



A question of style: the leadership of Christine Rankin – TEACHING NOTE

Overview

Christine Rankin is one of New Zealand's most controversial public figures. As she acknowledged in her autobiography, *Light the Flame*,¹ she is a polarising figure – to many she is an “incompetent dimwit”, to others she is a “wronged woman” (p.183). While she gained notoriety as Chief Executive of Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) a decade ago, her public profile remained high. In 2009 she was appointed to the Families' Commission and in 2010 was elected as a councillor for the North Shore ward of Auckland's new “Super City”. She has also actively campaigned against child abuse, having herself been a victim. This case is a story of her public and private life, which have both attracted the interest of the media at various times. This is not a decision-forcing case that asks students to “step into the shoes” of any of its characters. Rather, the aim is to provide a context for some debates about leadership and change in the public sector, especially the issue of women in leadership.

Course audience

- Advanced undergraduates
- Post graduate research programmes (Masters, Honours)
- Post experience students (MBA, Executive MBA, Short courses)

This case can be used to supplement teaching in leadership and/or change management across government/public management courses as well as in management and organisation behaviour courses.

Teaching objectives

- To consider the applicability of transformational leadership to a public sector organisation

This teaching note was written by Dr Todd Bridgman, Senior Lecturer, Victoria University of Wellington, to support the case study 2011-129.1. The use of teaching materials is restricted to authorised persons.

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¹ Rankin, C, (2008) *Light the Flame*. Auckland, Random House.

- To consider the relevance of the national cultural context to an assessment of the merits of transformational leadership
- To assess the strengths and weaknesses of transformational leadership
- To explore a gender critique of transformational leadership

Theoretical resources

To maximise the value of this case, students should be familiar with the theoretical issues and debates that it raises. The following resources are recommended pre-class reading.

Sinclair, A. (2007). *Leadership for the Disillusioned: Moving beyond Myths and Heroes to Leading that Liberates*, Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.

Sinclair, A. (2005). *Doing Leadership Differently*, (2nd edition). Melbourne: Melbourne University Press: 15-34.

In *Leadership for the Disillusioned* (2007) Sinclair provides an overview and critique of transformational leadership, from multiple perspectives including gender. In *Doing Leadership Differently* (2005) she argues that “leadership” is a masculine construction. “Think leader – think male” persists because it suits the interests of key decision-makers, who tend to be male. A self-perpetuating loop puts pressure on women to be like men in order to be judged as “real leaders”. If women display feminine behaviours, they are likely to be seen as weak. Put simply: women are damned if they do; and damned if they don’t.

‘t Hart, P. (2010). Occasional papers: ANZSOG-SSA Partnership Program, Vol 1, 23-30.

This article provides an excellent critical analysis of current leadership discourse, with its emphasis on making change and denigration of the status quo. ‘tHart argues this can be problematic in the public sector context which values reliability and continuity. He urges greater scepticism towards the preaching of leadership gurus from the private sector and greater consideration to be given to what leadership means in the public sector.

Khurana, R. (2002). ‘The curse of the superstar CEO’. *Harvard Business Review*, September, 60-66.

Hero (or transformational) leadership tends to be seen in the mainstream leadership literature as highly desirable, but Khurana (2008) has written about the curse of the hero leader. He argues that a quasi-religious faith in the powers of charismatic leadership exaggerates the impact of CEOs and can destabilise organisations, with heroes easily becoming villains.

Sample questions for student assignments

This case raises a number of controversial issues and debates for which there is no right answer. As a result, what is provided below are not “answers” but a brief explanation of some ways students might address the questions. It is not intended to be an exhaustive account.

Christine Rankin describes herself as a transformational leader and defines this form of leadership as being “all about the magic of personality”. In what ways has her personality helped and/or hindered her ability to lead change?

Christine Rankin is a passionate and charismatic figure and her rapid elevation through DSW to the chief executive role of WINZ suggests she has the potential to inspire people towards a vision. She is already incredibly driven and hard-working, which sets an example for others. However, it could be argued her personality has also hindered her ability to lead change. She acknowledges that she polarises people, so it is likely many people agree or disagree with her position on the basis on whether they find her an appealing personality or not, rather than on the merits of the relevant arguments. Students might also argue that Rankin failed to understand that chief executives of public sector organisations should not have personalities bigger than their ministers; *One of Christine Rankin's favourite leadership catchphrases is "There are no boundaries". What were the strengths and weaknesses of this approach to leading a public sector organisation?*

A strength of giving staff greater responsibility for making decisions is that gives greater value to their expertise. In the change to 24-hour processing of unemployment benefits claims, frontline staff were involved in discussion about how the process could be improved. They were given greater autonomy to make decisions on claims, which reduced waiting times. However, while the change was eventually successful, initially the error rate of frontline staff was high, which might have caused inconvenience and distress for claimants.

The Wairakei flight-chartering incident demonstrates the weakness of Rankin's approach. She was not aware that flights had been chartered and says she would never have approved it. When chief executives encourage staff to use their judgement rather than follow rules, they need to be prepared for the consequences and in the public sector, it is more likely incidents will attract media attention.

