



The Leadership of Margaret Sanger:

A Values-Based Analysis

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Abstract

Margaret Sanger was an advocate for birth control distribution in the United States and is best known for her founding of the organization Planned Parenthood. However, what is not often discussed is her leadership in terms of the values she exhibited throughout her activism. Therefore, this paper analyzes the leadership of Margaret Sanger through a values-based approach. Because both the context and the followers are essential to understand leadership, this paper also reviews the historical setting and the followership of men and women who supported Sanger's efforts. Following a discussion of her personal history, a values-based analysis of Margaret Sanger's leadership, in terms of universal and benevolent values, virtues, instrumental and terminal values, and empowerment ultimately reveals her classification as an authentic leader.

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Introduction

The Leader

Margaret Sanger was born Margaret Louise Higgins on September 14th, 1879 to Michael Higgins, an Irish immigrant, and Anne Purcell Higgins, an Irish-American (Wardell, 1980; Witherbee, 2005). She was the sixth of 11 total children and her large, lower class family resided in Corning, New York (Millennium, 2005). From an early age, Margaret inherited certain rebellious and strong-willed characteristics from her working-class father such as the propensity to speak her mind and the willingness to accept consequences for her actions (Wardell, 1980). During her adolescence, Margaret's father "introduced her to a concern for the general welfare" and taught her that "everyone should leave the world better for having lived in it" (Yasunari, 2000, p. 619). These childhood experiences shaped Sanger's future progressive thinking and were ultimately strengthened by the early death of her mother (Millennium, 2005; Yasunari, 2000).

Margaret's mother suffered from tuberculosis and died consequently at the age of 46 due to a confounding history of poor health from her 11 births (Wardell, 1980; Yasunari, 2000). Along with her deeply rooted ideals of compassion and general welfare, this event caused Sanger to pursue a career path in nursing during which she encountered the most challenging cases in her life, particularly in obstetrics (Bone, 2010). In 1910, Sanger began to work as an obstetrics nurse in the poorer areas of the East Side in New York City where she witnessed "the abysmal poverty, unsanitary environment, and endless stream of unwanted children" (Sanger, 2007, p. 213). Sanger encountered poor women daily who "begged her for information on how to avoid pregnancy" and, after watching a young woman die from a self-induced abortion, she set off to better the lives of women by fighting for methods of family planning and control in the United States (Millennium, 2005, p. 112).

The Followers

As an activist and a social movement leader, Margaret Sanger gained much support from the public as well as her followers through her endeavors to distribute birth control and family planning information to the general public. In 1913, Sanger created and dispersed a monthly newsletter called *The Woman Rebel*, and a year later was facing charges for violating Comstock laws which prohibited the distribution of birth control knowledge and materials (Millennium, 2005). "Facing a possible prison term of forty-five years, with a faked passport, Sanger escaped first to Canada and then to Europe" in order to avoid the trial (Millennium, 2005, p. 113). Upon return in 1915, Sanger's 5-year old daughter, Peggy, died from pneumonia, but the court continued with the trial against her (Wardell, 1980). "The story of the young nurse-mother pursued as a criminal by the United States government and now beset by tragedy

scooped World War I for headlines” and the public rallied in support for Margaret Sanger (Wardell, 1980, p. 739). A pre-trial dinner was attended by 200 of Sanger’s volunteers, and many of the social elite came to her aid (Yasunari, 2000). On the day of her trial, the courtroom was filled with supporters from all levels of society, and in risk of making Sanger a martyr, the courts declared her victory and dropped the charges (Yasunari, 2000). A post-trial survey indicated that 97% of the American community favored the availability of birth control, and Sanger seized hold of this support by creating the first birth control clinic in the United States.

