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A Template for the Future: Resonant Leadership in *The Song of Deborah*

By Lyola Thomas¹

Abstract

While leadership seems to come naturally for many great leaders, leadership is also a skill that can be learned. Some leaders gradually grow into successful leadership positions but, for others, leadership is a challenge that they suddenly find themselves rising to meet. In the heroic poem, *The Song of Deborah*, we come face to face with Deborah—a woman who suddenly becomes a leader—and she leads her community to victory and social transformation. This paper delves into her character and her leadership role within her patriarchal cultural history and attempts to investigate and understand if leadership skills are personality specific or gender specific and if women leaders share a common distinctive style. The paper concludes by framing a template for ideal leadership that is gender neutral and more suited for the emerging generations of the future based on the concept of resonant leadership and how these principles can even be adopted by contemporary leaders to make their leadership more reflective and thus more effective. The main objective of this paper is to popularize the concept of resonant leadership by reviewing it from a literary perspective using *The Song of Deborah* as a text that exemplifies this type of leadership.

Keywords: Resonant Leadership, Women in Leadership, Deborah, Leadership Skills, Gender neutral leadership, Patriarchy

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it uncertainty and ambiguity about the future, and global leadership seems to be lacking. But where can such leaders be found? This is an opportune time to reflect on this dilemma: Are good leaders born with innate skills, or do they grow and develop into the leadership roles that they are called to take on.

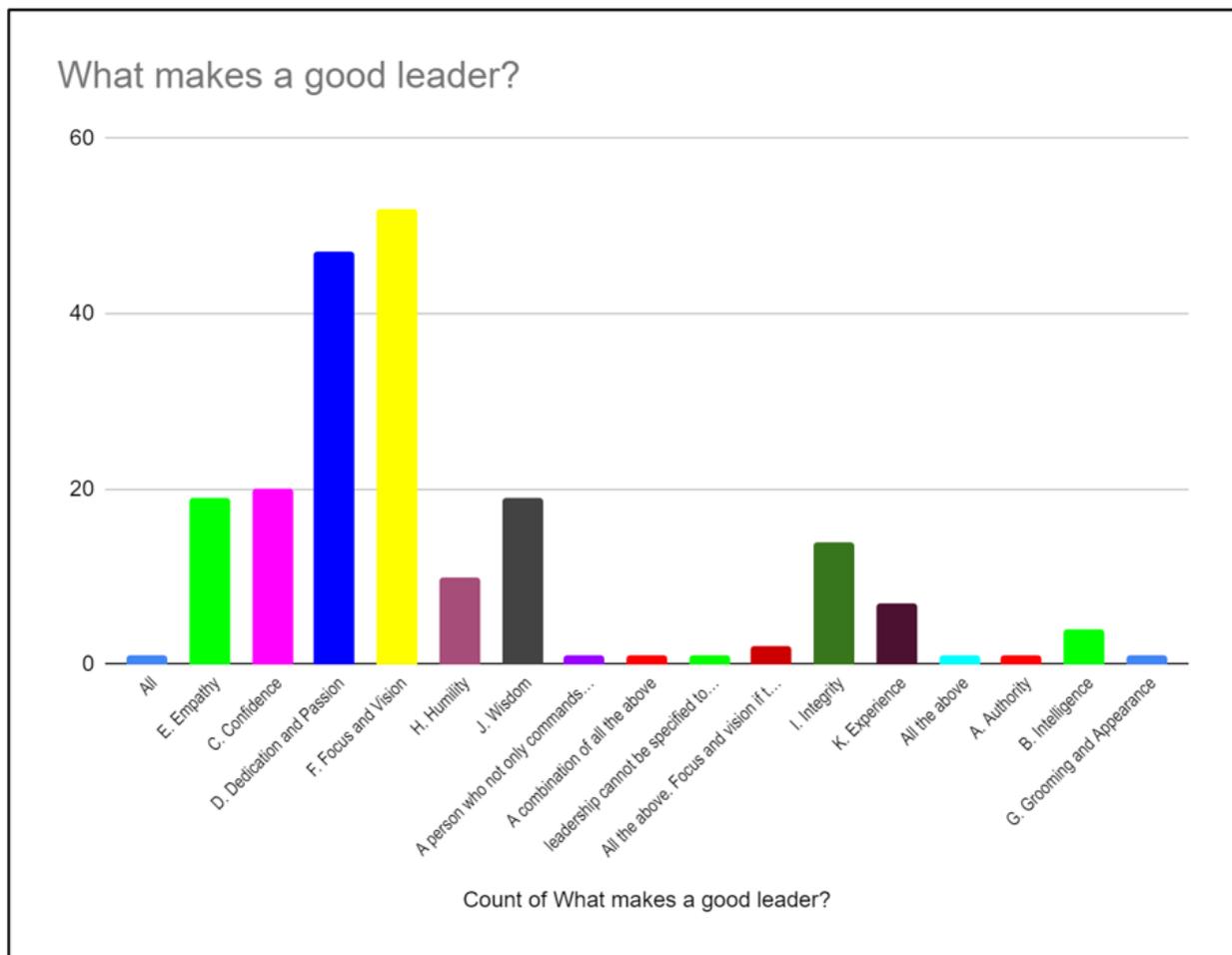
“People believe that you can't teach leadership skills and that great leaders are born, not made because whenever somebody emerges as a great leader, it's easy to say, ‘They were obviously born to lead!’ Leadership is a personal journey, but too many leadership programs still teach people to lead as though their right to lead a team were God-given and didn't need to be earned -- or even discussed. Too much leadership development tarts with the question, ‘How should I manage my team?’ instead of the question ‘Why should anybody on my team listen to me?’” (Ryan, 2016).

