Leadership and Calling: The Role of Calling in a Woman's Choice to Lead

Susan R. Madsen

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Susan R. Madsen

Utah Valley University

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Abstract

This manuscript explores the multifaceted phenomena of women, calling, and leadership by first providing literature and insight on the history, definition, related constructs, and benefits of the term “calling.” It then discusses the existing literature on the intersections arising among the constructs of women, work, leadership, and calling. The article concludes with a discussion of the applications to the leadership research, theory, and practice. The hope is that this piece will encourage others to include the calling construct in future studies, as understanding women’s aspirations and motivations may more deeply influence the decisions of women to lead—something that can ultimately change the world. Women and leadership development is an established research focus within human resource development today.

Keywords: women, leadership, calling
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A man saw three fellows laying bricks at a new building: He approached the first and asked, “What are you doing?” Clearly irritated, the first man responded, “What the heck do you think I’m doing? I’m laying these darn bricks!” He then walked over to the second bricklayer and asked the same question. The second responded, “Oh, I’m making a living.” He approached the third bricklayer with the same question, “What are you doing?” The third looked up, smiled and said, “I’m building a cathedral.”

—Joan Borysenko (n.d.)

Borysenko’s story provides an example of the different views or perspectives employees may have for their work. In fact, researchers (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997) have identified three perspectives individuals may have regarding the purpose of their work. A job is something done primarily to make money with the interest being in the material benefits and no other reward. A career can be moderately fulfilling but involves a constant process of trying to get promoted. According to Wrzensniewski et al., “People who have [c]areers have a deeper personal investment in their work and mark their achievement not only through monetary gain, but through advancement within the occupational structure” (p. 22). The third, calling, is valuable as an end in itself and serves the greater good; work is inseparable from overall life because of its meaning and its integration with identity. With calling, financial gain or career advancement are not primary purposes attributed to work; the fulfillment the individual receives from doing the work is most essential (Bellah et al., 1985; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Although other scholars may disagree
with these definitions, they provide insight into potential differences individuals may have regarding the purpose and value of work—with calling having the deepest meaning.

Although Dik and Duffy (2009) argued that there has been relatively little empirical research on purpose or meaningfulness in the work domain, the topic of “meaningful work” has recently become a popular area of research. People typically do want to experience more meaning in their lives as a whole. In fact, a decade ago a *USA Today* poll found that if people could ask God just one question, most would want to know, “What’s my purpose in life?” (qtd. in Brennfleck & Brennfleck, 2005, p. 3). Smith (1999) stated, “We long to find and do work that is meaningful, that makes a difference and needs to be done” (p. 31). According to Steger, Pickering, Shin, and Dik (2010), “Research is quickly accumulating, suggesting that many people want to experience a sense of calling in their work” (p. 90).

Individuals want to believe there is something special within them and that they have some type of life mission to discover and fulfill (Brennfleck & Brennfleck, 2005). Although many are unsure about what that might look like, they still feel driven to prepare for and accomplish this work or mission. A strong sense of calling lies at the core of meaningful work for many people, and researchers (e.g., Dik & Duffy, 2009; Hall & Chandler, 2005; Steger et al., 2010) have stated that more individuals now are seeking deep meaning in their work. Why is this so? Parker Palmer (2000) once said,

> Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic selfhood, whether or not it conforms to some image of who we ought to be. As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks—we will also find our path of authentic service in the world. (p. 16)
And, as Frederick Buechner (1973) asserts, true vocation joins self and service in “the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need” (p. 119).

The concept of calling as a research construct has been explored for the past few decades, most often using mixed-gender samples. However, my interests focus on the ways that calling plays out in women’s lives, especially those who aspire to, seek out, then acquire and maintain leadership roles in workplaces (e.g., business, nonprofit, government, and political). The emphasis on women is particularly important because low numbers of women continue to hold top leadership positions in nearly all countries and industries (Adler, in press; Madsen, Ngunjiri, Longman, & Cherry, in press). Although progress has been made, there remain many barriers that arise from within the complex team and organizational environments (external) and also within women themselves (internal) (Longman & Madsen, 2014; Ngunjiri & Madsen, 2014).

