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Champions of gender equality: female and male executives as leaders of gender change

Champions
of gender
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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine male and female executives as leaders “championing” gender change interventions. It problematizes current exhortations for male leaders to lead gender change, much as they might lead any other business-driven change agenda. It argues that organizational gender scholarship is critical to understanding the gendered nature of championing.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper draws on a feminist qualitative research project examining the efficacy of a gender intervention in a university and a policing institution. Interviews with four leaders have been chosen from the larger study for analysis against the backdrop of material from interviewees and the participant observation of the researcher. It brings a social constructionist view of gender and Acker’s gendering processes to bear on understanding organizational gender change.

Findings – The sex/gender of the leader is inescapably fore-fronted by the gender change intervention. Gendered expectations and choices positioned men as powerful and effective champions while undermining the effectiveness of the woman in this study.

Research limitations/implications – Further research examining male and female leaders capacity to champion gender change is required.

Practical implications – This research identifies effective champion behaviors, provides suggestions for ensuring that gender equity interventions are well championed and proposes a partnership model where senior men and women play complementary roles leading gender change.

Originality/value – This paper is of value to practitioners and scholars. It draws attention to contemporary issues of leadership and gender change, seeking to bridge the gap between theory and practice that undermines our change efforts.

Keywords Gender, Organizational change, Gender equality, Equal opportunities, Champion, Executive leadership

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

As the business case for gender equality continues to strengthen, so too does the expectation that building gender equitable organizations can be tackled in the same way as any other organizational change process. But can this logic be extended to our expectations of the role played by organizational leaders? While the critical role played by executive leaders as “champions” for organizational change agendas is well accepted (Kotter, 2007) and much explored, can this understanding simply be transferred to organizational gender change interventions? Given the increasing popularity of the business case approach, a focus on executive leaders’ capacity and willingness to drive gender change is warranted.

For more than a decade now Catalyst has asserted that “[t]he key to women’s advancement rests squarely with him’ (Wellington *et al.*, 2003, p. 19). Others, such as



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prominent international organization the Conference Board of Canada (Orser, 2001) and global consulting firms (Desvaux *et al.*, 2010; Schreiber *et al.*, 2010) have joined Catalyst (Prime and Moss-Racusin, 2009; Mattis, 2001) and Catalyst offshoot MARC (Men Advocating Real Change) in calling for the engagement of men in organizational gender change efforts. This emphasis on male CEOs is also clearly evident in Australia, where the Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elisabeth Broderick convened a group of Australia's most prominent businessmen called Male Champions for Change (2011).

The "business case" approach, where it is assumed leaders will champion gender change in the same way as any other business issue, appears gender and power blind, lacking an analysis of either. Unstated, yet obvious, is that powerful men would be leading these change efforts. The second approach, wishing to hold men accountable, is neither gender nor power blind. Indeed it is based on a pragmatic understanding that it is men who hold the power to create change. As Elisabeth Broderick noted in a recent public address "we cannot continue to ignore the sites of power"[1].

For many gender and organization scholars this focus on powerful men is problematic. As beneficiaries of the gendered status quo themselves it seems far-fetched to expect these privileged men to be part of the solution. And what about the few senior women? Women executives, themselves a minority group, subjected to intense visibility and scrutiny (Kram and McCollom Hampton, 2003) and operating within masculinist cultures, may be equally conflicted in advocating for gender change.

This research addresses a gap in our understanding regarding male and female executives as they undertake the leadership role of "championing" a gender change intervention. It examines the role, challenges, risks and choices as perceived by four leaders of an academic institution and police force. In these accounts the sex/gender of the leader is inescapably fore-fronted by the gender change intervention, which raises important questions and dilemmas regarding the capacity of women and men to exercise (gendered) power to effect gender change within their organization. The implications for current practice in the light of this careful examination of the gendered nature of executive leadership for gender change are discussed.

Context and theoretical background

Men to lead gender change: timely or naïve?

The call for men, particularly male CEOs, to engage in bringing about organizational change has been met with both scepticism and approval. On the one hand it is important public recognition of the continuing failure of organizations to create more gender equitable workplaces. It re-positions gender change away from being women's problem and therefore women's work, and places responsibility and accountability for change with those who have positional power. Yet this enthusiastic and simplistic call for men's engagement as the cure-all is, I will argue, disconnected from gender scholarship.

