

Mentoring Foundation Research Papers

Moments in Mentoring

Research Paper 2:

A Sense of Personal Agency: Using Power and Influence for Change (Part 1)

Introduction

As people move up their organisational hierarchies their horizons often broaden and they find they have more opportunity to take on responsibilities and make things happen in areas not directly related to their functional roles. In other words, they now have the opportunity to act on a larger stage.

This paper examines the experience of several of our Alumnae Mentees as they navigate this stage of their career and life. It places their experience in a broader body of knowledge gained from academic work in the field and from our experience running the FTSE® 100 Cross-Company Mentoring Programmes. The Executive Programme was founded in 2003 and, as at the date of writing, 162 mentoring pairs have participated in it. With approximately 70 Chairmen Mentors and the involvement of senior HR leaders as well as the Mentees themselves, the Foundation has unique access to the views of current and aspiring strategic leaders of some of the UK's largest organisations, as well as to HR specialists leading the field in

diversity and broader cultural change. This paper distils the learning we have gained over that time from our conversations, interventions and observations on the subject of women's sense of personal agency as they reach positions of power.

To understand the phenomenon of personal agency in greater depth, we spoke to four Alumnae of The Mentoring Foundation's FTSE® 100 Executive Programme, all of whom had either raised the topic with us or, from our observations, had already reached this stage in their career. We asked them to share their thoughts with us. Those Alumnae were:

- **Ruth Cairnie**, Non-Executive Director, ABF, Keller Group, Rolls-Royce plc.
- **Dr Emma FitzGerald**, Chief Executive, Gas Distribution, National Grid plc.
- **Clare Francis**, Managing Director, Global Corporate Banking, Lloyds Banking Group plc.
- **Dr Ulrike Schwarz-Runer**, Director & General Counsel, Grosvenor Group.



From left to right: R. Cairnie, Dr E. FitzGerald, C. Francis, Dr U. Schwarz-Runer

Our analysis and conclusions are based on their experiences. When citing them in this paper we refer to them by their first names.

We will propose that our interviewees have perceived and seized a broader mandate to act as they reach positions of top leadership, describing a new sense of liberation and authority (sometimes presented as a feeling that they “have permission”) to make wider and more significant choices in what they do. They have benefitted from the advice, support and role-modelling of their Mentors in stepping up to those positions and overcoming the barriers (real or imagined) that might impede them from acting. The primary focus of their broader mandate has been a desire to effect change: either in their organisations or more broadly.

The concepts and how we view them

Phrases such as power, influence and personal agency are widely used and subject to many different interpretations, depending on the reader’s world view. We consider how these concepts might be regarded through competing lenses, and describe the framework within which our work sits. This positioning is important, as how people view power and influence in relation to themselves (whether they exercise them and what they feel able to achieve with them) will have an impact upon their behaviour.

You will know from your daily interactions with colleagues, friends and family that humans rarely hold a collective view on many things. The different ways in which we view the world can be described as “lenses” or “paradigms” and social scientists, in their desire to categorise us, group those views into four core paradigms: the normative, interpretive, critical and constructivist.

Power through the Paradigms

If you are normative or positivist by nature (and traditional scientific enquiry is built on this model) you will be inclined to believe in single facts or phenomena which exist objectively and can be empirically demonstrated (derived truths). If you view the world through this lens, behaviour can be predicted and research is objective (value free). This is the paradigm of cause and effect, where power is viewed as tangible and will reside in a person or position. Power is something that one individual, or a group of individuals, exercises over others.

The interpretive paradigm accepts facts and phenomena, but suggests that individuals are subjective and that subjectivity affects experience and meaning. In this paradigm the phenomenon of power is explored from multiple perspectives, through which a richer picture can be built.

In the critical and constructivist paradigms, phenomena are seen as constructs that are largely created by a “dominant discourse” or power base and serve the purpose of maintaining power imbalances. In these paradigms power is negotiable and diffuse. Holders of the dominant power are threatened by individuals or groups who seek to liberate those subjugated to that power from their constraints. In

these paradigms, power is never static and can therefore be wrested from those that occupy the dominant position.

