

**BOOK REVIEW: DEBORAH RHODE,  
*WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP***

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As institutions become more attuned to the value of diversity in the workplace, it becomes increasingly important for organizations and their leaders to be aware of the challenges faced by women who are seeking opportunities and leadership roles in those organizations. In her book, *Women and Leadership* (Oxford University Press 2016), law professor and director of the Center on the Legal Profession at Stanford University, Deborah Rhode, sets out to explain the challenges faced by anyone seeking to increase the number of women obtaining leadership roles in top positions. In making her case, Professor Rhode explains many of the potential solutions available to women who would like to take on leadership positions and, more philosophically, why helping women succeed in leadership is important for both institutions and society as a whole.

Professor Rhode challenges the idea that there should be any disparity in the statistical representation of women in the highest offices of political, business, legal, academic, and board leadership. She succinctly points out that women represent half of the talent pool available to our country in terms of raw leadership potential. And she vigorously asserts the need for organizations in every segment of society to make the necessary structural changes to ensure that women have equal access to the opportunities and resources needed for their eventual attainment of an equal share of the available leadership and power. Professor Rhode takes a direct and single-minded approach to the issue of women in leadership and avoids a direct confrontation with questions calling for the examination of the impacts of potential disruptions in traditional familial structures stemming from integrating motherhood with the pressing demands of higher leadership roles. This allows her to examine the problem with a clear focus on the pressing needs of women

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seeking higher leadership opportunities while giving them the chance to weigh and balance their own family choices without judgment or bias.

As a woman with significant leadership experience, Professor Rhode is able to explicate the subject through a personal understanding of the many roadblocks women face as they ascend to top positions; she has been through the experience herself. She also presents significant and thorough research on the subject of women in leadership by drawing on recent social science.<sup>1</sup> For each domain of leadership covered by each chapter, Rhode provides strong statistical analysis of the number of women who fill top leadership positions. Additionally, she shows how current numbers represent significant progress for women when compared to the past, but also how the numbers reflect how far women still need to go to be equally represented in top leadership roles.<sup>2</sup>

One of the strengths of her writing approach comes through applying the same analysis of recurring challenges to each of the unique contexts addressed in the book. This focused approach to problems facing women in politics, management, law, academia, and on boards enables her readers to see with clarity the different challenges faced by women seeking leadership opportunities. Her detailed analysis using chapter-based topical organization allows the reader to tailor their investigation of women in leadership to problems from the area of leadership most relevant to them. This in-depth coverage of topics organized by leadership area also demonstrates and highlights reoccurring problems such as: too few female mentors, insufficiently flexible schedules, the burdens of child bearing, and the hardship of child care. These problems come up in each chapter and the repetition brings out the nuances that exist between different areas of leadership while also emphasizing the universality of challenges for women in organizational leadership.

Some of the most prevalent problems for women who seek higher leadership positions, discussed by Professor Rhode, include unconscious bias, childcare responsibilities, a lack of mentors, and outright prejudice.<sup>3</sup> She gives summaries of the statistical realities that demonstrate the disparity between men and women in leadership roles.<sup>4</sup> Using these realities, she also reveals the history of women in leadership positions thus allowing background and context for the

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1. DEBORAH L. RHODE, *WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP* 2, 9, 19, 23 (Oxford University Press, 2016).

2. *Id.* at 132.

3. *Id.* at 3-21.

4. *Id.* at 2.

advances women have made while also demonstrating the remaining progress that is still needed to reach true equality with men's representation in leadership.

In working to explain some of the avenues for increasing leadership opportunities for women, one of the strengths of the book—the very specific treatment of challenges in each domain of leadership covered—also becomes one of the book's distractions. Because these fine points of difference between the common challenges receive individual and careful analysis, the chapter by chapter repetition of these commonalities from one leadership area to the next create the potential for a casual reader to feel that the later chapters overlap. However, for the professional seeking to improve opportunities for women, Professor Rhode does a great service through her book by providing the necessary detail to implement change. Anyone seeking to make more opportunities available to women seeking a path to higher leadership will undoubtedly benefit by reading carefully her insights and implementing her solutions.

Perhaps one of the most important insights proffered in *Women and Leadership* is the acknowledgement that “[m]en must be allies in the struggle.” Rhode quotes diversity experts to note that “inclusion can be built only through inclusion. . . . Change needs to happen in partnership *with* the people of the organization, not to them.”<sup>5</sup> With this insight as a foundation, Professor Rhode lays out several specific priorities in each chapter that can lead to more women getting the opportunities and inclusion needed. Of the several suggestions for improving inclusion in power positions provided in each chapter, a few that stand out include: her call for “more positive, less gendered portrayals of female politicians in the press and entertainment media”;<sup>6</sup> for corporations to “set goals and targets and hold top management accountable in compensation and advancement”;<sup>7</sup> to allow female attorneys with pressing demands from parenthood to “scale back their time commitments or temporarily step out of the workforce without paying a permanent professional price”;<sup>8</sup> for academic institutions “to recognize the importance of diversity and gender equality in curricular, programming, and research priorities”;<sup>9</sup> and for corporate board leadership to create “female director networks that provide mentors to aspiring board members.”<sup>10</sup>

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5. *Id.* at 34.

6. *Id.* at 54.

7. *Id.* at 72.

8. *Id.* at 93.

9. *Id.* at 109.

10. *Id.* at 122.

With these and many more carefully researched and explained initiatives, *Women and Leadership* helps individuals and organizations to both prepare and promote talented women into high power leadership opportunities. *Women and Leadership* eloquently explains the challenges women face so organizations can proactively remove barriers and benefit from the expanded talent pool. This book is a must-read, not only to help women to finally shatter the proverbial glass ceiling but also to understand, through the context of organizational structure, why glass ceilings still exist.