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It is with this self-reflective question that we can begin creating a new template for leadership. Fortunately, though, there is no need to reinvent the wheel as the blueprint for the leadership that we need today has evolved and developed into what is known as resonant leadership.

What is resonant leadership? It is an idea coined by Daniel Goleman, that is easier to explain than put into practice. Resonance can be defined simply, as the sound produced through a synchronous vibration that is created when an object vibrates, and the rate of vibrations are similar to the sound waves produced by another proximate object. For example, if you hit a glass that holds a certain amount of water, it will resonate with a certain frequency, which will cause other glasses to resonate too. How does this apply to leadership? Leaders can either send out positive or negative wavelengths, which reverberate throughout their business and influence others; “Resonant leaders are aware that their actions have the ability to impact others and use emotional intelligence to guide and help others” (Culture Amp, 2019).

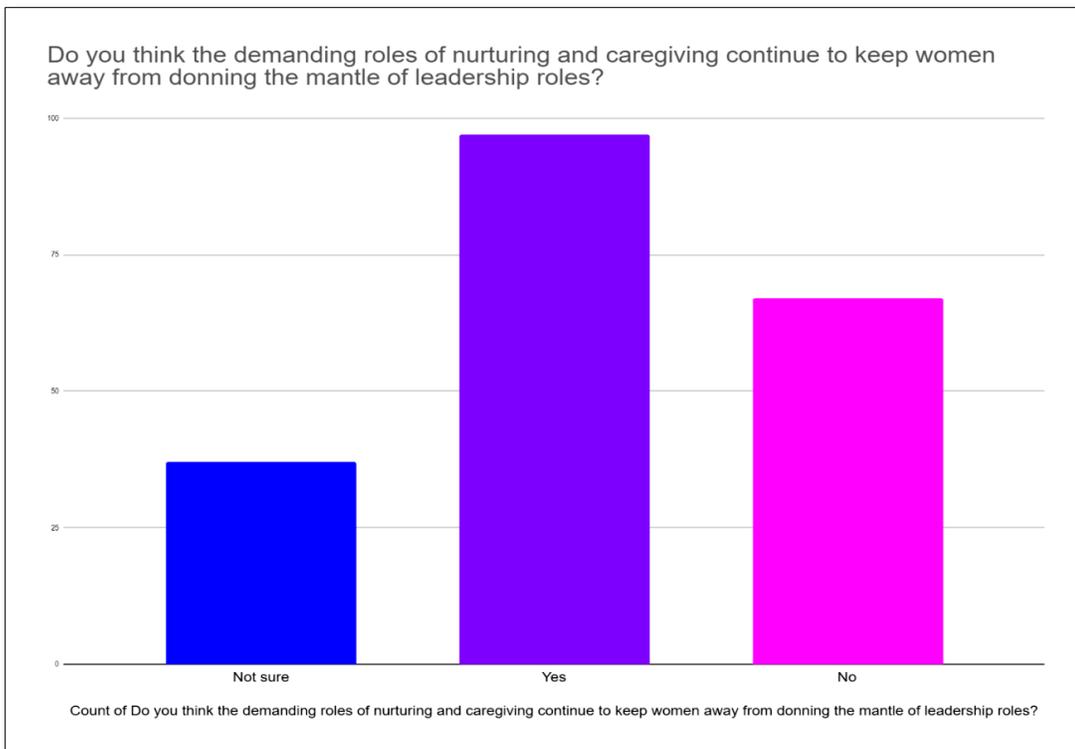
So, if resonant leadership is all about helping and guiding others, is it very far from what the common perception of leadership is? What do people perceive as the most important qualities for successful leadership today? A cross sectional study involving 192 respondents gives us a few thought-provoking indications. The common perception among the respondents is that a good leader is an individual who has focus and vision, with dedication and passion coming as close seconds. The data displayed in the given graph clearly reveals this with focus and vision scoring 25 percent and dedication and passion scoring 24 percent.



