



# **Advancing Women in Leadership Journal**

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## **Singing for Leadership: Fostering the Development of Female Leaders Through Voice**

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### *Abstract*

This study investigates the link between development of voice via participation in singing, and the development of leadership qualities and capabilities in women. "Voice" is discussed as a metaphor for both leadership and personal leadership development, and the issue of how female voices are dismissed and/or suppressed is considered. The theoretical framework that undergirds this exploration is transformative learning, which is a process of making meaning of one's life experiences. Singing can be a transformative learning process that facilitates a shift away from self-limiting attitudes and toward developing leadership qualities in women via experiential learning, learning within relationship, public performance, and the inner journey of reflection and subsequent understanding that leads to individuation. Three main themes emerged from this study that characterize the personal development and growth that participation in singing can foster: commitment, connection, and congruence.

Key words: Leadership, women, female leaders, development

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*Introduction*

“I have sung all my life...living in my voice and voicing my life is my place of fearlessness in this world.” – Michele George, from *Well-Tuned Women*

Can singing turn a person into a leader? Can a person learn to lead by learning to sing? And what might motivate such a question?

To be sure, the question of whether participation in singing might foster the development of leadership qualities is an unusual one. But it was one that I, as a voice and personal leadership development coach who also happens to be a singer, was motivated to investigate. As a singer, I have spent more than half my life exploring, training, refining and sharing my voice in a very public manner. As a voice and leadership development coach I have helped hundreds of others do the same.

Over the course of my work, which includes teaching privately, in educational settings and in a residential substance abuse treatment facility, I have noticed that there seems to be an integral connection between voice and identity, between how one thinks and feels about one's voice and how one thinks and feels about oneself and one's capability to lead, whether one is practicing personal or positional leadership. This seems, from my research and experience, to be particularly true for women. Indeed, Belenky et al. (1997) noted that “women repeatedly used the metaphor of voice to depict their intellectual and ethical development; and that the development of a sense of voice, mind and self were intricately intertwined” (p. 18).

So, what does singing have to do with developing a leadership identity? Simply this; the journey of locating one's voice through singing can be one of self-discovery, empowering one to find new meanings, new aspects of oneself that enlarge and transform one's identity. And, again, in my experience, I have found this to be a particularly potent avenue of learning and development for women. Singing is a vehicle by which women can explore their inner selves. It is a specific way of learning, a discipline that develops certain habits of mind and ways of being. Understanding one's voice is another way of understanding oneself and one's capacities. Developing one's voice is akin to developing one's identity; and when one becomes conscious of her identity, she is awakened to her potential. In fact, Thurber and Zimmerman (2002) referred to voice as self-knowledge and autonomy.

This transformation and realization of identity can be the basis for the emergence of leadership capacities. Coughlin (2005) underscored this when framing her discussion of what will best serve female leaders moving ahead in the twenty-first century around the idea of self-awareness. She stated unequivocally, “there is...no substitute for the power that comes from self-awareness” (p. 17). Self-awareness, then, leads to personal leadership and is the first step in learning to lead others; and one of the keys to fostering self-awareness is developing voice.

*Women and Voice*

Without question, women in every age have fought for the right to be heard, to participate in the leadership of their societies, to have voice both metaphorically and literally. Jameison

(1995) traced much of this history as it pertains to women in America, noting both the suffrage movement and the battle over the ERA as two of the better known in a long line of struggles.

The issue of women's voices being undervalued or dismissed in many cultures and sectors makes provocative reading. In his cogent essay, Eilberg-Schwartz (1995) discussed the erotic symbolism of the female mouth and sound, found in many ancient Jewish texts. One text lists the various kinds of exposures that are considered indecent for a woman to practice, particularly as they might distract a man from reciting the Shema prayer; these include her skin, her little finger, her leg, her hair and her voice. As Eilberg-Schwartz pointed out, "by eroticizing her voice, and by linking it to the exposure of other body parts...the sound of a woman's voice is defined as indecent exposure..." (p. 168). He also highlights another ancient text that warns men to refrain from conversing too much with women lest they, the men, be drawn into adultery. Eilberg-Schwartz noted here that "it is as if the text is itself exhibiting the dangers of the female voice" (p. 168). Later in the essay, he talks of the "denigration of the female voice" (p. 172) in reference to ancient Rabbinic literature which characterizes a woman's voice as disruptive to a man's learning of Torah. In these texts, while the male voice stands in for G-d's voice in the dissemination of Torah knowledge, women are excluded from Torah study and the transmission of such knowledge to succeeding generations. Their voices, their ideas, their expressions are barred. Such prohibitions are still a part of the more conservative branches of Judaism.

Islamic ideology preaches something similar as revealed by Delaney (1995). A woman's voice is considered weak and should not be heard: "For a woman to speak openly is almost the equivalent to exposing herself...This does not mean that women do not speak; the cultural wisdom, however, is that their words carry no weight, that they are not generative or definitive" (p. 68). Delaney continued: "These ideas are...familiar to Christians in Paul's command: 'Let a woman learn in all submissiveness, I permit no woman to teach or have authority over men: she is to keep silent'" (p. 68 – 69).

