

Helen Gurley Brown:

Inspiring Social Change through her Leadership of *Cosmopolitan*

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Abstract

This paper explores the leadership of Helen Gurley Brown as Editor-in-Chief of *Cosmopolitan* magazine and the innovative vision she brought to the organization. When Helen assumed the role of Editor-in-Chief, the magazine was struggling to survive and remain relevant. Helen brought with her a new vision and innovative approach based on her beliefs around female sexuality and women in the workplace that were highly controversial at the time. Her views came when women were trying to understand their role in the workplace and fight for greater sexual freedom. Helen offered an alternative lifestyle that addressed a cultural need among many women, and used *Cosmopolitan* as a platform to reach millions of readers. This paper discusses the innovative ways Helen ran the organization to embody these principals and empower women through *Cosmopolitan*. The paper also analyzes Helen Gurley Brown's leadership style against House's "modern" charismatic leadership theory and Bass' transformational leadership theory.

Helen Gurley Brown: Inspiring Social Change through her Leadership of *Cosmopolitan*

The late Helen Gurley Brown was a provocative leader who inspired social change through her role as Editor-in-Chief of *Cosmopolitan (Cosmo)* magazine. Taking over leadership of a company at a time in history when women were struggling to finding their fit in the workplace, Helen Brown brought innovative leadership to *Cosmopolitan* that embraced female sexuality and helped pave the way for women today. It is no longer surprising to see women like Meg Whitman, Indra Nooyi, and Irene Rosenfeld running Fortune 500 companies or to see that women make up 47% of the US labor force (US Department of Labor, 2010), because Helen helped to create a paradigm shift for women in society. Her charismatic and transformational leadership brought widespread organizational change to *Cosmo* and established new cultural norms for women both personally and professionally that are irreversible today.

Women in the Workplace

In order to analyze the organizational change Helen brought to *Cosmo* and to understand the significance of her leadership style, it is important to understand the context of women's role in society during the 1950s and 60s. When mass numbers of men were forced to leave the workplace to fight in World War II and the Korean War, many women took over their jobs and actually reveled in professional success. This gave women a newfound confidence that they could succeed in the workplace (Van Horn, 1988, p. 124). Additionally, with newly popular birth control medicine, women gained further control in their private lives. However, after the wars came to a close, women returned home as men displaced them in offices and factories (Van Horn, 1988, p. 127). Women were expected to go back to being innocent and obedient, making their only goal in life the happiness of their family (Solinger, 1994, p. 336), but many women struggled with the desire to still contribute to their families financially (Berkeley, 1999, p. 27).

Just at a time when women searched for an alternative to society's expectations, Helen published the bestseller "Sex and the Single Girl" in 1962 and then "Sex and the Office" in 1964, showing women they could have a lifestyle of sexual freedom and have a powerful role the office.

Cosmopolitan's Transformation

After the success of her books, Helen began looking for other outlets that would enable her to have a greater impact. She met with Hearst Company, the owner of *Cosmopolitan*, that at the time was an "'old general-interest publication for men and women — [that] was hemorrhaging money... They had been planning to just close it down but instead agreed to give it to me and let me try out my new format'" (Benjamin, 2012). Helen took over a magazine that had a "circulation of less than 800,000 ... [and] like its competitors was every inch a postwar product" (Fox, 2012). Without Helen coming on board, a *Cosmo* revival would have been highly unlikely.

Although Helen was recognized as a radical thinker before she started as Editor-in-Chief, it was during her leadership tenure at *Cosmo* that she made the greatest impact through implementing innovative change to the organization. Helen created a work environment that embodied her views on women and sexuality. She led the conversation and provided the setting for women "to get everything out of life -- the money, recognition, success, men, prestige, authority, dignity" (Noveck, 2012). "She repeatedly challenged those who denied the existence of sex in the office or who insisted on presenting it as immoral or counterproductive" (Berebitsky, 2006). Her employees embraced this conversation and were able to promote this philosophy to their *Cosmo* readers, not by writing articles they thought the audience wanted to hear, but rather writing based on their own instincts. As *Cosmo* pushed the envelope on

women's issues, readership skyrocketed (Benjamin, 2012), which at its height in the 1980s was three million women (Fox, 2012).

Helen empowered women to not only express their sexual freedom, but also to talk about it without shame. *Cosmo* employees could often be freely heard discussing the men they were dating and their "endowments, not just the financial ones" (Hallowell, 1969, p. 1).

