

## ***Leading: Role or Authenticity?***

***The Power of Yin    May 20, 2009***

***What if we asked ourselves “WHY NOT?” every time we had a good idea?***

***What do we need to walk out of . . . , in order to walk on?***

***How do we redefine our idea of leadership - moving from “role” to authenticity?***

Once again we had the opportunity to gather as women - from different cultures and life experiences - to explore a topic of shared interest: “How do we lead with authenticity?” From Uganda, Burkina Faso and the U.S., common themes emerged as we considered this question.

Whose frame do we use when we think of our work - our own? or a frame prescribed by someone else? What messages do we listen to? When we try something and it doesn't work, do we give ourselves credit for trying, “I had the vision and courage to try that!” Or do we tune into the “Who do you think you are to try to do that?” message that always seem around us?

Our conversation clearly revealed that much of what causes us to revert to “roles,” approved by, and sometimes imposed by, our culture - is based on fear. It also became obvious that we, as women, have to take responsibility - individually and collectively - to define what “leading” looks like to us, to define what “success” means to us, to convince ourselves of our own competence, to value our talents and our perspective, to value our unique leadership gifts. “When we convince ourselves, we can convince others.

As we reflected on “how do we do this?” several strategies emerged:

- It's visual; pay attention to how we stand and how we walk.
- It's being aware of how we talk about ourselves and our work, substituting positive ways to describe our work when we find ourselves dismissing our value.
- It's listening to others; noticing what others appreciate can help us discover more about ourselves.
- It's stepping out and taking risks.
- It's using the resources of a coach to help us own our skills.

Two other strategies emerged that prompted deeper conversation:

- “Owning my skills” means acknowledging that these are gifts God has given me. My work is to learn to leverage these! It serves no one for me to be shy or coy or in any way reluctant to use my talents. It serves no one to always be comparing, evaluating and judging my accomplishments. Better, instead to realize “I am the accomplishment.” The way I live my life, the way I use my skills, “I am the accomplishment.”
- We also realized that convincing ourselves of our value, and leading from our authentic self, means understanding our relationship to the functions of the organizations in which we work. Knowing how we contribute to organizational goals increases our self-confidence. It means we know the right questions to ask to help our teams move forward on tasks. It enables us to see and take advantage of appropriate opportunities. It also help us recognize those areas where we do not have the knowledge or skills needed, and to draw out and depend on the strengths and expertise of others.

Recognizing ourselves of our own unique value, appreciating our gifts and our approach to leading, enables us to nurture others. It enables us to express expectations of our children, partners, colleagues and other women, in ways that respects their uniqueness and engages them in trusting their own abilities.

Specific examples of shifting from rigid expectations of “roles” to fluid connection of skills with “what needs to be done,” reveal positive changes, a movement to a “partnership” approach to living together. “Whether we are washing the car or cleaning the house, or buying the food, at the end of the day it is not about what others think we should do; it’s what works for us.” “Awareness is the key. When we are aware of patterns that keep us stuck in confining roles, we can take action that starts new patterns.”

Our conversation closed with stories of how we learned to “think for ourselves” and challenge role expectations:

- Being told I shouldn’t climb trees because that would ruin my chances for marriage, didn’t keep me from climbing trees.
- If I heard “you can’t do that,” or “girls can’t do that,” that’s just what I did.
- I was close to my Dad; took on the “boy role” in my family in terms of taking risks and exploring my curiosities.
- My Dad broke the norms of our community and sent his daughters to school.
- I was sent to live with my Grandma who was old and needed help and companionship. She taught me that a woman should always walk with her head held high, that I should always be

clean and pay attention to my appearance, that if I wanted to be respected I had to respect myself.

With deep gratitude for the women and men who challenged us and supported us, who taught us and held great expectations of us - we acknowledged the strong foundation we have for stepping into our own authentic ways of leading. And we confirmed our own deep desire to support, challenge, and hold great expectations for others.

As we think ahead to our **next meeting, June 24**, our focus will be on ~

**affirming our own leadership.**

Bring your stories to share. The Power of Yin provides a space where we can claim our voice, step into our own power and gain confidence in our leadership. Use your own frame to view your life and your work. Bring your stories of those acts of leading that have been most meaningful to you this year!