

Creativity, Longevity, and Wisdom: Women's Wisdom in Leadership

By Rita Lusgarten, PhD

As a contribution to the Creative Longevity and Wisdom Initiative, my doctoral research addresses the cultivation and development of wisdom in women leaders. My research, in alignment with the goals of the initiative, has a strong focus on human development and consciousness and directly relates to the perceptions of wisdom across a particular field, i.e., leadership. The research includes women from the ages of 42 to 73, with the majority of the women being past 50 years of age. In this regard, the study contributes as well to the cultivation and perception of wisdom in the second half of life.

The topic of my dissertation research study was women leaders and wisdom in the field of leadership. The purpose of the study was to explore and describe the experiences of women leaders in cultivating and developing wisdom in their leadership roles and in their lives. Given that the study focused on the experiences of women leaders, I chose to engage in qualitative in-depth interviewing as a method, with phenomenologically informed narratives as my data. The research explored the personal experiences of women leaders in accessing and developing wisdom in their leadership. Nine outstanding women leaders articulated how they expressed, perceived, and exercised wisdom. The inquiry into their own experience clarified key aspects of how women lead as a contribution to scholarship and practice. The participants of the study were women in leadership roles in nonprofit organizations, though some of the women had previously worked in the corporate world as well as in public service.

My study contributes significantly to the scholarly literature on wisdom and to wisdom in practice. It also created a context for women leaders to articulate and reflect on their experiences of wisdom in leadership.

My study addresses the absence of women leaders' wisdom as a defining characteristic and contribution to the field of leadership in both a scholarly manner and real-world practice. The literature on leadership is filled with examples of "old paradigm" thinking (Loden, 1985; Wilson, 2004; Buchanan, 1996), whereby women become recognized as successful leaders in their fields by acclimating to and modeling a male-defined way of leading in a male-dominated organization and culture. Though women have made great strides in proving they can succeed "just like a man," they haven't arrived at a place where they are recognized as successfully leading through the expression of their own values based on their own inherent wisdom (Reiss, 1998; Harragan, 1989; Kimmel, 2000).

The gender reform perspective (Calas & Smircich, 1991, 1996; Calas, 1993) has contributed greatly to our understanding of women and leadership. This perspective holds that women are as capable as men. It suggests women perform just as well or better than men by releasing themselves from the cultural implications of being female and from any gender-defined role. It rejects the distinction between men and women so that women are no longer seen as inferior in a male-defined world. However, this perspective does not necessarily celebrate women's gifts and differences as a contribution to the field of leadership or the world. There is another school of feminism, the "gender resistance movement," which does do this. My study is more in alignment with this perspective. It assumes that when women identify and exercise their own sense of wisdom in leadership and bring it forward into their practice, the field of leadership benefits.

The literature makes it clear that women have often been excluded from places of power and responsibility and that their own inherent ways of leading have not been encouraged or honored. Women have been underrepresented at leadership levels in the workplace (*New York Times*, 1982; Wilson, 2004). This is mostly because workplace norms are masculine (Harragan, 1989; Fraker, 1984; Logan, 1985; Wachs, 2001). The dominant culture in organizations devalues women's ways of leading (Loden, 1985; Frenier, 1996), which means when women succeed they are forced to function like men (Reiss, 1998). We lose the unique capacities that women may have (Peters, 1982; Wilson 2004). There is also literature pointing to the fact that women's ways of leading and organizing have been ignored in leadership and organizational theory (Chaganti, 1986; Westerberg, 1996; Carter, Gartner, & Reynolds, 1996).

Feminist theories have noted gender inequality and the need for transformation in organizations (Hooks, 2000; Lorber, 2001; Tong, 1998). The gender reform movement focuses attention on whether there is a leadership style that distinguishes men from women. Many have concluded that there are no differences in leadership between men and women (Bass, 1990; Dobbins & Platz, 1986). However, I feel that these studies remain inconclusive since most successful women must adopt masculine behaviors. Many writers are searching for a new, more inclusive view of leadership (Loden, 1985; Macoby, 1997; MacGregor Burns, 2003; Wachs, 2001; Wilson, 2004; Coughlin, 2005).

