



Feminist Leadership: Key Definitions

Overview: Discussing various definitions of leadership allows women and men to appreciate the different contributions of feminist perspectives and practice as they relate to leadership for social change.

Purpose: Since our primary understanding of leadership comes from traditional male forms of authority, it is crucial to examine more collaborative and creative models and approaches that are emerging from feminists and others interested in innovation and participation. By analyzing different approaches to leadership and how they contribute to social transformation, people can define for themselves the qualities and behaviors they see as most crucial to leadership. Creating a shared definition gives them a vision to guide their own personal change and development process. This information and reflection can help them better identify areas and skills they wish to strengthen and acquire in order to develop more effective leadership practices for building healthier and stronger movements.

Facilitation note: This activity lends itself to many uses depending on what aspects of leadership you want to emphasize – organization or movement leader, working group leader, political organizer/facilitator or team member. The qualities and skills are often overlapping so a general leadership discussion is helpful for everyone. In doing this exercise, it may be useful to revisit the discussion of feminism – why we have negative associations with it, how it relates to patriarchy and feminist visions of liberation and transformation.

If you have done the Mural of Mentors and Ancestors exercise (see the Our Struggles, Histories and Contexts Pack; Feminism, Identity and Intersectionality Pack) you can build on and incorporate the definitions of leadership you developed. This activity can also be used in conjunction with the “How Do We Want to Exercise Leadership?” tool (see the Feminist Leadership Pack; Power and Transforming Power Pack) or complement discussions of feminist popular education.

Time: 90 minutes - 2 hours

Materials and space

- Flip chart
- Markers
- Masking tape
- Printed quotes from *Feminist Leadership for Social Transformation* – Srilatha Batliwala



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Credit: Adapted from JASS Southern Africa (JASS SNA)

Process:

- Introduce purpose and process – e.g. a mix of plenary, individual and small group work looking at different visions of leadership, etc.
- Option: If you have previously carried out the Mural of Mentors and Ancestors exercise with the group, review the list of qualities generated during that exercise to provide a starting point based on people’s common experience together. Ask participants to keep these qualities in mind when working individually and in small groups.

Individually and small groups:

- Hand out the definitions of feminist leadership from Srilatha’s piece and have everyone read them to themselves, then underline words and phrases that resonate with their vision of leadership, note any questions the definitions raise, and finally have them jot down how they think that these aspects of leadership help people develop the movements and the kind of change we want.
- *Facilitation Note: The definitions are divided in four groupings. This allows you to provide a set of definitions to four small groups; if you want to have more or less, it is easy to divide and assign the definitions as you see fit.*
- In their small groups, share the points that resonate, note the commonalities and discuss why they think these are important – e.g. how they think these aspects of leadership help people develop the movements and the kind of change we want.

In plenary:

- Have small groups first:
 - Read the definitions they worked on.
 - Share their reflections identifying commonalities.
 - Ask: What are 3 – 4 key points to include in a common definition?
- Once recorded on flip chart, ask for overall reflections on what may be missing, e.g. you may want to add input on qualities from Mural or ask what skills might be needed to meet this definition.
- Summarize the emerging definition, clarify any misunderstandings, recognizing that there may be differences in interpretation or emphasis, and adding any key points you feel are missing.



Individually:

- Have everyone think about what this definition means to their own development as leaders – what areas do they want to work on with others so they can strengthen their own capacities, skills and qualities?

Plenary:

- Have volunteers share their reflections and conclude.
 - *Option:* You may want to reintroduce a definition of movement-building at some point in order to make the more direct connection between leadership and movement-building, emphasizing that these two elements become our compass for action.
 - *Option:* If you are working on capacity-building especially with feminist organizers and political facilitators, you will want to review principles and practices of feminist popular education and have group identify what other skills and qualities might be necessary, reiterating the importance of feminist popular education as a key methodology for movement building



Handout

Feminist Leadership for Social Transformation

Srilatha Batliwala (2008)

Definitions of Feminist Leadership

Group 1:

Patriarchy, reflected through all the structures and institutions of our world, is a system that glorifies domination, control, violence, competitiveness and greed. It dehumanizes men as much as it denies women their humanity. So we need leadership that will explore and expose these links and challenge patriarchy. The only leadership that does this is feminist leadership.

Transformational leadership is leadership concerned with causing social change; feminist transformational leadership is concerned with achieving gender justice. For... feminist transformational leadership, leaders need to undergo a process of personal transformation, consciousness-raising and internalization of feminism...

- Peggy Antrobus

[Feminist] leadership is a process by which women assert their rights by continually evaluating relevant experiences, questioning their roles in society, challenging power structures, and effectively catalyzing positive social change...