External barriers, among a host of others, include the glass ceiling, pay inequity, organizational practices (e.g., biased recruiting, hiring, career development, training, promotion), others’ perceptions (e.g., likeability, attractiveness, discrimination), and a lack of opportunities related to things like role models, networking, and socializing. Internal barriers may include such elements as confidence, leaning in, negative messages, negotiation skills, aspirations, and feedback.

In finding ways to better encourage women toward and to prepare them for leadership, one of the most important and foundational areas of emerging research focuses on understanding women’s aspirations and motivations to lead (Madsen, 2008, 2009). In many cases, the aspirations and motivations appear to be different for women than for men. In fact, some initial studies (Longman, Dahlvig, Wikkerink, Cunningham, & O’Connor, 2011; Tunheim & Goldschmidt, 2013) have found that a powerful motivator for many women who have stepped forward to lead is that they believe they have been “called” to do so. After becoming aware of
their own giftedness and then understanding their call to lead, it appears that, among other things, their self-efficacy, self-awareness, and ability to become more resilient—key characteristics women need in order to assume leadership roles—seem to increase.

Although scarce, research is emerging regarding the intersection of women, leadership, and calling, and recent research has inspired me to write this piece. Hence, this article explores the multifaceted phenomena of women, calling, and leadership by first providing literature and insight on the history, definition, related constructs, and benefits of the term “calling.” I then discuss the existing literature on the intersections arising among the constructs of women, work, leadership, and calling. The article concludes with a discussion of the applications to the leadership research, theory, and practice. My hope is that this article will encourage others to include the calling construct in future studies, as understanding women’s aspirations and motivations more deeply can, in my opinion, lead to more women leading—something that can ultimately change the world. This area of women and leadership has clear connections in the literature to human resource development.

**Background and Characteristics of Calling**

**History**

According to Tunheim and Goldschmidt (2013), the term “calling” was coined in 1522 by the German theologian, Martin Luther, from the University of Wittenburg. His view, which was different from that of the Catholic Church at the time, was that everyone—not just religious leaders—has a calling from God. Hence, he believed that both religious and common occupational work could hold spiritual significance (Oates, Hall, Anderson, & Willingham, 2008). Luther believed that this sense of being called could motivate people to serve their neighbors and communities more effectively. Calvinism, which also has its origins in the
Protestant Reformation, also conveys a sense of calling that looks at the question of the control that God exercises over the world and teaches that people must be predestined and then called to be among the elect. Hence, people sought for evidences that they were among the elect (Swezey, 2009).

Calling for women was also addressed during the Protestant Reformation, but it focused primarily on motherhood (Oates et al., 2008). Calling in this context took on a special meaning particularly for women because the role of motherhood held spiritual connotations. As Oates et al. explained, “Luther gave wives and mothers a sense that they were fulfilling the Lord’s work, too” (p. 230). Luther also taught, however, that one need not go in search of a vocation, but should stay in his or her “place” (home) to fulfill God’s purpose. Of course this had less positive implications for women who had aspirations beyond raising children.

Definitions

Calling has often been used interchangeably with the concept of “vocation,” which involves living a life of meaning and purpose. In fact, the translation of the Latin word “vocare” (vocation) is “to call” (Brennfleck & Brennfleck, 2005). Some believe that the vocational call is “a summons from God” to use one’s gifts in the world, “whether it be within paid employment, the home, or volunteer activities” (p. 7). According to Dik and Duffy (2009), these terms are used to refer to a sense of purpose or direction that leads an individual toward some kind of personally fulfilling and/or socially significant engagement within the work role, sometimes with reference to God or the divine, sometimes with reference to a sense of passion or giftedness. (p. 427)
Dik and Duffy (2009) also stated that “a vocation is an approach to a particular life role that is oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation” (p. 428). The authors acknowledged the considerable overlap between calling and vocation, but noted significant distinctions. Both terms link “work to an overall sense of purpose and meaningfulness toward other-oriented ends, but only individuals with callings perceive the impetus to approach work in this manner as originating from a source external to the self” (p. 428).

