NITA CHERRY

7. TAKING UP AUTHORITY

This chapter explores how our group of university women have engaged with a central concern of leadership in organisational and community settings: how to take up explicit and implicit possibilities to exercise authority. Many contemporary framings of leadership focus on its socially constructed dimensions, and especially on the negotiated and contested dynamics of authority. These perspectives necessarily draw attention to the diversity of leadership practices, and to their informal, unconscious, messy, contingent and gendered nature of leadership dynamics.

Despite these developments, both the academic and popular literatures continue to be dominated by the testimonies and self-reports of those who sit near the top of organisations, in formally defined and endorsed roles of organisational leadership. These theories and accounts of leadership mostly focus on recognised leaders occupying significant public roles.

It is inevitable, then, that these discourses most frequently represent the use of authority as understood and practised by men, and by men who are at the top of their organisations. By contrast, this chapter presents and explores the accounts of a group of women who describe their efforts, over long periods of time, to acquire and exercise mandates to lead that have not always been clear and that have required, in some cases, significant and continuing negotiation.

DYNAMICS OF AUTHORITY

One of the central issues of leadership in organisational and community settings is how individuals acquire and exercise the authority to lead. In the broadest terms, there are two ways that such authority is acquired. One is by taking up a formal mandate to lead: an individual is invited or directed to exercise authority, and expectations and limits relating to its use are set out in various formal statements of the leadership role and the rules that surround it.

Another involves individuals mandating themselves. Without directly asking anyone's permission, a person enacts authority that is "allowed" by others, often without any explicit negotiation or even direct acknowledgment.

Just how authority is conferred, claimed, negotiated, sustained, challenged and lost – both explicitly and implicitly – remains one of the most intriguing dimensions of leadership behaviour and practice. It is a key issue because some of the most important of human transactions lie at the heart of it. These are transactions of influence and control, of freedom and dependency, of trust and doubt, of security and confidence, pride, autonomy and competence. Any leadership action, whether

N. Cherry and J. Higgs (Eds.), Women of Influence in Education: Practising Dilemmas and Contesting Spaces, 91–104.

or not it is conscious and intended, can be viewed as a series of mutual behaviours, in which people influence others or allow themselves to be influenced.

It is inevitable that these issues provoke anxiety if not resolved, and because they seldom can be resolved definitively or for long, they can remain simmering not far from awareness, revealed in the sudden sensitivity that we might have to adopt a certain tone of voice or a particular kind of direction. But sometimes more drastic ways are used to deal with what cannot be resolved, as happens when explicit rules and implicit cultures are developed to make it unlikely that anyone will challenge the way authority is being taken up and used. Gender practices have historically been one way to deal with issues of authority that would otherwise cause almost intolerable anxiety if continuously aired and contested.

More generally, one of the prime tasks of both formal and informal organisations is to create predictable house rules for leadership behaviours so that members of the organisation mostly know what to expect and how to behave in relation to leading and being led. Leadership practice in organisations is significantly influenced by the specific social and cultural contexts in which it occurs. These contexts don't simply provide the setting or stage for leadership, but they also significantly influence the range of things that are tried, what works, and

perhaps the circumstances under which a person will attempt to lead in the first place. The context defines, through its embedded normative rules, the range of behaviours that, at the very least, will be understood and tolerated. But context is not passive and certainly not static if understood as the web of reciprocal interpersonal responses that come into continuous play as soon as – and for as long as – people occupy the same social space. If a situation is novel, or a person is just inclined to try something different, leadership practice – including the way authority is taken up and enacted – is a very fertile ground for experimentation.

AQUIRING AND EXERCISING AUTHORITY

Chapter Two offered some interesting insights into the ways in which the senior university women in this project had engaged with authority in the context of their leadership work. Three of the women had been appointed to senior executive roles within the university and all three expressed longstanding interest in exercising formal authority to significantly influence the strategies and processes of organisations as a whole. They spoke of wanting to transform organisational practices, and of their interest and satisfaction in controlling very substantial budgets, offering expert framing of key issues and making their voices heard. Two of them were clear about the active enjoyment they got from exercising the formal authority conferred on them, and the pleasure to be had in organising and managing people, giving them clear direction and challenging them.

