**How do we pursue professional development for (female) leadership in times of crisis?**

***Introduction:***

Despite the idea that Higher Education (HE) is the foundation of thought leadership and the perception that the institutions within are establishments for provocateurs to develop innovative leadership strategies there is a disconnect with broader society and industry. Over the last 10 years, the 'women in leadership' drive has thrived in industry, but HE has fallen further behind (Ginsberg, Davis, and Simms 2019; Marchant and Wallace 2013; Morley and Crossouard 2015; Yousaf and Schmiede 2016). Although female leadership in HE has had significant attention, there is still a lack of representation due to the glacial increase in uptake which leads to a basic need for further dialogue (Aiston and Yang 2017; Redmond et al, 2017). Since 2016, we (the facilitators of the round table) have been exploring female leadership in higher education. A collaborative approach is adopted to working with our peers in developing action learning sets to encourage and support academic professional development for all levels. In this work, we have seen a distinct need to emphasize the support for female leadership. While this is not a gender focused approach, the purpose of this round table discussion is to collaborate and share experiences from the past 12 months (and before) to collectively view ways for females to be authentic and align their values, aims and be true to themselves in pursuing professional goals in HE in times of crisis such as Covid 19. Subsequent to introducing our research on leadership in HE, the round table session will focus on sharing, connecting and creating ways forward based on action learning (Dick, 2017) with the aim to encourage and support female professional development (Delaney & Stewart, 2019; Zuber-Skerritt & Louw, 2014)

The under representation of females in HE leadership raises the need for further consideration (Aiston & Yang, 2017). Although many universities in Australia have appointed female Vice Chancellors, women are predominantly employed at the lower echelons (level A, B and C) with challenges in gaining promotion (Marchant and Wallace 2013). This gap is highlighted by approximately 44% of Australian academics identified as female yet only 25% holding senior lecturer or higher positions thus demonstrating the current gender inequity in HE leadership roles (Lipton, 2015). To further escalate the problem of equity in enabling professional development, the majority of casuals and teaching intensive roles are females (Crimmins, 2016).

Although the embodiment of leadership is implicitly masculine (O'Neill, 2019) the importance of examining the different aspects of female leadership along with the structures and processes that have an impact is emphasised due to the limited research to inform the state of play for females in HE (Dobson, 2020). The escalation in casual and teaching intensive academic roles plays a key role when seeking tenure or promotion which usually requires a robust research portfolio therefore creating a hurdle for teaching focused academics (Barnes, 2020; Yasukawa & Dados, 2018). Females are more commonly allocated strong pastoral or administrative roles such as program director with incentives that ‘it will be good for your career’ yet this can increase the stress in times of crisis (Dutton & Worline, 2020). In 2020 there were early estimates of 21,000 jobs at risk in Australia alone, and the current Covid19 situation continues to impact HE (Doughney, 2020). The calls to “go raise the bar” and go beyond the status quo in the post Covid19 HE world (Parker, 2020), are espoused however the impacts on the more vulnerable in academia are obvious as we see rationalizations announced daily. As the unstable landscape of HE deepens and neo-liberal strategies are accentuated, female academics who account for a substantial share of the more exposed … will be more likely to be further hindered in their professional goals.

Given the distinctiveness of the HE environment, the copious mainstream resources focused on leadership skills adds minimal utility in navigating professional development pathways leading to goal achievement for academics. Inherently, this leads to greater levels of frustration and stress, even for the most dedicated. Despite Sheryl Sandberg encouraging females to pursue their ambitions, Michelle Obama countered with: "That whole, 'So you can have it all' - nope, not at the same time. That's a lie. And it's not always enough to lean in, because that shit doesn't work all the time," (Armstrong, 2019; Sandberg, 2015). Females need to create their own means and do ‘it’ differently to men in HE by “introducing new ways of approaching the opportunities and challenges” (Latchem, Kanwar and Ferreira, 2013, p157). In alignment with these views, our focus is to explore female academic leadership, and understand the incongruence in professional development of espoused views of institutions e.g. Athena Swan ([www.sciencegenderequity.org.au](http://www.sciencegenderequity.org.au)), versus the actual encouragement and support experienced by female academics. Given the radical changes in HE (Doughney, 2020; Parker, 2020) and the impacts of Covid-19 (Stephenson & Harris Rimmer, 2020) the professional development of female academics is of importance as new and unknown challenges arise.

***Theoretical Foundation/ Teaching Implication:***

Given the virtual conference and with the aim of being innovative and collaborative, we propose an action learning based round table discussion. This focus will frame the discussion to encourage, stimulate and explore individual’s academic leadership intent and identity in terms of professional development in times of crisis. Based on continual learning and improvement through a normative re-educative lens (Argyris, 1990, 2006; Gapp & Fisher, 2007) we will guide the round table discussion through a cyclical experience (Deming, 1994; Stewart & Gapp, 2018). The online experiential approach is adapted to ask participants to simply use any tactile approach (tablet, pen and paper, whiteboard etc.) as part of the action learning (Dick, 2017) methodology. As a result of the round table, a deeper ­awareness and understanding through reflection and sharing will be developed by participants. The action learning framework is known to shape resilience, innovation, creativity and lateral thinking through collaborative means that lead to improved coping mechanisms that potentially improve self-confidence within their workplace hence building leadership capacity.

**Session description:**

In this round table, we aim to engage and encourage narratives around female leadership in HE based on the past 12 months (pre to post Covid19). Conversations will be based on past experiences and how might we build on these for the future. Our aim in this round table is to create a collective and safe environment to explore individual female leadership practices, experiences and to gain deeper insights into individual’s priorities, leadership goals, practices and understandings. In the perfect world we would take participants through a face-to-face action learning set however during this workshop we will use the online environment to encourage participants to use whatever is available to them e.g. pen, color pencils, paper, tablet, word documents to explore how they see themselves, what are their ambitions and how they might be achieved.

We will open the round table with a brief introduction to each other and the process. Then, we will encourage an interactive discussion with participants as they move through the experiential phases (Deming, 1994; Stewart & Gapp, 2018) underpinned by action learning methodology (Dick, 2017). The collaborative and interactive approach of action learning can be thought provoking as diverse views are shared which often leads to assumptions and barriers being challenged albeit in a safe and open-minded environment (Hadida, Tarvainen & Rose, 2015). The discussion will be shared and start with 10 minutes for an overview of the methodology (action research and action learning sets – i.e. Dick 1990, 2017; Revans 1982; Ackland, 1991) and include some ground rules to create the ‘safe place’ (what is said in the room stays in the room). Table 1 depicts the three 10-minute phases with a debriefing of 20 minutes to conclude the session. To summarize the purpose of this roundtable, we channel Germaine Greer’s statement: “the aim is not to present a plan, or even a series of certainties or correct observations, but a correct statement of a problem” (Kleinhenz 2018) with the scope of how each participant might be able to achieve what they want in their professional development.

Figure 1: Action learning for leadership using PDSA (adapted from Deming, 1994; Dick, 2017; Revans, 1982).

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