While traditional leadership works from a hierarchical top-down model, resonant leadership operates in the exact opposite way. The major characteristics of resonant leadership are “Self-awareness, Authenticity, Empathy, Relationship management and Social awareness” (Clarke, 2015). A better understanding of these concepts in action can be attained if we look at the life and character of a leader who embodies resonant leadership in her leadership style. The historical character of Deborah as revealed in the poem “*The Song of Deborah*” is an example of how successful resonant leadership can be. One of the ways in which leadership is learned is through analyzing and mimicking different leadership models. A closer study reveals why Deborah’s leadership model is still so important and relevant.

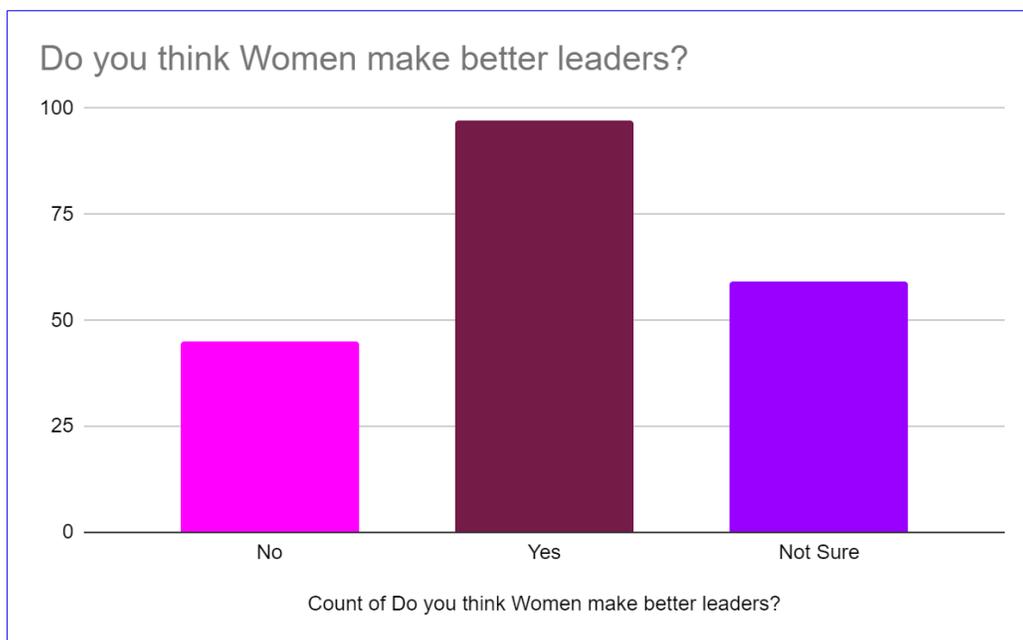
At a time when law and order was not a given, and when each man did as he wished, there rose a woman named Deborah who took the reins of the community in her hands. Bible scholars “claim that this song, found in chapter 5 of the book of Judges, is one of the oldest existing biblical texts. They often date it to the 11th or even 12th century B.C.E., hundreds of years earlier than the rest of the book of Judges.” (Frolov, 2021) She was a judge settling the disputes among the people as we see in Judges 4:4-5: “Now Deborah, a prophet, of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided” (Book of Judges). Not only was she a judge, but she was a mighty warrior and a prophet as we see in Judges 4:6: “She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, “The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: ‘Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.’ Barak said to her, “If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go” (Book of Judges). Here, we see Deborah speaking as a prophet on behalf of God and going into war at the behest of Barak. It is after their decisive victory that she composes The Song of Deborah. Thus, we see how the character of Deborah is a true leader in many aspects; she is multifaceted and is a mighty warrior, judge, prophetess, and minstrel all in one.