Cultural obstacles and the exclusion of women's ways of leading, organizing, and knowing from leadership theory and practice are described repeatedly in the literature (Calas, 1993; Calas & Smircich, 1996; Gilligan, 1982; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Tong, 1998).

Feminist theory states that women have unique voices and their own ways of knowing, organizing, and leading that need to be incorporated into the culture (Gilligan, 1982; Miller & Stiver, 1997, Tong, 1998). Jungian psychological theory discusses the masculine and the feminine as archetypal principles that are reflected in the culture and need to be integrated for wholeness and the development of wisdom. Neo-Jungian psychology holds that wisdom is cultivated through the individuation process and reconnection to the feminine. Gisela Labouvie-Vief, a female

developmental psychologist, has argued that the pinnacle of human development is wisdom—the healing of the split between *logos* and *mythos*. This healing is the integration of the masculine and feminine principles. My work describes the feminine principle, its importance, and the need for its integration with the masculine as a path toward developing wisdom.

I pose the following question: “What are the lived experiences of women leaders in accessing and developing wisdom in their leadership?” My goals are twofold: to explore the lived experiences of women leaders in accessing and developing wisdom in their leadership and to define wisdom in relationship to leadership in order to show its contribution to a wisdom-based leadership and new paradigm of leading. Through engaging women in the process of defining key elements and characteristics of wisdom in their leadership, their visions, voices, practices, and legacies for leadership in our world were articulated and brought forth.

My analysis of the interviews revealed a multifaceted view of wisdom and leadership. As previously mentioned, the participants included the heads of major global foundations, prominent authors, an Episcopal priest, and the CEO of a major international council on world affairs. Each contributes to making the world a better place to live.

I organized the findings into six main categories and their concomitant themes:

1. What Is Wisdom?
2. Elements that Facilitate the Development of Wisdom in Leadership
3. The Implications of the Development of Wisdom in Daily Life and Action
4. Obstacles to the Development of Wisdom in Leadership
5. Contributions of Women’s Leadership
 - a. Visions and Voices
 - b. Best Practices
 - c. Women’s Legacies
6. Cost of Leading Without Wisdom for Women, Leadership, and World

What Is Wisdom?

In order for women to reflect on how they developed wisdom in their leadership, they first had to define it. This task was not easy for most of the women, yet they all contributed definitions that arose from their own experience.

Seven themes emerged:

1. Wisdom as a merger of the head and heart, of the cognitive and feeling functions, of understanding informed by caring.

2. Wisdom as embodied experience, a knowing from the inside out that is cultivated through living with awareness and learning through life experiences.
3. Women's capacity to weave webs of inclusion and relatedness. This theme of relationship as women's inherent way of leading came up in 80 percent of the interviews.
4. The capacity to create context and a larger view, including the capacity to create context for collaboration and cocreativity and a consciousness of one's impact on the whole.
5. Women's values are a dominant theme throughout the study. Women differ from men in their values, priorities, and assumptions. Their values tend to be life-giving and life affirming, bringing forth possibility, and having a capacity to nurture and empower people, situations, and organizations.
6. Intuition as a way of leading.
7. The relationship of wisdom to power.

Throughout the interviews, some women defined wisdom as “feminine wisdom” while others stated that wisdom was not gender based. One woman in particular objected to the term completely. However, when I asked the participants how being a woman affected their leadership, they all answered that it had a profound impact. For some, it provided the strength to define their own values and make them leaders. Others, from a very young age, chose to not be female identified so as “not to be considered irrelevant.” As one woman said:

I spent the first 20 years of my life resisting that concept. I've since changed my views. I resisted that concept because the separation of boys and girls, the separation of men and women, was usually during my childhood. I'm 58, so we lived mostly with the notion that girls couldn't achieve what boys could achieve. So I didn't like the lines of demarcation.

