

Opinion: The gender of Leadership

By Scott A. Lukas

When I was asked to write my reflections on leadership to commemorate Women's History Month, I had thought, at first, of the many creative and innovative women leaders who have made a difference in South Lake Tahoe.

Lake Tahoe Community College has Kindred Murillo, who has helped steer the college in some exciting new directions in what are challenging economic times. Norma Santiago was elected and then ran unopposed as District 5 supervisor for El Dorado County. She has brought much attention to issues of social justice within our region. Nancy Kerry, South Lake Tahoe city manager; Patty Kouyoumdjian, executive director of the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board; Nancy Gibson, U.S. Forest Service supervisor; Darcie Goodman Collins, executive director of the League to Save Lake Tahoe; Sandy Evans Hall, executive director of the North Lake Tahoe Resort Association; Carol Chaplin, executive director of Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority; Lisa Noonan, Douglas County School District superintendent; Angela Swanson, JoAnn Connor and Brooke Laine, all councilmembers for South Lake Tahoe (and many others) have all, in their own unique ways, illustrated the value that women bring to local and regional leadership.



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But for all of their important and unique contributions, there is perhaps more that we can learn from their leadership lessons. This is the gender of leadership.

Some years back I participated in a planning session in the region. One of the guest speakers was asked to comment on the issue of leadership in South Lake Tahoe or, more specifically, the topic of how to move the city in new directions in challenging, if not turbulent, economic and social times. The speaker's response was quite puzzling. Here, paraphrasing, "Back in the day, we had more 'men in the mountains.' What we need now is more 'phallic thrust' in Tahoe." The phrase "phallic thrust" was, not surprisingly, greeted with some shock by the many attendees at the event.

During one of the coffee breaks, I overheard a number of them comment on how offensive the speaker was, yet no one challenged the speaker on any of these points. Presumably, the person was making a claim that Tahoe had gone somewhat downhill due to a lack of "macho" or masculinist leadership and the solution was to return to the days of old.

We might use the cases of national leadership to reflect on the problems with this line of thinking. Consider how the "phallic thrust" exhibited by the George W. Bush administration impacted the United States – including its role in the world, its perception among other nations, and its ability to deal with the imminent crises of economy, terrorism, and political instability.

These two spheres of leadership are quite different, but it might behoove us to consider the ways in which masculinist leadership has impacted people and culture in negative ways and then ask some serious questions about what sort of leadership we envision for the future of South Lake Tahoe. Surely, it will not be a form dominated by the "phallic

thrust” philosophy mentioned by this speaker and, at the same time, it may not completely benefit from female leadership. We would be mistaken to assume that women leaders are immune from the “phallic thrust” syndrome. In fact, theorists of gender would remind us of the many examples in which women have enacted the gendered ills more common to masculinity and patriarchy. Consider the complicity of Lynndie England in the Abu Ghraib prison-torture scandal as one example. The point may be to focus on the gender of leadership and not the fact of whether the leader is a man or a woman.

My colleague Scott Valentine, geology professor at Lake Tahoe Community College, recently raised a number of important issues about what he perceives to be a lack of effective local leadership. Valentine was unsuccessful in his bid to secure a seat on the City Council. In a number of columns that he has written, he has spoken of the many problems faced by South Lake Tahoe’s residents – a lack of stable economic base, a lack of concern with sustainability, an “old economy” mentality, few opportunities for younger people, and a general “old boys” philosophy when it comes to planning and strategic decision-making. Valentine’s call for new leadership and new vision for South Lake Tahoe reminds us that men and women have important roles to play in questioning our local leaders and the decisions they make.

We should certainly celebrate the many women who have brought positive change to our local culture and we should tell the story of local men who have taken a stand against the “old boys”/ “phallic thrust” philosophy of leadership that is rarely positive for anyone (except the old boys). But the important lesson here is to emphasize the gender of leadership. Generally, this requires that we look critically at the decisions made by local leaders and that we hold them accountable for their actions. We often forget that leaders should not be understood as being the final authorities in any matter – what George W. Bush touted as his “decider” role –

but “leaders” in the etymological sense imply the “meaning to begin a discussion or debate.”

More specifically this meaning of leadership might encourage us to:

- Create coalitions of people who are willing to work on new visions and directions for the community – especially ones that challenge the “old boys” mentality of the community.
- Open up new forms of dialogue with members of the community who have rarely been invited to the “old boys” events – these include members of ethnic and gender minorities.
- Foster greater awareness of the ways in which political, economic, and social forms of special interest continue to damage our decision-making processes.
- Develop new plans and strategies that effectively envision community outreach and involvement and that avoid the elitist and often cynical assumption that the “leaders know best” for the community.
- Effectively balance economic interests with social justice concerns.
- Participate, vote, and co-create change.

Scott A. Lukas is a cultural anthropologist who has written widely on the subject of gender, including contributions to The Routledge International Encyclopedia of Men and Masculinities, Gendered Perspectives on Community Colleges, and Handbook for Achieving Gender Equity through Education. He is the founder of the Gender Ads Project, former gender adviser of Dads & Daughters, and been interviewed on his perspectives on gender for the Czech feminist magazine FEMA and Huffington Post UK. He is an instructor at Lake Tahoe Community College.