Women in secular society have not fared much better. Tellingly, Erikson (1968) writes: Yet it still seems to be amazingly hard for many women to say clearly what they feel most deeply, and to find the right words for what to them is most acute and actual, without saying too much or too little and without saying it with defiance or apology. Some women who observe and think vividly and deeply do not seem to have the courage of their native intelligence, as if they were somehow afraid on some final confrontation to be found to have no 'real' intelligence. (p. 263)

Erikson laid the responsibility for this predicament squarely at the feet of both women and men. Women, he says, either too often retreat to the safety of background existence when confronted with a challenge, or lead in a strident manner, ignoring the voices of their female followers. Men are loath to relinquish their dominance, and the energy derived from that, in favor of equality, equivalence and the practice of empathy. Erikson noted, too, that man "habitually ascribes man's survival to the proud coherence of the schemes of men, not remembering the fact that while each scheme was tested and many exploded, women met the challenge of keeping essentials together, of rebuilding, and of bringing up rebuilders" (Erikson, 1968, p. 264). Though his well-known tract is almost forty years old, it speaks, still, to core issues of women being heard and recognized, as echoed by Lewis (1993), who shared that women "have been denied the status of

meaning-makers: we have been excluded from the stories we are told, as well as from those we are encouraged to tell to and of ourselves” (p. 70).

The word “voice” and the concept of having voice are often used as metaphors for leadership: “Just as writers must find their voice, so leaders must find an individual and persuasive voice, an authentic version of themselves that engages and recruits others” (Bennis & Thomas, 2002, p. 137). Voice is also used in reference to personal leadership development: “The human voice is one way in which we preserve our identity...The voice is an expression of psychological state, a physiological operation and the means by which a person asserts his or her rights within the social order” (Newham as cited in Dosso, 2004, p. 66). This last phrase is a potent one, for it speaks to the power of voice as identity for the individual as she knows herself and presents herself in context of her environment. Awareness both of self and self-presentation to others are of equal importance in the discussion of identity. Kuper (1999) suggested:

Identity is not a private matter. It must be lived out in the world, in a dialogue with others...identity is discovered within oneself, and it implies identity with others. The inner self finds its home in the world by participating in the identity of a collectivity. (p. 235)

Berger and Luckman (1966), who wrote of the sociology of knowledge, assert a similar idea, saying that, “identity...stands in a dialectical relationship with society. Identity is formed by social processes” (Berger & Luckman, 1966, p. 173). They also pointed out that just as society helps shape individual identity, it is, in turn, shaped by the individuals who live within its structure. Schlenker (1985) concurred: “a situated identity is, from the actor’s perspective, a theory of self that is wittingly or unwittingly constructed in a particular social situation or relationship” (p. 68). Schlenker further defined identity as “a theory...of an individual that describes, interrelates, and explains his or her relevant features, characteristics, and experiences” (p. 68). He argued that identity has two properties: a) the self-as-known - which is the part of us understood and experienced by the external world, and b) the self-as-knower – the part of us that engages in self-regulation as we observe, assess and react to ourselves in different situations. Simply stated, our identities are formed, developed and exist both in relation to ourselves and in relation to others. The two go hand in hand, for to base our identities solely on how others react to and perceive us is to have little self-determination, while to completely ignore the perception of others is to dislocate ourselves from vital exchange that can inform and nurture us. Schlenker also acknowledged that self-identification “involves fixing and expressing one’s own identity, privately through reflection about oneself and publicly through self-disclosures, self-presentations, and other activities that serve to project one’s identity to audiences” (p. 66). Thus, identity emerges from self-reflection as well as communication with others. It emerges from hearing and being heard.

Frequently, though, female voices are ignored or subverted, particularly as they age. Writing about the struggle of adolescent girls to develop their voices and be heard, Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan (1995) shared:

The girls in this study voice a tremendous need for an experience of connections in which they feel safe and can speak the truths of their lives without fear that they will

lose relationship...That these opportunities become increasingly rare for most as they enter into womanhood, however, is also painfully apparent. (p. 68 - 69)

Brown and Gilligan (1992) made an impassioned statement about the trifling of women's voices. They wrote, "as psychologists who are women, who were once girls, we struggle to hold on to what we know about relationships and feelings...and about the ways in which women's voices have been trivialized, dismissed, and devalued" (p. 41).

Yet, for women to claim their equitable rights as leaders and meaning makers in this society, they must know themselves and make themselves heard. Belenky et al. (1997) have noted that the development of a sense of voice, mind and self are closely knit. In an accounting of interviews done with a cross-section of women for their study on women, knowledge and identity, they share that "describing the self was a difficult task for all of the women...but it was almost impossible for the silent ones" (p. 31). Voice, then, is linked inextricably to self, to one's identity. Knowing one's voice, not just one's figurative voice but one's literal voice as well, is akin to knowing and believing in oneself. Joyce (1996) addressed this when describing her work with the Women of Courage program wherein she uses singing as a teaching tool. She has found that the path of learning inherent in singing engenders a holistic experience that fosters self knowledge and mastery as well as a sense of power, well-being and agency in the women with whom she works. These are some of the qualities upon which the development of a leader rests: "To be a leader – regardless of gender – you must first know thyself and then achieve self-mastery. Leadership is a journey that starts from within..." (Gergen, 2005, p. xx). Therefore, to foster in females the well-being and self-knowledge that is the basis of leadership potential, we need to engage the development of their voices, literally as well as figuratively. Society needs to foster the empowerment of women through their expressive voices.

