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Changing organizational structures: An interview with Rosabeth Moss Kanter

Interview by Sheila M. Puffer

Executive Overview

Rosabeth Moss Kanter is the Ernest L. Arbuckle Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School, specializing in strategy, innovation, and leadership for change. She advises major corporations and governments worldwide and is the author or co-author of 16 books, including her 2001 book, Evolve!: Succeeding in the Digital Culture of Tomorrow, *and a forthcoming book,* Confidence: How Winning Streaks and Losing Streaks Begin and End, *on organizational dynamics and the leadership of turnarounds. Other award-winning bestsellers since* Men and Women of the Corporation *and* The Change Masters *include* When Giants Learn to Dance, *as well as* World Class: Thriving Locally in the Global Economy *and* Rosabeth Moss Kanter on the Frontiers of Management. *In 2001 she received the Academy of Management's Distinguished Career Award, its highest award for scholarly contributions, for her impact on management thought, and in 2002 she received the World Teleport Association's Intelligent Community Visionary of the Year Award.*

She serves as a senior adviser to IBM's award-winning Reinventing Education initiative, currently active at 21 sites in the U.S. and in eight other countries. In 1997–1998 she conceived and led the Business Leadership in the Social Sector project, under the auspices of the Harvard Business School, which involved over 100 national leaders in dialogue and a call to action about public-private partnerships for change. From 1989–1992 she also served as editor of the Harvard Business Review. *She joined the Harvard Business School faculty in 1986 from Yale University, where she held a tenured professorship from 1977 to 1986.*

Professor Kanter has received 21 honorary doctoral degrees from distinguished universities nationwide and over a dozen leadership awards, and has been named to lists of the "50 most influential business thinkers in the world," the "18 business gurus to watch," the "100 most important women in America," and the "50 most powerful women in the world." Her public service activities span local and global interests. She has been a corporate and pension fund director and sits on many civic and non-profit boards, including City Year, the national urban youth service corps. She co-founded Goodmeasure Inc., a consulting group, and serves as chairman of its board and also is a director or adviser for other companies.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter

I am meeting with you more than a quarter century after my first reading of *Men and Women of the Corporation*. To mark the occasion, I am wearing the same suede suit that I wore in the 1970s when I was an administrator in the Canadian government as well as a part-time MBA student and instructor. And I am holding the paperback copy of your book, complete with highlighting throughout, that has been on my shelf all those years.

***Men and Women of the Corporation* was an award-winning book right after it was published, receiving the 1977 C. Wright Mills Award. Did you expect the book to be such a success from the start? Why do you think it made such an impact?**

I was very early in my career, but I had spoken about the themes before the book came out and understood that they resonated with people for several reasons. One was that we were on the cusp of change in the United States and then increasingly around the world. When you're on the cusp of change, an analysis that comes along and begins to explain the experiences people are having is welcomed. So there was an audience for this book, in fact, several audiences. One was academics who needed to incorporate a different perspective into their work given that the assumptions about organizations and how they functioned were based on the model of a large machine-age industrial bureaucracy with a sex-segregated workforce.

By the cusp of change, I don't mean only change with respect to the flood of women into professional and managerial careers but also many other changes. Because many existing theories were based on an old economic and organizational model, there was interest in hearing about emerging models and enlarging analyses to take more things into account that had been neglected. I'm not sure that one could have written about the composition of the workforce before it began to change, because as long as things are stable you take for granted the conditions around you.

Another audience was the people who were experiencing difficulties in their own careers entering worlds that had been closed to them, whether they were women or racial minorities or simply people crossing barriers. I was an advocate. I was one of those people and was very interested in ensuring that social science didn't continue to blame the victim—that is, hold that success or lack of it was solely up to the individual rather than reflecting systemic patterns. I had a mission to explain people's experience in such a way that they could both understand why it was happening to them, see the barriers, and then break through them.

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The audience of practitioners, executives, and policy makers had to deal with the influx of a new kind of person. This was after the early days of the Civil Rights Movement when women by accident got written into the law. This was now the point of change at which companies had to figure out how to ensure that people would have access to more opportunity. It was also at the cusp of the emergence of a new economy. Apple Computer was founded a year before *Men and Women of the Corporation* was published. America's productivity crisis had been noted five years before, and I remember being at many conferences dealing with the topic at which few people—yet—questioned whether the structure of the old industrial bureaucracy might just be a cause of

failure to reach full potential in terms of productivity and effectiveness.

So I was dealing with many currents in the air. I worked hard to meet every academic standard I could, but my goal was impact and change, not just academic research for its own sake. I was very conscious of the potential value of my work both for individuals and for changing policy. We needed to change policy because every time people were stifled or prevented from reaching their potential to make a contribution, we were losing productivity. One of the reasons I knew the book would be well received, and I don't mean this in an arrogant way, was because it was talking about things that didn't blame either the victim of discrimination nor the people who had benefited from past inequities. It was talking about the system, so people could listen to it.