Doing gender and gender change

This paper is situated within the social constructionist view of gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987) and Acker's (1990, 1992) work on the gendered organization. At the heart of this foundational scholarship is the understanding that both individuals and organizations "do gender". This is helpful here as we examine the role of leaders, who are themselves doing gender identity work while simultaneously being expected to disrupt systemic gendering processes that create gendered advantage and disadvantage (Acker, 1992). The research aims to provide a contextualized

understanding of the gendering processes at work for leaders in building/resisting more gender equitable organizations.

Gender change, which is understood to be both radical and transformative, requires “fundamentally altering power relations in organizations” (Meyerson and Kolb, 2000, p. 554). Difficulties in gender change interventions can therefore be seen as inevitable, because they redistribute power and rewards, undermining the privilege and advantage (Eveline, 1994) of those who, in turn, have the power to undermine change (Acker, 2000, 2006). Careful studies of gender change interventions, often reporting limited success (see e.g. Benschop and Verloo, 2006; Blackmore and Sachs, 2007; Charlesworth and Baird, 2007; Cockburn, 1991; de Vries, 2010; Eveline and Bacchi, 2009; Pincus, 2009; van den Brink *et al.*, 2010), have explored the influence of powerful men in resisting and undermining interventions and limiting change.

Champions: leaders for gender change

Clearly it cannot be assumed that men can and will drive the radical gender change required. What about women? Women’s engagement with and contribution to creating change has been extensively explored, often with a focus on the development of a feminist consciousness (e.g. see Colgan and Ledwith, 1996; Marshall, 1984; Morley and Walsh, 1995; Pringle, 2004). This focus on women has been criticized as burdening women with the responsibility for change (Mavin, 2008) and has lacked a focus on those with the formal power as leaders to create change. Yet positional power continues to be identified as a critical variable in gender change initiatives (Blackmore and Sachs, 2007; Charlesworth *et al.*, 2005; Mattis, 2001; Olgiati and Shapiro, 2002).

Recently, the term “champion” has emerged in popular usage to describe a subset of leadership behaviors that focus particularly on the role of executives in relation to change agendas. It refers to those who have enhanced credibility and positional power to confer approval and behave in ways that actively promote the cause, in this case, gender equity. This research examines the capacity of male and female executives to “champion” a gender change process.

Approach and methods

A feminist qualitative research methodology (Sprague, 2005) was adopted, whereby gender maintains a central place in the research, a critical stance to common assumptions is key and the inquiry maintains a focus on actively building a more gender equitable world. The research took place in an Australian university and a policing organization. The larger project, of which this is one part, examined the effectiveness of women only leadership development programs as strategies for building more gender equitable workplaces (de Vries, 2010). The research investigation arose out of my work as a practitioner/consultant in both organizations over a number of years. As such, a more formalized research process consisting of semi-structured interviews and focus groups took place against the backdrop of pre-existing and ongoing participant observation. My familiarity with both organizations brought with it the significant advantages of “working at the intersection of scholarship and practice” (Rapoport *et al.*, 2002, p. 196). I knew and was known by all interviewees. As a feminist researcher I make no claim to an unachievable objectivity (Acker *et al.*, 1983), but seek to make visible my dual positioning as both participant observer and researcher.

In each organization executive leaders who were publicly acknowledged as playing a championing and advocacy role in relation to the women’s program and more broadly

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in advocating for gender change were interviewed. Four of these have been chosen from the larger study for analysis. The chosen interviewees are the respective male CEOs, “Andrew”, a university Vice-Chancellor (VC) and “Mark”, a Commissioner of Police (COP), and secondly two police Assistant Commissioners “Geoff” and “Cecilia”. The organizations remain anonymous and pseudonyms are used.

The interview’s broad scope included: How did they define and understand championing; did they see themselves as leaders/champions in relation to gender change; in what ways did they demonstrate this; how did their position and gender impact on this role; what contributed to their taking on this role both in relation to the women’s program and more widely; and what difficulties and supports did they experience? Interviews were recorded and transcribed and manual coding was undertaken. Following this initial thematic coding it became apparent that a story-based approach where accounts of each person were written separately would preserve their particularities and uniqueness, while enabling comparisons between interviews to occur. In this story-based approach I was guided by the process described by Judi Marshall (1995), who emphasises a rigorously reflexive and iterative process to capture the essence of the person.

The four interviews were selected from the larger pool as exemplars of issues identified by the initial coding, such as their capacity to illuminate issues of sex, gender, power and agency in relation to undertaking the championing role, and for the richness of their interview accounts. In addition, as a result of the public nature of their roles and my longstanding involvement as a participant observer, a wealth of additional material was available to augment their interview accounts. This included speeches, conference papers, newspaper articles, radio broadcasts, internal publications and published research. The availability of this material from a variety of sources in addition to self-report, allowed me to check and re-check my analysis and built robustness into the analysis.