### *Research Questions*

In my work, I have seen participation in singing make a difference in the self-confidence, sense of identity and presence of my female students, qualities that are the basis of leadership capabilities. I have felt this growth in myself and wondered if other women have experienced the same phenomenon. If so, how does participation in singing foster such leadership qualities? How does it cultivate qualities such as presence and personal mastery – the latter with its inherent attributes of self-reliance, self-esteem and self-awareness – from which leadership potential may grow? Within this broad question lie the following questions: What effect do voice lessons have on the student's awareness of her voice? What self-understanding does the student gain in working with and exploring her voice in lessons, i.e. how, if at all, does her self-perception change? In the student's estimation, how is the voice teacher instrumental in shaping a student's awareness of and confidence in her voice and herself? How, if at all, does studying voice affect other aspects of her life? How does the experience of performing in front of an audience affect her, i.e. what does she learn from it and how does she feel about herself afterward? In short, what transformative learning is engendered for women who participate in singing and what meaning do these women make of their singing experiences, especially as those experiences pertain to their developing identities? These questions formed the basis of my research into this area.

*Theoretical Framework*

The theoretical framework upon which my research is based is transformative learning. Transformative learning is a process of making meaning of one's life experiences. The theory, first introduced by Mezirow (1990, 1991), originally centered on three themes: centrality of past experience, critical reflection on that experience, and rational discourse to examine and make or re-interpret meaning about the experience. Mezirow's thinking, particularly with regard to the place of reflection in learning, is influenced by the work of John Dewey. Dewey (1933) was an advocate of reflection as central to all learning experiences, allowing "us to act in a deliberate and intentional fashion...[to] convert action that is merely...blind and impulsive into intelligent action" (p. 212). Dewey also believed that "all genuine education comes through experience" (1938, p. 25), which, as Mezirow echoed, puts learners, rather than instructors, at the heart of learning. This is vital to the purpose of transformative learning.

As expanded upon by others, the meaning and methods of transformative learning have enlarged to include transformation as individuation (Boyd, 1991), transformative learning via experiential learning (Gallagher cited in Taylor, 1998), transformation as affected by self-perception in public interpersonal contexts (Tice, 1992), and the impact of learning-within-relationship on transformative learning (Barlas, 2001). My assertion is that singing can be a transformative learning process that enables a shift away from limiting perspectives and toward developing leadership qualities in women via experiential learning, learning within relationship, public performance and the inner journey of reflection and subsequent understanding that leads to individuation.

I have found scant primary research on singing as an instrument for personal leadership development in either men or women. Patteson's study (1999) supports the idea that singing lessons foster personal well-being in women. Smithrim (1998) found that singing was important to the emotional and spiritual lives of her subjects, and Joyce (1996) documented her use of singing as an experiential teaching tool that provides a holistic growth experience for abused women. While these studies informed my thinking about the multi-leveled role that singing can play in the lives of women, each focused on the personal engagement in singing, not on the challenges and growth potential that performing for an audience provides for the solo singer. Further, from my search in the fields of psychology, sociology, communication, drama, education and music, I have found no research on singing *per se* as a tool for leadership development or perspective transformation.

However, the work of Tice and Boyd in the field of transformative learning seems to support my premise. Boyd's (1991) discussion of individuation as the discovery of new talents, confidence, sense of personal responsibility and empowerment provides integral links to the path of learning within a voice lesson. Tice (1992) imparted, from her investigation of change in self-concept through public behavior, that publicly affecting a behavior can lead to adopting that behavior as a part of one's self-concept. This relates to the public performance aspect of singing. When a singer performs in front of an audience she embodies a personality and displays the courage to use her voice in public. Having this witnessed by an audience can be a powerful affirmation for her and may contribute significantly to constructing a positive self-perception.



Using her voice in public becomes a source of vigor, for performers “must have a strong sense of self” (Gardner, 1994, p. 330).

### *Research Design*

To address my central question, I interviewed nine female leaders of varying ages, backgrounds and professions who regularly participated in singing for at least three years. Each talked about what she experienced and still sees as an all-too-present problem of women not being encouraged, and often being discouraged, from finding their voices, and how that impedes their growth, independence and leadership development.

For this study, I defined participation in singing as the combination of singing lessons (three years minimum) and public solo vocal performance. I set these parameters for two reasons. First, learning about the voice – it is function, scope, breadth, depth, and how to use it to its fullest advantage - takes time. Second, unlike performing as part of a group, a soloist is the center of attention for the audience, which is a potentially intimidating and/or exhilarating situation.

I did not focus on professional singers, for part of my aim was to show that singing, often thought of as the domain solely of the highly talented and professionally oriented, may afford powerful learning experiences for those not professionally bound. However, I did talk with women who had studied voice seriously and been soloists in concerts, recitals and/or productions to see how, if at all, involvement in such situations transferred to other parts of their lives, particularly their growth and development as leaders.

