

1 Leadership out of Balance

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How well do we trust our leaders?

Not too well. A national survey¹ says nearly two-thirds of Americans think there is a leadership crisis in the country.

Not only do we doubt the abilities of those who make the nation's decisions, but we also fail to understand the mix of qualities that create great leadership, and the strengths that girls and women can contribute to that mix. (We might better understand if, for example, women—who make up half the population—were more than 3 percent of CEOs of Fortune 500 companies or more than 17 percent of the U.S. Congress.)

This book isn't a feminist "wo-manifesto." I'm not going to bluster about glass ceilings, old-boy networks, testosterone in corner offices, and the thin smokescreen of "You've come a long way, baby." Nor will this book play a blame game. I simply am going to look you in the eye and say that if the United States hopes to remain a major player among nations, facing challenges such as poverty, inadequate education, and global market competition, we're going to need to draw deeply from our entire talent pool, not just half of it.

¹The 2010 *National Leadership Index*, an annual nationwide survey by Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and *U.S. News & World Report*.

For that to happen, we'll need a top-to-bottom overhaul of how the country views the leadership potential of girls and women. This book aims to impact your view about that, and to convince you, for the sake of our nation's leadership, that we need to invest strongly in our girls.

Cookies and Confidence

I've been involved in Girl Scout leadership for 27 years. Girl Scouting is a three-million-girl working model of how to unleash and develop the powerful potential of girls.

Which brings me back to the guy on the airplane, described in the Preface. Do you have any idea what it takes for a 10-year-old girl to go out and sell a thousand boxes of cookies, door to door? If you say, "Yeah, a strong mother!" you're missing the point. Of course Mom's support is essential to help each girl and protect her as she sells. But what's really going on when a girl sells all those cookies is this: she's learning to be an entrepreneur. She's learning business skills. She's learning teamwork. She's figuring out how to be organized. She's learning how to set and achieve goals. She's finding confidence in her ability to engage with people and convince them. She's developing strength as a person who Gets Things Done.

She is literally *discovering the leader in herself*. Out of her experience of planning her campaign and knocking on doors and looking people in the eye and making the sale, she emerges capable of amazing new things.

Few people outside of Girl Scouting realize this. A decade ago, when I was leading the Girl Scout council in middle

Tennessee, I engaged the Nashville Rotary Club to make the cookie sale part of the Rotary service project. The Rotarians signed up as business coaches for Girl Scouts who lived in a public housing community that's near where the downtown Rotarians meet. (People tend to think of Girl Scouts as being white, middle-class, and suburban. But we're every color America is, and we have troops in public housing, in prisons, in the inner cities, and on the prairies. We're in practically every zip code in the country. We're everywhere.)

The idea was that the Rotarians would meet with the girls, talk them through the project, and give them guidance based on their own business experience and expertise. We prepared for that meeting by using our Girl Scout cookie sale training program—the same one that we use with the girls—to train the Rotarians.

It blew them away. The Rotarians were astonished at how well our program taught basic business skills, salesmanship, financial literacy, goal setting, investing, and other abilities not usually associated with cute little girls. Several Rotarians told me later that the training program was more sophisticated than anything they'd ever used in their own companies.

Like practically everyone else in the United States (except Girl Scouts) the Rotarians hadn't taken the cookie sale seriously: after all, it was just something done by girls.

A Different Perspective

There's a real difference between the way the public looks at the accomplishments of girls and boys. People latch onto the cuteness and wholesomeness aspects of the cookie sale because

they really don't know what to do with the idea of girls acting in an organized, effective, powerful way. And we in Girl Scouting haven't yet done enough to publicize the fact that the cookie sale is a huge leadership lesson for all involved, not just an organizational fund-raiser with cute little girls on the front lines to help boost sales.

For the girls, the cookie sale is a life-changing experience. It is the only childhood activity available to girls ages 6 to 17 across the country that is actually a hands-on business. It's not at all like reading about sales and merchandising in a classroom. You literally, as a girl, are presented with the chance to run your own business. And you do it like most businesses, in partnership with a team.