The interviewees enabled comparisons, first examining differences in approach to the championing role between two male CEO’s, and second, to highlight issues of gender and power when comparing a man and a woman at the same rank in policing. Participants in the larger study became “informants” in this research, with a number spontaneously commenting on their respective CEOs. In addition Geoff and Cecilia’s accounts mirror each other; both without prompting commenting extensively on the other.

Findings

Support from the top: male leaders of their institutions

Introducing Andrew and Mark. Andrew, the VC had been unwavering in his support of the women’s program (WP) for more than a decade. He consistently attended launches, celebration events, program presentations and graduation events. He was known for deviating from his formal briefing notes at these events to speak off the cuff about the gender issues that concerned him the most at the time. With his support the WP became the best practice benchmark program within the Australian higher education sector. As a “home-grown” VC with a 40-year history with the university, Andrew was well known, liked and respected.

Mark became Police Commissioner just prior to the start of the first WP in 2004. As Assistant Commissioner, Mark had been heavily involved in the earlier Gender research project into the culture of policing, sponsored by the previous Commissioner.

He initially took a prominent role as Chair of the Implementation Committee charged with following through on the project's recommendations, which included the implementation of a women's program. The Commissioner launched the first program with great fanfare, and his presence at the launch was considered critical to getting the program off to a good start. From that point on however, Mark became less visible, and his lack of attendance at program launches and graduations attracted comments. By the time of interview in 2007, Mark had not attended any event for more than a year.

The importance of male champions. As male CEOs, Mark and Andrew's gender and position coincide in powerful ways. While commonplace, the intersection of their maleness and positional power is noteworthy as a platform for leading change. They both believed champions were essential. As Mark noted:

[...] in an organisation like this where the Women's Program tends to be a little bit controversial [...] It is not possible to get those sorts of strategies off the ground without very strong support from the CEO. [...] a champion makes it clear that this is important.

Andrew saw his championing role as "showing the support of the institution" through attending events, doing the "behind the scenes work to secure funding" and "putting pressure on key decision makers". He emphasised how important it was to "walk the walk not just talk the talk". A male executive colleague saw his championing as critical, "because he is in a position that allows him to define the value of the program to the institution," which contributed to high levels of institutional acceptance and embeddedness.

Both Andrew and Mark believed that championing was most powerfully done by men. Women, they both noted, can be accused of self-interest. Andrew observed that female VC's "get criticized on the basis of looking after the sisterhood – women looking after women". This sentiment is echoed by Mark who noted, "if it is a senior woman doing it all the time, I guess the male perspective could be it is a little bit self-serving." Men, he observed, "getting up saying we need to champion this, then it has a different level of impact."

Choice and effectiveness. Andrew was widely acclaimed within the institution for his genuine support of gender equity. While there was no direct questioning of interviewees in the larger study regarding the VC, many chose to comment on his leadership and commitment. A female executive member commented:

You see it [being a champion] in other people because you see them doing things which you don't think they have to do [...] that's why you think of him as a champion, because he did these things which were unnecessary [...] unpopular. He was doing the right thing [...] I think that's where you see real leadership [...]

This observation highlights the notion of choice, where Andrew was going beyond what was expected of him, which in turn underscores belief in his genuine commitment. Andrew actively positioned the program's relevance and contribution to the organization. He was on the public record on numerous occasions, describing the program as "a transformational program" for the institution, effectively positioning gender equity as much more than a focus on women. Andrew "didn't feel he was alone doing it" but instead saw himself as championing with others. He named key people in "supporting and carrying the agenda", noting that this support, plus the calibre of the program, made "championing easy". Andrew's strategic endorsement of the program and provision of ongoing funding support enabled it to flourish, while simultaneously

his reputation as a gender champion was supported and strengthened. This reciprocity set up a positive cycle of engagement where the program was supported, Andrew remained connected and open to learning more about gender equity, and this in turn affirmed the importance of the program. Over time, championing the program became part of Andrew's public leadership identity.