As I anticipated, each woman had a unique take on herself as a leader, on the leadership qualities she feels she embodies, on which of those qualities might have been encouraged by participation in singing, and to what extent. Many of the leadership qualities discussed incorporated the notions of personal mastery - self-reliance, self-esteem, self-awareness - and presence - the confidence to use one’s voice in service of one’s vision, the “inner strength, public poise, and a quality of connection” that comes from a “centered, responsive, and committed self” (Parks, 2005, pp. 99, 101).

During each interview, I allowed the definitions of leader and leadership qualities to be somewhat open-ended. Certainly, for leadership to matter, leaders and followers, both, need to feel responsible for the leadership direction that seeks change based on values, commitment and vision. This occurs most potently in a learning atmosphere where information is shared, reflection is encouraged, assumptions are examined, collaboration and shared meaning are fostered, individual voices are heard and individual growth is nurtured. Leaders and followers become aware, and awareness leads to exploration, which leads to decisions, which lead to actions for change. Thus, as this cycle continues, championed by the leader, learning encourages transformation while transformation encourages learning.

Yet, I agree with Huber (1998) that leadership is contextual and is not marked by a generic collection of traits or behavior, and with Shamir and Eilam (2005) that leadership is a manifestation of the development of one’s self-concept, which, in turn, is predicated on one’s

history and, more important, one's life-story. Based on their unique lived experiences, leaders develop because they come to see themselves as those who can, those who are able to step into leadership. Therefore, it is the individual sense of self that ends up influencing the way a leader interacts with her world and defines her leadership. Each woman in this study viewed the development of her life as a leader through the lens of singing, while she examined and reflected on what transformational learning might have occurred for her as she discovered her voice.

### *Findings*

The women in my study were asked to share their experiences, thoughts and ideas about voice training, solo vocal performance, possible challenges encountered in training and/or performance, and how any or all of this might have impacted their individual sense of their capabilities, conceptions of their voices, sense of themselves as women, and growth and practice as leaders. Three themes emerged from my discussions that characterize the personal growth and development that my respondents felt they achieved through participation in singing: commitment, connection, and congruence.

#### *Commitment*

As the women in my study talked about the kind of commitment they needed to master vocal technique, three distinct sub-themes surfaced that represent everything they indicated was part of being committed to learning to sing: vision, courage, and taking responsibility. Asked what they felt was required of them in voice lessons, words and phrases such as discipline, patience, perseverance, practice, and figuring it out - all of which are part of taking responsibility - peppered their answers.

Some spoke of the necessary self-discipline involved in practicing. Others spoke of developing focus, preparation and persistence in order to stick with the learning process and get past challenges.

Pamela, a leader in the pharmaceutical industry, said this:

*Lots of practice...working until you get it right. And, discipline physically...I had to think about myself, physically breathing, but also when I'm not singing, what I was doing to my body, and also discipline mentally...extraordinary focus. I think of singing as taking much more focus than my current job...And just rigor, sticking with it all the time.*

Her statement speaks to the level of responsibility and diligence that was involved in learning to sing.

Along with this level of responsibility, singing required courage from my respondents. By courage I mean the kind of fortitude, willingness to experiment, openness to feedback and new ideas, flexibility and resilience that these women consistently had to display as they studied singing.



One response that particularly illustrates this came from Maci, who is a program director at a large philanthropic foundation. Her answer is complex and conveys how one's whole self is challenged when taking on the combined physical/mental/emotional demands of singing:

*Fearlessness, to be able to try things that are mind-body connected, and to be able to link intellectual inquiry...with what is deeply visceral and emotional and personal... To be fearless in the sense of when you're trying to surmount all of these odd things that technically try to get you into your body and yet out of your body at the same time, to figure out a way to technically create better sound...requires a level of trust in yourself and a level of fearlessness...in not caring what's around, being there for the moment and tackling physical, emotional, intellectual challenges.*

What powered the courage to take responsibility for their pursuit of singing is vision, or the goals - to progress, to master elements of vocal technique, to learn certain pieces for competition or performance - that motivated their pursuit. Dyan summed it up best:

*Probably the desire to progress...because that gets you through everything else...I think that's the thing that gives you the courage and the discipline and, the willingness to give up what you have to give up to progress.*

Employing such focus and attention in their singing lessons, the women in my study became aware of, connected with and used mind and body to unleash their unique, individual voices. They had to be willing to explore and stretch their knowledge of themselves as they undertook the learning process. Then, adding repertoire, they had to delve into their emotions and thoughts in order to bring to life the layers of meaning in a piece of music, while still attending to the rigors of vocal technique. In all, the demands of a voice lesson required that each woman bring her whole self to the learning process, and to the discovery of her voice.

This is the kind of holistic learning in which Vaill (1996) counseled leaders to immerse themselves. It is this type of learning, Vaill said, that promotes the integration of habits such as self-direction, willingness to take risks, and learning as a way of being that leaders of change need to develop: "We are describing learning that resonates in the total person in an integrated flow of mind, body, and spirit, no matter how humble or mundane the activity. It is the essence of learning as a way of being" (p. 67).

