

Elanor Boekholt-O'Sullivan

in collaboration with Antonie van Campen

ARMED with SENSITIVITY

A General's Perspective on Leadership

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For all those who sometimes feel they don't quite belong, but really want to, precisely so they can change the organisation they're so involved in from within.

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Foreword

By Janice Gross Stein

Elanor O'Sullivan has written a stunning book. I read many books about leadership and usually find myself yawning before I have finished the first ten pages. *Armed with Sensitivity* is so filled with unconventional wisdom that I finished the book in one sitting. Written by a woman who was 'the first' at so many things she did, I was not surprised to find new ways of approaching old problems and new categories that enable different kinds of thinking. All of that is here. But beyond all of that is Elanor's distinctive voice. I had the privilege of meeting Elanor when she was, of course, in the first class of senior women officers in a program – the Women for Peace Fellowship – sponsored by the Halifax International Security Forum. As I read, the voice of the Elanor that I had met and admired rings out above the words.

The best way to introduce you to this extraordinary woman is to let her speak for herself. When she begins her career, she tells us, 'You have to start small. No big words. Seeing who speaks first and who never says anything. Who quietly sets the tone, who always arrives just a little late. And sometimes just sitting down next to someone

and talking, without an agenda. That worked better than any leadership programme.’ How right she is. Leadership is, Elanor tells us, about being present. She goes on: ‘Leadership comes with standing next to someone. Asking what someone needs, even if you think you already know the answer. Looking at what people can do, not only at what they are formally required to do. Change does not start with a strategy. It starts with being there. And above all, being there to listen without judgement. It is precisely in places where nothing seems to be happening that you learn what patience is. What trust requires. And how, with quiet steps, you can still provide guidance. The trick is not to stand in front of someone, but to stand beside them.’

Would the leaders of today pay attention to this quiet voice that radiates both strength and understanding? The story she tells us is the antidote to bombastic authoritarianism, to those who think they know it all and have no need to ask, to those who think leadership comes from a checklist and can be captured by a formula. We have all seen these leaders and know the gaping holes they leave behind in organisations that never reach their potential.

Armed with Sensitivity is a brilliant primer for those who care about innovation and renewal in their organisation, especially in a time when we are so focused on technology. Elanor puts technology in its much larger social context and seamlessly knits the two together. Again her words say it best. ‘If you introduce a new weapon system but continue to use it as you always have, the benefits will be limited to what you already know. But the whole idea is that such a system can do more, provided that the environment changes as well. It is not just about technological innovation, but also about social innovation – how do you

organise yourself around it? – and cultural innovation – how are you going to act? That’s the crux of the matter. Purchasing a new system such as a drone is one thing. But you also have to rethink everything else: functions, mandates, powers, training and, of course, integration and co-operation with other systems. New technology only really comes into its own when the organisation changes with it.’ Here, Elanor addresses, in the most direct and easily understood way, the fundamental challenge of all innovation. What begins as a technological innovation, she tells us, becomes a social innovation and above all, a human achievement. Read her words again, quietly, slowly, and the immensity of what she is saying will slowly sink in. I know I have thought about her insights again and again. Many times, they have changed my own perspective in the organisation that I lead.

Finally, Elanor writes about diversity in her own, unique voice. Leadership, she tells us, is not about fitting in. It’s about daring to break the mold so that it doesn’t only accommodate one type of person: ‘Leadership is not a position or a protocol. Nor is it telling people what to do because you are already there. True leadership starts with opening the door. Not for the people who are already inside, but for those who are still outside wondering whether there is a door at all. Leadership requires something from all of us. That we dare to deviate from ‘the way it’s always been’. That we have the courage not to direct someone who is different, but allow them to flourish in their own way. Not as a favour, but as a necessity.’

In *Armed with Sensitivity*, Elanor tells the compelling story of a woman who, against all odds, wanted to become an F-35 pilot, one of the most demanding and daunting

responsibilities in contemporary militaries. As the chapter comes to a close, her voice still sounds in my ears: 'Because let's be honest: if she succeeds, it is her victory. But if we make it possible for her, then it is ours too. Then we will not only have an F-35 pilot, but also a system that is learning to fly.'

This book is all about human-centred leadership and what we can do to enable and support a system that is learning to fly. Don't miss reading this book. It will enrich your life, just as having Elanor in my life has enriched mine.

*Janice Gross Stein,
Founding Director, Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy
Chair of the Board, Halifax International Security Forum*

Introduction

Writing a book. Was it really such a good idea?

That thought crossed my mind more often than I would have liked. Especially while editing, rewriting and rewriting yet again. Every time I re-read the beginning, I thought: oh dear. Too heavy, too complicated, a bit too much self-analysis before breakfast. Halfway through, I felt the urge to quit. Just quietly, as if this project had never existed.

Still, I kept going. Not because I was bursting with motivation, but because it kept niggling at me. ‘Why don’t you write a book about this?’ people kept asking me. And a few publishers kept coming back. Somehow I felt it made sense – because the process itself is the story. Exploring boundaries, stumbling, getting back up and discovering that ‘I’m not perfect’ is very different from deciding that ‘I’m not good enough’.

An important guide in all this was my coach. A coach who helped me to press pause. Not in the sense of pausing to reflect while lying on a yoga mat, but really taking a hard look at yourself: where is the friction, where is there still work to be done, what do you keep putting off even though you know you have to do something about it. I’ve

learned that the list of things I need to work on, even today, isn't exactly short. It is almost bittersweet to think that we will never be a 'finished product'. We remain works in progress. That is not a failure. It is part of being human.

In other words, we are all 'a work in progress'. There is always room for growth, and if you don't tap into that room, it is not only a shame for yourself, but also for the people around you. And this touches on the core of what I wanted to write here: letting go of the idea that as a leader you always have to be sure of yourself. We have turned leadership into a kind of obstacle course, while setting the bar higher and higher – as if it were a sport in which you only count if you jump over every obstacle without faltering. But that bar is not motivating; it is just exhausting. It pushes people beyond their limits and leaves them with that quiet, nagging feeling that, at the end of the day, whatever they do is never good enough.

This book does not claim to be a manual. It is not a step-by-step plan or a recipe for success.

It is rather a plea to let go of some of that tension and make room for humanity. Especially in situations where we most often mask it. Can I be myself, even as a leader? Can I doubt, not know something, stumble occasionally without immediately having to justify myself? I am convinced that this is precisely where strength lies: in acknowledging discomfort and staying with it. Leadership is not something you put on, but something you dare to take off. Not armoured, but armed with sensitivity.

Because leadership is not about the smartest suit, the most convincing narrative or a charismatic personality. It's about people, real people. People with questions and good intentions, people who are sometimes having a bad day.

This is why I'm thrilled to present *Armed with Sensitivity*.
Not because sensitivity makes you weaker, but because it
makes you sharper: more human and hence more reliable.