, systems, and procedures, in a variety of organisational forms, including public bureaucracies, international organisations, corporations, and NGOs. Feminist researchers have argued that organisations are not rational, neutral bodies, but living and breathing microcosms of the societies that house them and the people who inhabit them. The organisations that rule our world are informed by cultural values and patriarchal norms that are anti-women and exclusionary. The gender biases that are built into the very foundations of organisations seep into their ways of working, to produce gender-biased outcomes.

Scope for change is limited by intangible and complex, but highly powerful, informal institutional values, norms, structures, and processes that underlie and shape human interaction. They are often hidden, not obvious; and need to be uncovered by a variety of methods (Schein 1992). These hidden norms operate as informal constraints on people’s behaviour and the policies of the organisation. They are, perhaps, even more of a constraint than the formal rules. They are often extremely hard to recognise. Examples include norms of behaviour and unspoken codes of conduct. They are embedded in language, symbols, myths, and social custom, and in different human institutions, from marriage, to markets, to local governance structures – for example, village panchayats (local governing councils) in India. These hidden norms are also embedded in what we might call modern organisations. It is clear that in order to make lasting changes to what an organisation does, both formal rules and informal norms need to change. Leaders who aim to bring about social transformation in line with feminist goals must provide the vision to challenge these institutional principles, and their manifestation in organisations. Part of this process is to challenge hierarchical power.

Overcoming new barriers

We are aware of a variety of experiments underway in development and human rights NGOs that are attempting to steer a way through these issues (see Rao et al. 1999). One medium-sized North American NGO we know of has been involved in a long-term effort to make its programme more relevant to changing times. Most recently, staff have made gender and cultural diversity a central part of their programme, realising that programmatic change is dependent on a change in the way they work. Part of the change is a commitment to more flexibility and responsiveness in the work of the organisation, and devolution of power. The commitment to devolution of power has resulted in the change being managed by a multi-level team, working by consensus. The effort has just begun, but there is a high level of excitement about, and shared ownership of, the new direction. There also seems to be a willingness to accept the inevitably slower pace of decision-making brought by devolved power and a commitment to participation.

However, the recent moves on the part of many national and international development NGOs to embrace a more ‘corporate’ approach does present leaders who seek to transform the ‘deep structure’ of organisations with a new set of challenges. Recent moves to make NGOs more ‘professional’ have led to an emphasis on ‘control-oriented’ factors, such as accountability to management, financial management, and adherence to policy (for more on this, see Kelleher and
MacLaren 1996). The challenge for the North American organisation will be to manage the tension between its commitment to devolved decision-making and the imperative for decisions to be made within a reasonable time. Much too often, we are seeing leadership that aims to promote social change, including feminist goals, sacrificed at the altar of professionalism. Anecdotal evidence is strong that this has led to a regrettable reduction in attention to principles that were formerly very highly valued – for example, commitment to beneficiaries’ participation, and devolution of power (Wallace 1999). This is because at the heart of the shift to a corporate approach is a change in the way organisations encourage their staff to conceptualise and exercise power. As stated earlier, power is expressed in modern organisations through hierarchy. Power is viewed as a limited commodity. Power struggles are conceptualised and played out as a win-lose game – if I have more, you have less. This conception of power devalues participation, and silences voices that would bring alternative perspectives and knowledge to deliver equitable outcomes, including gender-equitable outcomes. Is it possible to steer a ‘third way’ between the hierarchical managerial control of ‘professionalisation’, and the flexibility and political devolution that is required for organisational change for gender equality? Many corporations and some NGOs are also experimenting with ideas of ‘organisational learning’ (Senge 1992). Most published perspectives on organisational learning do not integrate a gender analysis or other analyses of social differentiation (Argyris et al. 1996), and it is far from clear that proponents of organisational learning contemplate a serious re-alignment or re-thinking of power or other dominant values in the organisation. However, some features of organisational learning have much in common with feminist organising. These include commitments to team learning and dialogue, to understanding the whole system, and to listening to issues important to clients or beneficiaries. Perhaps the North American organisation will learn that their preconceptions about decision-making can be revised.

Leadership and individual transformation

It is becoming clear that if we are to do this transformatory work, then both appointed leaders and others need to develop transformatory leadership skills. If we were to offer advice to leaders, we would begin by giving attention to the following issues.

Challenging the process

We would emphasise that leadership for transformation means being willing to take risks by questioning existing ways of working, and considering how tasks might be done differently if the primary motivation is a concern for equality and justice. The unconscious ‘deep structure’ of organisations leads workers to behave in ways that may seem reasonable, but sometimes prevent gender equality and the delivery of gender-equitable programme outcomes.

