

PlexusCalls

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In Conversation with

**Eileen Hoffman
&
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**Complexity, A Feminine Science: Why
Women Leaders Have An Edge In
Complex Organizations?**

September 26, 2003

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Why Women Leaders Have An Edge In Complex Organizations”**

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Birute is a pioneering developmental psychologist, therapist and writer who attended Harvard University and was a visiting scholar at the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College. She also is founding partner of Harvest Associates, a consulting firm, and co-author of the widely acclaimed book *The Soul at Work*. She is a member of the complexity group at the London School of Economics and is currently working on a book on women leaders.

Eileen Hoffman is a clinical associate professor at New York University School of Medicine and a health consultant who has been a pioneer in the field of gender-based medicine. She has written extensively on women’s health issues, and on social issues that affect the health of men and women in the US and abroad. She is a founding member of the American College Women’ Health Physicians.

Justina Trott, a member of the board, a founding member and past president of the American College of Women’s Health Physicians, is Medical Director and Clinical Physician at the Women’s Health Services Family Care and Counseling Center, Santa Fe, New Mexico. She has written on headache and stroke and given numerous presentations on issues that relate to women’s health care and women in the medical profession.

Birute: ... Stories are a critical way to encompass reality. There are several stories to emphasize some of the ideas we found. When Roger and I did *Soul at Work*, when we finished we realized most of the men we had talked to embrace a more feminine side. Feminine is a trigger word for many people, in the sense that relationships have become the bottom line. When we talk about complexity, when we say that agents interacting together have a mutual effect, and that something novel will emerge.....

Eileen explained the connections she made with women allowed her to recognize things that had not made sense to her in her work and training.

Justina: ...I was able to tap into my own experience to say these things don't ring true. Bringing my own experience and my own authenticity into a situation allowed me to explore what else was missing. The other pieces became the stories—to get back to Birute's point about stories--because we are relational. The stories need to be told. If you know your story is not going to be understood, or valued in the system, you reframe the story, which changes the story. The dominant system, the skills and attitudes of the current system of medicine, are designed to take relationships and personal experiences out of the system, and sanitize it, keep them different components that are disconnected.

The system becomes more complex when you bring your whole self into it. For women who need to have their stories told and understood, that changes the whole dynamic of the profession of medicine, and the dynamic of the human relationship in any personal experience. When I worked in a hospital as an administrator, I was dealing with union negotiations. Since most of the administrators were men and most of the union members were women, the women needed to have their experiences known and understood, and they needed their stories told to be able to move forward with their relationships.

Birute: I've been talking to women from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Palestine, and Israel, and when they are getting together, for the first two days they have to have time to tell their stories to each other to develop the relational concepts of trust.

Justina: Relating stories changes the system and the interaction, just as having stories heard does. So it's more than a need. Telling stories is part of the process, part of coevolving.

Birute: It's a lubricator for the connections that make things happen. When we see women in leadership...leadership may not even be the right word....I see them in my catch phrase, gather, rattle, and rock. *Gather* means critical mass. *Rattle* means the holistic view of the person, of yourself, of the system, and that's when women begin to address the disconnects of the system. *Rock* is about being attuned to the fluctuations in the system and the ability to affect the rhythms of what is happening.

Justina: Another thing women face is invisibility. I'm the director of the center when I work. When I had my evaluation, two males evaluated me, as well as several females. One male commented that I needed to act more presidential to be seen as a leader.... A second comment, raised by one of the women, was that "it doesn't seem like you're the one who is really in charge.".... I found it humorous.

Birute: Gathering is what you do as a leader of an organization. You are building critical mass, developing collective wisdom, and finding common ground. It's very complex work. But women do it very quietly. In your evaluation, the woman who made that comment doesn't see what you are doing. There are stories about women's ability to gather. We were gatherers originally. We used to gather nuts and berries. Now we gather people. It's out power as a collective to gather.

Birute recounted the following story told by Kim Campbell, who served from 1990 to 1993 as Canada's first women Minister of Justice and Attorney General, and who was Canada's first woman Prime Minister, serving in that post from June 1993 to November 1993. One of her legislative accomplishments had been to secure passage of

modifications to Canada's gun control laws that demanded increased responsibility of gun owners in the safe storage of their weapons.

When I was Minister of Justice in Canada, I had responsibility for the administration of criminal law, and it was a federal jurisdiction so it was a big responsibility. I was the first woman to hold the post....We passed legislation on gun control. We had had gun control since the early 1900s, but it's still contentious. There are urban versus rural things. We worked very carefully with the Legislature. We got dissenting sides together. I've always enjoyed bringing people together. I believe that unless people hear each other's sides, you assume they are being adverse or obtuse in not accepting your position...you discover that the argument isn't about the argument. I discovered that issues are more complex in nuance than they seem from the outside. Opposite points of view must be heard and getting consensus is required. Enormous amounts of consultation are needed—which I've always enjoyed because I've learned so much—I've always tried to negotiate with individuals with different views. When the bill passed by a very large majority, instead of saying Kim Campbell did what she promised, the press said she must have watered it down. I was not given credit for getting a controversial bill through. This was a situation where one was not in a command and control leadership position. The media didn't see my leadership because it didn't take place in public. There was a total disconnect between what happened and what was seen. The media did not want to give me credit for having accomplished anything.