> *I was one of those people, who instead of sitting there complaining about it, proactively engaged with the leaders to actually find solutions and have that voice representing people.*
>
> *From that, the success of actually making a difference in how institutions advanced, progressed and the environments in which people were working, and that doesn't mean that it's making a comfortable environment, it's actually making a dynamic environment. Ensuring that people had a clear direction, and the outcomes of that have been very rewarding …*

Their deep interest – and the personal source of authority that earned them the formal right to lead – is the use of robust organisational processes to get outcomes.

> *So (effective leaders) are not necessarily agenda driven. When I say agenda driven, somebody who's a leader who's on a soapbox about issues is less likely to be influential than someone who provides opinion and comment in a contextual forum.*
>
> *That doesn't mean that they don't lobby but it's not about agenda. And it doesn't mean that they don't have a sense of dogged determination … but they do it in a far more considered and balanced way … rather than in a dictatorial way.*

> *So they're usually solution oriented, they usually can articulate the issue and they can identify approaches to dealing with it. And that's how you influence. If you're a solutions and outcomes oriented person, you will influence. Whereas if your only sphere of influence is to identify issues and you have no mechanism to actually address those issues, then you won't be influential.*

One senior executive gave a detailed account of how such processes work:

> *So one of your first things that always makes you successful is for you to at least give people some information as well as exemplars of what you might seek. That gives a basis from which to work from and some options within that. And then have them understand by the nature of the questions you ask of people, for their input into that.*
>
> *Then you take on board that, and then the positions that you hold you need to then evaluate the merit of each of those and then redefine it in accordance with that. So the process of the next stage was in taking the feedback, we then convened a second group that looked at the merit at the different elements of feedback and how it might fit with a range of the options that came forward.*

Once appointed to executive roles, the incumbent's job specifications spell out the responsibilities, accountabilities, and key performance indicators that clearly announce to all stakeholders the formal mandate to lead. There are certain decisions and actions that the executives are authorised to make and take, and these are generally well understood by others.

At the same time, being a member of an executive team adds considerably to the personal authority of individuals in more informal ways, through the power of association. The authority of other senior colleagues, and of the Vice-Chancellor, can be channelled by very subtle invocations – such as dropping the Vice-Chancellor's first name in the course of a conversation with a more junior colleague – or by quite explicit reminders of previous directives, decisions or announcements made by "our Vice-Chancellor".

Understood as part of a continuous negotiation and re-negotiation of mandate, these invocations and reminders represent a challenge to others, who are being invited to either agree with the speaker or argue with the authority of the Vice-Chancellor.

A small number of the university women in our group who were not in executive roles, were however in management roles that also came with some formal mandates to organise and lead. These women were in roles of Associate Dean, Head of Academic Group, or Director of a research centre. They described themselves as having oversight of students and processes, and as being able to sign off on certain things. Some of these said they had had experience of formal leadership roles relatively early in their careers, even before coming to the

university sector. And they were well aware of the functional importance of acquiring the money and other resources to pursue their interests.

> *I think the research that I do is incredibly important and I am very passionate about my research and I think the better the leadership role I have, the more influential I can be about getting the types of research done that I want to do.*
>
> *It was what I wanted to do as a personal thing, as a personal journey ... my research I am very, very passionate about (it), to get my research done by as many people as possible, with as much money as possible.*

Strikingly, most of the other women in non-executive roles agreed that their leadership mandate was the result of pursuing their own personally defined interests in specific areas of research. They were not interested in balanced organisational decision making and detachment from the issues, or in being part of a management story. Rather, their deep – often described as passionate – interest was in finding out more about particular phenomena, sharing that knowledge and helping to put it to good use, in ways that transcended the boundaries of any particular organisation. Their domain was that of professional knowledge, and they were well aware of its transformative and powerful potential for different fields of endeavour and practice across the world.