Along with her sister, Ethyl Byrne, Sanger saw 140 women on opening day, all seeking help in family planning (Yasunari, 2000). The next week, police raided the clinic arresting both Sanger and her sister, indicting both with illegal activities against the Comstock laws (Yasunari, 2000). Byrnes was so devoted to her sister’s cause that she spent thirty days in jail, underwent a hunger strike, and was force-fed by authorities (the first force-feeding of a woman in American history) (Yasunari, 2000). This led both the public and Sanger to recognize that if anyone wanted birth control and family planning services, laws would have to be altered. In response, Sanger developed the National Committee of Federal Legislation for Birth Control (NCFL) in 1931 and membership soared from 1,000 in its initial stages to 12,000,000 in 1937 (Murphree & Gower, 2008). Sanger understood that “she had no choice but to mobilize men of influence in business, government, labor, academia, science, and the emerging professions, but her most active recruits always remained women” (Chesler, 2003, p. 25). She targeted many women who were part of the women’s suffrage movement who, after finally winning the vote in 1920, were eager to devote themselves to a new cause (Chesler, 2003). The spirit of her followers, overwhelming public support, and the changing lives of women allowed Margaret Sanger’s leadership and activism to become a great success and many legislative alterations were ultimately achieved.

The Context

Margaret Sanger emerged in the twentieth century of the United States, at a time “when the country seemed wide open with possibility” (Chesler, 2003, p. 24). Women were fighting for and gaining rights within the country but many constricting laws still remained in effect, especially relating to family planning and birth control. “The main obstacle to public information about family planning was one man: Anthony Comstock” who “lobbied through Congress a law banning pornography from the mails and common carriers” (Wardell, 1980, p. 738). Not only did the Comstock laws ban the distribution of pornography, but the law also included a specific section which banned information on devices for the prevention of contraception from surfacing into the public mail as well (Wardell, 1980). The ideas of controlling birth and distributing knowledge on contraception were characterized as “obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, indecent and disgusting” and these ideas pervaded the American public from 1873 until

Sanger's arrival in the early 1900s (Wardell, 1980, p. 738).

When Sanger began her activism, women's roles were changing in such a way that their presence in the American workforce and their status within society were increasing. Many groups of women such as the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and the National Woman's Party (NWP) were consistently lobbying individual states as well as Congress for women's right to vote. Across the country, women's values and ideals were changing to encompass a greater emphasis on equal rights and independence from the traditional gender roles of society. Moreover, the recognition of health risks and mortality resulting from excessive amounts of childbirth was increasing at a national level (Murphree & Gower, 2008). Essentially, Sanger emerged at an incredible time when the nation was revolutionizing the status of women within society. Her ability to emphasize women's control over reproduction as an unalienable right was widely accepted into American thought (Bone, 2010; Sanger, 2007).

The Values of Margaret Sanger

Universal and Benevolent Values

As cited in Michie and Gooty's (2005) article, Schwartz (1994) discusses a category of leadership values that fall within a bipolar dimension that he labeled as self-enhancement/self-transcendence. In the category of self-enhancement, leaders display values of achievement, power and hedonism, while leaders within the category of self-transcendence express values of benevolence and universalism (Schwartz 1994; as cited in Michie & Gooty, 2005). Schwartz (1994) goes on to describe values of benevolence as including honesty, responsibility and loyalty while those values associated with universalism incorporate equality, social justice, and broadmindedness (as cited in Michie & Gooty, 2005). In essence, Schwartz (1994) attributes leaders who display benevolent values as having a "concern for immediate others" and leaders who employ universalism demonstrate a "concern for the welfare of all people" (as cited in Michie & Gooty, 2005, p. 443).

As a leader, Margaret Sanger would be attributed to expressing self-transcendent values mostly in the realm of universalism as opposed to benevolence. It was well known that Sanger did not exhibit the values of honesty and loyalty, mostly in an effort to secure her fight towards birth control distribution. For instance, Sanger often smuggled contraceptives from overseas and illegally stored them in warehouses owned by her late husband, J. Noah Slee, in order to distribute the items in her unlawful clinic (Wardell, 1980). As previously mentioned, she often traveled on an illegitimate passport in efforts to escape severe criminal punishment for her illegal activities (Millennium, 2005). Sanger was also lacking in the value of loyalty such that she participated in multiple love affairs against both of her husbands without subsequent remorse (Wardell, 1980). Although she did not display high benevolent values, these actions essentially

strengthened her cause rather than weakened her efforts. For instance, without smuggling contraceptives into her clinic, women would not be able to receive the benefits she felt that they were entitled to in terms of family planning and prevention.

