

# Women face a labyrinth: an examination of metaphors for women leaders

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore the most common general metaphors for women's leadership: the glass ceiling, sticky floor and the labyrinth. The authors discuss the strengths and weaknesses of these metaphors for characterizing women's current situation as leaders.

**Design/methodology/approach** – In addition to reviewing the literature on the status of women leaders, the authors also discuss recent research on the power of metaphor to illustrate concepts and influence social judgments.

**Findings** – The authors conclude that the labyrinth is the most useful metaphor for women leaders, because although there has been slow steady improvement in women's access to leadership, women continue to face challenges that men do not face: gender stereotypes that depict women as unsuited to leadership, discrimination in pay and promotion, lack of access to powerful mentors and networks and greater responsibility for childcare and other domestic responsibilities.

**Practical implications** – Although the glass ceiling metaphor implies that women face obstacles once they have risen to very high levels of leadership and the sticky floor metaphor implies that women are prevented from any advancement beyond entry level, the labyrinth reflects the myriad obstacles that women face throughout their careers.

**Originality/value** – The labyrinth metaphor not only acknowledges these challenges but also suggests that women can advance to very high levels of leadership.

**Keywords** Women, Leadership, Metaphor, Work barriers

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

What is the best image to capture the conditions experienced by the current women leaders? Do women face a glass ceiling? Are they held down by a sticky floor? In fact, these metaphors do not accurately represent the conditions for contemporary women leaders, because the challenges women face are complex and nuanced, but not insurmountable. Women have experienced major strides as leaders. Yet, although women no longer lack all or nearly all access to leadership, full equality is still a somewhat distant goal, and women have the burden of overcoming obstacles that men do not face. What is needed is a metaphor that reflects current opportunities and challenges for women leaders. In this paper, we present evidence of the value of using metaphors to illustrate concepts, discuss the changes in the advancement and status of women leaders and consider possible metaphors for women's current situation as



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leaders. We conclude that the metaphor of the *labyrinth* best illustrates contemporary leadership opportunities for women.

Women face a  
labyrinth

### The value of metaphor

The question of what metaphor best describes women's quest for leadership is not a trivial concern. Metaphors play an important role in facilitating understanding of social phenomena, organizing cognition and producing change in attitudes (Landau *et al.*, 2010). The general definition of a metaphor is a word that is used to refer to something else to suggest that they are similar or to objects, ideas or activities that can symbolize something else (Metaphor, 2016). Scholarly definitions focus more on the value of metaphor to elucidate concepts that may be vague or complex. For example, according to the *conceptual metaphor theory*, metaphors help people understand and process information about abstract *target concepts* by referring to more straightforward and concrete *source concepts* (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). For instance, saying that someone "fell in love" links the abstract target concept, "love", to an accidental, forceful and uncontrollable event, the more concrete source concept of "falling".

Different source concepts for the same target elicit different associations, highlighting or inhibiting particular potential connotations of the target concept (Landau *et al.*, 2014). The association between the target and source concept need not be linguistic and may be more implicit than explicit. For example, people typically have positive associations with words conveying "up" and negative associations with words conveying "down". This concrete locational information makes it more likely to judge words as positive when they appear higher up than lower on a computer screen (Meier and Robinson, 2004). Similarly, other research found that participants judged higher-status individuals to live in more northerly regions of a city (i.e. higher up on a map) than lower-status individuals (Meier *et al.*, 2011). Also, participants judged managers to have more status and authority when their position in an organizational chart was placed higher up and farther away from the positions of their subordinates (Geissner and Schubert, 2007). As this study illustrates, metaphors based on higher vertical orientation can influence perceptions of individuals' social dominance, power, status or virtue (Meier *et al.*, 2014). Thus, metaphors not only elicit particular associations about concepts generally but also can prime judgments about people.