A little further on in our conversation:

I am a very driven person, which is not something I say with pride. I mean, I really am driven. And that has everything to do with gender. It has everything to do with it. Or to put it differently, it's got everything to do with my having been a girl. At an early age I decided I'm going to show the world that girls can do what boys can do. Not show the world, but show my father. So there's a defiance in that, but it's got everything to do with being a girl. And everything to do with being the kind of girl I was, being so slight, not a rough, tough cowboy like my big brothers. You know? Thinking and proving I can outtalk you. I can do physics. I can do control. I can do whatever you associate with men.

Other women spoke of having a similar drivenness during their early years in leadership positions, a need to prove their own worth by being able to do whatever their male counterparts were able to do. They achieved this by throwing off their identity as female or feminine so as not to buy into the cultural and sociological beliefs of their upbringing: that women were the inferior gender, incompetent, irrelevant.

The findings revealed three factors that contributed to women's difficulty in identifying wisdom:

Women are brought up to be modest. Riane said, "We are taught to deny our own capacity and power. How could I possibly define or identify wisdom in myself?" Alice said, "Not only am I a woman, I was brought up in New England. I am beyond modest!"

Women lack an interest in developing their point of view. They are often brought up for private life, not public life, and live their lives through others, through taking care of others. "We are taught to be selfless. How could we possibly identify or own wisdom in ourselves?" Because self-interest is not encouraged, women experience great difficulty in owning or articulating their wisdom.

Women have difficulty identifying what is unique about themselves because many are more oriented toward others and have been "in the background," supporting their children, husbands, partners, and organizations. They tend to feel that they are simply "doing what needs to be done" or are doing what many caring people in the world are doing. Chris said, "I don't think what I am doing is particularly unique." Alice said, "I don't think I make a unique contribution. I'm one of the many and we're all needed. I don't think I'd ever make the case that I am unique or that my contribution is unique."

Development of Wisdom in Leadership

This section looks at the elements that facilitate the development of wisdom in women leaders. A major theme for women in strengthening a sense of their own wisdom is their relationship to other women. Women spoke of the profound experience of having a sense of themselves mirrored back to them through relationships with other women. They spoke of how they felt validated in the presence of another woman in a way that they did not feel in the culture or society at large.

Another theme was "motherhood." Many women discussed women's capacity to bring forth new life. Because of this capacity, women fight for life and are engaged in life-affirming activities. They are also against war and aware of new possibilities. They have a capacity to fully commit, to see what is sustainable, and to have a positive impact on people, organizations, and environments.

A third and particularly important theme was “finding voice.” Giving voice to what they know and having the courage to speak their truth was essential for women to identify and own their wisdom. Women are in touch with a certain kind of knowing, a felt experience of things, referred to in the literature as “Eros” or “mythos” (Labouvie-Vief, 1994). But it isn’t until they can express this knowing or give it voice that it becomes wisdom. Some women have taken great pain to develop verbal expression of their experience, while others need to develop further.

The struggle for language may represent the synthesis or integration of the *logos* principle with the *mythos* principle (Labouvie-Vief, 1994; Jung, 1951/1971). This brought up another data point not included in the findings. As one woman said, “Women need to learn to speak a different language—one that is more truly reflective of their internal experience, one that is compassionate, not polarizing, not vitriolic.” (Irigaray, 1985; Kristeva, 1981).

Another theme facilitating women’s development of wisdom is *empowerment* through transforming emotional loss into wisdom or strength. The findings define a woman as a leader through her demonstrated capacity to transform experiences of victimization and emotional loss into empowerment. This in turn leads to the development of wisdom.

Reflection on personal experience is another theme in cultivating wisdom. A number of the participants spoke of bringing a greater sense of consciousness to their lives and experiences as a major contributing factor in the development of wisdom. Karin, when asked if she felt wisdom could be developed, said, “We can develop whatever we give attention to.” This particular comment points to the relevance of literature on consciousness studies in human development as further research in the development of wisdom.