Mark in contrast to this, did not want to be closely associated with the women's program. Mark, through his sporadic and diminishing attendance at program events, became a low visibility champion. There was little opportunity for the women or the program to engage with him, or build his awareness of the gender issues faced by the women on the program. When I commented on the difference between the first launch and what had taken place since, he responded: "Yeah, I think it was a good statement to make up front. I am not sure that the people in the program itself are the people I need to convince though." Rather than preaching to the converted, he emphasised "the importance for me is the dialogue out to the rest of the organization". Mark, in direct contrast to Andrew, was relying on his words rather than his presence to signal his support for the program. However, several other interviewees were critical of his low visibility and his lack of dialogue. Geoff, the Assistant Commissioner who is also part of this study, criticized his absence, "If you think something is important then you have to push it and give it your time [...] And the Commissioner is god [...] So, I do see it as a bit of a watering down and that's what worries me." A senior woman questioned Mark's dialogue out to the organization: "But does he? I don't know if he does. When does he do that?"

Mark referred to the down side of championing several times in his interview, noting that "the term [champion] can be used in a derogatory way as well, in a way that suggests you are overly focussed on this." He was also wary of assuming the championing mantle in a way that allowed others to bow out, where others of his executive team could say, "well you're championing that, so we don't need to, *we don't need to take the risk* (emphasis added)." Instead he expected his executive to match his rhetoric: "Whether you agree with it or not, you go out and you champion it".

While minimizing risk to himself or others, the danger of rhetoric not matching any genuine commitment was strong, and indeed evident. Mark's executive team turned out in full force on the two occasions when Mark launched the program but were otherwise mostly absent. Mark's absence and the perceived lack of support from his team were noted by the women on the programs and by champions such as Geoff, when he remarked, "[b]ut a lot of the men are speaking the words but they are not doing the action."

My first "reading" of Mark's account and observations of his championing was of Mark as an ineffective (and possibly uncommitted) champion, over relying on his word to carry his message in a command and control policing environment (Jones, 2008) and under-estimating the symbolic importance of visibility and presence. However, this would be inconsistent with Mark's very pro-active re/presentation of self in the media and his demonstrated appreciation of the symbolic value of his presence in other contexts. He frequently visited the rank and file, donning operational policing gear and providing out in the field "at the pointy end" photo opportunities. Mark can be seen as actively resisting being perceived as a gender equity champion. This is not to suggest that Mark does not support gender equity (the number of senior women had increased from three to 16 under his watch) but rather that he does not want to be actively and visibly associated with it, as a marker of who he is and what his leadership stands for.

The program pro-actively provided opportunities for Mark to interact with the women and demonstrate his visible support. This had the unintended consequence of highlighting the absence of champion support when he chose not to attend, leaving the program at risk. Despite an extremely positive evaluation conducted during the fifth year of the program, the program was discontinued.

Andrew's account of himself during the interview, his public persona as evidenced by what he said and wrote in various forums, the spontaneous accounts provided by other interviewees and his regular, highly visible participation in the program, all corroborate each other, lending credibility to this account of a gender champion. The program and his gender equality championing were both recognized by public awards. Mark's account highlighted his ambivalence towards the championing role, evident also in the gap between what he says and does as identified by his staff. Mark's championing lacked conviction and failed to develop or strengthen over time despite the efforts of those working with the program to engage with him.

Both the accounts of Andrew and Mark strongly endorse the powerful combination of maleness and positional power and the importance of the CEO for championing gender.

Same rank, different gender: Geoff and Cecilia

Introducing Geoff and Cecilia. Geoff and Cecilia shared the same rank of Assistant Commissioner (AC), but had little else in common; 20 of Geoff's 30 plus years in Policing had been spent as a detective, a male dominated bastion within policing. While at first glance Geoff seemed an unlikely gender equity champion, he had been consistently supportive and enabling. Along with Mark he had been involved in the Gender research project, became the first male member of the Women's Advisory Network (WAN) and was inaugural Chair of the WP Steering Group. Geoff was visible at program launches and graduations and was a popular mentor with the women. Geoff seemed almost universally liked by women and men in policing.

Cecilia was different. Her appointment was notable, as a senior lateral entrant and as the first woman in this policing jurisdiction ever to be appointed at that level. Cecilia's extreme visibility as the only woman anywhere near the top of this policing organization was inevitable. Highly accomplished, competitive and driven in her career, she had become accustomed to standing out from the crowd. While well accepted by the women Cecilia was considered an unrealistic role model. In a largely parochial workforce, Cecilia was not typical of policewomen and had not had a typical police career. Upon arrival Cecilia was unquestionably expected, and delegated by Mark to take on the mantle of championing gender equity issues. This included taking over Mark's role as Chair of the Implementation Committee and replacing Geoff as chair of the WP steering group.