Because metaphors have the power to shape social perception, they can be subtly manipulated to alter attitudes and behaviors toward other people. In one study, participants evaluated job candidates more favorably when the candidates' résumés were presented on a heavy rather than a light clipboard (Ackerman *et al.*, 2010). In this case, heaviness symbolized substantiveness and authority and suggested a stronger job candidate. In a second study, participants who touched a hard block of wood rather than a soft blanket evaluated others as being more adversarial and less cooperative, because hardness connotes being unyielding and tough (Ackerman *et al.*, 2010). Similarly, in two gaming experiments, participants were less trusting of others and less willing to share money with them when exposed to a fishy smell than to no smell or to some other unpleasant smell (Lee and Schwarz, 2012). Fishy smells connote underhanded and devious behavior and, thus, unconsciously primed suspiciousness in participants. Likewise, participants showed less trust and generosity toward other players in a money-allocation game when the participants held a first-aid cold pack than when they held a warm pack (Kang *et al.*, 2011), presumably because coldness primed

suspiciousness, whereas warmth primed trust. Other studies have demonstrated that sitting on a hard chair induced tougher bargaining than sitting on a soft chair (Ackerman *et al.*, 2010), and wearing dark rather than clear glasses caused participants to be less generous in a competitive game (Zhong *et al.*, 2010).

These studies underscore the power of metaphor to transform how people perceive and treat others and the potential importance of metaphors for framing messages about social issues. In view of the demonstrated importance of metaphors, we examine the metaphors that have been used to illustrate the challenges faced by women leaders and consider how well they reflect contemporary leadership.

### **The glass ceiling and the sticky floor**

Numerous metaphors have been coined to illustrate obstacles to women's advancement, including the *glass ceiling*, *glass cliff*, *maternal wall*, *glass escalator* and the *sticky floor* (Smith *et al.*, 2012). Many of the metaphors refer to specific contexts that undermine women's leadership opportunities. For example, the maternal wall (Crosby *et al.*, 2004; Williams, 2005) and *motherhood penalty* (Budig and Hodges, 2010; Correll *et al.*, 2007) refer to the unique workplace challenges experienced by mothers. The glass escalator refers to advancement advantages of men over women in female dominated occupations (Maume, 1999; Williams, 1992), and the glass cliff refers to the appointment of women to leadership positions when organizational conditions are risky or precarious (Haslam and Ryan, 2008; Ryan *et al.*, 2011). Also, *career ladder* refers to a single pathway to high positions, and *jungle gym* conveys the possibility of lateral and upward movement (Sandberg, 2013). But only a few metaphors have been used to represent the myriad of challenges faced by women leaders and aspiring leaders. One of these is the glass ceiling.

The glass ceiling is the overwhelmingly most popular general metaphor for women's lack of access to leadership. The term first appeared in print in 1984 in an Adweek interview with Gay Bryant (Boyd, 2008), but the concept gained widespread recognition after it was used in a *Wall Street Journal* article by Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986), who characterized women's failure to advance to executive positions as crashing into an invisible obstruction, the glass ceiling. The metaphor resonated with the public and became synonymous with gender gaps in pay and promotion. The widespread acceptance of the term is evident from the establishment in 1991 of the bipartisan Glass Ceiling Commission, which was mandated to investigate biases against women and minorities that blocked their advancement to corporate management and to make recommendations on methods of eliminating the glass ceiling (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). In further evidence of the popularity of the metaphor, googling the term "glass ceiling" entered in quotes produces 3,670,000 hits, only a few of which refer to an architectural feature of buildings.

An implication of glass ceiling metaphor is that women cannot advance to the highest levels of leadership but are held to a penultimate level, just below but in full view of the top. The image of a ceiling suggests that women face few challenges prior to reaching that penultimate level and that the path to further advancement is blocked for all women. The glass composition of the ceiling creates an impression that the obstacles women face are invisible and undetectable until the last moment when women bump into it and are denied further advancement. Moreover, the glass ceiling metaphor implies that the overall status of women remains relatively unchanged over time,

