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Leading in positive

Mariola Urrea

February 2020

“Women must occupy leadership positions with courage and determination in order to hasten the transformation within organisations”



Mariola Urrea | Professor of Public International and European Union Law at Universidad de La Rioja

To speak of Mariola Urrea is to speak of international law, legal research, recognition within and outside academia and, of course, responsibility and leadership. In this interview, Mariola, a highly reputable professional, analyses the keys to exercising positive leadership based on consistency, rigour, audacity and the creation of a healthy work environment.

In teaching and research, what are the defining qualities required of a leader?

Considering the activity we perform at universities, namely the creation and transmission of knowledge, two key qualities are crucial to good leadership. The first is rigour. We create knowledge and therefore our work must be very meticulous. We need to treat data reliably, without altering them or creating any doubt. A lack of rigour would have an enormous impact on credibility and trust. Consistency is also crucial to good leadership. Rigour and consistency are two of the essential qualities of any leader working in a scientific or academic field.

Do you think there is a specific formula for leadership?

The only formula for successful leadership in any professional project is hard work, i.e. working with passion, enthusiasm and sparing no effort. Professional performance must be based on generosity. These are the ingredients for success that must shape leadership in a world characterised by ever-increasing requirements, speed and the need for continual transformation and innovation that organisations demand today. In short, there is no formula, just effort and hard work.

You write articles, take part in radio programmes... How do you exercise leadership through the forums for dissemination, debate and opinion offered by the communications media?

The key is responsibility. We must be aware of the fact that when people access the media they not only seek information, they also seek guidance and tools to enable them to fit into in the world around them. What is written or said can influence people and that is an enormous responsibility. The audience listening to what you say or reading what you write has placed its trust in that media or information platform. Therefore, this ability to influence others must be treated with great caution, and you should remain true to your chosen course and be consistent. You should not be misled by the reactions and opinions generated on social media or by press offices. You have to be true to your beliefs and to your analysis of the facts, and address any issues that arise with the utmost rigour. Exercising caution and responsibility when speaking and writing is essential; however, keeping calm and accepting the consequences of your words is crucial.

How would you define your leadership model?

I like to work cooperatively. In all the teams with which I have had the opportunity to tackle professional projects, my preferred approach has been to set a clear objective. Everyone involved must be very clear about why and to what end they are being asked to make or perform a specific effort or task. Leadership has to be cooperative and communicative in order to build a cohesive team. I am not totally sure that I always achieve this; however, this is the approach to work that I like. It is for others to judge whether I manage to do so or not.

Do you think there has ever been a turning point in your career in which you have thought "now I am really leading"?

Academically speaking, that turning point came when I assumed university management responsibilities as the dean of the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences of the Universidad de la Rioja. It came also when I was appointed chair of the Spanish Conference of University Law Faculty Deans. That was the moment when I had to exercise what is traditionally understood to be leadership. We had to undertake negotiations with the Spanish Ministries of Justice and Education to develop the law of access to the professions of lawyer and court procedural representative. It required negotiation, defining positions and handling a lot of information. We had to align efforts, seek allies and yield positions in order to achieve an important overall advantage. Nevertheless, it was a shared and cooperative leadership, in which all the parties involved strove to ensure that the outcome, a royal decree-law, was satisfactory for all the parties concerned.

How is the role of women in Spanish companies changing as far as executive positions are concerned?

We are moving in the right direction, although the transformation is painfully slow. At present, one of the fundamental traits of leadership is that the players must become catalysts of change. Having said that the importance of the role of women in professional environments is undeniable, as it is in the public sector. As a society we must demand a speedier process of change, particularly considering that feminism is synonymous with equality and knowing that we cannot exclude 50% of the talent. The presence of women in private companies and in the public sector should

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be quantitatively and qualitatively more evident and significant. We can't expect things to change naturally, we need to be drivers of the change. We have to help transform society, to make it more equal from a gender standpoint. Women are important, but we should have a greater presence and it is up to us to speed up the change.

In particular, in the academic and research environments, how do you feel women's leadership is advancing?