The importance of male champions. Pivotal to Geoff's understanding of the championing role is that men as the dominant group need to drive change. As he put it, "with a powerful male champion, you know, there is no argument". Championing gender equity in this view is basically a male activity that needs to start at the top with the male leader. "And it needs those male champions to breathe life into it and watch it, like a watchdog". In his view, male vigilance and protection is required to maintain a focus on gender equity. Men could not afford to "take their eye off the ball". Geoff saw a great deal of potential for backsliding, "otherwise it will just go back to the way it was and you won't notice it 'til it is too late". Geoff's view, where championing required active sustained attention, contrasts strongly with Mark's reliance on executive rhetoric.

Cecilia concurred with Geoff's emphasis on male power, "I think it is really good to have male champions and it has probably got a bit more credibility if it is supported by some of the men."

Championing may also have a gender specific element to it. Geoff and Cecilia both emphasised being a role model as an integral part of the championing role; Geoff as a role model to men, and Cecilia as a role model to women. Geoff emphasised the importance of being "a role model for men to support women in the workplace", "telling my male colleagues about what I am doing and hopefully they will follow suit". He likened Cecilia trying to "change the mindset of men in the organization" as akin to "kicking against the wind". For Cecilia it was important that she role model retaining her femininity, being a woman and a leader in a very masculine environment, to other women. Cecilia was "championing that women can succeed at that level I suppose".

Choice, gender and effectiveness. Cecilia had little choice in taking on the formal and visible championing roles. She accepted her singularity as the only senior woman and the showcasing and additional duties (shadow job) that went with it, having experienced it in her previous organization. She observed:

I was always thrust forward [...] you get dropped in it [...] you are it and everyone is looking to you, or even people from outside [...] *So there is probably not much choice in it* (emphasis added).

As a highly visible woman in a man's world Cecilia was also subjected to heightened scrutiny. "[P]eople do tend to watch you more closely than the blokes". When men made mistakes they are still "a good bloke" but when she made a mistake it was amplified, "they rub their hands and go, oh, ho, ho, ho, did you hear this, yeah, she got that wrong, ha, ha, ha". She concluded, "I still think you are not really part of the club".

This lack of belonging has implications for her role as a champion and contributes to the cost of championing for her. Despite her prominence and visibility within and outside the organization, Cecilia did not find it easy being an effective gender champion. As a woman representing women, she often found that gender issues were discounted:

Yeah, I think there is always – oh, another one of those women's issues, you know what it's like, women with their women's things sometimes. And they don't see it so much as just an equity issue and fairness and good HR practice.

Cecilia's view, that being a woman undermined her capacity to position gender equity as a strategic issue, was consistent with the views of Andrew and Mark, discussed earlier.

In addition, men, as Cecilia saw it, could champion the women's program without cost because they belonged: "I don't think it did Geoff any harm for instance or Fred because they were people who were highly regarded and credible and liked and I suppose people accepted it".

Geoff's own account corroborates Cecilia's impressions. "Oh, yeah. I mean I can tell another Assistant Commissioner or Superintendent they are a boofhead and this is what they are doing wrong and they should be doing this [...] and they are fine in five minutes time". This robustness in his relationships means there is no cost for him. In contrast, he believed Cecilia may not be taken seriously and her relationships are seen as more fragile, and therefore requiring some protection. Geoff and Cecilia, by both their accounts, have a very different launching pad for their champion behavior.

In sharp contrast to Cecilia's lack of choice, Geoff had actively chosen to step into the championing role over time. Geoff expressed frustration at men who couldn't see that it "was all lopsided for them", a colorful expression of systemic male advantage. For Geoff gender equity was simple, it was about equality of outcomes, "it is not about treating them the same. You have actually got to treat them different". As Geoff gained more positional power he put it to use wherever he could to make life easier for women in the organization. Geoff was highly visible and known as a champion but did not appear to have paid a price for his ongoing commitment and clearly remained one of the boys. He experienced some of the reciprocal reinforcement, as did Andrew, where his choice to champion was reinforced by the gratitude of women, making championing a rewarding addition to his duties.

Neither Geoff nor Cecilia were asked to comment on the other, but both chose to reflect on their opposite gender counterpart at length. This strengthens their accounts, each confirming the other's perceptions, in particular Cecilia's sense of disadvantage in championing gender change.

Discussion

Championing of the women's program and gender equity more broadly, as revealed in these accounts, is an intensely gendered leadership role which unfolds within the complex relationship between self-presentation, others' perceptions and expectations, individual choice and organizational forces.