Deborah was not born a leader but became a leader because the role was demanded of her. Underlining her capability to lead at a time when women gained their identity only in their relationship to men as a mother, wife, or daughter. Deborah takes on several roles such as warrior, judge, minstrel, leader, and prophet. She is both a political leader and a spiritual and military leader for the Israelites. This in itself is an amazing phenomenon in a culture and community steeped in patriarchy. Several centuries later in more ‘progressive’ times, women still find it difficult to surpass the demanding roles of nurturing and caregiving to seek top leadership roles. This is also evident when we consider the responses to the question; do you think the demanding roles of nurturing and care giving continue to keep women away from donning the mantle of leadership roles?



The answer was an overwhelming ‘yes’. About 46 percent of the respondents felt that this was true and that it was difficult for women to be leaders if they are involved in domestic care giving.

The same respondents stated that they believed that women would make better leaders if given a chance, as depicted in the graph below. So, do women leaders share a distinctive style of leadership? Given a chance would women leaders be more caring and empathetic? Perhaps women leaders are naturally more inclined to resonant leadership.



Deborah took the chance she was given. The Song of Deborah reveals what a successful leader she was. One of the dominant characteristics of Resonant Leadership is the quality of self-awareness and authenticity and these are the foremost principles that Deborah adopts in her leadership style. We see that her self-awareness is derived from her relationship to Yahweh, her God and the God of her people: “The first of all duties is not the bringing of offerings, but the surrender of one's self to the will of God” (Paton, 2013). This Deborah did this very easily as we see in verse 5:2 when she makes an open call to praise God: “Hear this, you kings! Listen, you rulers! I, even I, will sing to[a] the Lord; I will praise the Lord, the God of Israel, in song” (Judges).

Deborah showcases an authentic leadership style; her proclamations are truthful, and she has no hidden agendas. She is aware of gender, social, and cultural biases but does not shy away from them. She does what must be done and says what must be said:

Despite the fact that Deborah is indeed a woman warrior who displays both wisdom and courage (more so than even her general), for a man to be killed by a woman was still considered shameful. During the period of judges, when political organization was loose, leaders emerged from among the people based upon their personal charisma and military prowess. Consequently, exceptional women could and did become judges. However, gender biases still operated in Israelite society and women warriors were rare (Koosed, 2021).

The next characteristic of resonant leadership is empathy:

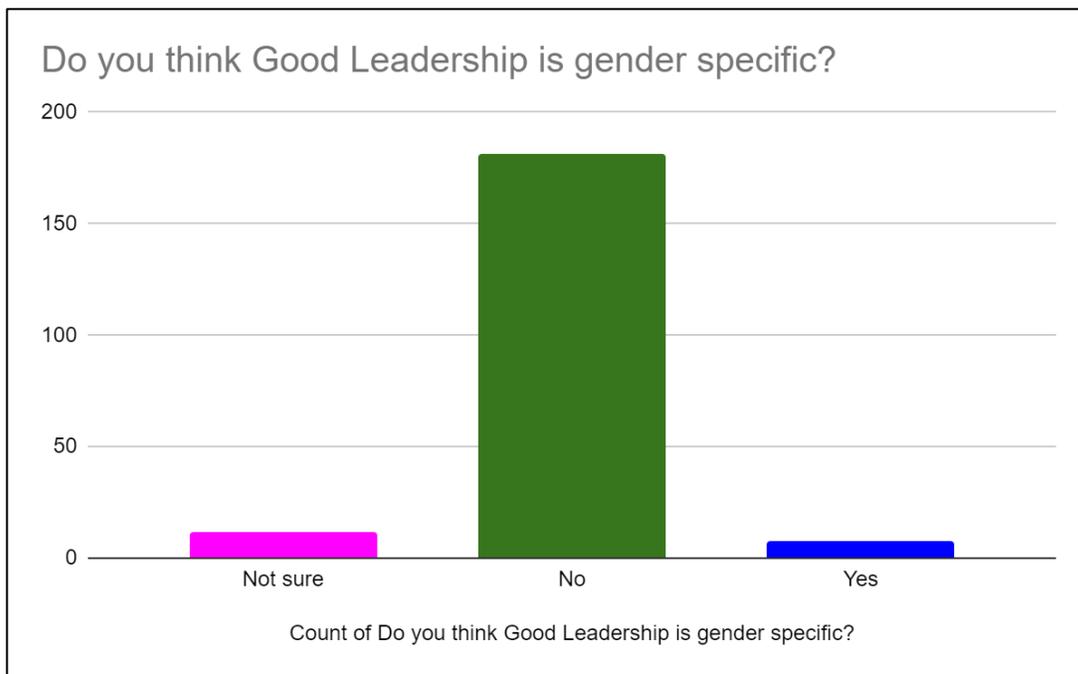
Goleman classifies this empathy with three components: *cognitive empathy* – which is simply having an awareness of how people feel, *emotional empathy* – when we get a sense of feeling what someone is going through and *empathic concern* – where we are moved to help others when needed. Being able to emotionally connect with others is powerfully resonant, as doing so lets people know that you understand them and are concerned for their well-being (Clarke, 2015).