Eileen empathized with those observations.

Justina observed the issue involves definitions and stereotypes.

Justina: Leaders are seen as people who have all the answers, who manipulate other people into buying their view. In your story, and in the process I'm engaged in, it's not my idea (that's going to dominate). I go into a meeting ignorant, and I say if ten people have different ideas on what needs to be done, let's get them together. The facilitating is bringing out the best in each individual and bringing people and ideas together. It's not leaders with answers, its synthesis. So it appears you have done nothing, but its collective leadership, and your role is being the cultivator.

If you're the hunter-gatherer, and you've sent ten people to bring back the berries, and ten people bring ten colors of berries, everyone says it's a feast. And everyone who sees it says here's my berry. The person who arranged it is not seen as the person who did it. So I have an elegant presentation of nourishment on a place where many people have contributed, and people from the outside say you didn't so anything, you just put out the dish.

Birute: We have become used to thinking of *power over* rather than *power with*...

Eileen: Or *power for*...

Birute: There has even been a struggle over the word power....our administration (in Washington) is as example of that. They struggle, they want influence. You ask if they want to have power to have the resources to put into effect the things you think are important. The word itself has been hijacked. Many words have been hijacked and shoved into a small corner...And we lose the meaning of power for trying to achieve something for the greater good.

Eileen: There is one place in medicine where power behavior has been acknowledged—and imbalance of power is an important part of the way you look at an individual—and that is pediatrics. That's where the first important holistic view was acknowledged in medicine. Children were not adequately served, and much of early pediatrics started as social activism. Medicine took this on before we had the science to understand it, because of the identified need to be embraced. As pediatrics developed as a science, we got a better understanding, a better science, of growth and development. For the first time, we paid attention to how children develop in families, in communities, and in school systems. There was a special aspect of caring for children, because they had no power. They were the objects of powerful forces around them. The first place where physicians were trained to advocate on behalf of the powerless one in the family was when there was child abuse.

Birute: A certain quality of the way women lead is the way they rattle. I know you (Eileen) have a great rattle. And it has to do with the holistic view—the view of the whole person within the whole system.

Eileen: I started on a learning quest to analyze the mismatch between when I was seeing and what I had been taught. (What I was learning about) medicine, psychiatry, and complex systems was what brought me to complexity science. I was convinced there was a science that allowed me to think of women's health with a unifying underlying science to it. When I talked about it in the late 80s, I was shunned, shut out. I was asked who was I to start bringing in novel ideas?

Birute: Why was it so threatening?

Eileen: Because it was a different way of looking at the world. It was interdisciplinary. So you're attacking the system on an academic level. You're talking about taking hours of teaching time from one department, perhaps adding it to another department, and that converts to power or the loss of power. If you have professionally trained clinicians dedicated to taking care of whole women, other practitioners feel intruded upon. Everybody got very flapped. Obstetricians-gynecologists said we're already doing women's health. Family practitioners said the same thing. No one wanted to embrace the situation where all disciplines could come together in a dynamic way and share their discrete knowledge bases.

I used to be a pariah. Now, it's no longer such a horrible thing. I got to be on committees with family practitioners, obstetricians, and psychiatrists. Over the decade the concept has become less abrasive, but it hasn't made a foray into meaningful levels of the system. I was recruited to develop a department of women's health, which turned out to be a way of taking advantage of my revenue stream. When it came to doing things differently, different professional practices, different end product, that wasn't tolerated. I ended up leaving and the institute closed down. There are many different medical schools and clinics where new practices are based on individual talents, but there are none at a very high academic level, which take advantage of

developing a new interdisciplinary discipline that will bring value added not only to the patient, but to all who bring services to the patient.

Birute: When will that happen?

Eileen: I think its something that's going to take a lot of time. Women want this. We have, over the last number of years, been able to form our own organization, which Justina is president of, which brings in dynamic collaboration of all different types of practitioners to a growing field. As activities mature outside the mainstream institutions, the mainstream will be attracted, in just the same way they see other inter disciplinary effort that is the name of the game today.

Justina: Relationships will be important here. As more women are increasingly entering all the fields of medicine, they want to relate across disciplinary boundaries, and begin filling in the voids between those boundaries through relationships. As we work together, as we serve on committees, we will create cross-disciplinary relationships that will weave the fabric that creates new disciplines.

Eileen: Complexity is what we have brought into this field in the discipline of women's health. We see complexity as an important component of developing a women-centered science of medical care, so we are actually putting complexity as a feminine science into practice.

Birute: When you begin bringing relationships, feelings, into anything, there is messiness. Just by nature, this becomes complex. When I was doing a dissertation on love, one of the psychologists said we couldn't use feelings as a variable because it was too complex. How can you talk about love without mentioning feelings!