Now, the term “calling” has also been defined in a variety of ways. Hall and Chandler (2005) simply referred to it as “work that a person perceives as his purpose in life” (p. 161). Dik and Duffy (2009) defined it as

a transcendent summons, experienced as originating beyond the self, to approach a particular life role in a manner oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation. (p. 427)

In their research instrument, Davidson and Caddell (1994) described calling as follows: “My work has special meaning because I have been called to do what I'm doing regardless of how much time it takes or how little money I earn; I was put on this earth to do what I am doing” (p. 138). Common themes in a number of definitions include that calling “arises from some force outside the person and is thought to pertain to careers that an individual sees as meaningful and that promote the greater good in some way” (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007, p. 591). Longman et al. (2011) clarified, identifying two influences inherent in definitions of calling: first, the external recognition of a divine call to serve God, a transcendent summons, or some guiding force, and, second, the internal search for purpose and meaning that is sought through self-reflection,
prayer, and meditation. They found that it is the “recognition and embracing of personal gifts, talents, and strengths that enables individuals to contribute to the good of humanity” (p. 258).

**Religious vs. Secular**

Historically, the term “calling” carries a religious connotation. The early notion of a calling was described as “a divine inspiration to do morally responsible work” (Hall & Chandler, 2005, p. 161). However, modern researchers have adopted a “more expansive and secular conceptualization of calling, emphasizing meaning and personal fulfillment in work” (Steger et al., 2010, p. 82). The secular view includes the characterization that an individual does work because of a strong sense of inner direction, with the calling coming from an internal motivation that is not specifically driven by instrumental goal-seeking—a form of psychological engagement with the meaning of work (Hall & Chandler, 2005). The term “calling” now applies to individuals with either religious or secular views. A few studies have explored specifically whether both religious and nonreligious people experience a sense of calling. For example, Steger et al. (2010) found that both highly religiously committed people and those who were less religiously committed felt “called.” They concluded that self-efficacy, meaningfulness, and a value of serving a greater good were common for both highly-religious and non-religious individuals.

Hall and Chandler (2005) compared the two views, and in terms of the source of the call, they said that the religious view includes a belief that the call comes from God or a higher power, while individuals with the secular view believe it comes from within. Both religious and nonreligious individuals believe that their callings serve the community, but, according to Hall and Chandler, the latter may also view their callings as serving him/herself. The means of identifying a call differ as well: the religious view the call through discernment (e.g., prayer,
listening), while those with secular views perceive the call by means of introspection, reflection, mediation, and other relational activities. According to Brennfleck & Brennfleck (2005), nonreligious people believed their calls were directed by duties and roles in society instead of by God or some higher power.

The literature agrees that each person’s calling is unique. Having a sense of calling, according to Hall and Chandler (2005), is a highly individual and subjective experience. These authors and others (e.g., Novak, 1996) argued that a calling also involves preconditions. For example, an individual must have strengths or talents (a “fit”) in a specific area, openness to exploring and discovering one’s call, and a love for the kind of work that will be involved. The Quaker tradition asserts that an individual’s call emerges from personal inspiration. Palmer (2000), in Let Your Life Speak, stated:

They remind me of moments when it is clear—if I have eyes to see—that the life I am living is not the same as the life that wants to live in me. In those moments I sometimes catch a glimpse of my true life, a life hidden like the river beneath the ice…before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you…let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent. (p. 2)

Finally, Weiss, Skelley, Haughey, and Hall (2003) argued that an individual must have a personal awareness that he or she has been called and then eventually discover the unique path for him or her to take in accomplishing that calling. The literature also highlights the fact that finding one’s unique call is not easy, and it often requires a great deal of discussion, reflection, trial and error, and persistence (Hall & Chandler, 2005).