Better yet, it's a business that people see as important. Just being able to say "I'm a Girl Scout and I'm selling cookies" puts a girl in a position of respect, influence, and approval. At the same time, she's learning how to interact with coworkers, how to play by rules, how to be ambitious, how hard work pays off, and how to set both long-term and short-term goals. The cookie sale is not just about how many boxes one girl sells. It's about how many boxes the whole troop sells, and what projects or field trips or adventures they'll all agree to use the money for in the next year. The experience of the sale is tangible; it validates a girl's worth.

Long-term goal setting? For eight-year-old kids, "next year" is long-term goal setting. But many Girl Scouts dare to plan further ahead than that. A friend told me a remarkable story about her daughter, who joined Girl Scouts as a five-year-old Daisy and stayed with the same troop all the way through high school.

When the girls in the troop were in first or second grade, they decided that they wanted to go to London when they got to high school. They saved cookie-sale money every year, and they accomplished their goal. They went to London and visited the headquarters of the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS is the international parent agency of Girl Scouts of the USA [GSUSA]), and they stayed at Pax Lodge, one of four world centers for Girl Guides and Girl Scouts. They came back feeling like citizens of the world. Nothing else in my daughter's life did as much to help her set big goals and learn to achieve them as the cookie sale.

Don't Blow Your Own Horn

One reason the guy on the airplane didn't understand the scope of the cookie sale was because no one had told him. Unlike boys, girls are seldom encouraged to highlight their own accomplishments.

For example, a national poll of American women² found that two-thirds of women of professional achievement, and more than three-fourths of those who were deemed "women of distinction," had been Girl Scouts in their youth. The same poll found that more than four out of five successful professional women who had been Girl Scouts rated their Girl Scout involvement as helping them achieve later success. Yet many women don't talk about their Girl Scout experience this way. A man is much more likely to list Boy Scouts on his résumé than a woman is to list Girl Scouts on hers. Some women don't link what they did as kids with their adult lives. Others value the Girl Scout experience personally, but

²*Defining Success*, Girl Scouts/Louis Harris & Associates, 1999.

they don't imagine that it's worth mentioning to anyone else. Women haven't been trained or inspired to talk about their own leadership development. A lot of them believe that if they do talk about it, no one will listen.

The Need for Change

Americans are uncomfortably aware that we need better leadership. So why don't we tap our whole talent pool instead of ignoring half of it?

An essential part of solving the leadership crisis that bedevils us is to bring more women into positions of leadership. That's not because women are better leaders than men. It's because men and women together make better leaders than either men or women can make by themselves.

If a blended leadership of men and women is best for the United States, then in order to achieve that blended leadership, some things are going to have to change. At Girl Scouts we have been thinking hard about the subject of major change. A few years ago we realized that Girl Scouting itself, facing a decline in membership and momentum, needed to change if we wanted to stay relevant in a world evolving "at the speed of girl." And so, in the most sweeping transformation in our hundred-year history, we turned a tradition-bound organization inside out.

This was no small task. Girl Scouts is one of the largest nonprofits in the country, with an annual operations budget of three-quarters of a billion dollars, and a million volunteers and nearly three million girls. Radically changing something that big is like having to tear down and rebuild an ocean

liner sailing at full speed without sinking it. But we did it. We managed (and are still managing) to reinvent our ways of work, streamline our structures, build a new leadership brand, attract new public and private and corporate funding, and revitalize the fun and adventure a girl gains when she becomes a Girl Scout.

I'll explain the whole process as we go along, but briefly, we did it by going back to our roots: our core beliefs about who we are, what we do best, and why we're driven to do it. We also were driven by the belief that we were doing it to meet a huge unmet need, and that if we succeeded in revitalizing our own organization, we could lend a hand to improve our society as well.

