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Women's Ways of Leading

Sally Helgesen

It is lunchtime in the pink-and-green garden dining room of the Cosmopolitan Club in upper Manhattan, the all-women's club started by Abigail Rockefeller when the Union, her husband's club, refused to serve her. The atmosphere is genteel, with stone planters trailing petunias and women mostly over fifty, some even wearing hats with veils.

It seems an unlikely place in which to be discussing modern leadership and management techniques, but I am with Frances Hesselbein, chief executive of the Girl Scouts, a woman who bridges the paradox with ease. With her low, well-disciplined voice, Hermes scarf and bag, and grooming so perfect you expect that, like the Duchess of Windsor, she must polish the soles of her shoes, Frances Hesselbein clearly belongs to the world represented by the Cosmopolitan Club. Yet she is also the woman who brought modern management to her organization with such success that Peter Drucker called her "perhaps the best professional manager in America."

I am attempting to interview her, despite the club's rather archaic ban on "visible paper"; apparently ladies are not to engage in business over lunch. So I am balancing my notebook on my knees under a napkin and scribbling without looking while an elderly waitress serves Parker House rolls with silver tongs. Frances Hesselbein is describing the management structure she devised for the Girl Scouts,

a replacement for the old hierarchical pyramid.

The new system is circular, she explains; positions are represented as circles, which are then arranged in an expanding series of orbits. "I use circles," she says, "because symbolically they are important. The circle is an organic image. We speak of the *family* circle. The circle is *inclusive*, but it allows for flow and movement; the circle doesn't box you in! I've always conceived of management as a circular process. When I was head of my regional organization, I devised a structure similar to the one I'm using now. It wasn't something I'd read I should do, it was just something I felt. These days, there are all these theories about the circular management model, but with me it was intuitive—this attraction I've always had to the circle."

Suddenly, Frances Hesselbein seizes a wooden pepper mill and sets it in the middle of our table. "This is me," she says, "in the center of the organization." She moves a glass of iced tea and several packets of sugar to form a circle around the pepper mill. "And this is my management team, the first circle." Using cups and saucers, Frances Hesselbein constructs a second circle around the first. "These are the people who report to the first team. And beyond this outer circle, there's another, and another beyond that. And they're all inter-related." She picks up knives and forks and begins fashioning radials to link up the orb lines. "As the circles extend outward, there are more and more connections. So the galaxy gets more *interwoven* as it gets bigger!"

The table at the Cosmopolitan Club is a mess, but I am fascinated. Frances Hesselbein has created the perfect image of a spider's web. And the image of the web has been haunting me lately, for I have been thinking about structure. More specifically, about how women structure things differently from men—companies, office spaces, human relationships, even their own presumed place in the universe.

The Web as Structure

[This chapter explores how many women lead differently than men. The information about women's leadership style described in the following pages is based on in-depth observations of four successful women leaders: Frances Hesselbein, National Executive Director of the Girl Scouts; Barbara Grogan, President of Western Industrial Contractors; Nancy Badore, Director of Ford Motor Company's Executive Development Center; and Dorothy Brunson, President of Brunson Communications. Each woman was observed as she carried out her day-to-day work activities. The data on each woman is referred to as a "diary study."]

While doing the diary studies, I became aware that the women, when describing their roles in their organizations, usually referred to themselves as being in the middle of things. Not at the top, but in the center; not reaching down, but reaching out. The expressions were spontaneous, part of the women's language, indicating unconscious notions about what was desirable and good. Inseparable from their sense of themselves, as being in the middle was the women's notion of being connected to those around them, bound as if by invisible strands or threads. This image of an interrelated structure, built around a strong central point and constructed of radials and orbs, quite naturally made me think of a spider's web—that delicate tracery, compounded of the need for survival and the impulse of art, whose purpose is to draw other creatures to it.