- CREA
Sexuality and Rights Institute, Goa, 2000

Group 2:

Leadership from a feminist standpoint is informed by the power of the feminist lens, which enables the feminist leader to identify injustices and oppressions and inspires her to facilitate the development of more inclusive, holistic... communities. Feminist leaders are motivated by fairness, justice, and equity and strive to keep issues of gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, and ability at the forefront.... The elements particular to a feminist leadership construction include a focus on both individual or micro-level and societal or macro-level social justice concerns, a desire to bring marginalized voices to the center of the conversation, and a willingness to take risks as one strives to enact a transformative agenda.

Tracy Barton

- Tracy Barton, "Feminist Leadership: Building Nurturing Academic Communities", in *Advancing Women's Leadership Online Journal*, Vol.21, Fall 2006

[F]eminist...leadership is...women and women's organizations sharing power, authority and decision-making in our common pursuit of social, legal, political, economic and cultural equality.

- DAWN, Ontario



Group 3:

Feminist leadership [is] oriented to a different arrangement of the human order: re-distribution of power and re-distribution of responsibilities. Fighting societal inequalities. Changing economic and social structures, beginning with transformation of psychic structures. Bridging personal freedom with collective freedom. Aiming at cooperation instead of competition. In feminist leadership equality, mutuality and absence of sex role behavior should be visible. Feminist leadership should promote (or even rehabilitate) emotionality and the values of relationships. Feminist leadership renounces external paraphernalia of power and their influence.^[1]

- ADMIRA, a women's organization in Bosnia and Serbia
http://www.zenska-mreza.hr/prirucnik/en/en_read_management_leadership_8.htm ,
accessed October 10, 2008

We need. . . a new vision, a new definition of power and leadership. We must go away from the old model and toward one of creative cooperation on our small and threatened planet. The world needs women to imagine, define, and lead us toward a sane and sustainable culture. A culture of soul. A culture that values life more than war. People more than profits. And hope more than despair.

- Johnnetta Cole
African-American Scholar

Group 4:

We are not interested. . . in leadership for leadership's sake. We are interested in bringing women's talents to bear, along with men's, in addressing major social, political and economic concerns.

- Mary S. Hartmann

[T]he question is not whether we should have leaders, but how we develop all women as leader. . . It is especially important that leadership be considered a form of stewardship.

- Flora Crater

[S]ociety has tended to mystify leadership skills as somehow belonging only to a few people who are then seen as better than everybody else. But if we view leadership skills as something that many people have to varying degrees – skills that can be built upon, supported, and enhanced because they are needed in the world, not in order to make one person superior – then we might have a better way of dealing with leadership. . . There is a difference between women's leadership and feminist leadership, because the latter has a particular political standpoint.

- Charlotte Bunch



Optional Additional Handout:

Feminist Leadership

Compiled by Charles Knight

Feminist practice has led to a set of distinct attributes for the idea of “Leadership.” Indeed, feminist leadership is meaningful within the context of feminist culture and its social relations. This brief describes key attributes of feminist leadership as it has developed from the practice of many over the course of decades.

Awareness of self as part of a larger whole -- both in the present moment and through generations and cultural legacy. Attention to history (ancestry). Greater attention to interconnectedness and collectivity than to autonomy and independence. Understanding that leadership is rooted in communities and histories and therefore one person or group cannot define it for another (Women’s Theological Center - Spiritual Leadership). Self/community knowledge and discovery is a necessary part of the process.

1. **Shared leadership:** Attention to bringing the collectivity/community along. Affirmation of emergent leadership qualities inherent in all (“training more about affirming skills than imparting skills” – Susan Eaton). Mentoring.
2. **Relational:** Building strong trusting relationships. Relational/Cultural models. Importance of storytelling in affirmation of the person and the community.
3. **Inspirational/Spiritual:** Oriented to the protection and nourishment of the human spirit in everyone wherein the capacity for leadership resides – thus increasing the capacity to transform the individual, their relationships, organizations, and communities
4. **Clarity of purpose:** With an orientation toward the **transformational** (of the individual and the whole).
5. **Explicit awareness and attention to power dynamics** and their varied meanings in context of different cultures and identities. Critical attention to the role of fear and the need for control in the power relations of dominance. Sympathetic recognition of fear in the individual and the community. A lot of leadership is about bringing people through their fears toward collective goals.
6. Attention to learning to **practice of ritual, celebration**, and the personal and community expressions of joy and sadness. Joyful expression is highly valued.



7. Creating **safe environments for expression, self-care, participation, and growth of leadership skills**. Collective support for challenging each person to the best practice of leadership.

Sources:

- Disabled Women's Network Ontario (DAWN Ontario).
- "Seminar in Honor of Susan Eaton", MIT Faculty Club, 14 May 2004.
- Women's Theological Center, "What is Spiritual Leadership?"