Performing the role: the behaviors of effective leaders

The notion of championing made sense to these Executive leaders, and there was substantial agreement between them about the need for championing and what the role entailed. The behaviors of executive leadership required to support, advocate and drive gender change were attention to resourcing, high visibility (primarily through attendance and speech giving), strategic positioning of the program to a variety of audiences, persistence over time and consistency of attention to the issues. Followers were quick to identify gaps between the walk and the talk, noted absences as symbolic of a lack of support and were quick to note if gender was only ever mentioned in women's forums, or if gender was losing traction as an issue. The importance of this signalling from the top about what is important is reinforced by these findings where visible and sustained championing was linked to an ongoing and well-supported program, and where less consistent championing was linked to the program's demise.

"Champion building" strategies, designed to build leaders' gender awareness over time, and strengthen their commitment proved to be a two-edged sword. Providing opportunities for champion visibility and support, while effective at the University, did not have the desired effect in policing. Champion building was a two-way process that could be embraced, or resisted – at least by the men. And for men who chose to embrace the role there was a dividend – the gratitude of women.

Do men make better champions? Gender marked roles, expectations and choices

This research highlights the gendered nature of the championing leadership role. Executive level champions are part of the organizational gendering processes they seek to change. This negotiating of gendered selves is starkly apparent in the accounts of Cecilia and Geoff. They represent the "token" and the "dominant" group in what is a highly gender skewed environment (Kanter, 1977). This difference in group

membership, for Cecilia as “token woman” or Geoff as “one of the boys”, has a profound influence on their respective understanding of the champion role, their choices in undertaking the role and their ultimate effectiveness as champions.

Cecilia’s recruitment into policing sets the scene. It exemplifies a common response to the absence of senior women where “one or two targeted appointments are made of women who already have a track record and are not seen as ‘high risk’” (Sinclair, 1998, p. 19). While used as symbols of great progress, senior women like Cecilia provide little threat to organizational ways of operating. Her experience typifies what Silvestri (2003, p. 150) calls “inserting” women into policing because of organizational imperatives driven by equal opportunity policy. Cecilia is thrust into “activism by default” (Silvestri, 2003, p. 153).

Cecilia’s token status provides opportunities and profile that would not exist for a man in the same position (Donnellon and Kolb, 1994, p. 147), but this is accompanied by high visibility and vulnerability (Kram and McCollom Hampton, 2003; van den Brink and Stobbe, 2009). Being a female leader poses many challenges for her: maintaining a sense of her feminine identity in such a macho environment, a lack of real choice about representing women, the need to (as a highly visible representative of the group) prove that women are capable, the marginalizing of women’s issues when they are brought up by her, and the reduced sense of belonging she experienced which constrained her capacity to act and increased the personal cost of acting. Managing her gender in this environment is hard work (Maddock and Parkin, 1993; Catalyst, 2007).

Men, on the other hand, do not need to engage in this “gender work”, their gender is the gender of policing, quite ordinary and unquestioned. Geoff’s male body and sense of belonging combined with his positional power provided him with a sense of agency and protection that is in stark contrast to Cecilia’s disempowered and vulnerable status. Championing a gender equity cause highlights men and women’s embodied gender based on the male/female distinction. For women, there is little capacity to camouflage or minimize their membership of a disempowered “outsider” group, and the claims of self or group interest that ensue (Ashford, 1998; Blackmore and Sachs, 2007).

While Geoff and Cecilia both have the same formal power, Cecilia’s story replicated those of high flying corporate women where despite formal power, women “are disempowered, in some ways by their gender” (Martin and Meyerson, 1998, p. 313). Geoff and Cecilia’s corroborating accounts endorse the huge gulf between women and men in exercising formal and informal power, in this case to champion a gender equity cause in the policing context. It supports the conclusion of Martin and Meyerson (1998) that the capacity of high ranking women in masculine organizations to address systemic gender inequalities may be more limited than we realize.

Men’s power to challenge the status quo derives from their membership of, and acceptance within, the male establishment. They appear more likely on the basis of the personal power of homosociability to be able to influence men. Andrew and Geoff, home-grown and well respected within their institutions, are able to take on the championing mantle effectively and with seemingly little personal or professional cost. Mark’s hesitance to identify himself as a champion in a wholehearted way seems related to his assessment of risk, suggesting that there may be a potential cost for men if they are not securely positioned as “one of the boys” (Marshall, 2007).

