



Gender, Authenticity and Leadership: Thinking with Arendt

Rita Gardiner

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Gender, Authenticity and Leadership examines the conceptual underpinnings of authentic leadership to discover why little attention has been paid to gender. The author explores the failure to interrogate the complexities surrounding the concept of authenticity, especially as it relates to the diversity of lived experience. Rather than encouraging a genuine approach to leadership, this theory's normative foundation is more likely to encourage social conformity. By contrast, the author shows how Hannah Arendt provides us with a richer ethical lens from which to consider these issues.

Using a blend of phenomenology and feminist theory, the foundations of authenticity are traced back to the Enlightenment and the emergence of bourgeois selfhood. Historically, women's desire to lead was negatively affected by notions of gender propriety, and these societal restrictions serve to perpetuate gender inequities. Thus, the book demonstrates how gender prejudice is deeply embedded in organizational practices, as well as the cultural imagination.

As part of this inquiry, the author conducted interviews with senior women leaders in higher education. Their descriptive accounts illustrate ethical tensions between personal principles and institutional priorities that serve to complicate the notion of authentic leadership. Research findings also suggest that it is the relational self that is fundamental to understanding what it might mean to lead authentically.

When we broaden our definition of what constitutes authentic leadership to account for the myriad ways in which we live and lead, we discover how people without positional authority can change their communities in profound ways. Hence, leadership is not dependent upon a person's organizational position, but rather on how their actions demonstrate care for the world. This more expansive context, together with Arendt's insights, opens up new avenues of thinking about the interconnections among gender, authenticity and leadership.

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