The image of the web not only imbued the language of the women in the diary studies; it was also evident in the management structures they devised, and in the way they structured their meetings. Frances Hesselbein's "circular management chart," drawn with cutlery and sugar packets, was the most obvious example, and perhaps the most fully articulated. Jokingly called the Girl Scouts' "Wheel of Fortune" by Peter Drucker, the wheel actu-

ally spins; most management staff jobs are rotated every two or three years. Frances Hesselbein explains that job rotation used in conjunction with the circular chart is ideal for team-building. Teams can be formed to address needs as they arise—for example, the devising of an eighteen-month plan—then disbanded once the task has been accomplished. People serve both on different teams and in different positions, which offers staff people wide experience in the organization. In addition, being rotated into different jobs instills a feeling of common enterprise, cuts down on the tendency to form cliques and fiefdoms, and helps managers understand firsthand both the difficulties that face and the priorities that drive their fellows. "But the reason we have such team-building freedom is because of our circular chart," says Frances Hesselbein. "When someone gets shifted, he or she is simply moved around or across—it doesn't feel like a demotion because there is no up or down. There's no onus attached to being moved."

Nancy Badore's entire career has been built on the notion that management is best done by interrelating teams; she helped to develop the model for training Ford's top executives in this style on the factory floor, and then brought it, to the chagrin of some, to the executive suite. She runs the Executive Development Center along participatory lines; the management chart shows her in the center, with team members (who head the various programs for executives) branching out like the arms of a tree, rather than in a wheel configuration. Her monthly team meetings, at which the program managers make their progress reports, are not, she explains, "about them reporting to me. They're about *them* getting exposure to one another's projects and ideas." Thus she appears not so much to be chairing the meeting, but acting as facilitator, extracting and directing information. This is very much like Dorothy Brunson's view of her role as "a transmitter," absorbing information, then beaming it out "to wherever it needs to go."

Similarly, when Barbara Grogan chairs a meeting of the governor of Colorado's Small Business Advisory Council (which she had founded), she focuses attention on encouraging the participants to exchange ideas with one another, and forge new alliances among themselves. She describes the process of using her central position to promote interchange as "encouraging the flow," echoing Frances Hesselbein's language.

Implicit in such structurings is the notion of group affiliation rather than individual achievement as having the highest value. This emphasis was obvious in the ways the women described their notions of success. "I never wanted success if it meant clawing my way over other bodies," said Barbara Grogan. "I always knew that would make it pretty lonely once I got there." Frances Hesselbein expressed a similar notion. "I don't have the pressure on me that people have who think of themselves as being out there alone. I think of myself as part of a long continuum. That continuum includes my family, but also all of the fifty-six million women who have ever been in the Girl Scouts—a long green line going back in time and giving me support. Thinking of yourself as part of something larger frees you. You don't feel this sense of individual burden. It's been the source of so much of my energy."

The web of concern may be very large, as Nancy Badore notes. "The Executive Development Center trains Ford executives all over the world, so I try to think in global terms. I don't just see Ford as this company, an entity unto itself, it's a piece of the world, interrelated by politics, history, and economics. And I'm part of that. So while I'm asking myself what role the company can play, I'm also asking what role I can play, particularly as a woman. I'm asking it in terms of the world: where can I make my best contribution? The question really gets down to *why was I born?*" Thus thinking in terms of the larger group is an important component of the "ecological" focus that I found among the

women in the diary studies. This enlarged consciousness derives in part from the women's awareness of themselves as women, in the vanguard of a movement that is changing history. Thus a kind of hidden agenda informs their actions and decisions, manifesting itself as a mission both to improve the status of women and change the world.

This sense of having a larger concern—a concern for the group or whole—is of course implicit in the imagery of the web. The orb and radial lines bind the whole together; every point of contact is also a point of connection. The principle, as Frances Hesselbein observed about the circle, is *inclusion*. You can't break a web into single lines or individual components without tearing the fabric, injuring the whole.