As we saw in Chapter One, the research participants' interest in becoming professionally influential varied considerably, from taking a keen interest in formal leadership roles from relatively early in their lives, to a clear rejection of the idea that they had deliberately sought to be influential. Several were adamant that they were not interested in taking up formal authority:

> *Distinguished, I don't try to look distinguished. I hate being called Professor. You know, I hate it. It is elitism to me, but other people might like it. You know. I just don't like elitism, particularly.*
>
> *I am probably not a good person to interview. I don't do the bureaucratic stuff. I had a prior career in the public sector and I have done a lot of line management and operational management and frankly I am over it. And, you know, the thing that attracted me to research was to be able to work in a more collegial way.*

A number were quite explicit about not wanting to control people but rather, they wanted to offer resources that others could take up and use for themselves.

> *And I very much like working in a collaborative team way. We are all professors. And I have always not liked working in a top down way ... I have always tried to make sure that everybody has input. Not necessarily that everybody in the end gets their*

> *way but to really consider the directions and where we are going in decisions.*
>
> *And the second thing … is that I have always worked with either an early career researcher and I have always attempted to pair with them and to mentor them. And I do that specifically by sharing with them, for example, mistakes I have made or failures.*

These accounts alert us to significant differences in the authority bases from which the university women exercise influence. Most of them have created their own claims to authority through many years of self-directed effort. While academic success eventually and progressively created its own authority, recognition of their expertise and achievements has generally not come quickly. Even when translated into the role of professor, that recognition is not accompanied by a mandate that is as explicit as the authorities and powers contained in the job descriptions of the executive women.

An extensive professional curriculum vitae can document a collection of achievements but the self-crafted mandate that it suggests is implicit, rather than explicit. Being a world expert in something does not prescribe how that authority can or should be used, even in the most artfully prepared academic profile. A professor might be expected to make significant contributions – broadly defined – to research, teaching and the larger communities of industry and society. But the individual must continue to personally negotiate what her mandate actually means. Sometimes personal authority is introduced by reminding others of the successes, contributions and reputation that the speaker has already accumulated. This can be done in very subtle ways, by referring to a paper one has written, the time one spent in a particular role, or to the management of a particularly tricky issue that would be known to others. Sometimes, however, other people need to be reminded or told quite explicitly about the value and extent of one's expertise. As when one person tells another that "I am considered a world authority on this subject" or that "my work really established the world's best practice benchmark on that".

> *You know she was trying to tell me that she knew all about something that I was actually the expert in, and she was trying to claim that she was the expert … Now that is a problem because neither of us is are going away …*
>
> *I took it as a power thing. We both want to, you know, she works in a very different way to me. And wanted to be recognised for something. And I went fine, that's fine. But don't try and make me not recognised for my bit.*
>
> *So a crisis meeting was called … and at this meeting was the DVCR, the Chief Financial Officer, the Faculty Manager and the Director … and I just … said this has been an impossible*

> *situation for the last four years ... No one wants to take any responsibility for this account.*
>
> *I am not taking any responsibility for this account. You should have given a budget to start with ... (W)hen I presented my case by bringing everyone together about this, it was decided ... that from next year I will be having a budget ... Because I was sick, I was sick of it ....*

Even when reputation is built to the point where a certain amount of authority is commonly – if implicitly – acknowledged, some of the women described the political sensitivity with which it needs to be used:

> *And he is the Dean and he gets the credit for it, so, um, even though a lot of people know he is not doing it, we are doing it, but it makes him look good within the University. And so I think that is an important strategy too.*

Deliberately lateral ways of working were described:

> *Yeah, everything is team, every single thing I do is in a team. I have done very little by myself. And so the interest I have is in working with other people and that is why I love working with people from other fields. Because they can tell me all this stuff that I have no idea about and I can tell them stuff that they have no idea (about) as well.*
>
> *And I guess for a little while I made sure I sat on all those committees ... And it was interesting that over the time, our practices spread, because I think partly the admin staff were helpful in going back and talking to other administrators.*

And sometimes, as we saw in Chapter Two, it is enough to hunker down on one's own patch of turf:

> *My sort of work is, does not bring in, it's too political. People don't like to fund it. And, yet, you know, the University supports me in those endeavours. ... You know, it' a little bit off the main stream. They facilitate, they don't try and block what I do ... I am a bit bunkered here, because you know, we are all in our little corners of the world here.*

The stories of academics working in faculties and research centres suggest, then, that they largely self-mandate, authorising themselves to lead, exercising influence in a range of ways, building and claiming the confidence and credibility to lead, sometimes over quite long periods of time. Arguably these non-executive university women now have a good deal of autonomy, which is acknowledged in their accounts of their careers.

They have been free to do the things that reflect their own passions and interests, following their own sense of what is important. But it can also mean that they are not guaranteed of support, even in their own universities. Their stories suggest that they need to continually re-negotiate that authority as other players seek to stake their own claims for leadership. Establishing and sustaining one's own mandate can require continual effort, and can come to represent significant amounts of time and effort that could have been used more productively. Stories of continual negotiation were far more common among the non-executive women than were stories of sustained and undisputed recognition.

GENDER PRACTICES AND AUTHORITY

Chapter Two detailed a range of specific ways in which influence is exercised in the practice of leadership. It should be stressed that not all influence processes involve the use of authority and the exercise of formal and informal mandates. Many influence processes are based on employing real-time skills that successfully mobilise the energies of other people. People can be very influential because they are charming, entertaining, assertive or scary, and not because they have any authority in the situation.

And similarly, authority can be effectively invoked in a situation by someone who is completely lacking in charm, in wit or in any kind of empathy. This separation of interpersonal skill and authority is perhaps clearest in situations when a person who possesses significant authority doesn't even bother to be polite. However, most of the women we interviewed were very conscious of the need to be interpersonally aware and skilful in the way they exercised authority, however that authority had been acquired. One of the executive women described these skills strategically in the context of the management of organisational change:

> *The first thing you have to be seen to be doing is developing the case as to why you need to change and you need to engage people in that dialogue as to intent and purpose of the change.*
>
> *To have people not be passive but active in the process you have to provide them with the opportunity to be active for them to have a voice.*
>
> *And so there was a process put in place to enable people to independently and collectively have a voice in that process and importantly is your ability to actually receive those messages from people ...*

The message here seems to be that listening to the views of staff and acknowledging them is an important thing to be seen to be doing; that it is a strategically important process that serves a useful public purpose, even if views are not acted on. On the other hand, a non-executive woman described the practical importance of interpersonal skill in face-to-face influence situations:

> *I think I have a good skill base. I think I am very personable. I think I have a reasonable emotional IQ and I think to be in a leadership role you do have to have a range of different abilities … They involve being a person that can communicate with other people and can sit back and listen.*

Whether it is a strategic process playing out across an entire organisation, or a real-time encounter limited in terms of space and the number of participants, listening is seen to be an important aspect of effective influence.

Many of those interviewed then went on to remark that they thought women were more likely to listen than men, and it should follow that this would make women more influential. Ironically, it seems that this can put women at a disadvantage when dealing with men. Some of those we interviewed thought that this happened because men were more assertive, talking over women, ignoring their contributions and not seeking out their ideas and expertise. However, others thought that women did not help themselves enough, were too diffident or not clear enough in their communications:

> *I think there are pervasive gender difference., I have specifically noticed in the last few months … that women are more diffident. So women will often suggest something almost as a question: Do you think it should be this or this? Whereas men are much more likely to say I think it should be this.*

> *And women already have an opinion but they don't necessarily offer that opinion and throw it out for discussion and then maybe steer it towards their opinion. So I see that almost on a daily basis. And I think that is very relevant to the degree of influence that women have and the degree of credit that women get for the influence that they have.*

> *Where the whole of the way you use language … you know that women will come out with a language that's "Oh well, I think perhaps it's like this". Whereas men will come out with "It needs to be done this way" … And I think that's quite noticeable in a lot of the committees.*