Academic writers and researchers are often very attached to a particular paradigm, but our experience at The Mentoring Foundation leads us to be sceptical that people fall neatly into these convenient categories. Reading the broad-brush definitions of different world views above, you may well ascribe to elements of each of them, and this is also our approach. We do keep them in mind though, when considering the experiences of our Mentees (and Mentors) in relation to power and influence and how they can be used. Paradigms can help us better understand individual perspectives and the differences between them.

Whilst we do not ascribe to a particular paradigm, we are influenced by different ideas from within most of them. Our research work at the Foundation is qualitative (interpretive) – we talk to our Mentors and Mentees in order to understand their individual perspectives and to derive meaning from them. We allow their narratives to shape the facts or phenomena we are seeking to understand. On that basis, we do not seek to define power, influence or personal agency. We allow those concepts to take shape through the meaning given to them by the Alumnae Mentees to whom we have spoken, and through our experience of observing our Mentees as they progress.

What the literature says

The literature on power and influence is diverse and is often shaped by the world view of the author. Of particular interest is what has been written about women and power.

It may surprise you to learn that even today women are often considered as marginalised and not holding power. Timothy Macklem (2003) describes how in Western society women are still not able to define themselves, their roles or their images. They continue to be, according to this view, defined by a narrative that they do not control. To use Macklem’s words: “Women’s lives are unsuccessful.... because [they] are said to be something other than they actually are, so that they are said to lack capacities they in fact have, and to have capacities they in fact lack.”

You might not agree with all or any of his view, but it surfaces many of the issues women face when navigating power. Firstly, that the dominant narrative (or society in general) has built a strong view of what women are. Secondly, that the many existing preconceptions about women do not accord with people’s ideas and preconceptions about power. How many times have you heard women described as not assertive enough, not ambitious enough, not confident enough, not prepared to help each other enough? CJ Vinkenburg et al (2011) describe how gender stereotypes can cause women to be measured unfavourably as leaders when they are assertive enough and ambitious enough, as these behaviours are not congruent with preconceived notions of how women should behave: “Given prevalent gender stereotypes that men are agentic (e.g. assertive, directive) and women are communal (e.g. sensitive and caring...), women leaders can be evaluated

‘The problem is, if women are not themselves challenging limiting expectations of them, then who is?’

unfavourably because their agentic behaviour violates ideas about desirable femininity.”

In seeking to overcome the gender power imbalance in our organisations we are also bearing witness to a more recent tendency to ascribe specific characteristics to women, as a way of legitimising them as leaders in a new, “post-heroic”, leadership era. How many times have you heard women leaders described as more consensus driven, more inclusive, more risk averse? These are some traits of the post-heroic leader.

It may also surprise you to know that most peer-reviewed academic research does not support the assertion that any of those characteristics belong to women. In fact, previous literature has identified purported psychological and performance differences between men and women as overstated and not backed up by science (Hyde 2007) – although this is contested in much popular management literature (for example, see “Are Women Better Leaders than Men?” Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman, Harvard Business Review, March 15 2012). Even if some leadership characteristics can be attributed to women, the literature is fairly united in its view that despite a fair amount of “rhetoric surrounding new leadership styles, very few organisations actually use them”. (Rippin, 2007). In other words, the leadership skills we attribute to women are still not the ones that prevail in most organisations.

Which of course does not prove or disprove anything. Examining the truth of gender preconceptions is not the purpose of this paper: they are relevant here as they contribute to the noisy context in which women (and men) operate.

In the academic literature the related concepts of agency and personal-efficacy are also widely considered and are relevant as they are similar to our notion of “personal agency”. Both concepts are associated with power. For Giddens, the influential sociologist, “to be an agent is to be able to deploy (chronically in the flow of daily life) a range of causal powers. An agent ceases to be such if he or she loses the capability to “make a difference”.”. Agency and leadership are enhanced by having the right “broader” resources. For Giddens, writing in the 1980s, having the “gender privilege” (i.e. being a man!) was one of those resources. Self-efficacy is described similarly as “beliefs in one’s capabilities to mobilise the motivation, cognitive resources and courses of action needed to meet...

demands”. (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Again, self-efficacy is seen as influenced and can be enhanced by perceived role-models as well as personal experiences of success (Chen et al 2001). Preconceptions about women and their personal agency may well, it seems, affect their ability to act on it.