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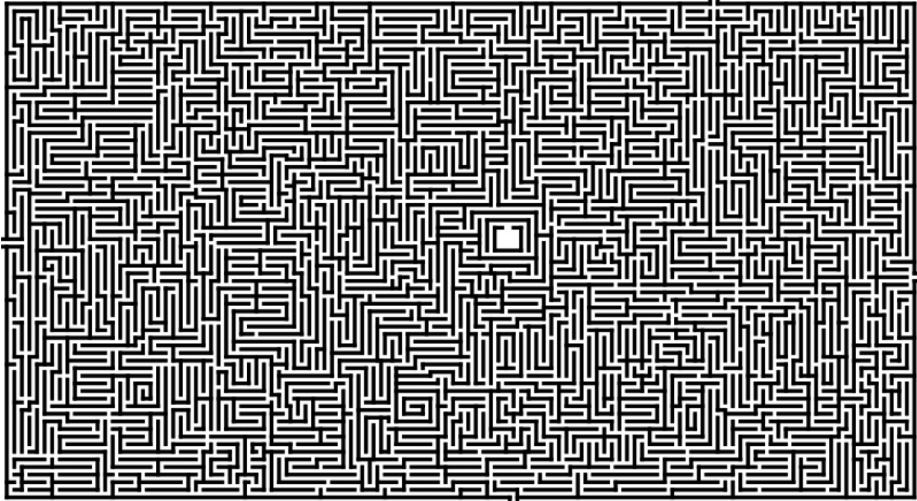
because no woman can rise to the highest level without breaking through the ceiling and, thereby, opening opportunities to women who follow.

Although the glass ceiling metaphor focuses on challenges for women in advancing to high levels of authority, the *sticky floor* metaphor characterizes obstacles that women face much earlier in their career paths. Sociologist Catherine White Berheide coined the metaphor to illustrate the difficulties of women who remain in low-paying, low-status positions in state and local government (Noble, 1992); her colleague Sharon Harlan noted that the term could also be applied to any field where women fail to advance much beyond entry-level positions (Spaid, 1993). These sociologists used the sticky floor image to refer to discriminatory practices slowing women's advancement, including occupational segregation practices that place women in dead-end jobs, underpayment of workers in female-dominated occupations and the lack of flexibility and absence of job ladders in these occupations (Harlan and Berheide, 1994). In essence, their discussion of the sticky floor emphasized that many women never hit their heads on a glass ceiling, because they never had opportunities to advance to any level of leadership.

Harlan and Berheide (1994) did not pit the image of the sticky floor against that of the glass ceiling but instead acknowledged the presence of obstacles for women in both elite and low-level positions. Nonetheless, other researchers have referred to the sticky floor as a metaphor for discrimination that is pronounced at low- rather than high-level positions (Arulampalam *et al.*, 2007; Booth *et al.*, 2003; Christofides *et al.*, 2013; Kee, 2006). The sticky floor metaphor has also been invoked to refer to poor career planning by women who create barriers to their own success or who opt out of leadership. For example, in one advice book, titled *It's not a glass ceiling, it's a sticky floor: Free yourself from the hidden behaviors sabotaging your career success*, women's lack of advancement was attributed to shortcomings such as being too perfectionistic, avoiding leadership, negotiating ineffectively and failing to form strategic networks (Shambaugh, 2007). Similarly, Irene Dorner, CEO of HSBC USA, partly blamed women's rarity in the upper echelons of finance on the sticky floor, whereby women do not actively pursue leadership (Sorkin, 2013). Nevertheless, the sticky floor is most often used to refer to external obstacles that hold women to the bottom of the corporate hierarchy.

In contrast to the glass ceiling, which implies that women rise to relatively high levels, the sticky floor suggests that most women are unable to rise at all. Moreover, unlike the glass ceiling, which implies an impenetrable barrier, the sticky floor implies a weaker obstacle to women's advancement and a greater possibility that some women might be able to pull themselves up from the floor to reach higher positions. Used by itself, the sticky floor also suggests that once women escape the floor, or the very bottom of the hierarchy, there are no longer any barriers to advancement.

As an alternative to earlier metaphors for women's leadership, we have proposed the image of the labyrinth (Eagly and Carli, 2007). We apply the term in its colloquial usage as a formation with multiple paths, some of which lead to the center, where leadership resides (Figure 1). Some paths to leadership are more direct than others, and some paths lead nowhere or are dead ends. Finding a successful route to the center is thus not guaranteed and requires persistence and effort. Unlike the glass ceiling and the sticky floor, the image of a labyrinth provides a more subtle and complex metaphor. The labyrinth does not focus on obstacles that women face either very early in their careers or very late. Instead, the labyrinth implies that women face challenges throughout their



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**Figure 1.**  
A labyrinth

**Sources:** Maze.svg (2006); Retrieved from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maze.svg#filelinks>

careers, from the moment they began to chart a course to leadership until they reach their goal.

