Power shifts: leading, following, solidarity, sponsorship, mentoring…

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Abstract

Organisations, whether working in the public, private or third sector, are increasingly being pushed to have their leaders more closely reflect the demographic profiles of the communities in which they work. The discussion started with women on boards, and in many ways that remains the dominant focus, but there are increasing calls for broader understandings of board diversity than solely gender (Sealy et al., 2009a). However, while the challenge is not new, progress remains slow, even in terms of women's representation (as a majority-minority), let alone in terms of other minority groups, and the question remains – how to change the demographics of the leaders of organisations.

Drawing from the work done on women and leadership we can see how the arguments for gender equity in organisational leadership are well-rehearsed, from those arguing on the basis of human rights and sensible talent management (World Economic Forum, 2014) to those who argue that gender-balanced boards outperform those which include none, or very limited numbers of women (Wiley and Monllor-Tormos, 2018). While the strategies for change have ranged from individual development, through equality policy measures (Ely and Meyerson, 2000), to recognising the need to transform organisations, or society (Martin, 2003) and a slightly separate, but vibrant set of conversations about the need to challenge and change practices of leadership and leadership development (Chetkovich and Kunreuther, 2004, Ganz, 2010, Western, 2008).

My doctoral research looked at a practice named by the global women's organisation which was being studied as "intergenerational-shared leadership". A concept developed within the organisation to support their constitutional requirement that 25% of board members should be young women (defined as 30 years of age or younger). However, like many other organisations with an intention to make their boards more reflective of their political commitments and the communities they serve, there is a gap between goals and outcomes.

In considering how the more progress could be made in not only realising the young women's quota but ensuring those young women were then able to exercise the powers associated with being a board member, the question of followership arose. In particular, whether developing an understanding of followership as an active and critical process that deliberately engaged established women leaders to support the emergence of new, and particularly young, women leaders within the organisation through not only sharing leadership but being willing to follow (Lewis, 2017). This idea relies on an understanding that leadership development is a collective organisational practice involving both leaders and follows, rather than solely focused on individual leaders (Day, 2000). A practice of active and critical followership would acknowledge the power of followers, particularly within democratic organisations, to help shape a collective practice of leadership within an organisation. However, the idea of labelling this as a practice of followership or in fact suggesting people consider themselves followers is neither wholly uncontested within the organisation, nor amongst other leadership scholars (Ford and Harding, 2018).

Responding to a call for papers for another conference the practice of active and critical followership was reshaped as an expression of solidarity (Oosterlynck et al., 2016, Segal, 2013), and that has led to a wondering of how else the work of established organisational leaders in helping new organisational leaders to emerge, particularly from under-represented groups could be framed. Particularly, whether there were other concepts that might be more acceptable and potentially less confrontational, without losing the sense of a shift in power that the idea of active and critical followership was meant to imply – not a loss of power, but a shift.

Thus the central idea to be developed and explored through this paper is to identify other concepts that have been developed to facilitate established organisational leaders supporting the emergence and progression of newer leaders, such as mentoring or sponsorship and to consider how they might differ from the idea of offering followership or shared leadership, and particularly consider how the

underlying approaches to power (Lukes, 1974, Veneklasen and Miller, 2002) differ across those concepts.

Mentoring has long been called upon as a practice whereby established organisational leaders can either lend their experience to help under-represented groups rise through the organisation (Chao et al., 1992, Sealy et al., 2009b). Within my research organisation mentoring is often discussed as a practice within "intergenerational-shared leadership", however, there is also a recognition that mentoring can often serve to reinforce age and power hierarchies. So, if mentoring isn't suitable, then perhaps sponsorship (Ibarra et al., 2010), as a practice distinct and perhaps more recognising of power and more outward facing than mentoring. Or returning to the work of activists, in addition to the idea of solidarity, there is also a concept of allyship (Droogendyk et al., 2016), which importantly for this discussion explicitly recognises the role of privilege.

As this abstract is drafted the outcome of the intended exploration is not known. However, it is hoped that by considering the role of power within practices such as mentoring, sponsorship, solidarity and allyship that some useful ideas can be offered in reflection on both theory and practice.

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