

Women mayors more team oriented than heroic individuals, study finds

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A study of New Zealand's women mayors found marked differences in leadership style compared with men.

A strong theme in the findings of PhD graduate Marianne Tremaine is that of "mayors as mothers", putting community good ahead of their own needs. Exhibiting less personal ego than male mayors was also a key finding of the study.

Ms Tremaine, a lecturer in the University's Department of Communication, Marketing and Journalism and a research associate in Te Au Rangahau, the Maori Business Research Centre, surveyed 18 of the 19 women mayors in office from 1998 to 2001 for her study of women's leadership in New Zealand local government. She also carried out a case study of Palmerston North's mayor during the same period, Heather Tanguay, and an in-depth interview with three mayoral candidates in the 1998 elections.

The women mayors were asked to consider the requirements of exemplary mayoral leadership. Ms Tremaine says her findings "challenge the heroic model of an individual leader" and instead suggest a model of working with and through others as being what women mayors regarded as at the core of being an exemplary leader.

"Although there are volumes written on leadership theory, I thought looking at leadership in a different setting might generate new understanding of how leadership works," says Ms Tremaine, whose PhD

will be conferred in Palmerston North tomorrow.

“As the number of women mayors in New Zealand increased, there were signs of a difference in their approach.”

She says four interconnected aspects of exemplary mayoral leadership were identified by the participants: Being at the centre of webs of people rather than at the top of a hierarchy; having less concern for ego than for working towards change; being committed to making a difference in the community and/or the council; and being prepared to sacrifice their own interests for the good of the community.

“There was strong evidence of the mother metaphor. The way that these mayors saw their task as mayor involved an expanding of the mother/carer role to encompass the whole community. Thus the community became a very large family with the mayor as its mother. Their desire to meet every need, to be available to everyone, shows how much they have internalised the mother metaphor as a leadership model.

“Alongside the ability to chair a meeting efficiently and to make a speech, there was recognition of the need to get out into the community. There was recognition of the need to get alongside people and empower the community.

“These women showed that they do not have the same egos as men in the same roles. As one of them said, they do not have the same sense of maintaining their own importance. They would be more inclined to attend the school pet day or volunteer fire brigade gathering than a flashy corporate event.

“When it came to talking about difference in male and female leadership styles, some of the points made included women’s less combative style, which can encourage a diversity of views. Women mayors were seen as

being able to listen to alternative ideas, without trying to shout or talk people down. Participants considered that women were focused on the need to do the job and to do the job well, so that they had a desire for the right outcomes. They thought men were more driven by money.

“Unfortunately the low key nature of women’s leadership does make it all too easy for those who expect leadership to be heroic, to dismiss women’s ability to involve others as being simply what women do in their everyday lives, rather than a leadership-related activity.”

Source: Massey University

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