> *We were allowed to send our draft applications to this woman who was also pretty influential in the University and … she went through the cover letter that I had written, and I had written it in a very neutral manner … (And) she said I want you to start every line where possible with "I did this" and it was really hard and I felt embarrassed to actually write it like that.*

For some of our women, these are not just differences in interpersonal style but reflect deeply entrenched cultural practices that enact, to varying degrees, longstanding patriarchal authority and dynamics. They offered quite specific examples of these cultural practices at work in their immediate contexts:

> *Their behaviour is quite arrogant in personal demeanour, usually. And the other sort of behaviour is the nature of the language they use can be quite condescending. I have actually had situations where I have seen, it hasn't personally happened to me so much, where there was quite an attitude that women's places are in the home ...*
>
> *I watch, and in my research field, the boys' club, exists. They don't even realise that they are being a boys' club.*

Others were very much prepared to reflect on how they are dealing with those dynamics themselves:

> *If the gendered behaviour is the more masculine, hard, task, fast, decisive, don't over discuss it, don't waste time, don't do all that, just get to the point, that kind of stuff that you actually have to think harder about how am I going to approach this than going into a room where it's people who you know you're more comfortable with.*
>
> *This woman who had obviously thought a lot about it, said to me there is sort of no word to describe a woman who is really successful that is not a gendered word ... (F)or a man you say these words, you describe him. He is dynamic, he is this or that but anyway you immediately picture a man. But for a woman she said there doesn't seem to be, there isn't a word to describe both people who are really, really successful leaders that you wouldn't know whether it was a man or a woman. That is what she was trying to say.*
>
> *And I think she is definitely right in that way. Because she was told she always gets her way with people because she is charming. Whereas, you know, you and I have talked a bit about it and it is strategies and it is this and that and that and the other. But you know, I mean you wouldn't say a man was charming, you would say he was something else.*
>
> *But I think that I do worry that people see behaviours that I see in men and they see the same behaviour in a woman and it is objectionable to them. They wouldn't comment on it in a man ... What we perceive as bullying, I think the threshold from a woman is much lower.*

Several women in our group described ways in which they thought women collude with these dynamics. This collusion was expressed in a number of quite different ways. One way is simply to roll over and comply with dominant male behaviour, even while resenting it. Another is a reluctance to learn to do some of the constructive things that men do:

> *The women are very un-strategic. I am probably un- strategic too … Like a lot of the men I have worked with, the junior ones, they know that they will do five articles this year. One of them will be co-authored with so and so who is a really key person in their discipline … And then in year two they will do this and in year three they will do this.*
>
> *And there are only two women I have worked with who are strategic like that. And one woman who I have been mentoring … I said look, if you want to get ahead in this game, you have got to set your agenda. She says she always takes the opportunities that come up. And as a consequence she is still in a part-time position at the age of 40.*

Another form of collusion noted in the interviews occurs when women do emulate men, but copy the worst features of their behaviour:

> *I find women are more likely to be more honest and up front with you than perhaps some of your males and so that's a different style. The other style that you tend to see in women is when they try to emulate a more masculinised and aggressive style …*

In theory, the cultivation and enactment of one's own authority to lead, as a woman, opens up the opportunity to create distinctive ways of doing this, that do not simply replicate those of men. But at the same time, as we have seen, there are significant challenges. The taking up of authority, in itself, can challenge established gender practices in ways that trouble both men and women. It is worth repeating an example already offered in a previous chapter.

> *If I was chairing the meeting I would go and sit in the middle of the table and … some of them were so uncomfortable with it. You know, it was such a little thing … And if you were in the middle of the table you were actually picking up different sorts of things.*
>
> *It … made them profoundly uncomfortable. They didn't like it, you know … Couldn't I chair a meeting in a proper way. And I went: "I am chairing a meeting in a proper way." So it did them good I reckon. So I can chair in both ways but … the point that I am making is that the gender behaviour is a set of practices that are the norm.*

This provides a very clear illustration of how something as basic as a change in seating arrangements around a table can shift the ways in which authority and influence are enacted. But what is even more striking is the way in which those shifts were perceived, representing threats to the established and "proper" ways in which order is established and maintained. When both men and women share these perceptions of the established order, they are actively involved in perpetuating gender practices that pose formidable challenges to women seeking to express their authority in other ways.