Other Characteristics and Benefits
Dik and Duffy (2009) clarified that the identification and applications of calling is a lifelong process, not something an individual discovers one time. Rather, it includes an “ongoing process of evaluating the purpose and meaningfulness of activities within a job and their contribution to the common good or welfare of others” (p. 429). They also purported that everyone potentially has a calling and that it can be in the context of any legitimate area of work, not just religious, teaching, or social service careers. Indeed, callings can be pursued within all occupations, and Dik and Duffy argued that this includes occupations that may not appear to work toward the well-being of society in an obvious way.

It is also important to note that a calling is a dynamic phenomenon and has the ability to change depending on life circumstances (Tunheim & Goldschmidt, 2013). For example, a call may be slightly different when a woman has young children living at home, and it may change as the children grow and move out of the home. Also, a call may change based on a woman’s preparedness. For example, she may not take on a leadership role until she has completed her education, or she may move into more influential positions as she gains more confidence and experience with learning and leading.

A few studies explored other facets of callings. For example, Hall and Chandler (2005) argued that one of the deepest forms of psychological satisfaction can occur when work is perceived as a calling. Their calling model of career success also includes interactions involving calling and self-confidence, effort, objective success, identity change, and external recognition. They emphasized that a clear sense of identity is essential to the processes of self-exploration (secular) and discernment (religious) in discovering calling. Further, profound self-awareness includes and integrates a calling with values, life purpose, and gifts. Literature more generally discusses other closely related or interacting and moderating variables, including one’s interests,
passions, motivations, talents and strengths, skills and abilities, personality traits, openness to call, commitment, courage, gifts, and love for work.

Scholars have found that those who feel called in their employment can have the following benefits: better job performance; heightened job satisfaction; increased organizational citizenship behavior (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007); greater life satisfaction (Hunter, Dik, & Banning, 2010); better psychological well-being (less depression and anxiety, increased happiness) (Steger et al., 2010; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006); heightened sense of identity (French & Domene, 2010); enhanced adaptability; lower absenteeism (Hall & Chandler, 2005); greater meaning in life (Dik & Duffy, 2009); increased social connectedness (Longman et al., 2011); satisfaction of fulfilling God’s plan (Oates, Hall, & Anderson, 2005); deeper career engagement; heightened sense of contribution and worth (Steger et al., 2010); self-clarity and firmer career decidedness (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007); increased positive workplace attitudes (Steger et al., 2010); decreased boredom (Oates et al., 2008); greater energy, enjoyment, and vitality (Hall & Chandler, 2005); stronger capability to manage temporary setbacks or failure; and increased self-awareness, self-efficacy, and resilience (Longman et al., 2011). Steger et al. (2010) also found that “people who approach their work as a calling have a career that engages them at a deep level and provides them with a highly valued sense of contribution and worth in their work lives” (p. 91).

Finally, some scholars have argued that calling has substantial overlap with other constructs. These include, but are not limited to, purpose, meaningfulness, personal engagement, flow, psychological participation, psychological success, and intrinsic motivation. Hall and Chandler (2005) stated that the challenge that researchers are currently exploring is “how to characterize the key facets of a calling and how to distinguish it from separate, but similar,
constructs” (p. 161). Yet, Dik and Duffy (2009) and others have already deemed calling to be a sufficiently distinct variable that warrants attention as a unique construct, stating that calling is a “valuable, inclusive, and cross-culturally relevant” construct that provides a “promising template for guiding research and practice that targets individuals’ experience of work as meaningful” (p. 425).