Conversations like these were not just between close co-workers, but also discussed at the company level. "Women's Wear Daily published the fact that a memo had been circulated among *Cosmo* girls asking what they felt about men massaging female breasts" (Hallowell, 1969, p. 1). Intimate dialogue at *Cosmo* became not only acceptable but also an opportunity for women to realize their similarities in visceral feelings.

Helen made it clear that not only should women freely talk about sex, but that they should also use their gender differences to further their career. "In her view, if some expression of sexuality could help women advance professionally—and she believed it often could—then women should use it" (Berebitsky, 2006). Helen herself was known for wearing short dresses, mini skirts, and bright red heels, and "maintained that the days when management 'preferred a little brown wren at every desk' were long gone. Office women's personal and professional lives would be well served by a tasteful display of their physical assets" (Berebitsky, 2006).

Additionally, upwardly mobile romances, business lunch dates and fraternizing with staff was considered productive and could serve the interests of bosses, females, and the bottom line (Brown, 1996). By exploiting one's sexuality, Helen taught women how to sidestep workplace inequalities and create power and authority.

As a leader in the 1960s, Helen Brown was a polarizing due to her progressive opinions and unconventional traits. Though forward thinking for her time, she exhibited a strong approach to leadership that can be best categorized as charismatic and transformational.

Charismatic Leadership

Max Weber defines charisma as “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he/she is set apart from ordinary” (Weber, 1947). When Helen published “Sex and the Single Girl” she vocalized her radical stance on female sexuality and strong belief in female empowerment. Helen used *Cosmopolitan* as a platform to advance her views, and employed charismatic leadership of the organization to reach millions of women.

The most widely accepted approach to charismatic leadership today centers around House’s “modern” charismatic leadership theory, which contains five key elements (1977). House defines the first element, “vision and articulation” as “inspirational, value-centered, realizable and given with superiority imaginary and articulation” (1977). As described in the article “That Cosmopolitan Girl”, it is clear that Helen had a vision where women gained control of their lives by using their assets, both physical and mental, to achieve their goals in the workplace. Helen dramatically exhibited the second element, “taking personal risks to achieve the vision” (House, 1977) by not only espoused her ideals, but living them as an example for her followers (Dienstfrey, 1983). She took great personal risk living a life of sexual freedom in the 1950s, and then by vocalizing her personal experiences and beliefs through her writing. Helen ranks the lowest against House’s third element “environmental sensitivity” (1977) because she failed to identify the constraints and challenges of the current context. While her intention was to actively challenge current social norms, she held little regard for commonly held beliefs around gender roles that a large portion of society still supported. Helen exhibited signs of the

fourth element, “sensitivity to follower needs” (House, 1977), by recognizing the widespread dissatisfaction among women at the time and providing practical advice as to how to change their lives. She was able to instill an ethos of the "fun, fearless female" in *Cosmo* readers everywhere through the content of the magazine (Connelly, 2012). Helen ranks the highest against House’s fifth element, “behaviors that are out of the ordinary” (1977) as her approach to life extremely progressive for her time. Few women were living this kind of lifestyle in the 1950s, and her out of the ordinary behavior enabled her to ultimately change cultural norms for women both personally and professionally.

Transformational Leadership

In addition to being a charismatic leader, Helen Gurley Brown also exhibited traits of a transformational leader. Goertzen summarizes transformational leadership as “a moral process where leaders engage with followers based on shared motives, values and goals” (2006). Helen’s social platform centered around two key goals for women: career equality and empowerment of women, through which she was able to generate a large following. Brown served as an inspiring role model for women through being a successful business leader and embodied her social philosophy through her work ethos. Similar to charismatic leadership, the impact of transformational leadership comes by recognizing the need and motives of your followers. Transformational leaders attract followers that are mobilized by a leader’s ability to appeal to and strengthen those motives through word and action (Goertzen, 2006). Women during the 60s and 70s were looking to connect and be heard, and *Cosmo* provided them an outlet to do so.