Self trust and believing in oneself is a sixth theme. Given that women live in a culture that does not necessarily reflect their values, it is of paramount importance for women to believe in themselves and trust that they know what they know in the absence of cultural or sociological validation. Another contributing factor to the development of wisdom is *making mistakes*, and learning from them. Bringing consciousness to mistakes and reflecting upon them is an essential ingredient. The last theme in this section is the presence of *mentors*, which speaks to women’s need for relationship and external encouragement.

Implications of Development of Wisdom in Daily Life and Action

The most important part of this section has to do with a developing sense of *strength in oneself, a feeling of coming home to oneself*, leading to a sense of *personal power and making a difference in the world*. When women own or identify what they know, they feel a sense of personal power. Every participant in this study spoke of her leadership in terms of wanting to make a difference in the world. Making a difference is central to their identity as a leader.

Another theme in this section is the *integration of the personal and professional life*. Many women have either commented on or spoken to the problem in corporate culture of a lack of awareness of a personal life. Women are overworked and exhausted and have less time to attend to their health and relationships. Family or personal life is often not valued in the culture of organizations. As more mothers enter the workforce, it is essential that they have the opportunity to be successful in their work while simultaneously caring for their home and family. This speaks to the present culture's exclusion of women's values from organizations and the importance of integrating personal and professional life for a greater sense of well-being. A recent study on women and power shows that corporate culture reflects the culture at large (Eisenhart, 2005). Change needs to happen on a cultural level for this to be reflected in corporations.

Obstacles to the Development of Wisdom in Leadership

The findings in this section have been divided into three: internal or psychological obstacles, sociological obstacles, and cultural obstacles. Every participant spoke of obstacles without being asked. In many cases, it is the absence of the elements named in the *development of wisdom* that lead to or become obstacles. For instance, psychological or internal obstacles include the many ways women do not own their power and capacity. Such obstacles manifest themselves in fears of speaking up, problems of finding voice, fear of not being included, lack of self-trust, etc. I believe these findings point to women's vulnerabilities and to where they need to develop themselves.

Another way to understand obstacles is to see how strength can become an Achilles heel. For instance, the data point to women being relationally oriented. This is an asset yet at the same time it causes women to be far more affected by their relationships than men would be. The data also suggest that women find a sense of their own value through being mirrored by others. Therefore, finding oneself in a situation that does not reflect women's inherent values becomes an obstacle to developing a deep sense of knowing and wisdom.

The need to be mirrored presents a dilemma on two accounts. First, women are challenged to come into their own sense of wisdom in the absence of mirroring in a culture that is male dominated and male defined. Some women have faced this challenge by refusing to be defined by gender at all. Others experience a need for approval that results in driven behavior. They need to be recognized as smart and strong and capable. In the past many women accomplished this by denying any relationship to the feminine or by resisting gender definition. Alice said, "When I was growing up, to be a girl meant to be less than. Why would I want to be that? I had absolutely no interest in being the inferior gender."

Women who don't see their value mirrored back to them by their fathers, brothers, and eventually the whole-male dominated culture, end up denying their female characteristics, ceasing to identify with the feminine and/or overworking to exhaustion.

Sociological obstacles include the fact that women are taught that they belong to everyone but themselves. In rejecting this social conditioning, in owning their wisdom, they become their own.

Cultural obstacles include the dehumanizing reality of living in a culture that does not give equal value to both halves of humanity and how impossible it is to talk about value, diversity, or an equitable society without gender equity. We need to understand how cultures change and how to encourage positive change. Riane devotes all her work in the world to this.

Women spoke of the cultural challenges and the difficulties they experience in leading. They spoke of the obstacles to women's development of wisdom and of the difficulty women have in identifying their own wisdom. For many, if not all of the women, the cultural implications of being a woman have affected them greatly. A number of women have been motivated to reject feminine identity. This rejection has allowed them to function in a man's world but has also contributed to the denial of aspects of their own nature, leading to driven behavior and often to overworking to the point of exhaustion. The internalization of cultural biases against women has psychological implications such as lack of self-trust and self-worth and an inability to "find voice" in the face of the more dominant culture. Karin said, "It costs women a sense of their own authenticity."