**Women, Calling, and Leadership**

The previous section discussed the definition of calling as well as its benefits, related constructs, and other characteristics. This section highlights studies that have linked calling with women in the workplace more generally, and then hones in on studies that connect women and leadership with calling. It is important to note that nearly all of the existing literature on women and calling is based on research conducted within a Christian (religious view) setting.

**Women and Calling**

There are few studies published on women and sense of calling in different domains, and although some do not focus specifically on women leaders, they do provide some useful insight. The first is French and Domene’s (2010) qualitative study of female Christian university students who agreed beforehand that they felt a sense of calling (religious view). The students had examined the experience of “life calling,” which the researchers concluded appears to be deeply intertwined with one’s worldviews and life values. They found that life calling, which included occupation, definitely informed these students’ choices, career paths, identities, and world lens with a sense of being called to something greater than themselves. The authors concluded:

Perhaps people with a strong sense of calling at an early age view their whole life through this lens because they have a strong sense of that calling. Perhaps their adoption of a lens of calling to interpret all aspects of their life is what has allowed them to develop such a
strong sense of calling. Perhaps these students’ dispositions are prone to becoming absorbed in whatever they do and they have come to interpret such an approach as a “calling.” In any case, it is evident that calling pervades every area of these people’s lives and, as such, may be beneficial to address when counselling such students. (p. 9)

These women felt that life calling was both an inward and an outward experience and that this strong sense of life calling was linked to their skills, personhood, passions, and the desire to help others. The participants admitted, however, that pursuing a calling comes at a cost (e.g., putting aside other areas of interest, relationships, and recreation; expending a lot of effort and dedication; unexpected trials, hurdles, and sacrifices). These women also believed that the support of others through significant relationships (e.g., parent, career counsellor, educator, and friend) was crucial in their development of life calling. Also, during the formative years, exposure to a particular area of interest was an important factor in the discovery of a life calling. These authors also provided a connection between calling and self-efficacy, initiative, engagement in related experiences, challenges and obstacles, resiliency, determination, active versus passive, conscious effort to find calling, and sense of identity.

Next, work-life conflict and integration literature abounds in terms of documenting the high level of stress, concern, and challenge that women, in particular, feel when they attempt to integrate family, career, and community responsibilities. Oates et al. (2005) investigated the role of calling in the lives of working Christian mothers struggling with interrole conflict. Their qualitative study focused on interviews with 32 mothers working in Christian academia. The researchers studied calling attributes, factors that shaped their experience with calling, and related implications. They found that mothers who experienced their profession as a spiritual calling often felt able to adapt and manage the career-mothering tensions more effectively.
Further, they found that greater levels of calling conviction, higher sense of meaningful work, broader comprehensiveness in calling, and perceived collective responsibility were also linked to increased ability to cope with interrole tension.

The grounded theory that emerged from the Oates et al. (2005) study was titled “The Sanctification Framework,” which posits that the sense of calling was manifest in three areas:

1. Certitude and commitment: The conviction and commitment to calling was critical in helping women manage the internal tension inherent in multiple roles.
2. Collaboration: The belief that there were adequate interpersonal resources to assist women in managing the demands of both parenting and career.
3. Context of purpose: The belief that one’s work was part of a God’s larger plan seemed to place their interrole challenges within a transcendent perspective.

For many, embracing their calls also led to a decrease in guilt. In sum, the sanctification of work—through experiencing a sense of calling—assisted women in coping more effectively with work-family conflicts and other interrole tension.

A few researchers with mixed-gender studies have noted gender differences in understanding calling. First, Duffy and Sedlacek (2007) concluded from their qualitative study that men were more likely to consider their job as a calling than women were. Second, French and Domene (2010) reported in their literature review that women relied more on relationships and staying connected, and they cared about and for others because of their perceived calls. Oates et al. (2008) discussed the various benefits for pursuing multiple roles (i.e., career, motherhood), particularly when the roles are viewed as spiritual callings and when adequate support systems are available. Another study found that women who worked with people (as opposed to things) were twice as likely to view their job as a calling, and, interestingly, as
educational level increased, so did a sense of calling (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007). Finally, Phillips (2009) found in her study of college students that both men and women perceived vocational callings from a purposeful and spiritual perceptive; however, they conceptualized calling in different ways: women interpreted call from a relational (affective) perspective that was connected to sense of self, while men discerned calling cognitively and pragmatically. A female student’s path to a sense of calling focused on what they felt good about doing and what makes them feel they matter, while the male students’ sense of calling centered on their paid work and the belief that they can perform well enough to support their future families.