In developing her leadership style, Christine Rankin sought to emulate that of her mentor, George Hickton. Although they both exhibited a transformational style, Hickton went on to have a long and distinguished public sector career, while Rankin's ended in controversial circumstances. What are some possible explanations for this?

Responses to this question might make mention of a lack of political nous, the fact she was a woman, her dress style or even bad luck, given the Wairakei incident occurred in an election year when the opposition were keen to highlight public sector spending. *Should Christine Rankin's distinctive dress style have been taken into account in the evaluation of her performance as chief executive of WINZ?*

It could be argued that her appearance was not appropriate to a public sector context which values conservatism and the maintenance of a low profile for chief executives. From this perspective, Christine Rankin being a woman was incidental to that. An opposing view is that Rankin should be judged solely on her performance in the job and that to not do so was sexist, in that women are more likely to be subjected to criticism about their appearance than men.

Christine Rankin was annoyed that many people could not see past her appearance to make a fair assessment of her performance as chief executive of WINZ. In light of this, what do you think of her decision to continue with her distinctive style?

This could be seen as the actions of a strong leader who refuses to bow to the sexist critique of her leadership style. It could be seen as a sensible strategy by a local body politician who needs to attract media attention to give her the best chance of re-election. It could also be seen as a naive move, on the grounds that Rankin herself acknowledges,

to her apparent frustration, that her appearance gets in the way of people judging her for her performance.

Christine Rankin acknowledges that she became obsessed with career success and that “work became the perfect excuse to get away and avoid dealing with my home life” (p.95). Should her private life be taken into account in the evaluation of her success as a leader?

One view is that what happened in her private life is of no relevance to her evaluation as a leader in the workplace, since the privacy of public figures should be respected. An opposing view is that transformational leadership emphasises the importance of leaders role-modelling desired behaviour. From this perspective, Rankin’s four marriages are incompatible with her work as a Families Commissioner advocating stable, two-parent families. A counter-argument is that Rankin admits that she has made mistakes in her private life and has used these experiences to connect with people she is trying to influence.

To what extent are the principles of transformational leadership appropriate in the public sector?

The principles of transformational leadership outlined by Rankin in Box 1 emphasise leadership from the top down, charismatic leadership involving an emotional connection with employees and the drive for on-going change. It could be argued that each of these is more appropriate to the private sector than the public sector, which is conservative in values. Alternatively, the argument might be made that the public sector should do more to emulate the private sector to encourage innovation and risk-taking.

Christine Rankin believes displays of emotion are an essential part of transformational leadership. In what ways might emotional displays be perceived by followers as a source of strength and/or a sign of weakness? Does it depend on whether the leader is a man or woman?

This raises interesting questions about our understanding of what constitutes “leadership”. The term “strong leader” is used frequently and it could be argued that displays of certain emotions, such as sadness and vulnerability are not consistent with this conception. It could be argued that women are in a “no-win” situation. For example, Rankin feared that if she did not cry at the Employment Tribunal hearing she would be seen as lacking feeling, but if she did cry she would come across as a weak woman.

Christine Rankin believes that New Zealand lacks visionary leadership because the national culture values modesty and is suspicious of those who are passionate about making change. Do you agree?

Rankin is highlighting what she is commonly described as the “tall poppy syndrome”, where people are resented because their achievements, talents or views distinguish them from others in society. The counter-argument is that New Zealanders are rightly wary of egocentric and self-serving leaders.

Khurana (2008) has written about the curse of the hero leader. He argues that a quasi-religious faith in the powers of charismatic leadership exaggerates the impact of CEOs and can destabilise organisations, with heroes easily becoming villains. How well does that explain Christine Rankin’s leadership at WINZ?

The Rankin story is a classic illustration of the curse of hero leadership. Rankin’s heroic status is evidenced by her rapid rise from her entry level position at DSW to

chief executive of WINZ. She attributes much of her success to her transformational leadership style – her passion, energy and ability to unite people towards a vision although it is hard to make an independent assessment of this. What is clear however, is that following the Wairakei incident she quickly became a villain, which gave the organisation much unwelcome publicity and reduced the public's confidence in it as a result.

Possible teaching aids

There is some excellent visual material to supplement the teaching of this case. The following clip is from Television New Zealand's *Close-Up* programme, on Rankin's appointment to the Families Commission. Included are some clips from the Employment Court hearing, her child advocacy, her *Dancing with the Stars* appearance, as well as an interview with Rankin herself, where she refutes claims that her personal style and multiple marriages makes her unsuitable for the Families Commission role. It runs for approximately 8 minutes and would be an excellent way to introduce the case.

<http://tvnz.co.nz/close-up/christine-rankin-responds-2731782/video>

The youtube clip below is a 7 minute television interview with Christine Rankin which discusses her book *Light the Flame*. She is wearing her trademark earrings and short skirt, so will be a useful visual reference for students who have not seen her before. The interview traverses many of the issues raised in the case, including her difficult upbringing, time at WINZ and her life after.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=frPMo6LKt_w

Songwriter and Singer Steve Low performs *Ballad of Christine Rankin* - a review of her colourful life in an original song.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HDucI3Z6ab4>