These ideals filtered into her strong display of universal values including equality, social justice, and broadmindedness. Margaret Sanger exhibited a concern for the welfare of all individuals such that she “was truly committed to improving the lot of the poor, immigrant, and non-English speaking woman in America” (Sanger, 2007, p. 213). Equality was not just a matter of winning the vote for women, but also a matter of winning the right to control their own bodies and she often “asserted that a woman is best judge of whether and when to bring a child into the world” (Sanger, 2007, p. 214). Furthermore, not only would birth control better the situation of women, but it would also have a profound effect on the quality of life across the globe such that families could pull themselves out of poverty because they would not have to bear unwanted children (Wardell, 1980; Yasunari, 2000). Overall, her deliberate disobedience of benevolent values and her great adherence to universal values furthered the reach and success of her family planning cause.

Virtues

Similarly to Schwartz (1994), Johnson (2009) sought to examine the values of leaders, and in particular, described a leader’s character through the realm of virtues. Johnson (2009) described three important features attributed to virtues such that: (1) virtues are woven into the inner lives of leaders; they are not easily developed or dispended but instead persist over time, (2) virtues shape the way leaders see and behave, and (3) virtues operate independently of the situation such that a virtue may be expressed differently depending on the context (p. 71). Johnson (2009) goes on to discuss seven different virtues including courage, integrity, humility, reverence, optimism, compassion, and justice. In terms of Margaret Sanger it can be said that as a leader, she exhibited the virtues of compassion and justice.

According to Johnson (2009), compassion involves the leader developing an orientation that puts others ahead of the self and those who exhibit this virtue “value others regardless of whether they get anything in return from them” (p. 76). Sanger’s virtue of compassion stemmed from her past experiences as an obstetrics nurse where she witnessed a young woman named Sadie Sachs die after trying to self-induce two abortions (Yasunari, 2000). Because of Sadie’s death, Margaret promised herself that “because of this night, tomorrow and forever would be different...she would close her heart to every other cause to give herself to one great goal”: she devoted her life to helping women gain control over their lives (Yasunari, 2000, p. 620). Sanger traveled the country and the globe in order to educate women on family planning services. Also, as previously mentioned, she opened the first American birth control clinic in order to service thousands of women across the country (Yasunari, 2000). In addition to compassion, Sang-

ger also exhibited the virtue of justice which Johnson (2009) describes as having both “a sense of obligation to the common good” and “treating others as equally and fairly as possible” (p. 76). Sanger’s sense of social justice and welfare was ingrained in her since youth due to her father’s teachings on equality and fairness (Wardell, 1980). Furthermore, Sanger sought to treat all women as entitled to birth control and family planning; she took in women from across the country, across socioeconomic statuses, and of all different races (Yasunari, 2000). She even went as far as to publish her pamphlets in multiple different languages such as English, Yiddish, and Italian so that she could break through language barriers and reach all kinds of women across America (Yasunari, 2000). Margaret Sanger wanted nothing more than to help improve the lives of women from all walks of life, and her virtues of compassion and justice helped her to achieve these goals.

Instrumental and Terminal Values

In his assessment, Rokeach (1979) came across and developed two main categories of values that individuals display throughout their lifetime: instrumental values and terminal values. Instrumental values consist primarily of personal characteristics and personality traits and include ideals such as honest, independent, polite, and logical (Rokeach, 1979). In contrast, terminal values are ideals that individuals attempt to work towards or things that people feel are most desirable in life (Rokeach, 1979). Terminal values include items such as freedom, happiness, inner harmony, and a sense of accomplishment (Rokeach, 1979).

Throughout her lifetime, as well as her leadership, Margaret Sanger employed many different instrumental and terminal values. As a person, Sanger was ambitious, courageous, intellectual, independent, loving and helpful, all of which are important instrumental values. In addition, she exhibited a longing for freedom, equality, and an overarching sense of family security in the realm of terminal values. For instance, Sanger exuded ambition and courage when she first began her crusade such that “state and local laws were all arraigned against her...the medical profession denounced her, the churches excoriated her, the press condemned her, and even liberal reformers shunned her”, but she continued to fight for her cause (Alexander, 1977, p. 10). She also exhibited intellect throughout her leadership by educating herself and others. Because many of the laws prohibited doctors from discussing contraceptive methods, Sanger sought out knowledge about the devices by traveling abroad to France and the Netherlands in order to bring back the methods to the women of the United States (Yasunari, 2000).