I showed that powerlessness corrupts, lack of opportunity demotivates, being too different and not being accepted distracts the attention of the group, and having a homogeneous group of executives at the top perpetuates tradition rather than opening the company to innovation. Structural arguments are very powerful, particularly the numbers issue. Everyone understands the experience of being different from the people around them. People can more easily have a dialogue about this common experience than they can about what it means to be female or African-American, so that communication begins to open. I could talk to executives about how these ideas could not only create more equity in the workforce, but also how they could create a more productive organization that would be more effective for everyone. So I had many ways of talking about these issues, and I think that's important in the impact that academic work can have. If it is thought of in terms of significant economic and social issues, then it can make a contribution to improving the world. I don't want to do anything that doesn't make a contribution to improving the world.

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Of course, the book was also an ethnography of a corporation, one of the first to tackle the topic of corporate culture. I was trying to explain the focal company [a large multinational conglomerate which Kanter called Industrial Supply Corporation, or Indsco] as an iconic company, representing the full range of industrial giants. Even if I could have named it, I wouldn't have, because it was more powerful disguised. Through the years, countless people have asked me: "When did you study us?" It was archetypal. I wanted to explain "Industrial Supply Corporation" and what it did to people. I also wanted to understand why some people, more women than men, got a bad rap. Many people really cared about these issues, particularly women. Many women told me how the book explained their experience. It certainly explained mine. I wrote it partly because I was annoyed at the academic work coming out claiming that women feared success and had no ambition. I knew many people for whom that was not true. I wanted to debunk a range of stereotypes by testing them in the real world. Why was it that people didn't want women as bosses? In other spheres, women are supposed to be kind and nurturing. This was a new frontier at the time that looked at the sociology of the workplace, that added to the classic studies through the years. I felt that it spoke to many different audiences. That's another criterion I have for my work, that it's multidimensional.

***Men and Women of the Corporation, The Change Masters*, and numerous other works of yours employ intensive field research and ethnographic methodology, richly supported by social science research literature. How feasible and valuable is this methodology today?**

With *Men and Women of the Corporation*, I didn't have all that much access to top management. And I wasn't at Harvard Business School at the time. Now business schools write cases, and there is an established mode. I was unusual too. But I was studying corporations because of my interest in practice. As a young professor, I did not want to spend my life in an ivory tower. I wanted to be out in the real world. I had access to the company because I was brought in to do some consulting projects, using survey research skills I had gained in graduate school. One project led to another, and my training in field research proved handy. I befriended people in a personnel development group, and that was a source of entree. So I was working with the middle level of the company, and that's where the action is, where people were thinking about who's going to get promoted.

I interviewed the first women brought in to a certain function, as well as the first woman promoted from secretary to manager. I got to see the difference between the requirements of a support role and those of a managerial role as she struggled with the transition. In some ways, I learned the company much better because I was living it through the eyes of people in the middle, than had I spent all my time

in the executive suite. I hadn't intended to write an ethnography, but all the pieces fell together when I considered current theories in light of my actual experience in the field. Then I began to see the connection between the observations I was making and the new or enlarged concepts that were required to make sense out of them. As I explained in the methodological appendix to *Men and Women of the Corporation*, I moved back and forth between the field observations and the theory, and they started to come together very nicely.

When the book came out, the social sciences were becoming so overwhelmingly quantitative and were concerned so much with mathematical modeling. I was doing a study using field methods. The first responses I got from senior people in the field were very positive. The only controversy about the book was from people who did not like change and wanted to pretend that discrimination didn't exist, like a member of the *Fortune* editorial board about to retire who said I was wrong because companies don't discriminate (and maybe women belonged at home anyway). Other people of his generation resisted those ideas, and I worked hard to convince them. I wrote an article on the values and composition of the changing workforce and included 102 footnotes to convince a very old economist that I knew what I was talking about, because he wanted to say nothing had changed, that there was no "new work force" or "changing organization." Of course, the founding of Apple in 1976 and the growth of the information technology industry soon proved that they were wrong, and I was right, and as awareness of all these changes grew, my next book, *The Change Masters*, was very well received.

In the introduction to *Men and Women*, you advanced as your main premise that organizational structure was the primary determinant of behavior in organizations and that "the women's issue also appears as an important sub-theme in this book" (p. 8). With "women" prominently in the title, was this more than a sub-theme? You could have called it *The People of the Corporation*. Did "the women's issue" ultimately overshadow your main theme?