Contribution of Women's Wisdom to Leadership and the World

Visions, Voices, Best Practices, and Legacies

Every woman in this study expressed a deep caring for the world and her need to make a difference through leadership. Many women spoke of needing to change the world in positive life-affirming ways and to bring forth new ways of seeing, accompanied by new ways of leading. They spoke of themselves as bridge makers and relationship builders, as addressing what is needed in the world and giving themselves to what really matters. All of them expressed their dedication and devotion to making our world a safer and better place to live where all people can respect and honor one another.

Women spoke of effecting change in social structures, in culture, and in the belief system within these structures. They spoke of transforming and healing, trusting oneself, finding one's greater work to do in the world, collaborating, and forming contexts of cocreativity. They spoke of a new paradigm of leadership that is a synthesis of masculine and feminine qualities, of linear thinking and a deep capacity to care for people and organizations. They spoke of the importance of values in leading, of guiding principles, and of strategic ways to implement life-affirming visions of a better world. They spoke of inclusivity, of everyone's point of view being honored, of the need to understand the other person's assumptions before going to the table to work out agreements that affect millions of people's lives. They spoke of the importance of weaving people's particular views into the larger framework. They

spoke of merging one's intelligence with one's heart. They spoke of empowering, of nurturing, of guiding, of bringing out the greatest potential. They spoke of the transformation that is needed in the world and their dedication to being a part of this transformation through the ways they lead. All of them felt that women today best embody this capacity for change and that women are more open to new ways of leading in the world.

Cost of Leading without Women's Wisdom

Leadership without feminine wisdom costs women their authenticity. A number of women described themselves as split, an internalization of the split in the culture. To be relevant or powerful, they have had to take on the values of the dominant culture, which for the most part does not honor or recognize many of the values the women articulated in this study.

The cost to leadership is a loss of solidity, the creation of pain, and working in isolation. All of these costs are demonstrated in our current political leadership.

The costs to the world are also tremendous: a huge personal cost to women, men, and children worldwide; a loss of human potential; an unsustainable environment; and suffering, dying, violence, destruction, etc. Most of the women attributed the present turmoil in the world to our inability to live with difference; to create webs of relationship; to empower, nurture, and sustain each other and our planet; and to realize we are all connected.

The synthesis of the head and heart, of understanding informed by caring, and of an intellectual framework imbued with empathy are congruent with literature on wisdom that examines the integration of the masculine and feminine (Jung, 1951/1971; Neo Jungians, 1978–1989) and the synthesis of “*logos* (knowing)” with “*eros-mythos* (feeling)” (Labouvie-Vief, 1994). This synthesis is a central theme in my research findings, along with finding voice—being able to express one's felt experience and therefore stand in one's truth.

Alice spoke of the development of language as a way to make sense of the irrational aspects of her life. Later on the development of language became a metaphor for the development of wisdom in her life. The idea that women's voices need to be included in theory construction and the creation of culture also showed up in the findings, along with an emphasis on weaving webs of inclusion and relatedness as a way of developing wisdom. The findings also showed that women have a different set of assumptions, values, and priorities that play a central role in their ways of knowing, leading, and organizing.

Other relevant themes articulated in the findings were that women need to find a new language that better reflects their internal experience, a point of view represented in the literature of the French feminists (Irigaray, 1985; Kristeva, 1981) and of the *cost to women* of being split through the internalization of a culture which splits the masculine and feminine and does not mirror feminine qualities.

This study provides a model of wisdom leadership, as well as insights into how women access and develop wisdom in their leadership. It also points to a need for inclusion of women's visions and voices, practices, and legacies as contributions to the field of leadership and to a future world that we can all work toward realizing. As Chris said: "By incorporating women's wisdom into leadership practices, we'd find a different way to come to peaceful resolution around conflict and not destroy each other." Women's wisdom, perspective, and values have been left out of the main literature on leadership and organizations. Theory excludes women's ways of leading and organizing (Changanti, 1986; Westerberg, 1996; Carter, Gartner, & Reynolds, 1996; Cliff, 1988). Current literature identifies the problematic omission of "the feminine" in theoretical discussions of construct validity (Kerlinger, 1973). These omissions underscore the contribution my study results make to the theoretical discussion on leadership and organizations.