The labyrinth metaphor suggests that advancement is difficult but not impossible. Finding the center does require effort and careful navigation, but it can be achieved. Consequently, unlike a glass ceiling or a sticky floor, the labyrinth allows some women to reach very high levels of leadership, yet the walls of the labyrinth remain in place to present challenges to the women who follow. If the path that men take is construed as a road (perhaps with some hills and potholes along the way), the labyrinth that women face clearly presents a more difficult path that requires more time to navigate and entails a greater likelihood of failure. Some women will be unable to chart their way through and will get stuck in dead ends. Some may advance by persisting after experiencing setbacks and wrong turns and others by following the crumbs of those who came before them.

The labyrinth is both optimistic in its acknowledgement that women do succeed as leaders and realistic in its reflection of the uncertainty of success. This metaphor neither blames women for their lack of progress nor blames the situation. Rather, women's success resides in an interaction between the skills and motivation of women and the challenges of the situation. Also, the focus of labyrinth is not exclusively on women, as [Bruckmüller et al. \(2013\)](#) claimed, because men are the chief architects of the labyrinth and implicitly enjoy a relatively unencumbered path to leadership. So how well does the labyrinth reflect women's current status as leaders? How well do the glass ceiling and sticky floor reflect women's current status as leaders?

### **The status of women leaders**

How have women fared since we proposed the labyrinth as a metaphor for women leaders nearly 10 years ago? There is no doubt that there are more female leaders now



than at any time in history. At the beginning of 2015, there were 24 female presidents and prime ministers (International Parliamentary Union, 2015c). Moreover, of the women who have ever served as heads of state, 37 per cent have held their position within the past five years (Christensen, 2015). The greater representation of women as heads of nations parallels the generally rising percentages of women in other governmental roles. Internationally, women hold 22 per cent of seats in national parliaments (International Parliamentary Union, 2015b), which is nearly double the percentage in 1997, and about 50 per cent higher than a decade ago (International Parliamentary Union, 2015a). In the past decade, the percentages have increased across all regions of the world: in the Americas from 19 to 27 per cent, in Europe from 19 to 26 per cent, in Africa from 17 to 22 per cent and in Asia from 15 to 19 per cent (International Parliamentary Union, 2015b). Increases have been especially pronounced in countries with legislative quotas on female representation (European Commission Directorate General for Justice, 2013). In the USA, 19 per cent of Congressional seats are now held by women, compared to 15 per cent a decade ago (Center for American Woman and Politics, 2014b). The percentage is highest in the Nordic countries, where currently 41 per cent of MPs are women, a very slight increase compared with 2005, when the statistic was 40 per cent (International Parliamentary Union, 2015b).

Beyond elective office, women have gained representation in senior government positions. In the G20 economies, the percentage of women among public sector leaders has increased in all but three countries since 2013; women are best represented in Canada, where they hold 46 per cent of such positions (Ernst and Young, 2014). In general, women remain in the minority in supreme courts, but there has been some increase in their representation over time. In 2007, the supreme courts of the nations of the European Union averaged 30 per cent female justices; in 2012, the number rose to 34 per cent; moreover, in 7 of 33 European countries – Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Luxembourg, Hungary, Latvia and Slovakia – women are now in the majority (European Commission Directorate General for Justice, 2013). In the UK, the first and sole female justice, Lady Brenda Hale, was appointed to the Supreme Court in 2009 (UK Supreme Court, 2015). Among the four women who have ever served as US Supreme Court justices, three of them, or 33 per cent of the court, currently are in office (Center for American Woman and Politics, 2014a). In Canada, 44 per cent of the court now comprises women, the highest percentage ever (Supreme Court of Canada, 2015).