Eileen: Women's health is the worst-case scenario for reductionism and factionalism. If women's health is the science of genomic variation based on sex, like pediatrics is the science of growth and development, we could ask questions like how does a woman's ability to adapt to the pregnant state inform our care of men and nonpregnant women? How do maladaptations of the nonpregnant state help us look at

conditions that women and men get? There is a lot of value added in what is brought into the system, not so much because women need their own medical specialty but because they are the worst case of the most fragmented scenario being served. If we can learn something valuable by looking at women as a complex adaptive system, and construct our science from that, we can contribute to everyone else who could benefit from the system.

Birute: The existing system has its benefits and limits.

Justina: We've come almost as far as we can in medicine with the tools of the science that are used in every other venue, whether its complex negotiations at a peace table, business, economics, or the stock market. We know the tools that complexity science will offer will allow us to take what we know further. The science and understanding we've used to date has been necessary but not sufficient, especially when it comes to female adaptation. The new tools will let us contribute (greater understandings) of all the workings of life.

Birute: The last leadership behavior, *rocking*, comes in the form of tend and defend, not flight and fight, and it's related to oxytocin as opposed to adrenalin. In the face a difficult situation, women tend to know how to rock. There are many examples: Linda Rusch, on a Friday afternoon telling her staff to come into her office, without saying why. The music is blasting and she says "let's dance". She changes the rhythm of the day.

Eileen: Changing rhythms means being aware of fluctuations, in general, and of being aware of where I am in my life, where in the cycles, and that makes me more attuned to external rhythms. External rhythms are a wonderful paradigm for looking at health and the series of oscillatory systems in the body that are all linked in a harmonious way. Males and females are dependent on the same rhythmic functions of themselves, their bodies, the environment, the seasons, but they tune that out. Socially, we're conditioned to be non-fluctuant, or linear, and unvarying, and if we can now learn through the female system that variation is the norm, that fluctuations and oscillations are the norm, we could apply that understanding to men and make men healthier.

Birute: Men's cycles are influential, but they're not as obvious.

Justina: In the whole notion of the menstrual cycle, premenstrual or post menstrual, the rhythm is so obvious that we focus on it as though that's the only rhythm in the cycle. But there are endocrine pace makers, oscillatory centers that generate the rhythms for a number of cycles in the body that have to be entwined and integrated. The same cycles are happening in men, but there are just no external signs that make it obvious.

As the call's allotted time winds down, Birute recounts a brief story told to her when she interviewed the novelist Barbara Kingsolver, whom critics have called one of the leading voices in contemporary American fiction.

Birute: (Barbara Kingsolver tells us....) After September 11 the newspapers asked me to write a piece for the Sunday editorial pages. They said they knew I would say things that no one else would say. I had a great sense of responsibility, an emotional recycling I'll call it. So I wrote a piece about patriotism. I had to say something. There are times when you have to know how important your values are. If you can't stand up for your values now, you can't know what kind of people you are. So I said it's important to take a moment to evaluate our mode of leadership in the world. I wrote about diversity, tolerance, compassion and freedom of speech. There were plenty of men saying these things, but the women who said them were tarred and feathered. The names and (disparagements) that were used were ugly and hateful to women. The NY Times and the Wall Street Journal ran articles about how stupid I was. They said I was un-American. One woman even called upon the Wall Street Journal (editors) take it upon themselves to say my books should be banned internationally. I got mail from people who had never read my work. At the same time, I got support from my readers, and sold more books in that six week period than I did when Oprah held up a title and said `buy this book.` That was encouraging. But the other reaction was astounding. I thought I was saying mild mannered things. Yet there was this horrific reaction. It was a horrible time, and I looked for the trouble in what I had said. What did I say? We began getting horrible threats. I wondered what will happen to my kids. My first concern was to

keep my family safe. But the good thing about these creeps is that they have short memories. When I was weeping I had the vague sense (that there was a lesson to be learned here.)

Then I remembered reading *The Art of War*, and *Shogun*, (by James Clavell). *Shogun* is a very masculine book. But then I remembered reading something that isn't necessarily masculine. You can conquer your enemy when you have grown large enough to control your enemy. How can you become large enough to include your enemy? It is very hard to separate from the language of conquest. You have to let your wisdom grow to include your enemy's reality, and realizing that made me strong. Rather than hurt the person who has hurt you, make yourself stronger. It's a reflective response. I started saving my hate mail. And I'm going to use it in my next novel, which will be about moments of fear, political force, and using language. The risks of speaking out are great, but the risks of silence are greater. If I had just shut up and taken this, we would have moved backwards.

Eileen: (Barbara Kinsler's experience holds) apt analogies for women: become large enough to include the other view.

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Plexus Institute wishes to extend a special thanks to Marcelle Bastianello for her kind and generous work to make Plexus Calls available to our members by providing transcripts of our conversations. Marcelle is President of Innovative Systems Associates in Newton, MA where she does consulting work and research primarily for business organizations. She also has been at the heart of pulling together members from the Plexus community and beyond to form our New England Plexus Fractal group. She can be reached at isaco@rcn.com.