1-2003

Review of Standing at the Crossroads: Next Steps for High-Achieving Women by Marian N. Ruderman and Patricia J. Ohlott.

Jean M. Haar

Minnesota State University - Mankato, jean.haar@mnsu.edu

Book Review

Jean Haar

STANDING AT THE CROSSROADS: NEXT STEPS FOR HIGH-ACHIEVING WOMEN. Marian N. Ruderman and Patricia J. Ohlott. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002. 245 pages.

Standing at the crossroads: Next steps for high-achieving women was written to address the changes occurring for woman managers. Ruderman and Ohlott, professionals in the field of leadership development, noted that significant changes occurred for women managers from the 1980s to the 1990s. They observed two changes: First, although the number of women in top positions stayed low, the number in midlevel positions grew significantly. Second, the issues for women changed from concern about "gaining access to the boardroom to gaining comfort in the personal life choices associated with a managerial career" (p. 2). Women reached a point where they were more concerned about making choices that fit both their professional and personal beliefs and values rather than being concerned about fitting into existing structures. Gone was the hesitation to instinctively lead based on what they believed to be the right way to lead—a way that for years had been viewed as weak and powerless—a way that presently is recognized as an effective and moral way to lead (Sergiovanni, 1999).

Overview

In Standing at the crossroads: Next steps for high-achieving women, a synthesis of the forces that affect the inner and outer lives of high-achieving women managers is presented. The authors studied the experiences of sixty-one high-achievers who participated in a five-day leadership course conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership. The "patterns that underlie the dilemmas, choices and contradictions that influence women's life journeys as managers" are presented (p. 5). According to the authors, clarification of life patterns can be used to guide women's development and help them make informed decisions about their careers.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part contains a chapter for each of five themes related to the development of high-achieving women. Each of the chapters includes an explanation of why the theme matters, the dimensions of the theme, how to develop the theme, and possible obstacles to developing the theme. Part two includes an examination of the themes from the perspectives of how the individual and the organization can apply an understanding of the themes to enhance effectiveness. The authors note that the development of women managers is an issue of importance for individuals and for organizations. They refer to 1999 U.S. Census data that identifies

About the Author

Jean M. Haar is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership, 115 Armstrong Hall, Mankato, MN 56001, E-mail: *jean. haar@mnsu.edu*

women as 45.1% of the managerial and executive workforce, up 12.7% from the 32.4% reported in 1983 (p. 12). Ruderman and Ohlott also refer to a study reported in *Business Week* that found that women score higher than men in the area of managerial behaviors. They contend that given the increased demands for leadership, organizations cannot afford to misunderstand or underestimate the development issues for women in leadership roles.

Through the personal stories of high-achieving women, the authors identify and explain five essential themes for guiding the development of women managers. The five themes are: (a) the need to act authentically, (b) make connections, (c) control one's destiny, (d) achieve wholeness, and (e) gain self-clarity.

Themes

Authenticity is described by Ruderman and Ohlott as "the desire to have a healthy alignment between inner values and beliefs and outer behaviors. An authentic person understands her priorities and emotions" (p. 7). "Authenticity is thus a state or condition rather than a personality characteristic" (p. 17). Many of the women in the study felt they lived authentic lives. Those who were in conflict with authenticity were in situations that squelched their authenticity and, as noted by the authors, the individuals were motivated to address the various conflicts as a result of discussion about this theme.

Connection "refers to a fundamental human drive—the need to be close to other human beings" (p. 7). Ruderman and Ohlott discovered that though many of the women felt that intimacy was important, few had the number or the depth of close relationships they would have liked. They noted, "It was surprising to find a group of adult women so lacking in intimacy, a condition that may well result from living in a time of transition, when women are moving away from roles primarily in the home to roles that balance home and organizational life—a balance that is proving elusive" (p. 7).

Ruderman and Ohlott explained that controlling one's destiny "represents another fundamental human drive: to take the initiative on one's own behalf and do whatever it takes to excel in one's chosen endeavor...This does not mean being overly controlling; it means needing to be in charge of what happens to you, to the extent that is possible. It refers to intentional actions taken toward achieving a desired goal" (p. 7, 8). This theme affected the women in the study in a number of different ways. Many, after discussing the theme, set goals for themselves and "began to claim more power and control over their leadership and their lives" (p. 8).