Women have also advanced in corporate leadership. In most countries, women's representation in managerial positions has increased over time (Davison and Burke, 2011), and women have been increasing as executives and members of corporate boards (Deloitte, 2013; Hausmann *et al.*, 2014). Women now hold an average of 21 per cent of directorships on the FTSE 100 boards and 16 per cent of directorships on the FTSE 250, up from 17 and 13 per cent in 2013, respectively (Vinnicombe *et al.*, 2014). In the *Fortune* 500, women now comprise 19 per cent of corporate board seats (Catalyst, 2015). Women have the highest board representation in Norway, where they hold 41 per cent of the seats, followed by Sweden and Finland, each with 27 per cent, and France with 18 per cent (Catalyst, 2014). These four countries have mandated quotas of 40 per cent female representation on corporate boards of publicly traded companies, although only Norway has the strong sanction of dissolution as a publicly traded company if the quota is not met (Zimmermann, 2013). All these percentages are the highest they have ever been. Nevertheless, women remain highly underrepresented as CEOs, especially of large

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corporations. For example, although in the USA, 26 per cent of all CEOs are women (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015, Table XI), the percentage of female CEOs in the *Fortune* 500 is 5 per cent (Fortune, 2014), in the FTSE 100 is 5 per cent (Cohen, 2014) and in the Global 500 is 3 per cent, (Fortune, 2014b). One exception to the rarity of female CEOs is in US philanthropic organizations and foundations, where women are especially well represented, holding 56 per cent of CEO positions (Targeted News Service, 2013). The greater representation of female leaders in non-profit compared to for-profit organizations has also been found in countries of the European Union (Claus *et al.*, 2013).

As there have been increases in female leadership, over time, people have also increasingly perceived leaders as manifesting stereotypically feminine characteristics and interpersonal skills along with traditionally masculine characteristics and directive skills (Koenig *et al.*, 2011). In addition, many experts on leadership endorse transformational leadership as highly effective (Judge and Piccolo, 2004; Wang *et al.*, 2011); yet, this style of leadership is not inherently masculine or feminine, and women manifest it slightly more than men (Eagly *et al.*, 2003). Attitudes about female leaders have changed as well. A recent meta-analytic review revealed that female leaders received lower ratings of effectiveness than their male counterparts in the past, but that this is no longer the case for the most recent studies. Based on self-ratings, female and male leaders now rate themselves as equally effective, and based on ratings of leaders by others, such as bosses, peers, subordinates or judges, people now rate women to be more effective than men (Paustian-Underdahl *et al.*, 2014).

The advancement of women as leaders parallels other changes in the status of women. In the USA, women now earn more bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees than men (US National Center for Education Statistics, 2013, Tables 322.2, 323.2 and 324.2). This same trend is evident in other countries. Around the world, women's education levels have increased over time (United Nations Development Programme, 2014, Table IV) such that if current trends continue, girls throughout the world entering school currently will be on average as well educated as their male peers (United Nations Development Programme, 2014, Table V). Finally, globally, men's labor force participation has dropped in recent decades, whereas women's has remained relatively unchanged (United Nations, 2010), thereby reducing the gender gap in employment.

In spite of this progress, a gender gap in labor force participation exists around the world (United Nations Development Programme, 2014); women continue to earn less than men, and women have not reached parity with men as leaders. Women leaders remain underrepresented in all sectors: government, politics, business and higher education. In no country do women have equality with men as members of public sector executives, corporative board members, corporate officers or CEOs. Women remain in the minority in all but two national parliaments (International Parliamentary Union, 2015b). Even in US philanthropic organizations, where women hold most of the leadership roles, they still remain underrepresented relative to their representation in more subordinate positions (Targeted News Service, 2013).

The rarity of female leaders is not merely due to a lack of interest by women or to women's inability to lead effectively (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Rather, women face a multitude of challenges not faced by men. Stereotypes continue to portray successful leaders as more similar to men than to women (Koenig *et al.*, 2011). Women are seen as lacking the agentic qualities needed to be good leaders, but are also expected to be highly

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communal and exhibit qualities such as kindness, warmth and helpfulness (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Women are thus placed in a double bind (Carli and Eagly, 2012). For example, women are penalized for seeking power (Okimoto and Brescoll, 2010) and salary increases (Amanatullah and Tinsley, 2013) or, otherwise, behaving too assertively (Carli, 2016).