The noisy context...

Feminist theorists are of the view that women have themselves so fully internalised the myriad expectations and preconceptions of them that they too no longer see those expectations as externally imposed. Even women characterise external pressures as having become personal individual choices, rather than something imposed by the power imbalance in our culture. For example, we talk of how a woman chooses to stay at home to look after her child, or chooses to step off the career ladder for a better work-life balance. Whilst these might appear as choices, they can also be construed as societal expectations. Going back to our paradigms, a more normative view is to see these choices as a rational balancing of external truths about family and childcare, whilst those with a constructivist leaning will see them as representations of a gender power struggle! The problem here is that if women are not themselves challenging or struggling against limiting expectations of them, then who is?

At the Foundation, we follow individual women’s careers in great detail. We can see that powerful but outdated contextual constraints remain in place. Many readers of this paper – men and women – are engaged in trying to change that context (particularly organisational culture) to one which is more favourable to women as well as men. We are more optimistic than much of the academic literature. Our Mentees are beginning to accede to the top of their organisations in larger numbers and their experiences of taking up positions of power and influence, what they do with them, and the impact that their Mentors have had on them in the process, offer new insights into the way forward. The specific context in which women operate makes their experience different from that of their Mentors and their male counterparts. Nonetheless, our Mentees tell us that their Mentors have offered very useful – sometimes transformational – role models. Many Mentees have been inspired by those relationships and the insights they have gained from them.

Alumnae experiences of personal agency

The conundrum of multiple, conflicting expectations (the noisy context) and the desire both to integrate into an establishment – often with a strong “male” culture – and to change it were described by Ulrike:

“You know men work in a different way. I have someone in mind; he just never even imagines that he could fail at something and he was super successful. It never even crossed his mind that he would get some push back... But I really do think that women wait to be asked. I realised this about myself, sometimes I don’t want to impose myself... it

was kind of a wake up when I realised that I can no longer complain about things not working in the company. I'm there to change them – I'm there to change them and be part of the establishment"

The dimensions of personal agency

When we spoke to our Mentees, certain common elements in their narratives stood out.

All of them professed a strong interest in the topic and could relate detailed experiences of their own sense of increased personal agency. There were also strong similarities in their understanding of what personal agency is. While they all mentioned their executive roles, most of the Alumnae did not focus in detail on how their new-found status and agency affected how they carried out their executive role. For them, status and agency were important to a broader societal role, and their desire to be a force for good. In Emma's words: "I've had to learn why this needs to be more about the whole of myself in my work life. The only way [it works] is if the rest of the elements are in congruence. That's how I live my life, it's not just how I do my job."

Ulrike described the process as "thinking bigger", including reflecting upon her potential influence "in the sector, outside the company; and then there is your personal agenda: what do you want to achieve, is it charities or is it part of your non-executive director role?"

For Clare it led her to think more about her values than performing a function. "You can learn to do things differently, but we all stand for things: you can't change your values. The things that are important to me are client-centricity, risk management, and acting with integrity".

For Emma, agency meant "recognising that you have qualities as a leader... and having a value set that makes you want to apply those qualities as broadly as you can to make the biggest possible impact for good."

These may sound like grand words, but our Mentees are not just "talking the talk". Emma describes her attachment to her broader work and how it compensates for the difficulties of corporate life: "I do a lot of work with young people with learning disabilities, helping them to develop an ambition they didn't think was possible. When you see someone, who starts off morose and won't talk to people, develop the ability to live a normal life – I find that

incredibly satisfying. It re-energises me to work through the corporate nonsense."

Ruth describes with passion the moment she connected strongly with one of her external causes: "I'm not trying to tick a box. I want to do things I really care about. So when [a position on the Finance Committee of] Cambridge University came along, I thought "Yes! I care about that. It's important to me that we continue to have a Cambridge University that is in the top of the world's research universities. What can I do for that?" It is such a liberating feeling to think that I've started to find things where I can say "yes, that's for me."