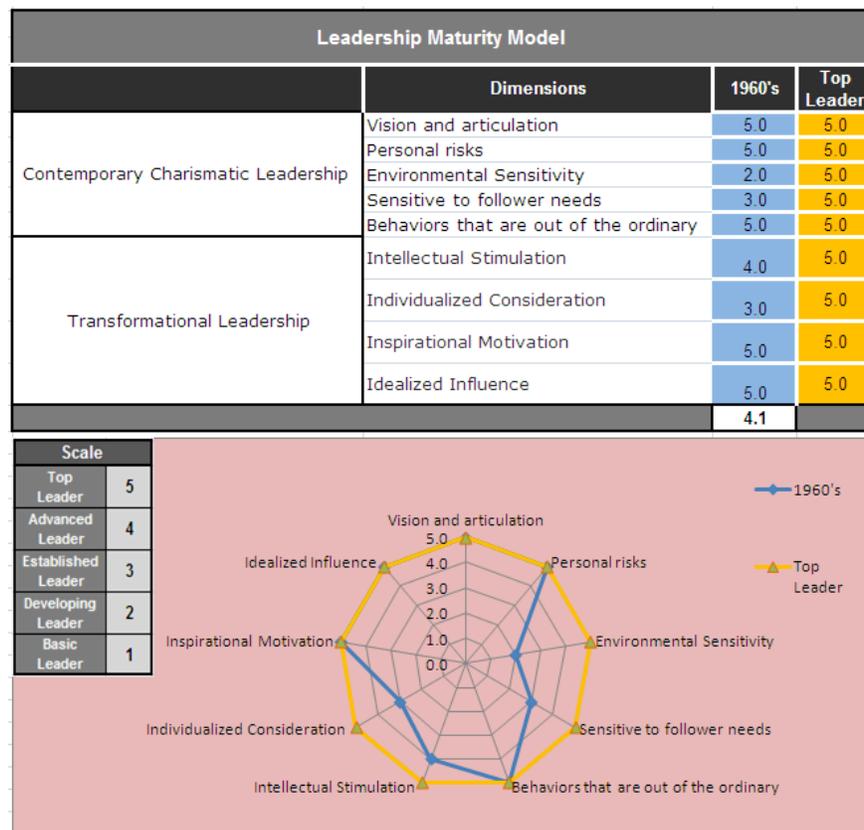
Bass’ transformational leadership model remains the most recognized theory for transformational leadership, and consists of four significant elements (1985). Bass defines the first element, “intellectual stimulation”, as a leader's ability to meet the needs of their followers

through serving as a role model, mentor, facilitator, or teacher (1985). Helen captured the first element by living the lifestyle she preached to her followers. She was the ultimate role model for women in the 1960s because she had spent the previous decade living a life of sexual freedom and advancing her career. Even during the 1960's, Helen failed to fully grasp the second element, "individualized consideration" in which a leader encourages the group to contribute, learn, and be independent (Bass, 1985). Helen had a one-size-fits all approach to sexuality and empowerment of women, and while she encouraged women to challenge the status quo, she only outlined one way to do so. Helen demonstrated Bass' fourth element, "inspirational motivation", or giving meaning to the followers of a task (Bass, 1985), by showing women how embracing a life of sexual freedom could result in greater happiness (Dienstfrey, 1983). There was always a deeper meaning and purpose to the advice being given through *Cosmo*, which provided inspirational motivation to her followers. Bass defines the last element, "idealized influence" as being a role model, acting out and displaying ideal traits of honesty and trust (1985). New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg best summarized Helen's influence stating, 'She was a role model for the millions of women whose private thoughts, wonders and dreams she addressed so brilliantly in print. She was a quintessential New Yorker: never afraid to speak her mind and always full of advice. She pushed boundaries and often broke them, clearing the way for younger women to follow in her path' (Quinn, 2012).

Leadership Maturity Model

The analysis below rates Helen against House's charismatic leadership theory and Bass' transformational leadership theory. Each element was scored on a scale of one through five based on the traits she exhibited as a leader. Overall Helen scored very high as a leader because she was willing to take personal risks to accomplish her vision, exhibit behaviors that were out of

the ordinary, and provide idealized influence. Her weaker areas related to being able to provide individualized consideration and sensitivity to women who did not agree with all of her views and being able to recognize the environmental sensitivities she faced at the time. Overall, we ranked Helen as an advanced leader based on her average score of 4.1.



Helen inspired millions of women through her charismatic and transformational leadership of *Cosmo* magazine. Her innovative approach of leading the organization by way of example took tremendous personal risk. However, by challenging the status quo she was able to bring about great social change. Her ability to create an environment within *Cosmo* that mirrored the direction she felt society needed to head in, inspired her employees and empowered them to also be catalysts for change. Helen’s organizational innovation and leadership ultimately helped change the cultural norms of her time establishing women as equals in business and society and helped define today’s modern woman.

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