From Hierarchy to Web

Carol Gilligan, in *A Different Voice*, consistently opposes the image of the hierarchy to that of the "web of connection" in describing the difference between what women and men view as valuable in this world. She writes, "The images of hierarchy and web, drawn from the texts of men's and women's fantasies and thoughts, convey different ways of structuring relationships, and are associated with different views of morality and self" (Gilligan 1982). She notes that these images are in their way mirror opposites, because *the most desirable place in the one is the most feared spot in the other*. "As the *top* of the hierarchy becomes the *edge* of the web, and as the *center* of the network of connection becomes the *middle* of the hierarchical progression, each image marks as dangerous the place which the other defines as safe" (Gilligan 1982). In the hierarchical scheme of things, "reaching the top"—where others cannot get close—is the ultimate goal; in the web, the top is too far from the center. The ideal center spot in the web is perceived in the hierarchical view as "being stuck" in the middle—going nowhere.

The contrasting models also reveal different notions of what constitutes effective communications. Hierarchy, emphasizing appropriate channels and the chain of command, discourages diffuse or random communication; information is filtered, gathered, and sorted as it makes its way to the top. By contrast, the web facilitates direct communication, free-flowing and loosely structured, by providing points of contact and direct tangents along which to connect.

The women in the diary studies, eager to be "in the center of things" and chilled by the notion of being "alone at the top," echo the values, principles, and presumptions that Carol Gilligan found to be characteristic of women in general, that indeed she believed to be structured into the female psyche. These values have long been restricted to the private sphere, but that is dramatically changing; the women in the diary studies, having attained positions of authority and influence in the public realm, are able to structure their principles into the way they do business. Thus, using the model of the web to design management charts and apportion office space, to construct meetings and evolve more direct means of communication, they are participating in an *institutionalizing of the web*.

In *Reinventing the Corporation*, Naisbitt and Aburdene propose the lattice or grid as the structural model for the new corporate economy (Naisbitt and Aburdene 1986). It is interesting to note that these structures, with their interconnecting points and intersecting lines, are quite similar to the web—except that they are bound by boxlike shapes rather than circles. Thus the structure of the reinvented corporation is far closer to the female perception of what is desirable, though it retains an essential "male" angularity. The grid of interlocking pieces facilitates direct communication, can shift to meet changing demands, and hastens the flow of information. The image recalls that of the microchip—making quick connections, breaking information into bits, processing, rearranging the units: energy moving

in pulses rather than being forced to run up and down in channels.

Such a model is obviously more suited to the information age than the hierarchical structure, which found its most widespread application in the industrial era (Naisbitt and Aburdene 1986). Yet hierarchical concepts have continued to influence institutional structures because they represent a particular manifestation of male psychology, meeting male needs for limits and boundaries on relationships in the workplace, and satisfying the male value for ends over means. But as women continue to assume positions of influence in the public sphere, they are countering the values of the hierarchy with those of the web, which affirms relationships, seeks ways to strengthen human bonds, simplifies communications, and gives means an equal value with ends. . . .

References

- Gilligan, C. 1982. *In a Different Voice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
 Naisbitt, J. and P. Aburdene. 1986. *Reinventing the Corporation*. New York: Warner Books.

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Food for Thought and Application Questions

1. Does Helgeson endorse a structural or an individual approach to leadership differences between the sexes? Present evidence that she supports one position or the other. Now develop an argument in support of the opposite position.
2. Examine articles from the business section of a major metropolitan newspaper or a business periodical (e.g., *Harvard Business Review*, *Businessweek*) in or

der to locate reports of new trends in management or alternative management styles. When you locate such an article, answer the following questions: (a) Is the management style being described similar to the "web" approach discussed by Helgesen? If so, how? If not, how does it differ? (b) Is there reference made to the approach as a "female" style or one that incorporates "feminine" values? (c) If specific man-

agers are mentioned in the report, are any of them women? (d) What benefits to the organization are reported as associated with the new approach?

3. The fact that higher levels of management are male-dominated creates an obstacle to implementing the "web" management style discussed by Helgesen. Why might some male managers oppose this alternative management style? ♦