**The Call to Lead**

Because of the “leader is male” mentality that still exists in most contexts, there is a misguided perception by many women that being a leader is a prideful and arrogant role. Since many women’s styles are more collaborative, team-focused, nurturing, and developmental, leading is often not something they want to consider, seek, or pursue. Yet, one of my favorite leadership quotations is as follows:

> Leadership is a concept we often resist. It seems immodest, even self-aggrandizing, to think of ourselves as leaders. But if it is true that we are made for community, then leadership is everyone’s vocation, and it can be an evasion to insist that it is not. When we live in the close-knit ecosystem called community, everyone follows and everyone leads. (Palmer, 2000, p. 74)

This section summarizes four key studies that combine women, calling, and leadership. There are hints in the literature that, even if women may have the perception just described, if they feel called to lead, they will step forward to make it happen. This, of course, is a powerful insight in motivating and preparing more women for leadership.
First, Dahlvig and Longman (2014) recently published a model that introduced three key contributors to women’s leadership development, specifically in Christian higher education: motivators that lead to leadership self-efficacy, leadership experience, and finally leadership competence. They argued that a woman’s awareness of calling and giftedness is one of three critical motivators for her to move into more significant leadership roles within higher education. These researchers found that female participants were not motivated by the attractiveness of the career ladder, but rather the 1) awareness of calling, along with 2) relational responsibility and 3) mentoring/external encouragement.

Second, Tunheim and Goldschmidt (2013) conducted a phenomenological study of the lived experiences of calling in 15 women university and college presidents in the United States, six of whom came from religious institutions. The majority of participants did believe they had been called in some way into the presidency. Researchers described three stages of calling for women:

1. **Identifying the call**: This was described as a spiritual call, a calling through a match of the institution’s needs and the women’s own gifts and skills, and/or the process of obtaining more knowledge and information.

2. **Interpreting the call**: Exploring and interpreting the call was a next step for most participants. Many continued the process of obtaining more information, continuing an examination of their gifts, while others sought guidance from others, attended workshops or seminars that provided clarity, and continued deep reflection and/or prayer.
3. **Pursuing the call:** Once an internal call to the presidency was accepted by the women, they then opened themselves to opportunities and, in some cases, actively sought out positions. They moved from understanding their call to making it happen. As these researchers stated, “according to Luther in 1521, regardless of how much preparation one has, there comes a time when one just has to take a leap of faith—if the calling is true, the role will be there” (p. 38). Tunheim and Goldschmidt found this to be true, particularly with presidents who felt called to lead.

Third, I have personally collected data for years on the leadership development journeys of female U.S. university presidents and governors, as well as educational, government, and business leaders in the United Arab Emirates, China, and Slovenia. An important component of this research focused on the leadership motivations of these women. Although I have not specifically collect data using the term “calling,” I have reanalyzed data from two U.S.-based studies (Madsen, 2008, 2009) to explore whether the women felt called in some way to lead. Although these prominent women leaders did not use the term “calling,” after reviewing transcriptions, it is clear that each of them felt called in either a religious or secular way. The data reflect the following 12 primary leadership motivations (rank order):

1. To make a difference
2. To influence positively
3. To serve the community and help others
4. To make things happen
5. To fulfill accomplishment and achievement needs
6. To fulfill drives and ambition
7. To do what I am meant to do in life
8. To have power
9. To do interesting, exciting, and meaningful work
10. To learn, develop, and grow (liked change)
11. To get great satisfaction from my work
12. To have challenges and important responsibilities

