

Through the Labyrinth: The Truth about How Women Become Leaders.

Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2008. 308 pp. \$29.95.

Despite the significant advances of women over the past 25 years, and despite the number of talented women available to fill leadership positions, women still have a more tortuous, more demanding, and more exhausting path to leadership than do men with equal ability. In *Through the Labyrinth*, Eagly and Carli give us a comprehensive, detailed, rigorous, and overall definitive explanation of the obstacles women face that men do not. Whether you think that you have a firm grasp of the causes and effects of gender discrimination in organizations or whether you think that sexism is no longer a serious problem, this book will change your mind.

The contribution of this book is not really in the conclusions, which will seem obvious to many. Rather, the unique contribution of the book is the way these conclusions are assembled and supported. Eagly and Carli cover each putative explanation for the difficulties women face in reaching leadership positions. The authors make wise tradeoffs between depth and breadth and consult a range of disciplines to address the arguments used to explain, rationalize, or justify the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. With mastery of the big picture and effective deployment of one telling detail after another, their conclusions are virtually indisputable.

The *Labyrinth* is heavy on the “why” and light on the “how to.” It focuses more on why women struggle than how women become leaders. Thoughtful, concerned managers as well as social scientists will find this emphasis valuable. But because the book lacks the bullet-pointed summaries, authoritative recommendations, and lists of action steps that characterize popular management books, *Through the Labyrinth* may not appeal to the average manager.

The book opens by suggesting that we replace the metaphor of “the glass ceiling” with the metaphor of the labyrinth. This new metaphor should connote “a complex journey that entails challenges and offers goals worth striving for. . . . Passage through a labyrinth is not simple or direct, but requires persistence, awareness of one’s progress, and a careful analysis of the puzzles that lie ahead” (p. x). The image of a labyrinth is useful because it is complex and structural. It is built by interwoven societal patterns (e.g., gender roles), cultural institutions (e.g., the gender division of labor in the home), and practices of work organizations (e.g., models of the ideal employee). The structure also incorporates barriers due to individual prejudices, but rather than blaming individuals for their prejudices, it holds our organizations and larger culture responsible for reinforcing and nurturing these prejudices.

Once they document that the underrepresentation of women in leadership is still significant and still widespread, Eagly and Carli devote the bulk of their effort to examining common beliefs about why only some women have gained access to leadership positions and why men continue to have far more

access to leadership roles than women do. Noting that not all explanations are equally valid, the authors examine each one in turn. Chapters address questions like Are men natural leaders? (no), Is discrimination still a problem? (yes), Do organizations compromise women's leadership? (yes), Do women lead differently from men? (it depends, and not as much as people assume), and so on. By the time the reader gets to chapter 10, the message is clear: "There is no defensible argument that men are naturally, inherently, or actually better suited to leadership than women are" (p. 188).

Even if the reader wanted to argue with these conclusions, it would be difficult to build a case against them. Nearly every line of Eagly and Carli's argument is supported by research; even their modest speculations have endnotes. For every five pages of text the authors provide two pages of notes and references—and what a set of references they are! If you have published research on women in organizations, your research is probably cited here. And if you are one of the more than 1,700 authors whose work is cited, your work has also been understood, appreciated, and applied to good effect in *Through the Labyrinth*.

Their analysis does miss a few points. Though the authors take care to mention that racism, heterosexism, and other types of prejudice and discrimination influence barriers to women as leaders, they miss their opportunity to trigger our curiosity about how other types of discrimination join with sexism to advance men and hold women back. They may be correct that there is not enough empirical research to draw conclusions about how each form of discrimination generates additional obstacles for many women, but there is enough research that they could have shaped some thoughtful questions. These issues deserve more attention, because these obstacles are real to the women who face them.

