



New Trail

Leadership Without Bombast

Kim Campbell, who served as Canada's 19th prime minister in 1993, reflects on her personal leadership style

By Kim Campbell on August 8, 2014



Photo: Richard Siemens

In my life, I have had many opportunities to lead, but it was not until I was out of public life, thanks to the Canadian electorate, that I had the opportunity to examine whether all of this activity reflected a leadership “style.”

In early 1996, while a Regents' Lecturer at the University of California, Irvine, I met business professor Judy B. Rosener, who had just published *America's Competitive Secret: Women Managers*. The book compared the leadership styles of women and men at major American corporations. Rosener observed that whereas men preferred a “command and control” style of leadership, women tended to use what she called an “interactive” style. This latter was a less hierarchical, more power-sharing and consensual form of direction. It was also a style of leadership that was effective and increasingly encouraged in “flat” corporations — those that depended on the creativity of all employees — such as the knowledge-based industries that were growing in importance.

There was, however, a catch-22. When women led in this interactive style, it was not recognized as leadership and they did not get credit for it. Men, meanwhile, were being trained to *be* interactive leaders and were rewarded for their ability to manage in this new way. One reason women tended to prefer an interactive over a command-and-control leadership style was that they

were not tolerated as command-and-control personalities. Forceful exercise of authority by women risks being seen as unfeminine, “shrill” or any number of descriptors that undermine their efforts. The leadership style that was forced upon women by the corporate culture did not result in their recognition as good leaders, despite their skill and success.

Reading Rosener’s book was a revelation to me, as it was clear that I had an interactive style of leadership. It had been the key to my success in passing contentious legislation as Canada’s minister of justice and attorney general from 1990 to 1993. This was not just a matter of personality or personal characteristic but, rather, of my clear understanding that I could not just “ram through” my ideas within caucus. My role as minister did not give me the power to enforce my views. Only by building a consensus on sufficient common ground to create legislation could I respond to the challenges I faced. In order to create constituencies for action, my staff and I worked painstakingly to consult, not only with members of Parliament but also with citizens from all walks of life. When some members of my own caucus could not support my legislation, I tried — even when I had sufficient support to move ahead — never to create a personal breach. This approach enabled me to pass a record amount of legislation when I was in the justice portfolio, but I was sometimes perplexed at the lengths journalists would go to to avoid giving me credit for these efforts. Reading Rosener’s book gave me the first clue as to why that was the case.

By its nature, interactive leadership is not bombastic. If you are trying to build coalitions on divisive issues, big public declarations about what you are going to achieve are counterproductive. Journalists did not recognize my leadership as such because I was not making the noises they associated with leading. Even more surprising to them than my legislative success was the support I received from two-thirds of the caucus when I declared my candidacy to lead our party.

As prime minister, I found that I did not always have the luxury of broad consultation. There are some issues where the prime minister must make decisions quickly and based on her personal authority. One reason (among many) I regret not serving longer in our highest office is that I was not able to see how my leadership style would have developed in that unique role.

Today, the inclusive, interactive, non-directive style of leadership is *de rigueur* in business and politics. As men become more interactive, perhaps it will create a greater acceptance of women using a command-and-control style when that is what they need to express. Leadership is a complex and often contextual phenomenon. There is no “one style fits all” or “one style for all occasions.” Good leaders learn to use the style that achieves the goal.

At age 16, Kim Campbell became the first female president of her high school’s student body. Thirty years later, she repeated the feat on a national scale, becoming the first female prime minister of Canada. She is the founding principal of the new Peter Lougheed Leadership College at the University of Alberta.

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