I deliberately called it *Men and Women of the Corporation*. Men and women. That's a phrase that trips off the tongue. I called it "of" and not "in" the corporation. "Of" means you are "a creation of." I was writing about two kinds of people who were created by, whose behavior was created by, the tracking system in the company. That was what I meant by structure, which today would include structure, culture, and processes. It's the system underlying behavior. It could have been called *The People of the Corporation*, but that would have missed the point that both men and women were shaped by their positions, though in different ways because they were concentrated in different roles. If the roles were similar, so was the behavior associated with them.

In some ways the women's issue did get much of the attention, because there was a strong female constituency who cared about the issues, and as I said earlier, we were on the cusp of major social change. But the book got read, used, and quoted by many people of both genders. Jeffrey Pfeffer [of Stanford University] talked about this as being one of the first studies of organizational demographics and how it affected performance. Many people cited the chapter about managers where I advanced the idea that is now called cloning. I called it homosocial reproduction and was being a little provocative.

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The three guiding concepts of opportunity, power, and numbers got a great deal of discussion, but there were many concepts in the book besides those three key variables. I published some separate journal articles, including one on the numbers issue in the *American Journal of Sociology*, that became very popular. I also developed a training video on the structural phenomenon of being different, *A Tale of "O,"* that is still widely used around the world 20 years later. So there were many themes, but women were certainly a constituency and an audience. But the book wouldn't have resonated if it were just about women and women's experience, nor would any of those other materials, including that training video. I was careful not to talk about the usual things that are said in gender studies or about women, because my goal was to understand organizations and provide an agenda for changing them. In essence, all I'm saying is that if a company is tracking people by a certain set of physical characteristics, and yours are different, then your entry job is likely to be different depending on your own characteristics. And that sets your behavior in motion. In Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex*, the second sex refers to the Other. The Other has to always be super conscious, whereas the dominant

player can take everything for granted because the world just makes room for him. I think that dominant players are often less interested in knowing how the world works, because it is working for them, whereas those who feel like the Other are automatically more interested. The ideas from *Men and Women of the Corporation* show how, for instance, in situations of risk, people still want to be with those like themselves, and exclude others.

In the same year that *Men and Women of the Corporation* appeared, you published an influential monograph for the Russell Sage Foundation titled *Work and Family in the United States*. That volume laid some groundwork for why these domains should not be considered separate worlds. What were the major messages you tried to get across in that book?

The two books came out at the same time because another piece of the societal-change equation was that people went home and had lives outside the corporation. One chapter in *Men and Women of the Corporation* dealt with corporate wives. I had done some analysis a few years earlier and published a chapter in a book I co-edited about the roles women played in and around the white collar or managerial ranks of corporations. They were not simply playing roles as secretaries, which was the principal role for women, or in occupations that were female-dominated, like teaching and nursing. They were making major contributions, particularly at higher ranks of companies, colleges and universities, and in government as wives, as a second unpaid staff person or contributor to the work of the organization. In fact, as part of the research for *Men and Women*, I convened a meeting of the wives at Industrial Supply Corporation because it had become clear to me how important their contributions were, not just in getting their husbands off to work in the morning and taking care of everything at home, but that they were actually providing services just as the First Lady provides services to the United States. So you vote for one and get two.

What impact did *Work and Family* have on government and corporate policy making?

The role of women in organizations was one of the big issues at that time, and some of the issues of work and family are still unresolved today. Back then, when men entered the workforce, they brought two people. When women entered the workforce, they either had to stay single, in which case they were one person, or if they had a family, they were less than one person because they had obligations at home. This was a policy issue, a matter of debate very much on people's minds. I took a look at these intersections, and again we were on the cusp of change as women started trying to get into other occupations. All of a sudden, it became an issue of what would happen to the family at home. And if men weren't going to bring two people with them to the workplace, then expectations would have to change.

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I was very interested in whether we needed new policy and had been involved in many policy discussions of some of these issues. So I wrote *Work and Family* for the Russell Sage Foundation. One of my regrets is that I let them publish it rather than a commercial publisher, and it went out of print. But the Center for Work and Family at Purdue University in collaboration with Boston College now gives a Rosabeth Moss Kanter Award, named after me as a result of that book, for research on work and family. At that time there were a handful of people who were interested in the intersections. It seemed to me that if we were dealing with change, change took place not just inside companies but also at the intersection of those companies and the lives of the people they were hoping would be productive.

Work and Family begins by talking about the myth of separate worlds, as though life at home has nothing to do with life in the company. I discovered at Industrial Supply Corporation, and we see it all around us, that people pretended that all the richness and variety of people's differences were irrelevant to the work of the corporation. There was a tacit agreement that these worlds didn't intersect, when clearly they did. When people called in sick, they might really have been taking care of a sick child. When men got promoted, it was often weighed what kind of a hostess their wife was, how good she would be at entertaining, and she was often part of the politics whether he got ahead. I acknowledged these other obligations and said there was a call for child care, the absence of which still astonishes me in a country like the United States. Also, it was clear that people took their experiences home with them.