Commitment was also discussed as an aspect of performance. Each woman was asked what she felt singing solo in public required of her. Susan referenced self-management, preparation and flexibility:

*When someone would hire me to do a solo gig, it's completely on me...I'm given, 'Here's your outline. Here's your objective. Show up at this date and time', and I have to have done all of those things; they're not going to hold my hand through that. So, it's being able to manage yourself. And know what's expected of you. And being flexible too, because...it's never exactly the tempo that you expected, or maybe you rehearsed something incorrectly and the maestro says "No. Change that"...and you've got to be able to turn on a dime.*

Pamela, in discussing the realities of performing, shared an experience that surfaced the need for a singer to develop resilience:

*In college, we would do these performances for each other...and you could just see the eye rolls...and lots of backstabbing. And...to try to put that in context, and then keep getting back up on that stage....It's hard and necessary, and learned a lot through that process.*

Jane relayed a specific instance that points out the need for persistence to figure things out when faced with a performance challenge:

*I had a solo that I had to sing on my knees...I was like... 'I can't support from there.' ...I ended up saying to myself "Okay, I will get on my knees but I will find a position that works for me"...I had to adjust with it until I hit that spot where I said "Ah. Here's where I can do it."*

Saige mentioned the courage needed to sing in front of an audience. Her words reveal the personal nature of singing and why it can be an intimidating undertaking:

*Singing is such a personal, intimate thing - it's a part of you, it always takes courage to go out and share that with other people. Especially when you know, in an audition or competition, that the people who are watching you are judging you...so it does take that certain element of courage.*

#### Connection

Punctuating the discussion of both learning and performance were the elements of connection - awareness, emotional connection, collaboration and presence. For instance, Susan conveyed that being prepared for a lesson, in part, showed respect for her teacher:

*Say that I was up late the night before a lesson and I overslept and I got to the lesson and I hadn't warmed up, and I'm still kind of tired, that lesson is not going to be as productive. So, I've wasted my time and the instructor's time.*

Others, commenting on relationships with teachers, spoke of the elements of trust, listening, communication and support that, for them, contributed to a fruitful learning process:

*It required listening...she would do different things with me to try to help me hear it and feel it....And I can remember the day...that I found the power part of my voice... It was like, 'OH!', and she was going "There it is!", and I was like "Yeah, that's it! I get it!"...We just both got goose bumps. (May)*

*She was a really, really good teacher...And she would have a really good ability to listen to what I was doing and say "Oh, you know what? Try thinking of this differently" and focused me in a completely different area than I would have picked on my own. (Jane)*

Support and sharing were aspects that several of the women raised as important to

their relationships with colleagues:

*If I went to a rehearsal and I was a soloist, and they were trying to set up chairs for the orchestra, I'd be in there doing it, because that's just, I'm part of that team that's making that happen. (Susan)*

As well, a number of respondents commented that a singer must connect with and be sensitive to her audience:

*Honoring the audience...they come with an expectation of being entertained, or being moved...and you don't want to slide through because that's not fair to them. (Beth)*

Many recounted how when a singer finds and illuminates the depth of meaning in her repertoire, she makes the experience of singing meaningful for both herself and her audience:

*There's an intimacy to it that I really enjoy, and that's, I think, in seeing this shared understanding of what I'm trying to communicate or what the song is trying to communicate. (May)*

Several respondents also mentioned the presence they needed to exude and call upon when in front of an audience:

*I sang at a dinner one time...my musical cue came and I couldn't remember my name, nothing...the music went on...and I said "Well!", and I stood there grinning, thinking 'At some point my brain will kick back in and I will know where I am', and stood there for what seemed like an interminable amount of time before I finally heard where I was and jumped in and sang the rest of the duet...but, the audience loved it...And as long as they don't know, we all get to have a good time. (Jane)*

### *Congruence*

Prompted by questions about whether they felt participation in singing had affected their individual sense of self, my respondents gave thoughtful answers that spoke of learning humility and self-reflection, becoming more self-aware, gaining self-confidence, and feeling a sense of freedom as they found and used their voices:

*Well it's a very intimate thing because, unlike other instruments, it's your body that's actually creating the sound. So, it's a lot of looking inward, and understanding yourself and what you can do, and what you can't do too. You can't always do everything that you want to as a singer. So, you get to know your abilities and also your limitations. And, like I said, I think it's something really personal and intimate....It's something that you're creating and making. It's part of you. (Saige)*

*I think, it gave me...an understanding that I could do something really cool, that a lot of people couldn't do...that I could create...something really remarkable, and that that was*

*special...that I could sing those things and sound so amazing...It's really relevant to me.*  
(Pamela)

Some of the most powerful responses came in answer to the question "What does your voice represent to you?" Their answers reveal how closely my participants identify with their voices:

*Freedom...it feels so free to sing. And it's not something somebody can take away from me very easily. It's mine. It's going to sound the way I make it sound.* (May)

*I think initially, it represented that there was something unique about me. And then over time, the voice actually was giving me a voice.* (Susan)

*I think of communicating, and I think of identity...I think of the ability to communicate and, because of that, the ability to be known.* (Beth)

*It's, the vocalization of me...Everything that I am inside...comes out through my voice...I really think of it as my whole body...when you sing you use your whole body...I really see my voice as an extension of my entire being.* (Saige)

What does this identification with voice mean for them as women in their individual life worlds? Jane and Dyan speak to this:

*So then if your voice is this very personal thing and you get used to putting that out on display, you can get a lot more comfortable and confident with yourself and your relationship to the world.* (Jane)