The Message We Send

If we are to inspire girls toward leadership, we need to help girls change the way they see their own potential. Girls are growing up in a society that belittles their skills, their intelligence, and their abilities by telling them over and over that the only things about them that really matter to anybody are their looks and their sexuality. The top 25 TV shows for kids ages 12 to 17 regularly depict teen girls as highly sexualized and objectified.³ In these shows, 98 percent of the sexual incidents involving underage females take place outside any kind of committed relationship. Three in four incidents are presented as being funny (not to the girls; to the other characters and to the audience). And in

³A recent study by the Parents Television Council.

these shows, 93 percent of the sexual incidents that involve young females are unhealthy, according to the American Psychological Association's definitions of healthy sexuality.

So what? Why should we care?

We should care because the message this stuff sends, regardless of how you feel about teen sexuality, is that girls are to be seen as sex objects first.

If that's how we're teaching teenage girls to see themselves, it's no wonder they seek confidence in how they look, and how desirable they are, above all else. "Today's girls view being sexy as the ultimate accolade," says Carol Platt Liebau, political analyst and commentator, and author of *Prude: How the Sex-Obsessed Culture Damages Girls (and America, Too!)* (Center Street, 2009). As a result, girls too often think the only way they can receive admiration is through promiscuity and sexual aggression.

What about admiring girls for expanding their horizons, growing in self-awareness, setting goals, using their intelligence, or taking on projects that help others? We don't see much encouragement for those values coming from our society's center, or its top or its grassroots. And if girls don't absorb those values as adolescents, it's going to be difficult for them to model those values when they become adults and parents.

Some people think this situation is hopeless. I disagree! The challenges are real, and the outlook is grim if we keep going the way we are, but we do have solutions within our reach.

We Can Do This

You are a solution. I don't know if you're reading this book as a parent, a woman, someone interested in leadership, someone who pays attention to gender issues, or someone who wants to know how a famous nonprofit organization turned itself inside out. Whoever you are, you can help.

Americans generally value equality. We try to be fair and just in how we treat kids. So here's an idea for you. It may sound simplistic, but it's the solid truth, and it may be the most important thing I have to tell you:

What's good for girls is good for the country.

We all benefit when every citizen is valued: boys, girls, men, and women. We all benefit when there's a place for us all at the table, and leadership is shared. I'm convinced that the United States will gain competitive advantage, in how our economy runs and how our civil society is played out, when we have men and women sharing the problems and sharing the solutions.

For that to happen, we must make a major change in our culture. A culture is about behavior. It's about how people treat each other, what our shared values are, and how people are rewarded and recognized. Those cultural assets determine how we develop our leaders.

Most of us already have a general sense of how blended leadership works. If you grew up in a home where the decisions were made by your parents together, openly, each tempering and respecting the other, you know what that means. If you didn't grow up that way but had childhood friends who did, you know what it means. If you're lucky enough to have

a true partnership in your own life, you know exactly what it means.

My message is not about how individual people should live. There are households and organizations run entirely by men or by women that run beautifully. I'm talking instead about finding and nurturing a balance of leadership strength in our whole culture. To talk about that, we'll need to speak of averages and statistics. Statistic number one is that the population is evenly split between men and women. After that, the splitting becomes less even; we'll get back to that in a minute.

What Numbers Tell Us

For us to have a conversation about balance in decision making, we need to talk about things you can measure. For example, if I say to you that there's a serious imbalance of power between men and women in the United States, you might think, "Oh, of course she's right," or "No, she's blowing smoke and everything's fine." But if I tell you that only 15 percent of corporate board positions are held by women, or that 17 percent of members of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate are women, then we have something real to talk about.

(If you think Congress is making progress toward gender balance, consider this: there's been a 1 percent increase of women per election cycle in the past 30 years. At this rate, we'll reach parity in 400 years.)

The statistics on women in leadership, dismal though they may be, are not really the root problem. They're a symptom. The problem is a lack of balance. I believe we can correct

that. And I'm not talking about a radical feminist agenda, or about quotas. I'm talking about a country that works better, a country where more of us feel happy and proud of our productivity as citizens.

I'm talking about making a better world for us and for our sons and daughters. We can do that together, you and I. Because when it comes to the crunch, we are tough cookies.

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