These accounts demonstrate the clearly gendered nature of leadership when championing a gender cause. This is also reflected in the views (although not necessarily the actions) of these leaders, who all believed men to be better positioned to champion gender equity. In voicing this belief they are echoing, or in step with, the larger call for

men to step up to lead change. Their views reflect the current gendered status quo where men have power and agency. Men, by virtue of their gender are advantaged, while women, by virtue of their gender, are disadvantaged in effectively carrying out this leadership role. This can be seen as a pragmatic reflection of the gendered reality, however, it also serves to further entrench the “heroic” leadership of men and the criticism and scrutiny of senior women. This research concurs with Judi Marshall’s (2007) work exploring the gendering of leadership in relation to the emerging field of corporate social responsibility. Examining the gender patterning led her to suggest that “women and men leaders are largely differently placed”, with white (older) men using their positioning and credentials while women operate with less acknowledgement and from the margins.

Women doing the work

Despite both men and women believing that men made better leaders of gender change, and that the male CEO was the most powerfully placed to drive change, women in both organizations were expected to champion gender change. Andrew divested some of his duties onto the most senior woman on becoming VC, although he maintained a visible and active championing role. However Mark while noting the difficulties for women in championing gender equity and also noting the risks of any one person on his Executive team taking on the mantle of equity, nevertheless removed himself and Geoff from various formal roles, placing the newly arrived Cecilia at the forefront of controversial gender change initiatives.

The commonly observed inclination for organizations to expect senior women to champion gender equity, could be partly seen as a natural response to the importance of senior women as role models. However, the expectation that senior women will undertake championing duties regardless of their portfolio, inclination or personal commitment can serve to undermine gender equity initiatives. This effectively absolves men of any responsibility, making gender equity women’s work and women’s problem. And, at least in the hyper masculine environment of policing, this opting out by men effectively undermined any chances of success, ensuring maintenance of the gendered status quo.

Gender work remained gender marked, expected of senior women but not men. Women like Cecilia effectively become conscripts, while men were seen as volunteers. Men, such as Andrew and Geoff, were shown enormous gratitude from women for their engagement and there was less reputational risk attached to their attention to gender issues. However, women were implicated as somehow “self-serving” because of their sex group membership, and for Cecilia this added to her visibility and vulnerability. This is not to suggest gender championing was easy for any leader. All nine leaders interviewed in the broader study acknowledged the difficulty of championing gender causes.

Championing for a different audience: potential for complementarity

Geoff and Cecilia saw a major part of their roles as being role models for others: Geoff saw his capacity to influence men as key while Cecilia saw herself as a role model of what was possible for women to achieve whilst retaining their femininity. This raises the question of the potential for complementarity of senior men and women’s gender change leadership. Rather than claiming men as better champions it may be more helpful to see women and men as undertaking complementary championing roles and to note that both are required. This would leave senior woman less exposed, and ensure that male power is used to good effect, particularly in influencing and bringing along other men.

The importance of leadership

This discussion has put an enormous emphasis on individuals as champions or potential champions. This to a degree reflects the fragility of women’s initiatives, where one individual can make all the difference. As Piterman (2008) notes, diversity strategies lack resilience. Vulnerable to shifts in the organizational landscape, they can be easily undermined or wound back. It also highlights the positioning of equity as a personal value, where as one of Blackmore and Sachs (2007, p. 238) respondents noted “people can go with it [equity] or not as a personal preference”. Unlike other organizational imperatives, gender equity is still seen as an added optional extra, “not part of the managerial self” (Blackmore and Sachs, 2007). Bagilhole’s (2002, p. 30) study in a UK university found the “power and personal autonomy of some senior academics” allowed them to respond to EO “in the way they see fit”. This choice for men, to opt in or out, is also demonstrated here. The champion building process proceeds on the basis of, and is to a degree captive to, this assumption of male choice.

This research supports the need for and capacity of male leaders to support and champion gender equity. However, passive enactment is not sufficient. A half-hearted performance on the part of Mark was clearly not enough to create sustained change, and gave his team “permission” to be big on talk but not on action. This raises the question of whether mandated championing, where executive men are expected as part of the business imperative to support gender equality, can ever be effective.

Gender change needs to be less reliant on individual leaders and at the same time it is reliant on individuals. We do need to find a way to shift from the individualistic concept and practice of championing gender equity as a choice, to gender equity being part and parcel of an organization’s mandate. However, this requires substantial (transformative) organizational change, which will not occur without a mandate from the top. Championing this change is a demanding role requiring genuine commitment and enactment, and the capacity to do so effectively is intimately intertwined with sex (bodies), gender and power. This is not the case with championing other business imperatives.