Often, the authors do not distinguish between women's and men's perceptions of women, men, and leadership. While documenting that people in general resist women's leadership and evaluate female leaders less favorably than male leaders, the authors miss the chance to discuss how and when men's and women's perceptions, stereotypes, and prejudices are similar or different. These distinctions are meaningful because aspiring women need to demonstrate authority and influence others in ways that both men and women recognize as leadership. Moreover, stereotypes affect not only perceptions of others but also perceptions of ourselves. The authors miss the chance to consider how a woman might be affected by her own beliefs about women and about leadership. Potential women leaders may hold themselves back and hold other women back because of internalized sexism or its specific manifestations (e.g., low assessment of one's leadership ability, low ambition, self-handicapping, etc.).

Eagly and Carli discuss the obstacles for women so thoroughly that a reader cannot help but be disappointed when she or he reaches the chapter on how some women make their way through the labyrinth. Simply not enough is said about how women can become leaders. The authors offer

just two general strategies and ask women to tailor these to their context, their styles, and their life situations. They advise women to demonstrate that they are “both agentic and communal” and to “create social capital.” These strategies are certainly important. Although the discussion of how to pursue these strategies is nuanced, it is too brief to have much impact.

It is also disappointing to see just how individualistic these strategies and related recommendations are. For the most part, women are expected to work on their own behalf. Though women are encouraged to network with other women to share advice and support, when it comes to recommending mentoring relationships, only men are identified as possible mentors. And there is no suggestion that women should develop mentoring relationships with female protégées. Aspiring women leaders need more comprehensive and more substantial ideas for how they can help other individual women, how they can help women as a group, and how they can join with other women to work collectively. At the very least, women must employ whatever individual power they do have to help each other through the labyrinth. Eagly and Carli state clearly that women cannot tear down the labyrinth on their own. They mention several times that both men and organizations need to make more of an effort to help dismantle the labyrinth. But, again, the suggestions are generic and brief.

The *Labyrinth*'s incontrovertible evidence of gender discrimination ought to have been depressing, and its recommendations ought to be inspiring, so I am discomfited to admit how often the book failed to engage me emotionally. Why was this so? One reason is that the authors try too hard to portray the situation facing women as both an accomplishment (half-full) and a problem (half-empty). This strategy is bound to generate ambivalence. Another reason is that passion, dismay, and urgency are suppressed in the text. Although we know by their scholarship that the authors care, they rarely show us just how much. In addition, because data and recommendations are often presented using passive and indirect language, the data are too blunted to sting, and the recommendations are too enervated to mobilize. Even when their arguments are so strong and so tight that they nearly make themselves, the authors still pull their punches. Thus when the authors decline to assert their conclusions in candid, direct, and commanding language, they starve their arguments of the conviction that translates expertise into authority. The overall effect is that no one seems angry, no one seems at fault, no one seems to be held accountable, and no one feels responsible, even though it is patently obvious that someone should be.

Thus, *Through the Labyrinth* shifts the responsibility for action to the reader. Readers have the opportunity to use what they have learned to dismantle the labyrinth and remove barriers to aspiring leaders through their own authoritative action. Specifically, organizational scholars, consultants, and professors can take action to resist colluding with individuals and organizations that ignore gender-based discrimination or claim that sexism in organizations is no longer a “real”

problem. Those of us who conduct research, teach, or advise others on "leadership" can check whether our own data and materials are up to date. We can also cull from our beliefs and recommendations any myths about what a leader is, what leadership is, and what women (and men) are capable of that serve to advance men and not women. As Eagly and Carli document so conclusively, many leadership "principles" are simply myths, myths that are sexist in their application if not also at face value. We can, and should, hold ourselves accountable for teaching others how men and women can be equal contenders for leadership roles.

Eagly and Carli want their labyrinth metaphor to offer women hope. The labyrinth metaphor suggests that if a woman is resilient, resourceful, and more than a little clever, she might be able to make her way to the leadership role she wants. The surfeit of evidence supports a different truth, that an aspiring woman is more likely to smack into a dead end than she is to achieve a position of leadership. Still, women will persist in their efforts, and women will continue to work longer and harder than men with similar ability to reach the leadership positions they deserve. Although *Through the Labyrinth* may not tell an aspiring woman, or the reader, enough about how to navigate her way through the labyrinth unscathed, it does tell us enough about the labyrinth itself that we can appreciate all that this woman must conquer on her way to becoming a leader.

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