The motivations listed that most closely align with calling include: to make a difference, to positively influence, to serve the community and help others, and to do what I am meant to do in life. For example, one university president with a religious view stated,

I have always wanted desperately to make a difference. I believe we’re put on this earth for some reason, and I believe that very strongly. We must not squander that. There are so many people who can’t speak for themselves, and they must have a voice. When we can be that voice, then our lives are really worth living. (Madsen, 2008, p. 243)

Another woman leader with a more secular view said, “I thrive on challenge. I thrive on doing different things all of the time. I like variety. I like trying to work through and finding solutions to things…figuring out your way through issues. I like to help make things happen” (p. 244). She believed that her talents, gifts, and passions were aligned with the position and that she was “made to do this work.” After completing this data analysis, it became clear that calling—for women with religious and secular views—was an important leadership motivator for the participants in these studies.

Finally, the most comprehensive calling model to date that brings together the constructions of leadership and calling for women has emerged from the work of Longman and colleagues (2011). They explored this phenomenon in a grounded theory analysis based on 16 interviews with women leaders with the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU).
These researchers discovered that calling is actually centered in leaders’ knowing and using their unique talents and strengths, which are “often recognized as gifts from God that were clues to God’s plan for their lives” (p. 264) (see Figure 1). According to Longman et al., the model conceptualized calling along two continuums: internal-external and specific-general.

*Internal-external* refers to sources of validation from which women experienced confirmation for their giftedness. *Specific-general* identifies a spectrum regarding the nature of calling being a well-defined task or a generalized sense of purpose or direction. (p. 264)

The model also includes four conceptual factors or forces that influenced their sense of calling:

1. Theological influences: principles or beliefs engrained in the historic Christian faith;
2. Family realities: relationships with immediate family, relatives, and friends that contribute to one’s sense of self and possibilities;
3. Life circumstances: environmental aspects of life, such as geographical location, socio-economic status, work environment, local community, church, and peers; and
4. Cultural expectations: shared beliefs and practices that influence and impact all life domains.

The researchers argued that these four forces or contextual factors could either limit or help expand the women’s use of their gifts and talents and also influence (directly or indirectly) the ways women discern and act on their calls.

*Figure 1. A conceptual model of women’s calling.*
The larger, shaded concentric circles of the Longman et al. (2011) model represent “the potential for movement or development inherent in a woman’s sense of calling” (p. 264). Longman et al. observed that the model most likely would not be circular; instead it would depend upon where a woman places herself both on the specific-general or internal-external continuum and with the four factors that may limit or propel the calling embracement. For example,

If a woman has both a strong sense of self-awareness and self-efficacy (internal) regarding a well-defined task or calling (specific) and is being externally affirmed in her giftedness (external), the woman’s self-efficacy through recognition of gifts and talents expand in three directions to depict a strengthened sense of calling. If this same woman has a supportive family and comes from a supportive theological tradition, and is at a point in life to be mobile (an aspect of context) to pursue her sense of calling, there would be few environmental limits in fulfilling her call. (pp. 264–265)

Longman et al. summarized that the awareness of giftedness and the act of identifying their calling are important in propelling women to engage in leadership opportunities.

Although two of the four studies were conducted in Christian settings and many of the participants in the other two have the religious view of calling, these studies provide at least a start for understanding the power and potential of the calling construct in the secular or religious view to help women aspire to and become leaders. Clearly, a majority of women in these studies stepped forward, in part, because they felt called to lead.