This brings us back to the individual leader. What kind of journey do these men need to take – what makes the difference between “a Geoff” and “a Mark”? How does one develop an “Andrew”? Sinclair (1994, p. 11) describes what is required as “leadership into a new culture” that is marked by the tandem features of “strong commitment to change driven from the top, accompanied by an understanding that this requires dramatic personal change for executives”. Sinclair paints a picture of a personal journey on the part of the CEO, often prompted by insights gained from female family members, for example, the experiences of their daughter/s or wife. As Sinclair (1998) observes, this transformation of self and culture requires leadership that moves well beyond the heroic style prevalent in Australian corporate culture.

In this intervention men have been courted as supporters but they have not been invited or required to engage in their own journey of “inside out” change (Sinclair, 1998). They have not needed to confront their own masculine identity and privilege and how that contributes to women’s disadvantage. Geoff and Andrew had embraced gender equity leadership as part of their identity, and were able to identify and intervene in systemic inequity. Both spoke at length in their interviews about women who they had admired and been influenced by in their working lives, in line with research done by Catalyst (Prime and Moss-Racusin, 2009). Beyond that there were few clues about their determination to do the “right thing”. However it appears that their sense of male group belonging and homosociability remained undisturbed.

Expecting male leaders to champion gender equity may have perverse consequences, where half-hearted championing may serve to undermine change interventions. On the other hand, genuine championing requires significant gender insight and commitment on the part of the male leader. Further research is required to understand how to best support men in that journey of change.

Conclusion

This research draws on gender and organizational scholarship to problematize the gendered leader in gender change efforts. It draws attention to the absence of an analysis of gendered power and agency in the current call for CEOs to include gender equity as part and parcel of their executive leadership role. Disappearing the gender of the leader as being of no consequence in this role, in effect adopting a gender blind approach, is unrealistic and potentially harmful. The assumption that a compelling business case will overcome the complexities of gendered leadership is naïve. So too is the assumption that a gender targeted approach where we turn our gaze to the male CEO, is the cure-all for the current slow progress. This research raises fundamental questions regarding the gendered power to effect change, signalling some caution and recommending further research.

Men undoubtedly appear well positioned to bring about change because of their positional power and the advantages conferred by their gender. The interviewees overwhelmingly subscribe to this position, that men make the best gender champions, and the accounts of their championing support this. But does this focus on men ultimately strengthen rather than dismantle the gendered status quo? Are we looking to men to be gender change heroes, thus inadvertently reinforcing the heroic masculine? Which men and under what circumstances will work for radical gender change? If their male belonging is their platform for change, can this ultimately be preserved, or must it be abandoned for the sake of gender change? The inherent contradiction of increasingly seeking out privileged men to champion gendered change, when they have been beneficiaries of the status quo cannot be swept under the carpet. Much more investigation is required to explore the limits of men's capacity and willingness to engage in dismantling male privilege.

Women have up until recently shouldered much of the burden of working for gender change in organizations. Cecilia's account, in the hyper masculine world of policing, highlights the constraints and difficulties of senior women taking on this role. Expecting more from our male leaders and less from our female leaders might well be welcomed by women like Cecilia.

It is critical that gender scholars participate in the debate surrounding this mainstreaming of gender change into the role of CEOs, and the increasing focus on male CEOs. This examination of the many factors at play begins this process by offering a more nuanced account of the engendering of the role. The question of working within or outside current gendered power structures to effect gender change remains unresolved. While Lorde (1981, p. 99), sounds the note of caution, that the "master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" it must be acknowledged that current practice is indeed trying to recruit those with access to the master's tools. Perhaps men like Geoff and Andrew have so far only been tinkering with, rather than dismantling the master's house. Nonetheless current practice provides ample opportunity to investigate the truth or otherwise of this feminist manifesto.

This research has practical implications. It confirms the critical role of executive champions and adds to our understanding of effective champion behaviors. It cautions

organizations to carefully consider the gender of champions and questions the effectiveness of allocating gender champion duties solely to senior women. It demonstrates possibilities for building executive support through two-way processes of engagement between men, gender interventions and their organizations, thus working for transformational change. However this strategy can also backfire. Men exercise choice in their engagement with this role. Finally it proposes a model of partnership, where senior men and women can play complementary roles leading gender change, and ensuring that gender change is men's and women's business.

Note

1. www.ceda.com.au/events/eventdetails/2013/05/w130523?EventCode=W130523

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