Women have to encourage each other to take responsibility for dealing with university policy from top level positions. In the context of university management, there are still very few female deans of faculty and female presidents of universities; therefore, we still have a big challenge ahead. In the field of research we do find distinguished female researchers leading teams and, in the classroom, the academic results of female students are of course particularly important. However, female presence at management level is crucial, since it is there that institutional transformation commences and change can be driven. This is the reason why I want to encourage women to assume top level roles and to do so boldly, with determination. We need to speed up the transformation in those organisations we are involved in. It is a social commitment that we have to tackle.

Within the sphere of activity of a leader, how do you exert a positive influence? How do you maintain a team's trust?

You have to provide a clear example, demonstrating that there is consistency between what is said and what is done. It is important to relate to the project you want to develop and to implement the values you adhere to. We must accompany teams throughout the entire process to help manage any uncertainties or concerns that may arise. A leader not only has the role of a visionary who has to anticipate future events, they also have to accompany the team throughout the whole process to ensure that it is performed in the best way possible. With a strong, resilient and sustainable leadership model you can achieve anything you propose.

We live in a highly complex, volatile world in which we have to know how to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity. A good way of having a positive influence, is to set the project's goals and then to achieve them by adopting a collaborative approach. We have to create intelligent organisations, where individualistic leadership is shunned. A collaborative leadership model is more productive and sustainable over time. A good leader is like the conductor of an orchestra, they have to ensure that everyone shines, but the result has to be harmonious and add value to the organisation as a whole. One of the greatest challenges, both in the business and academic fields, is the creation of a healthy professional environment. We must strive to build work spaces where individuals feel comfortable and motivated.

You have mentioned vision, rigour, and creating a good work environment. How do you think that the figure of the leader and personnel management will evolve in the coming years?

The goal of leadership in the future is to create teams capable of disruptive thought as a means of seeking solutions in an effective way. We need to be able to create a culture where thought on the leading edge of existing knowledge and past experience is encouraged. We must be able to overcome restrictive barriers such as fear and social conventions. To achieve this, good personnel management is a necessity. A good team is founded on diversity, not only in terms of gender, but also in terms of age and qualifications and training. Problems need to be addressed from various perspectives; only then will we achieve disruptive solutions. The challenge facing a leader is how to manage this diversity in a creative and efficient way.

Is there a leader or leadership model that you admire?

We all have our role models which we like to draw on for inspiration. But when we talk about leadership we have to think beyond the individual, we need to focus on the organisations. What is really important is making organisations more intelligent. In other words, we have to implement procedures that enable institutions and teams to develop any project defined, with or without the presence of a leader. Of course, projects of this nature can only be sustained over time during a defined phase, after which further leadership will be required. To explain this concept I like to refer to Jean Monnet, one of the so called “founding fathers” of the political, economic and legal project that made the predecessor of today’s European Union possible. Monnet stated that it is the institutions, not the people, that are important. And, although it is true that governance is on occasion a hindrance in processes requiring insight or in relation to individual leadership capabilities, what stands the test of time is the organisations. Therefore, I would recommend leaders to always work towards the development of intelligent structures. This will be the most important leadership model both now and in the future.

What is the most important thing you have learnt about leadership through your professional career?

That leadership undoubtedly has a lot to do with audacity. It is a question of having the courage to do things that others aren’t do. In my experience, failing to make decisions is more costly than making them, even though they are wrong. Taking responsibility for mistakes is part of exercising leadership. You cannot be a good leader if you are reluctant to take responsibility for mistakes. In time, you come to realise that you are not going to get very far without cohesive teams that are loyal to the organisation. Unbeatable leadership is built on a solid foundation like a good team.

As for the great ethical values that a good leader should have, which ones do you consider indispensable?

Consistency is a very important trait because it lends credibility to and bolsters your relationships with human resources, which are crucial to the success of any project. We should all cultivate this trait and, in the case of a leader, this is a necessity. Other essential values are hard work, rigour, dedication and, of course, honesty and decency. Audacity is also fundamental. However, it should not be confused with taking a questionable stance or acting recklessly. Audacity must always be based on knowledge and experience. You have to be willing to make mistakes. Exercising extreme caution stops the world from advancing. You have to take risks, but they have to be calculated risks. In other words, risks can be taken with the support of a united, enthusiastic team that is willing to work unstintingly to achieve the proposed objective, provided that they have a healthy, attractive environment to work in.

“Over time I have learnt that failing to make decisions is more costly than making them, even though they are wrong. Assuming errors forms part of leadership”.

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