*Comfort. It means being comfortable going out and facing the world as myself, as opposed to having to put on something to do that.* (Dyan)

### *The Themes Entwined*

The three umbrella themes - commitment, connection and congruence - seemed to be quite naturally intertwined in the thinking of my participants as they spoke of both learning and performance. For instance, Pamela, recounting a specific learning journey, said the following:

*Like a lot of French music, you learn the notes at first...or you learn the rhythms at first and you have to let them go...I had to be open to...my coach...who just said "Lie on the floor and pretend that there aren't these beats", and I needed a lot of rather unusual imagery...and it took a while but, ultimately I 'got it', in terms of what it meant to sing Debussy...It was really more about letting go and then once I did that, I was able to experience the music in a different way and therefore able to sing it better.*

Within this description, Pamela, in short order, talks of the discipline needed to learn notes and rhythms, the willingness to experiment, openness to new ideas, persistence, and trust

of her coach needed to then learn to transcend the notes and rhythms, the awareness she developed about the music, the meaning she derived from it, and the sense of efficacy she felt as a result of mastering this music. She went on to indicate that this feeling of accomplishment fueled her continued willingness to learn, which starts to show the dialectical relationship between the three main themes:

*In some lessons, I just thought ‘Oh, my god, is that me? Was I really able to do that?’ and sometimes it could be just so extraordinary when I heard myself create music as I wanted to...And there were those moments when that would happen in the course of a lesson, primarily as a result of just trying things and letting go, and just opening things up literally and figuratively, that were really just amazing.*

The implication, then, seems clear. Aspects of commitment and connection foster each other and in turn foster aspects of congruence, which then fosters more aspects of commitment and connection and the cycle continues.

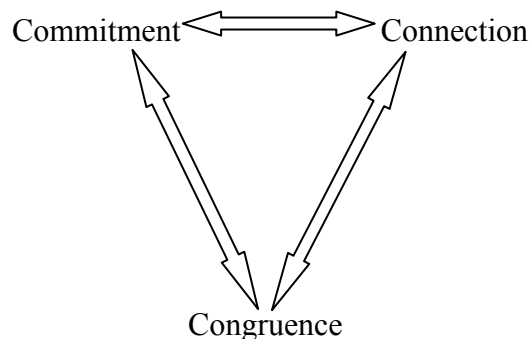


Figure 1. Virtuous cycle of commitment, connection and congruence

As they continued to perform and study, my respondents learned about themselves and about their potential to achieve. Singing was an endeavor to which they committed themselves. Through participation in singing they found connection and meaning with others and within themselves. From that meaning, fed by the accomplishments that they experienced as they developed their voices, they became aware of themselves and their voices in new ways, ways that helped foster within them a growing congruence with self that then became a situated part of their individual identities.

Jane succinctly characterizes this:

*And so, once you do that and you discover you can do that, it opens up a host of other possibilities for taking risk.*

This applies not only to singing, but to taking on challenges in other areas, including leadership.

### Leadership

The discussion of leadership covered three main areas. I asked my respondents what

qualities they feel characterize their leadership practice, how in their estimation participation in singing might have informed their leadership, and what their individual sense of voice might mean for them specifically as female leaders.

They spoke of fostering strong relationships with their colleagues, operating with their teams as collectives, encouraging the development of others, and creating a learning atmosphere in their places of work. In naming their individual leadership qualities, words and phrases such as preparation, emotional connection, openness, discipline, persistence, communication, vision, and self-acceptance surfaced.

Asked whether, in their estimation, participation in singing might have contributed to the development of some of these leadership qualities, most indicated that they felt it did. Jane made a point regarding awareness of/observing others and emotional connection, and how, for her, these qualities were nurtured by her participation in singing:

*Well...I do find that, for example, in meetings I can look around the room and figure out who stands where on an issue...more quickly; and I'll walk out and go "Looked to me like so-and-so was really not on board with this" and the person I'm in there with will say "Really? How'd you get that?" Well, I was looking, because on stage you can't have a conversation and go "Hi, how's this song working out for you? Is this good?" You can't, you have to look for those other more subtle clues.*

Pamela said:

*So...first would be...creative process, being flexible and open to different ideas... when I think about that whole experience and how that has formed the person I am today - particularly with regard to leadership - being open to multiple, there's more than one way to get there...I think if I hadn't been a musician, I never would have been that open to crazy ideas and, just, possibilities....And then others...you really have to focus on yourself to be a singer, to really concentrate, because it is about who you are...you are the instrument. I think that I developed...self-awareness and I'm really pretty clear what's going on with me almost all the time, and...that has really helped me as a leader.*

Here, again, Pamela references aspects of all three themes as she describes how what she learned as a singer continues to impact her approach as a leader.

