

# 13 | Learning Leadership through Mentorship: Opportunities for Female Academics

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## **Abstract**

*This paper examines the prospects and challenges of women learning leadership within the University and what may be upheld as best practice. University of Abuja was the focus of the study. It sought to obtain first-hand accounts from academics who learned leadership or who were mentored and the possibilities available for building on those experiences. First-hand accounts from female academics revealed that majority believed in mentoring and most of them had mentors during their career growth. Younger female academics in this University prefer senior female academics to provide guidance during their career progression. It was also discovered that most female academics constantly need a “push” or focus to achieve. When they have low self value, they do not achieve leadership heights because they are faced with greater risks and huddles involved in leadership. If better mentors and mentees are to evolve from the university, then negative indices have to be unlearned as positive aspects of leadership are promoted to advance the cause of women and discard the ‘glass ceiling mentality to the crash of history.*

## **Introduction**

Leadership opportunities within the academy and society for women are narrow and scarce. This constraint is in terms of access and upward mobility for women often termed the glass ceiling. However, leadership tutelage for women may be a prospect for them to undergo guidance in leadership through learning the qualities that make for leadership, especially in the Academy. The auspices under which different forms of

leadership manifest and the styles attached to them may be from male or female leaders, depending on the exigencies of the workplace. Mentoring may help in the attainment of the traits needed to be a leader through learning leadership from the close observation of a leader by a mentee or intern. One of the feasible means or learning processes of acquiring leadership through mentoring is for women Academics to undergo leadership education in informal, settings from other academics through best practices.

In workplaces, sex/gender differences often exist. Female role modeling is therefore decisive in working out the challenges these differences often bring about like succession plan, work ethics, organisational or inter relationship conflict. As more women come into academics and are more successful in their scholarly endeavours, more opportunities are opened for younger women. Having such women (like Professor Mabel Osakwe who we honour here) as mentors, can help develop the concerns of new entrants who are women academics. This is because up and coming women may look up to many of the women who have stayed longer within the university system as sources of inspiration and proof that women can bond together and indeed do get to the zenith of their careers. Mentoring is aimed at helping women surmount the problem of powerlessness through bonding. Its aim is to confront the issues that face women at work on a day-to-day basis, like stress, workplace politics, sexuality, career development, training, sex/gender differences, ageing, succession plan, etc. As a development option, it encourages counselling, guidance, builds self esteem among other merits. A lot of women undergo relationships according to roles as colleagues, daughters, mothers, wives, bosses etc, and as mentors. In our traditional systems, mentoring was common and was seen as a means of helping young individuals or workers in the early and middle stages of their lives and careers find a clear path in their chosen sphere of work. It puts in place the opportunity to rely on seniors or adults for advice, contacts, learning of skills, etc. Modelling of women through mentorship in the university system can enable them to be disciplined, and display positive demeanours.

Mentoring has become a useful tool in advancing the cause of women and foregrounding their issues. Mentoring and leadership should no longer be seen in male or patriarchal terms. Women are good and able leaders and mentors at home, the community and the Academy.

## **Women and Leadership**

Leadership has assumed different explanations, definitions and conceptualizations. It is common to see women occupy leadership positions in every walk of life. These are not limited to formal employment, but also involve informal ones. Richard Pettinger (1997) argues that

Leadership is concerned with getting results through people, and all that entails and implies – the organization of the staff into productive teams, groups, departments; the creation of human structures; their motivation and direction; the resolution of conflicts at the workplace ... (33-34)

Gerald Cole (2004) attempts a description of the various kinds of leaders, from the charismatic, the traditional, situational, to the appointed, functional and principle-centred leader. In his treatise on the theory and practice of management, he considers leadership at a place of work as a process that is dynamic, with responsibility and commitment towards achieving group goals. (53). Cole (2004) moves from his workable definition which he tied to the exigencies of national context, to declare that “there is no best way of leading – leadership is essentially about striking the right balance...” to explain his position further, he asserts that this balance is “between the needs of people, task and goals in a given situation” (53). This means leadership is not facile but crucial to the development and progress of women academics. A similar reason was made earlier by Anthony D’Souza, (1989) to make the claim that “leadership carries a heavy burden of responsibility” (23).

If from the above definitions leadership is group-oriented, should women continue to accept the claim that they do not bond with one another, are not group-based and so are bad

leaders? To focus on women and leadership, certain stereotypes like the quotation from bell hooks above reveals. Women in leadership positions are sometimes considered to be excellent leaders except when they lead outside formal settings like religious groups, markets, homes, etc. This stereotype concerns the wrong belief that women lack the skill, emotional strength to cope with the often stressful demands of managing human and material resources in formal organizations. Gender bias also comes in when female and male leaders are assessed side-by-side. Domestic factors also shade the stereotype of women as leaders. Women are considered to be care givers at home; and early socialisation factors prevent them assuming leadership roles early enough. To Mary-Louise Kearney (2000):

*Because of their natural skills for conciliation and negotiation-honed by personal and domestic experience-they (women) can uphold and inculcate values for a more equitable human society. Their innate traits can be brought to the areas of social and business leadership, thus dismissing the compulsion to ape male stereotypes (40)*

The stance of Nina Colwill (1995) is a good description of the assumed male style of leadership. To her:

*Men's styles are seen to be more competitive, controlling, unemotional, analytical and hierarchical; women's styles tend to be presented as more collaborative and cooperative. (32).*

Much of the distinction between management and leadership seems to come from the assumption that the title of leader assumes competence. Therefore, an effective and successful manager can be considered to be a leader, but a less-competent manager is not a leader. (13-14).

Both concepts are used interchangeably as the line separating leadership and management is slim. To further the variance, John Naylor (1999) sees leadership as social, internal, within the leader, a phenomenon and not a position; while management is environmental, based on the manager's position. (523).

What can suffice for now, so we do not derail from our focus, is to consider the variances between the two concepts

mainly in the areas of the means, channels and processes involved in the two concepts and the achieved goal or realised result. Yukl (2006) however submits a working definition of leadership which is:

*Leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how it can be done effectively, and the processes of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish the shared objectives (27).*

He notes that leadership can be collective, joint, or legislated, or even spread. The position of Yukl (2006) tallies with that of Nahavandi (2000) who sees leadership as consisting of a triad: a group phenomenon, goal direction and a formal or informal hierarchy which can be rigid or flexible.

Indvik (2001) in her seminal treatise "Women and Leadership" discusses studies that reveal women's leadership qualities and abilities which are often not well represented in these leadership positions. Women have through educational empowerment prepared themselves for proficiency in leadership positions and managerial careers. Through polytechnic or university education in different disciplines, these women have emerged as good leaders. These professional and other unskilled women could be as competent as the men they work with, but their career progress is slow, due to several social, cultural, spousal, economic and geographical factors. In the academy in Nigeria, patriarchy is often implicated. Despite male dominance in leadership positions, female leaders are on the increase in the academy, and for our purpose in this paper, the University of Abuja shall be our focal point.

The paucity of women in these leadership positions in the Academy may account for why the more number of men make leadership exclusive to a greater number of their fellow men than women. More so, the arrival of large number of women to the leadership scene in the university system is often seen as a later manifestation. If in the opinion of Bob Johnson (1999) leadership means having a sense of worth in the organization through inspiring and motivating people, making them feel good about themselves, their work and the organization,

