

Broad Influence: How Women are Changing the Way American Works

Jay Newton-Small

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Introduction

The compelling power of personal story is illuminated in Newton-Small's detailed and well-researched book *Broad Influence: How Women Are Changing the Way America Works*. Beginning with Newton-Small's mother, a trail-blazer at the United Nations, *Broad Influence* exposes the hidden moments of injustice experienced by women in multiple work contexts, including politics (legislative and judicial), finance, law enforcement and the military. The book then adeptly moves from injustice to impact in each work domain to highlight how women have methodically begun to change the norms within each profession.

Especially now, with the 2016 tumultuous United States presidential elections generating misogynistic discourse, Newton-Small's meticulous reporting should be required reading for all young adults of any gender identity. The basic argument of the book seems to be the idea that a critical mass of women within a profession has the ability to influence its culture. Evidence is presented to support the argument. Yet, the argument is not the strength of the book; it is its sourcing, as hundreds of interviews lie at the foundation of the text. The text is rich, evocative and compelling. To read the book is to catch a glimpse of how it might have been to be the woman to first wear pants to work, to be the woman diplomat who withstood sexual harassment or to be the women viciously attacked online after they commented on the sexist nature of Silicon Valley. These experiences are presented in straightforward prose yet with profound insight. Combined, they paint a picture of both the hardships and the progress made by women at work.

Synopsis

The book is important for human resource development (HRD) for at least two reasons. First, Newton-Small's attention to detail and sourcing offers an innovative reportage/research method for qualitative researchers in HRD. Second, the content of the book – women at work – is highly relevant to the discipline of HRD and for scholars and scholar/practitioners focused on organization development, career development, leadership, culture and change. While the focus of most of the book is on the USA, the final chapter offers detailed information about

women at work around the world; this chapter alone could be included as required reading for any HRD student interested in global workforce issues.

The book is important, also, because of the tumultuous events in politics, migration and economics currently facing humankind. While the book can tend to essentialize the feminine (e.g. women are more collaborative, caring, consensus building, better listeners), the meticulous reporting of women's experiences humanizes how gender discrimination has and continues to be felt. This humanizing is a welcome complement to and confirmation of empirical research findings of marginalization, double-binds and stereotype threat.

As the book makes clear, over and over again, "men set the standards for the behaviors that broadcast power" (p. 13). One story is especially bold in its excoriation of this type of male-normed behavior. As described by Newton-Small, a senior White House official relayed that he was "was impressed by a young woman leading [a] meeting" (p. 21) but only until she volunteered to deal with an administrative task:

The minute she did that, she completely changed her relationship with the table. She was no longer the leader. She was the follower. She was no longer the equal. I see it all the time. The women jump up to make shit happen [...] They just wanna get it fixed or keep it moving and keep everyone happy (p. 21).

This scenario illustrates not only the privilege men possess in the workplace but also that men get to decide what is and what is not "powerful" behavior. For HRD, this type of scenario has implications for both research and practice; researchers can build on Newton-Small's research to further flesh out more of these types of "disempowering" behaviors. HRD practitioners can develop cultural interventions and/or leadership development workshops to expose these unwritten rules and norms.

Evaluation

While the book excels at these details, a cohesive argument about what Newton-Small calls a "critical mass" of women at work seems underdeveloped. The book suggests that when about 20 per cent of a particular workforce are women, then women start to have an easier time and progressively impact that workforce's culture and norms. Perhaps because this is not a researcher's book, the argument is suggested using personal and anecdotal evidence in piecemeal fashion. Despite this weakness, for HRD scholars interested in vicariously experiencing discrimination and injustice, this book is a must read. The book offers all of us the opportunity to critically reflect on our taken-for-granted assumptions about workplace norms, culture and standards of behavior.

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