These findings can contribute to new paradigms in leadership and alternative ways of leading by specifically articulating women's visions and voices for leadership. They also show that women are open to finding new ways to lead. The literature speaks to the need for this (Macoby, 1997; Loden, 1985; MacGregor Burns, 2003). My work supports women in their efforts to own and include their ways of leading that are not validated by the present culture. This may motivate women to put themselves forward and integrate their own ways of leading and organizing into their leadership practices, thereby contributing to practice.

Cultural obstacles to women's ways of leading are pervasive in the literature. They are also pervasive in the findings. I hope these findings will serve to motivate both men and women to incorporate new ways of leading into their practices, thereby contributing to leadership practices, to theory on cultural change and leadership, and to a more equitable society. The findings also contribute in theory and practice to a wisdom-based leadership that integrates and synthesizes the best of masculine and feminine attributes. Karin said, "It's a 'crossing over' time. There has to be some acknowledgement of the values that are dominant in our culture while simultaneously leading in a new direction." I feel the findings in this study can contribute to creating this bridge.

Suggestions for Future Research

The *relationship of wisdom and power* is an important theme emerging in this study. For a number of participants, wisdom and power are very close to each other. As women recognize and identify their wisdom, they simultaneously gain a sense of power and a feeling of being empowered. Further research in this area could illuminate and broaden our understanding of this relationship and its connection to wisdom in leadership.

A second theme is how women leaders define themselves as making a difference in the world. The findings in this study show that as women become stronger internally by identifying their own sense of knowing/wisdom, they want to implement that wisdom and create strategies for change. Further research on this

subject would also broaden our understanding of women leaders and the development of wisdom in the world.

A third theme is the need for women to create a language that is reflective of their internal experience. The findings also speak to the importance of voice and language in women's development. A further exploration of these areas would broaden our understanding of how articulating what one knows contributes to the development of wisdom in women.

A final theme is cultural change and that women desire to create change. Relevant research would examine how cultures change, what factors contribute to change, and the most effective strategies for implementing cultural change, all within the context of the development of wisdom in women's leadership.

Conclusion

My study was an exploration of the personal experience of women leaders in accessing and developing wisdom in their leadership. This resulted in a multifaceted and multidimensional representation of the ways in which women lead. It has also resulted in insights about what would constitute a wisdom-centered leadership.

Leadership seen through women's eyes is a collaborative, cocreative partnership that includes all or many points of view. The strength of women's leading is through relationship. Because women are oriented toward and organized around relationship, they have a much greater sense of their impact on others, their relationship to others, and their effect on others. At the same time, because women are organized around relationship as a central part of their identity, women need to be in the kinds of relationships that mirror back and validate their identities and values. Many women need this mirroring and validation in order to come into their own sense of knowing and wisdom. Being in relationship with other women can be strengthening and can serve as a strong contributing factor to the development of wisdom in their leadership. For significant change to happen, women must come into their own sense of knowing and must bring this knowing into the world.

The findings show that wisdom does not belong to gender, although one can speak of feminine wisdom without necessarily owning all of wisdom as feminine. The findings also demonstrate that what is needed is an integration and synthesis. In a time where we are so polarized and divided, an integration of the masculine strengths and the feminine strengths can contribute to a more wisdom-based leadership. Given that women have lived in a male-dominated world and culture, and that many women have taken on these values to succeed in a world where the definition of success is also male defined, we can surmise that women would have a greater chance and capacity to integrate the feminine into the present culture, thereby bringing about a change in cultural values, beliefs, and structure. Second, since we are so one-sided right now, living in a culturally defined male world, a movement toward feminine values would be a step toward this greater synthesis. At a time of such great turmoil, horror, and devastation in the world, it is women who have the greatest capacity to bring forth a more integrated way of leading. Women have had their feet in both

worlds: they give birth to both males and females and are the bridge makers and torchbearers of a future world that will be here for our children.

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