Many of the respondents talked about how their experiences learning to sing and singing in public developed in them the self-awareness and confidence to feel that they could take on other challenges, including leadership challenges:

*There's a sense of accomplishment and empowerment in getting up and singing, that made me feel more confident in forging forward with the things that I wanted to do in other areas. 'Wow, I can walk on the stage and do this piece and work with this conductor. I can get up and talk to people about donating to this organization'. It made me feel comfortable about that use of my voice. (Susan)*



Dyan, in comparing singing to leadership, stated that for her, leadership is less fearful than singing:

*It's not nearly so scary, because almost everything you do is completely prepared. You're not at dependent on, oh all the sudden the french horn doesn't play his part, or the scenery falls down. It's not so much a moment-by-moment existence. And mistakes are not nearly so obvious in this, because once again, you're doing things over time, and it's a little more private...as opposed to being out in front of people and being completely naked...and everybody knowing, well if you miss the note (slaps hands together in a 'that's it' gesture), losing all credibility. So, I think it's a lot easier.*

With regard particularly to their individual situations as female leaders, many of the women referenced how they felt participation in singing played a part in their willingness to take on leadership roles. They interlaced their answers with comments about the struggle they felt women often face both in the workforce and in finding and using their unique voices, and the necessity of grappling with these challenges.

Pamela, mentioning the resilience that women in business need to have, credits aspects of singing for helping her develop the resilience that has served her well as she has progressed in her career:

*I think it comes back to confidence...that I can prevail. Singing has some serious downs as well as ups...The competition is quite fierce and to keep going back and trying over and over again when...not-so-nice people are telling you that you're lower than a snake's belly, it just really has given me a great deal of resilience. And to some degree I suspect that that also relates to being female...female in the business world...I have had to prove myself, more often than if I were male...And I think that singing and coming back for more taught me that was doable.*

Dyan gets to the essence when drawing a parallel between singing and leadership, and the self-assurance that she feels is necessary for success in both, particularly for women:

*I think ultimately, what it comes down to, for both things, is being comfortable in yourself.*

Influences other than involvement in singing were mentioned by a few of my respondents. May spoke of other avenues of learning, such as her church youth group, that contributed to the development of qualities that she feels she exhibits in her leadership role. She also related a few examples of how she exhibited leadership skills as a teen and in college.

It is interesting to note, though, that as she tells it, her early leadership appeared to manifest most when she wanted to use her voice and participate in singing activities:

*I've always had special groups that I was singing in. It was like I just had to have that outlet...They were always things that I started. I don't think it was necessarily because I had*

*to be in charge, but it didn't exist. So, in order for it to exist I had to get a group of people together.*

She also gives credit to her early performance experiences for investing within her the sense of confidence to do this.

While Jane did not specifically name other influences, she had this to say when I asked what her sense of her voice means to her as a female leader:

*It speaks to confidence. I am unusually, for a lot of reasons, only one of which is vocal music but vocal music is definitely a part of that, I am unusually comfortable getting up in front of people, whether it's a large or a small group of people, or an individual I need to influence. If I have to go in and talk to a V.P. about something, somewhere in the back of my brain exists the fact that 'Well, for god's sake, I'm not going to sing in front of the guy. I'm just going to go in and talk to him.' And that is, somehow for me personally, much easier. I can do the really tough thing, so I know I can go do this other thing that's a lot less vulnerable and personal, a lot less risky.*

Jane seems to be saying that singing was one significant way by which she gained the confidence to challenge herself in other arenas.

The stories and words of the women in my study start to trace a compelling path. Their learning journeys in singing seem to have fostered journeys of self-learning, self-discovery and self-knowledge. Each in her own way experienced a transformation of her sense of capability, sense of efficacy, awareness of herself and ultimately her identity - how she thought of and knew herself. That transformation, in turn, contributed to her growing confidence to take on the challenge of leadership.

### *Discussion*

To be clear, the intent herein is not to imply that my respondents became leaders *because* of their participation in singing, for it would be foolish to claim such a cause-and-effect relationship. No single aspect or endeavor of one's life is solely responsible for its outcome.

Yet, the meaning that these women derived from their experiences as they involved themselves in singing tells the story and reveals the meta-meaning of this exploration, which Karpf (2006) fittingly expressed: "Finding one's voice...is a powerful experience, with the capacity to alter one's view of oneself and one's place in the world" (p. 131).

Through participation in singing, a transformation in their understanding of themselves and their capabilities occurred in my respondents. In developing their voices, they developed aspects of themselves, aspects of their individual identities and awareness of their individual capacities. They developed a sense of efficacy around singing, a sense of 'I Can' that enabled their attitudes of 'I Can' in other areas, including leadership.

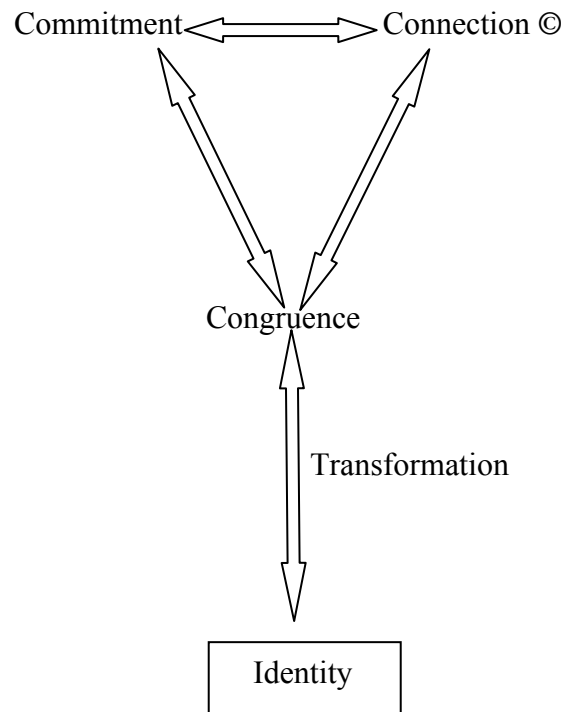


Figure 2. Virtuous cycle of commitment, connection and congruence affects a transformation in self-understanding, leading to an enlarged sense of identity.