Implications for Research and Practice

A number of key findings from this article may be useful as implications for research and practice, particularly for those building theory, conducting studies, or designing and facilitating
women’s leadership development programs. First, discovering calling can be linked to using talents, gifts, abilities, knowledge, and passions in a way that helps other people and society at large. For some, understanding life and vocational calling can inform their choices, career paths, identities, and world lens with a sense of being called to something greater than themselves. In addition, awareness of calling for women is a critical motivator that can lead to leadership self-efficacy, leadership experience, and, finally, leadership competence. If women discover this call to lead, aspirations and motivations to lead in informal and formal positions of influence may improve. Studying these relationships in more depth will also provide additional insight into helping women see how their unique gifts and talents are connected to the calling to lead. Also, using these constructs in discussions and programs will assist women in understanding their callings.

It is also important to consider cautiously the advantages and disadvantages for individuals in understanding their calls. Although answering one’s call comes with a host of benefits, it may also result in sacrifices. For example, if a mother with small children feels called to take a leadership position within higher education, she will most likely experience heavy work-family conflict, even with a good support system in place. Yet, mothers who feel called in their careers or in other community work may also be able to adapt and deal with the work-family tensions more effectively, and do this with less guilt. Since these are very personal decisions, developmental opportunities should be thoughtfully crafted to help women explore both the pros and cons of career and life choices, including the ways that they relate to calling. Critical reflective activities can be included in program components geared toward self-awareness. Additional theory and research on these life complexities is also recommended.
Finally, the emerging models outlined in this chapter can provide a starting point for more rigorously tested constructs and new theory building (qualitative and quantitative methodologies). For example, constructs of calling for women—i.e., faith, family, life circumstances, culture, validation (internal-external), nature of calling (specific-general), and knowing and using giftedness—can be tested and replicated in additional theory-building processes and research studies. In addition, the calling stages model (i.e., identifying, interpreting, and pursuing calling) may benefit from more extensive studies that elucidate the intricacies of each stage for women. The same is also true for the Dahlvig and Longman (2014) model of key contributors to women’s leadership development. Although these models already provide a useful framework for researchers to further explore these phenomena and for practitioners to carefully design development experiences, effective practices—developmental relationships and activities—can be continuously discovered and designed to improve programs. Carefully designed research and evaluation of these programs and practices can then help in redesigning or confirming their effectiveness in women’s leadership development settings as well.

Conclusion

The existing literature provides initial evidence that, for at least some women, a sense of calling can influence their aspirations and motivations to lead, strengthen their commitment to their work (paid or unpaid), provide a source of personal and professional strength, help manage role conflicts, enhance their ability to prioritize more effectively, provide a difference perspective on challenges and failure, decrease guilt for these failures (in God’s hands), and provide the courage to lean in. As Smith (1999) stated,
It takes courage to pursue our vocation, the courage to be—the courage to be true to who we are, even if it means living on the edge, living with risk, living with less security and less influence and less power—because to pursue our vocation means that we have chosen the way that is true to who we are, true to ourselves, true to our call. (p. 123)

The foundation of developing courage—and the identification, interpretation, and pursuit of calling—is critical reflection. And without it, calling may not even be discovered let alone pursued. Warren Bennis (2009), one of the most well-known leadership writers, once said,

There are lessons in everything, and if you are fully deployed, you will learn most of them. Experiences aren’t truly yours until you think about them, analyze them, examine them, question them, reflect on them, and finally understand them. The point, once again, is to use your experiences rather than being used by them, to be the designer, not the design, so that experiences empower rather than imprison. (p. 92)

By understanding the influence that calling may have for both religious and nonreligious women, scholars and practitioners can assist women in facilitating new leadership aspirations and motivations. This could influence more women to seek out opportunities to become leaders in various settings (e.g., business, government, political, nonprofit). For many, calling in work and life may bring peace to the soul, particularly as it relates to ensuring the time they spend on earth is meaningful, and this is what I believe is truly important. As Mary Oliver (n.d.) wrote in the poem, *When Death Comes,*

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,
and each name a comfortable music in the mouth
  tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
  previous to the earth.

When it’s over, I want to say: all my life
  I was a bride married to amazement.
  I was a bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder
  if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
  I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened, or full of argument.

I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.
References


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