Women are subject not only to gender stereotypes that are perceived as incompatible with leadership but also to gender discrimination in employment. A recent meta-analysis revealed that women receive less favorable ratings than men in hiring, promotion and other job contexts than men do (Koch *et al.*, 2015). Although the gender gap in pay has declined over time, women continue to be paid less than men controlling for human capital variables (Mandel and Semyonov, 2014). One study of UK executives found that not only were women paid less but also their pay was less merit-based or related to performance than was men's (Kulich *et al.* 2011). Research across different countries, including the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia and a number of European nations, continues to reveal that when controlling for human capital variables, women are promoted less often than men (Arulampalam *et al.* 2007; Blau and Devaro, 2007; Johnston and Lee, 2012; Yap and Konrad, 2009). Women also are also more likely to be offered especially risky leadership opportunities where the potential for failure is greater (Ryan *et al.*, 2011). For example, a recent study examined the appointment of women to boards of companies listed on the UK stock exchange based on whether the firms matched by industry and market value had reported a loss or gain over the previous three years. Results indicated that firms experiencing large losses were more likely to appoint women than firms experiencing small losses or gains (Mulcahy and Linehan, 2014).

Organizational structure can also impede women's access to leadership. Compared with men, women lack access to powerful mentors, sponsors and networks (Hewlett, 2013). They also receive fewer developmental assignments (King *et al.*, 2012). Women are also disadvantaged very early, at the formation of new organizations. A recent study examined who became the boss in mixed-gender entrepreneurial teams that were creating new companies. Results revealed that controlling for merit and human capital, men had a 37 per cent greater chance of becoming the boss than women did (Yang and Aldrich, 2014). Furthermore, although family-friendly policies, such as mandated paid parental leave and the right to work part-time, have increased women's labor force participation, these policies are also associated with a reduction in women's representation as managers and leaders (Blau and Kahn, 2013). In contrast, there are policies that organizations can implement that can increase the percentage of women leaders. In particular, a longitudinal study of over 700 organizations demonstrated that creating diversity staff positions or diversity task forces and to a lesser extent formal networking and mentoring programs led to an increase in women among managers (Kalev *et al.*, 2006). Likewise, using open recruitment methods rather than recruiting through informal networks is also associated with a greater representation of women leaders (Reskin and McBrier, 2000).

Clearly, the challenges that women leaders face are varied and contextual. First, women of color face different challenges than white women. For example, although dominant behaviors are penalized more in white than black female leaders (Livingston *et al.*, 2012), black female leaders are penalized more than their white counterparts for failure (Rosette and Livingston, 2012). Moreover, men show greater gender bias than



women do. Men perceive women as lacking the qualities needed to be a good leader more than women do (Koenig *et al.*, 2011), and men are harsher in their evaluation of women in studies on hiring, promotion and job performance (Koch *et al.*, 2015). In addition, women are seen as more effective in mid-level leadership positions than in low- or upper-level leadership roles and in organizational settings that are less stereotypically masculine or male-dominated numerically (Paustian-Underdahl *et al.*, 2014). Women are also particularly disadvantaged in job evaluations for male-dominated jobs, somewhat disadvantaged for gender-neutral jobs and somewhat advantaged for female dominated ones (Koch *et al.*, 2015). Thus, women fare better in settings that are more role congruent, as predicted by the role congruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002).

The picture, overall, is of slow improvement in women's access to leadership, but a long way to go before they will share leadership equally with men. This picture is not one of a single obstacle at the entry level or at the penultimate level of women's careers, but a multitude of hurdles throughout, and ones that depend on particular conditions that are contextual and varied. At the same time, the advances that women have made and the changes in the perceptions of leadership have eased women's path to advancement. To represent women's growing access to leadership together with their continuing challenges, we recommend labyrinth. Labyrinths can be more or less complex, thereby presenting few or many obstacles. They can reflect the variations created by different contexts, which in turn create different demands and thus different routes to leadership. The labyrinth provides, as a metaphor should, an easily grasped image of challenge and possibility that helps elucidate the current conditions that women leaders face. Moreover, the labyrinth metaphor remains viable even as conditions change for women aspiring to lead. As conditions for women leaders improve, the labyrinth metaphor will continue to be illuminating, as long as women have not reached parity with men. If women can now reach their goal more easily than in the past, they still do so less easily than men. So, to be successful, women must continue to carefully chart a path through the impediments and puzzles that they encounter in the labyrinth.

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