The habits that they adopted and applied toward the pursuit of singing were habits that turned into situated behaviors, ways of thinking and being that these women carried into their work lives and that undergird their approach to situations they encounter. That this development occurred for these women as they explored their voices is significant because of the strong association between voice and identity, between having a voice - literally and figuratively - and being known: “In women, there is an impetus to try to deal with life, internal and external, in all its complexity. And they want to develop a voice of their own to communicate to others their understanding of life’s complexity” (Belenky *et al*, 1997, p. 137).

Education is a life-long endeavor through which humans unfold. So, too, can it be in the context of a woman learning to sing, exploring her voice, learning about herself and her capabilities, then sharing her voice in public and gaining strength from all that is inherent in the act of public performance. Within this autopoietic learning system (Herda, 1999) the singer lives in relationship to all things influencing her. Becoming aware of how and what she learns, becoming more aware of herself, she is better able to appropriate new meanings that help her make choices, use her voice and direct her own life (p. 101, 102).

### Conclusion

Why is this issue of voice so important, especially for women? It is important because

to have voice is to have identity. Belenky et al (1997), referred to women having a sense of voice as “the hallmark of women’s emergent sense of self and sense of agency and control” (p. 68). To have voice is also to have the potential to lead, for voice is central to identity.

To truly know your identity, you must know your voice. Conversely, to be able to speak with a genuine voice, you must be secure in your sense of self. Literal and figurative voice – how you communicate your values, what you stand for, how you are in the world – are the core of your identity, and thus are central to becoming an authentic leader. Parks (2005) underscored this when she wrote that leaders “have to convey the integrity of an authentic, congruent self” (p. 107).

Leaders who truly facilitate others to create change are those who lead from within. Their habits of mind and ways of being secure their individual sense of self, sense of purpose, commitment, confidence and personal congruence. The women in my study seem to embody such qualities and have indicated that their participation in singing helped foster and/or reinforce these qualities.

Does this mean that all women should partake of singing? Yes, if they want to; some may not. Not all women choose to discover their singing voices. Some choose to explore themselves through athletics, dance, or various other artistic pursuits. However, I will say again at the risk of repetition that there is an integral relationship between voice, self-expression, and identity that speaks to the evolution of the self. I have experienced this first-hand from my own participation in singing, and chose this area of inquiry to explore how this process of becoming may unfold for other women embarking on journeys of self-discovery through voice. The women in my study took such journeys and shared their stories with me. Their stories are rich with the meaning that they made of their experiences. Through their participation in singing, these women took the time to develop their voices and themselves to fullness. As they practiced and mastered singing, they nurtured key habits of mind and ways of being that blossomed over time, within and without. They learned about themselves and their capabilities, transforming and enlarging their individual sense of self, and thus fostering congruence, which they then appropriated in service of their work as leaders.

In a very real sense, the stories of my participants are also stories about personal independence. Their voices represent who they are. Their voices express the fullness of their individuality. Dyan succinctly stated this with the following two words:

*It’s Myself*

The journey of these women’s lives has occurred, in part, through the journey of their voices. Their words give rise to a new way to think about leadership development, one that recognizes the importance of knowing and developing oneself, one’s identity, as a basis for leadership potential. This speaks of *being*, as opposed to just doing certain actions or adopting certain “buzz” words and phrases that may look and sound like leadership, but are not grounded in situated behaviors and the sense of knowing oneself and one’s capabilities. It recognizes that the habits of mind and ways of being developed via a learning process can be appropriated for, and are often the basis of, successful leadership work. Finally, it acknowledges the importance of

knowing one's voice and the congruence that that fosters within one, as a central factor in leadership identity and practice. The value of this, for women in particular, is stated well by Jane who says of the benefits of knowing her voice and the impact of that on her leadership:

*It speaks to confidence...it speaks to being able to bring forward your unique value, and your unique thoughts or your unique viewpoint...it's self-awareness and self-confidence...if you're going to lead other people effectively, you have to be pretty aware of yourself.*

In today's society, women's voices are still, in large part, given scant attention compared to men's. Women hunger to be acknowledged. Too often, though, women's mouths are shut, either because they are silenced by others or because they have lost their voices. Ultimately, the tragedy of this is the loss of what these women have to contribute.

When women find their voices, they find their identities. They discover their power. They express what they have to give. They begin to lead. The possibilities inherent in this are manifold, for women and for society as a whole. Because of our society's ever-present systemic challenges, we can ill-afford to ignore the voices of women. We must tap the polysemy of women's voices yet unheard and reap the fruits of their creative spirits. I believe that participation in singing can be a powerful transformative learning experience, enabling women to gain their voices, encourage the growth of their identities, make themselves heard and realize their vanguard potential as leaders.

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#### *Note*

The names of all respondents quoted in this article have been changed to respect their privacy.

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