Wholeness "represents the desire to unite and integrate different life roles" (p. 8). This theme proved to be the most dominant theme in the data. The women had a strong desire to have a career that allowed for a fulfilling life outside work. Ruderman and Ohlott observed, "A desire for wholeness—for having time for a variety of life experiences—motivated many women's growth and influenced steps they took to achieve greater well-being" (p. 8).

Self-clarity "involves understanding one's own motives, behaviors, and values in the context of today's world: the myriad ways organizations treat men and women differently" (p. 8, 9). The women in the study sought to understand how stereotypes and perceptions of women influenced the way others perceived them.

Discussion

By clarifying the experiences of high-achieving women and by framing their experiences within the five themes, Ruderman and Ohlott provide a resource for those interested in increasing the success of women managers. The validity of the themes can be reinforced through a comparison with Senge's five factors for creating a learning organization in *The Fifth Discipline*: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. Specifically, Senge's views on creating personal mastery appear to mesh with Ruderman and Ohlott's themes.

Senge describes personal mastery as "approaching one's life as a creative work, living life from a creative as opposed to reactive viewpoint" (p. 141). Personal mastery has two components. "The first is continually clarifying what is important to us. We often spend too much time coping with problems along our path that we forget why we are on that path in the first place. The result is that we have only a dim, or even inaccurate, view of what's really important to us...the second is continually learning how to see current reality more clearly...In moving toward a desired destination, it is vital to know where you are now" (p. 141-142). Senge discusses identifying one's personal vision and identifies the topics of authenticity (remaining true to oneself), achieving wholeness, and gaining clarity. These are topics similar to the themes Rudeman and Ohlott recognized in the high-achieving women.

Senge discusses the need for balance "between productive family life and productive work life" (p. 311). He addresses the "old" idea of a great CEO: workaholic versus the "new" idea of those who make great CEOs, people who are great parents. What message does an organization send that expects employees to give the organization a higher priority than it gives their families? Balance is needed. Healthy, happy people help make healthy, happy organizations. These views are comparable to Ruderman and Ohlott's "achieve wholeness" themes.

"For an innovation in human behavior," Senge contends, "the components need to be seen as *disciplines*. By 'discipline,' I do not mean an 'enforced order' or 'means of punishment,' but a body of theory and technique that must be studied and mastered to be put into practice. A discipline is a developmental

path for acquiring certain skills or competencies" (p. 10). Ruderman and Ohlott demonstrate a similar belief. They state, "We wanted to create something that the next wave of women managers could use to understand, validate, and enhance their own experiences. We also sought to help organizations foster the growth and effectiveness of their women managers in this changing environment" (p. xii).

Conclusion

Ruderman and Ohlott provide guidance for those interested in strengthening women's roles in leadership positions. The study adds to the research Astin and Leland (1991) presented in *Women of Influence, Women of Vision.* They state that there exists an unfinished agenda of frustrations for women interested in leadership and achievement: "(1) continuing and subtle forms of discrimination; (2) confusion and conflict related to feminist identity and philosophy; (3) problems of balance among family, work and personal agendas; (4) isolation and lack of acceptance within the traditional male hierarchy of institutions and policy groups; and (5) economic issues—from pay inequities and the feminization of poverty to the needs for child care" (p. 148-149). The five themes identified in *Standing at the Crossroads: Next Steps for High-Achieving Women* establishes a framework for women and organizations intent on confronting the previously addressed frustrations while also strengthening opportunities for women to grow in their professions. Astin and Leland contend, "The comments, beliefs, values, and hopes expressed through these leaders argue for a continued, perhaps calculated, effort on behalf of women. Women from all walks of life must be included in planning and implementing an agenda that speaks to the range and complexity of issues that demand attention" (p. 154).

Furthermore, Ruderman and Ohlott's work can serve organizations that wish to "discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organization" (Senge, p. 4). Attention to the development of women managers through the use of the five themes can assist individuals as well as organizations to meet their respective purposes. As Ruderman and Ohlott state, "Anyone who reads this book,...will come away with ideas for guiding the growth and development of high-achieving managers, and will understand how to use the various roles in these women's lives to produce greater wholeness and more effective performance" (p. 11).

References

Astin, H. S., & Leland, C. (1991). *Women of influence: Women of vision.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art & practice of the learning organization.* New York, NY: Currency Doubleday.

Sergiovanni, T. J. (1999). *Rethinking leadership: A collection of articles.* Arlington Heights, IL: SkyLight Training and Publishing Inc.