> *I feel that some of it comes from the men actually not thinking that the women, within this setting were just as able. And it also comes from women such as myself. I think we are very non-combative. So if you feel that you're being pushed aside, you say why – I'll just get on with my job.*
>
> *Because we don't have that much space in the mind to actually keep on things like this, especially if one is not actually keen on those things. So you say oh forget it, if you think I can't do it, fine.*
>
> *Find another person and we just get on with things. So we are reluctant to make ourselves visible until somebody takes notice of us. Whereas men are, I can't say they are show-offs, but I feel that men notice another man more easily than they would notice a woman.*

For some women, this perpetuation of gendered practices can go well beyond behaviours that actively limit women's' capacity to be influential individuals. It can extend to actively creating obstacles when other women strive to take up authority in new ways. Examples of that were mentioned in Chapter Two, when women introduce their female colleagues to others as being "feisty" or "unconventional" or "out there". One of those we interviewed described the demeaning ways in which women can discuss other women:

> *And they can be catty in the way that they talk about others, and in … the type of conversations they might have … assuming that you know that this is a female (being talked about).*

These strands of thinking also highlight the challenges that beset women in finding role models or concrete examples of how women might distinctively and constructively take up authority. Several of the women in our group spoke directly of this difficulty. Some had no choice but to learn from men:

> *Most of my role models were men. That is not necessarily a bad thing. There are things to be learned from them.*

Simply taking up obvious male role models can, of course, lead to "more of the same" but it can also lead to distorted versions of male behaviour:

> *I think it is a tightrope, you know that the role models, between looking for you know, the model of being a woman without turning into Margaret Thatcher who was, you know a pseudo man, if you like.*

Others had to largely make their own way when it came to learning to take up authority:

> *I can remember when I was quite a lot younger, if somebody seriously challenged me and wasn't very nice about it, I used to find tears come to my eyes. And it was partly because I was actually upset and partly because I was angry and I had to really work on that not happening because that was the worst possible thing that could happen. You know, I used to say sorry, we need a bathroom break.*

Such learning can take a long time. One women in her mid-sixties commented:

> *I don't think I do that in a bombastic, what might be considered a male way, but sometimes I will. Sometimes I will even sit there and think about, well if I were a man what would I do with this challenge. But mostly I don't need to do that. It is sufficient. And of course that is accumulative. It is not a one off, as other people have said to you, you actually gradually get better at it with individual people and in a particular context.*

CONCLUSION

Some of our women said, or implied, that they are still unclear about what they are looking for in terms of authority practices that sit well with them or that they would like to aspire to in their own practice. Or they might know what they don't like, but be still looking for approaches that they can identify with:

> *I also really hate, I will use the word schmoozing. I am not a good cocktail party, dinner person. I, you know, I had a really good mentor when I, I was a Deputy Director at another centre and the Director, a woman very, very successful Professor. She was a great mentor but she was out every single night. She was at all the functions doing the meet and the greet.*

This aspect of our conversations with academic women highlights the extent to which the taking up of authority, even among very well educated, very experienced professional women, might still be a work in progress.

> *But, I think that sort of attitude, or how women often took that on, just remains part of your psyche. You have just to keep proving yourself or being better.*
>
> *I think it is fraught with the fact that you can be undermined in so many ways that would never happen to a guy. Now, it might happen to, I am sure in minority statuses and things like that they can be equally undermined whether you are male or female, but as a white Anglo-Saxon female, which has got to be the top of the pile for females, I suspect, it is always going to come down to personal stuff that is used to undermine you rather than capability or what you are actually doing or saying.*

It is equally interesting to speculate as to whether this generation of academic women collectively offers strong alternatives for younger women who might be actively looking for new and different role models.

Nita Cherry PhD
Professor of Leadership and Organisation Studies
Faculty of Business and Law
Swinburne University of Technology