Liberation is another theme of our Mentees' experience of the choices their power and status offer them. They find that they have the freedom to think about what matters to them and act on it. For Ulrike the evolution was gradual: "In the job it's about the 'what'; what you have to do to do the job. And then all of a sudden it's the 'why'. It shifts from doing something to achieving something. There is a purpose."

This view of liberation and empowerment as a result of a new focus on things that matter to them is shared across the group. For Clare this has been the opportunity to apply her core beliefs to her executive and broader industry roles: "I am a banker through and through. I'm at the point when I think about what I can do to help [my industry]...I think for me one of the big catalysts has been being able to chair the client board of the industry."

A mandate for change

It is worth considering the Mentees' words in the context of organisational cultures that do not yet largely include women. We observe that their perceptions of their contribution are either outside their company or as a force for change within it. Could this be a reflection of their sense of exclusion from the predominant corporate culture and their rejection of what it represents? Could it also be the start of a rebalancing movement, where individual forces for good can lead to change? In the constructivist paradigm are their actions the start of an alternative power base? Certainly, these women seem to characterise their position in those terms.

For all of them, new found power and exercising it is linked with a desire to change things. Some relate it specifically to improving the success of other women: Ulrike looked around her company and saw that: "...in our organisation, younger women get so far and

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then they don't have any role models. What's very much on my agenda, is how can I help them in subtle ways."

Ruth describes it in a similar way: "You need to start a discussion, to open women's eyes to other things that they could, or would, like to be influencing but are not at the moment. It's about envisaging things that could help younger women to think that through, and think how they could achieve it.' If you think about business, government and society and who are the big movers and shakers, the people who are really identifying issues and driving them, it's still the case that most of them are men."

Clare describes her targets for change more broadly, across the whole banking sector. But in doing so she refers to her core values of "client-centricity, risk management and acting with integrity". It may be subconscious, but in articulating what she brings as enablers for change Clare refers to characteristics of altruism and integrity that are frequently attributed in the literature to "post-heroic" leaders and women. This altruism is a feature across the group of Alumnae, both in the choices made for their contribution and in how they articulate them. For Emma both her charitable work and her executive success are tied into motivating others: "what gets me out of bed in the morning as a leader, is helping people to achieve their potential. That's my natural mind-set. I'm trying to encourage people to think about it in terms of values, as opposed to the next promotion."

Ruth describes it as "deciding to devote more of your energy to looking at what you really care about, and where you would like to make a contribution. There's a lot of talk about being authentic – this is an important part of becoming more grounded!".

What is interesting in all the narratives - alongside the thread of altruism - is the merging of personal and professional interests. It is perhaps integral to Ulrike and Emma's description of a "job" becoming a "role" that the separation of job and contribution disappears. All the women we spoke to were merging their interests and motivations as they reach these broader, top leadership positions. In doing so they are living the ideal of "bringing your whole self to work" espoused by so many companies as a goal for their organisational culture.

It may be that in expressing altruism and a broader contribution beyond the normal focus of a corporate leader upon productivity and profit, our Alumnae are influenced

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subconsciously by the contextual pressures of expected behaviours for women. No-one could accuse any of them of the stereotypical behaviour often attributed to senior women leaders, such as "pulling up the ladder behind them" or "behaving like a man". Ruth acknowledges a gender element to her broader ambitions: "supporting others comes very naturally to most women, as they develop. Mentoring other women in your organisation, becoming in effect their de-facto champion, improves organisations."

Ruth is also quick to remind us, and we agree, that "giving back" or making a broader contribution is not a uniquely female characteristic: "It's not only women who get to a certain stage in their life and want to give back; I hear that extensively from both women and men". It may be, however, that women's experience, context or ingrained characteristics mean that they are more likely to use that mandate to focus on beneficial change.

Expectations and motivations are always complex and normally hidden, so it is impossible for us to draw any conclusions. But in any event, what is remarkable is that reaching the top of the corporate ladder is enabling these women to achieve much greater freedom to act. As a result they are gaining deeper fulfilment both in their corporate life and beyond.