Action and power

We would also suggest that to become a transformational leader requires a mind-shift to a different way of being, and time spent considering what this means. Paradoxically, we believe that becoming a force for positive change and transformation is more about who the leader is than what she or he does. Much too often, leaders see it as essential to try to get more power, so that we can push what we believe is a better agenda and overcome opposition. In contrast to Newtonian ideas of power as limited and controlling, we see power as an energy that is limitless, challenging of hierarchies, and available to
Part of the wonder of the conception of power as relational and unlimited is its potential to transform relationships, and, ultimately, human organisations and institutions. Leaders need to be open to seeing the world as primarily made up of relationships. This is not just a question of personal psychology and interpersonal relations: it is also a question of spirituality. We have found David Bohm’s book, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (1980), useful in thinking about this. Bohm suggests that the material world and consciousness are parts of a single unbroken totality of movement. Everything in the universe affects everything else, and each one of us is related to the whole of humankind. When we are engaged in something that is deeply significant for us personally, and are attuned to those who surround us, we can experience moments of incredible clarity or joy, and achieve extraordinary physical, artistic, or intellectual things. Musicians call this being ‘in the groove’.

To relate this seemingly abstract set of ideas to the practical issues faced by leaders in development organisations, the challenge is to discover what is needed to find these moments of ‘groove’, which will lead us as individuals, and in relationships with our colleagues, to be a force for justice and equality. We think that key factors in creating these moments are personal commitment to a cause, and the process of working in close collaboration and dialogue with others who share similar goals.

Lessons we have to offer from our experience are:

- **Define yourself as a force for transformation** in a manner that makes sense to you, in light of your understanding of the situation, and your values.
- **Work purposively for thoughtfully chosen and valued ends**, knowing that you are part of something larger than yourself, which is working with you, rather than focusing on accomplishing a task ‘come hell or high water’ (a confrontational, aggressive, man-against-nature script rooted in patriarchy).
- **Work with power**. Realise that power comes from all locations and positions, not only from those higher in a hierarchy. There is also power (and risk) in having a clear purpose, enough information, and a good relationship with others. These forms of power enable you to be a force for change, beyond playing by the organisational rules.
- **Avoid the trap of becoming a ‘true believer’**, denying the legitimacy of different points of view, as this prevents the dialogue necessary to come to a holistic vision shared by all.

**Observation and analysis**

We would also highlight the usefulness of some new analytical tools transformational leaders. Although organisational analysis has been going on for some time, the complexity of organisational environments and our concern for the deep structure has led us to seek out, and create, new analytical tools intended to help transformational leaders understand organisations. Many of these challenge old ideas of organisations as machines, and develop an understanding of them as unpredictable, living systems, made up of individual people. We are starting to understand that we cannot only look at parts of organisations, but need to study them as whole entities as well. Tools for seeing ‘wholeness’ include mind-maps, timelines, multi-perspective analyses, causal maps, and power circuits analysis.

Some new analytical tools also address the issue of power. For example, one set of analytical tools which we have found helpful has been developed by Barry Oshry (1999). It contains a description of the different types of power available to people at different levels of an organisation, and this kind of analysis opens up the
possibility that staff at all levels can be powerful actors for change – not only appointed leaders. Other analytical tools direct our attention to ways in which power is used in systems. Is it being used in ways that restrict the power of others, and exclude them from key activities or decisions? Or is it being used to energise the system?

A third group of new tools is concerned with the ‘deep structure’ of the organisation – the unconscious, taken-for-granted rules that are beyond challenge (for a fuller discussion, see Rao et al. 1999). For example, aspects of the ‘deep structure’ of many organisations are:

- rigid beliefs about power and hierarchy and their expression;
- failure to understand and address the fact that all human beings balance their work with their family life;
- a narrow focus on instrumentality – that is, the reduction of organisational purpose to a narrow set of quantifiable indicators;
- a tendency to emphasise the individual hero and achievement model at the expense of collaborative efforts involving both visible and so-called ‘invisible work’.

There may be many other aspects of the deep structure of particular organisations that need to be uncovered. An important way to do that is by ‘surfacing’ silent voices within the organisation and its clients or beneficiaries. Aspects of the ‘deep structure’ can then be changed by altering work practices, so that they counter deep-structure values that hinder gender-equality objectives.

**Conclusion**

The forces of the status quo are very powerful; the daily pressures to play the game by the rules are overwhelming. We must develop a greater understanding of the conditions needed to start and sustain social transformation. We must build managerial efficiency with leadership for change, not at the expense of it. To do this in practical ways, addressing the pressing challenges that women around the world face today, is the task in hand.

**Notes**


2. Social Darwinism is the theory that persons, groups, and races are subject to laws of natural selection. According to the theory, which was popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the strong grew in power and in cultural influence over the weak.

3. Newtonian physics maintains that everything in existence can be described objectively, because all phenomena result from the interactions of their physical parts.

4. For example, Nuket Kardam (1991), Kathleen Staudt (1998), Anne Marie Goetz (1997), and Joan Acker (1990), among others.

5. Clients or beneficiaries of organisations often have little if any access to the mechanisms that are intended to make organisations accountable, and other mechanisms intended to ensure good governance. It is obvious that this
renders organisations poor vehicles for promoting values of gender justice and new paradigms of sustainable development!

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