Deborah's empathy is also revealed in *The Song of Deborah* in the way she is aware of how the people are feeling. Her empathetic concern is also displayed in her response to Barak who refuses to go to war unless she accompanies him.

According to Boyatzis (2014), “Resonant leaders are able to build trusting, engaged, and energizing relationships with others around them”. An example of her relationship management and social awareness is seen in Judges 5:1: “When the princes in Israel take the lead, when the people willingly offer themselves.” Deborah's social awareness is revealed through these words; we see how well Deborah can command the heart and mind of the people she leads. They willingly offer themselves even when they know that they are putting their lives in danger. Through this we see how Deborah can identify the needs of the community and take the necessary action to fulfill those needs. She can command both the princes and the common people. This shows how well attuned and socially aware she is, able to garner the support of the different social strata and make the right decisions at the right times to lead her people to victory. Again, these are qualities of a resonant leader:

As well as establishing relationships with others, resonant leaders are aware of how their organization is functioning and are able to meet the needs of their clients or partners. They do this by being attuned to how people are feeling, which allows them to say and do the right things at the right time in order to assuage frustrations and offer calm reassurance (Clarke, 2015).

The successful leadership modeling of Deborah set as it is in ancient history helps prove that leadership is not gender specific. This point is also backed by an overwhelming response in the negative to the question “Do you think good leadership is gender specific?”



The cross-sectional analysis of 192 respondents indicates that a good leader can be a man or a woman, proving the fact that leadership is a skill that can be learned. If leadership is a skill that can be taught, then should it be taught? Today leadership as a skill is not taught en-masse in schools and learning centers, while other life skills take precedence and are disseminated widely on a priority basis. It is a common misconception that leadership is but for a few. There is a clear distinction between leaders and managers. As Jordan (2017) puts it, something else that needs to be made clear is that:

not everyone is a leader and managers are equally important as leaders to an organization. In other words, being called a “manager” isn’t being labeled as a second-class leader. Management is also a gift, and the position of management needs to be elevated to its rightful place, so that everyone understands that those who have the gift of management are certainly no less significant than those who have the gift of leadership.

This paper thus posits the importance of adopting and popularizing resonant leadership. If resonant leadership is adopted in organizations, it would not only boost employee productivity,

but it would create workspaces where individuals feel validated and involved. It would encourage institution driven shared common goals. Resonant leaders who adopt the qualities of self-awareness, authenticity, empathy, relationship management, and social awareness would be able to inspire and boost employee morale and engagement. Resonant leaders are more self-aware and would spread empathy and positivity throughout their team. This would no doubt have a positive ripple effect as opposed to the traditional trickledown effect of leadership; “For sustained, desired change to occur in a team, something has to carry the contagion of emotion and information back and forth among the levels within which they exist. Resonant leadership and social identity groups do this” (Boyatzis, 2014). The positive ripple effect would undoubtedly affect society at large as well, creating harmonious bodies and stronger communities that can withstand the onslaught of fear and suspicion.

It is also important that resonant leadership be taught and modeled according to the needs of the youth so that they can grow into empathetic individuals who are self-aware and socially aware:

Leadership is an important life skill that youth should learn in their development. Learning experiences should help youth learn how to lead by developing qualities that will help assist a group or person in meeting their goals...Communicating effectively including learning to listen, giving and receiving feedback, working well with people by involving them in meaningful ways; motivating and empowering others managing conflict and sharing leadership (Moyses, 2018).

The adoption of resonant leadership, however tenuous, would ensure that our future would be in safe hands.

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