How mentoring helps

All the women we spoke to mentioned the classic barriers women face when progressing to the top in their corporations. Hesitancy, lack of confidence and lack of role-models were mentioned by them all either in relation to themselves or other women. Ruth characterises them as "a continuum: on the one hand as people get to the next position, they have more authority, they can influence more but on the other hand they are probably continually trapped by not being sure how much scope they have..."

Some described how their Mentors helped them overcome these barriers and engage with their new-found power and sense of personal agency.

Clare described her Mentor as allowing her, in her words "to think outside the box" ... "particularly at that point in time, because I had a purpose in terms of 'how do I play to my beliefs?'. Her Mentor had posed the simple, but galvanising question "Well, why wouldn't you?" to her dilemma about whether she had a mandate to act. "I think what the mentoring has allowed me to do is draw out passions and take those to the next level and, therefore, force me to be a much more rounded leader".

Emma described her Mentor as giving her "confidence to step in so I could see that, if I wanted to achieve things I thought were important, I had to play a wider role and exert more influence. There was also an element of 'Oh, get over yourself!'"

Others felt that at the time they had not yet formulated their questions and wished in retrospect that they could have discussed the topic more with their Mentor. Ulrike

told us: "I'm not sure that I would've picked up on this at the time when I had my mentoring relationship; it's certainly something that has become clearer to me over the last couple of years. This could be a great topic for people to discuss with their mentors: how can they spread their wings?"

It is almost as if their Mentors' experience and belief that you "just do it" have given the Alumnae we spoke to a glimpse of how they too could achieve a more action-oriented, empowered leadership style frequently attributed to men. Our Mentees learn from Mentors whom they trust and respect that they can act in that way without compromising their authenticity. As Clare says, becoming a leader is not about changing your beliefs, it's just about changing how you do some things.

Conclusion

In both the academic literature and in how many of us think of our workplaces, the dominant corporate culture is perceived as being largely unfavourable to women. Men and women are seen as polar opposites, sitting at either end of a long continuum. Nonetheless, despite this environment, our Alumnae have successfully negotiated their careers and arrived at a point where they now have a broad mandate to act. Many of them are using that mandate to bring about beneficial change. In their Mentors, they have found role-models (mainly male – although there are some women Mentors) on their journey who are interested in talking to them, hearing their perspectives and sharing their own experience and insight. Our first research paper illustrates how the Foundation's Programmes facilitate productive dialogues and new lines of communication, where experiences are shared and mutual learning takes place. Through those conversations the gap between Mentor and Mentee narrows and both parties often learn more about what they share than what separates them.

The results are tangible, as these narratives demonstrate, and may contribute to ending the repetitive cycle of dualistic assumptions about difference (male –v- female, Venus –v- Mars) that saturate much of the current thinking within organisations and in academic research on diversity and change. Returning to our different paradigms, these conversations expose the participants, in a sympathetic and trusting environment, to different experiences and world views. By adopting an open stance to the other person's view, individual lenses can adapt and shift, bringing fresh insight. Through shifts like this, the process of deeper change can take place.

In the context of their sense of personal agency, the confidence and impetus our Alumnae have found to act and bring about beneficial change is already making a difference. If women continue to step up to leadership roles in greater numbers, this impetus should increase. As Ruth states: "We have had this campaign for women on Boards. That's quite tangible. And then you can have a campaign for more female Chairs, and so on. But actually, I think the important questions are less tangible. It is more

about who is driving change and driving opinion." We should not underestimate the potential for change that can be brought about by these individual (and possibly collective) acts of personal agency. Giddens wrote, back in the 1980s "Social systems are constituted by the activities of human agents...While as individuals we can do little to change the world, through purposive, reflexive organisation we can mobilize the power to transform social systems." We are optimistic that as our Mentees and Alumnae (and other women) succeed to the very top, many more of those agents of change will be women.

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The Mentoring Foundation

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'The Rise of the Female Executive: how women's leadership is accelerating cultural change' by Peninah Thomson and Clare Laurent with Tom Lloyd, will be published by Palgrave Macmillan in Autumn 2015.

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