Sanger also exhibited the terminal values, like freedom, by fighting against the Comstock laws within the country. Sanger viewed these laws as a barrier for women to obtain their rightful freedom and it thus became her goal to defeat Comstock and grant women their deserved liberation (Yasunari, 2000). Her ideals of family security were constantly played out through her leadership and social activism such that she believed “women wanted their children

to be free of poverty and disease, that women were natural eugenicists, and that birth control, which could limit the number of children and improve their quality of life, was the panacea to accomplish this” (Sanger, 2007, p. 213). Margaret Sanger’s instrumental and terminal values created a strong basis on which to propel her social movement for birth control and ultimately gained followers’ respect and support for the cause.

Empowerment

Like other researchers, Ciulla (2004) examined the values of leaders and discussed the components of an important aspect of leadership: empowerment. He states that “empowerment is about giving people the confidence, competence, freedom, and resources to act on their own judgments” (Ciulla, 2004, p. 59). Ciulla (2004) goes on to discuss two types of grassroots empowerment as defined by Richard Couto: psycho-political empowerment and psycho-symbolic empowerment. In psycho-political empowerment, the leader “increases people’s self-esteem and [it] results in a change in the distribution of resources and/or the actions of others” and the empowerment itself involves “the confidence, desire, and, most important, the ability of people to bring about real change” (Ciulla, 2004, p. 60). In psycho-symbolic empowerment, the leader raises people’s self-esteem but essentially teaches the followers to learn how to cope with unchanged circumstances (Ciulla, 2004). As Ciulla (2004) describes, leaders often seek to employ psycho-political empowerment but usually end up delivering the latter. While this discrepancy is common among many leaders, Margaret Sanger can be said to be an exception such that she successfully utilized psycho-political empowerment during her social activism.

Sanger’s entire leadership venture was an effort to empower women and their families to live better lives. Thousands of women wrote Sanger during her lifetime expressing their concern as well as their gratitude for her cause and how her efforts improved their lives (Yasunari, 2000). The distribution of birth control and family planning services was only made possible by Sanger’s efforts and “today birth control not only saves the lives of countless mothers but enhances the health and happiness of many times that number” (Alexander, 1977, p. 10). Instead of just teaching women to cope with the situation they had at hand, Margaret Sanger sought to make a revolutionary difference and combat laws that promoted the ignorance and blatant disrespect of women’s rights (Yasunari, 2000). Sanger and her followers in the National Committee of Federal Legislation for Birth Control accomplished one of the greatest feats against the Comstock laws such that, in the *U.S. vs. One Package* decision, the courts held that contraceptives could be imported and distributed for medical health purposes (Murphree & Gower, 2008). Not only did Margaret Sanger empower millions of women across the globe to take control of their reproductive rights and end their suffering, but she and her followers also accomplished successful legislation that chipped away at existing Comstock regulation and promoted the birth control revolution.

Authentic Leadership

Perhaps the most essential examination of values within leadership context is Michie and Gooty's (2005) description of an authentic leader. These researchers built upon numerous scholarly works, including Schwartz's (1994) values analysis, and developed three propositions that enable one to be defined as an authentic leader. First, "authentic leaders will have both self-enhancement and self-transcendent values, but will give higher priority to self-transcendent values" (Michie & Gooty, 2005, p. 445). The researchers defined self-enhancement and self-transcendent values as in accordance with Schwartz (1994) and built upon that research by developing other-directed emotions which include affect such as gratitude, goodwill, appreciation, and a concern for others (Michie & Gooty, 2005). Therefore, Michie and Gooty's second proposition states that "authentic leaders will frequently experience positive other-directed emotions toward inside and outside stakeholders" (Michie & Gooty, 2005, p. 447). Finally, "frequent experiences of positive-other direction emotions will moderate the relationship between a leader's values and actions, such that authentic leaders will exhibit high consistency between their self-transcendent values and behaviors" (Michie & Gooty, 2005, p. 450). Essentially, Michie and Gooty (2005) defined an authentic leader as one who exhibits a high degree of self-transcendent values and a high experience of positive other-directed emotions which leads to a high consistency between their values and behaviors within their leadership.

In this sense, Margaret Sanger was an authentic leader throughout her lifetime as a social and political activist for family planning and birth control. As previously discussed, Sanger showed a great adherence to self-transcendent values in the realm of universalism such that she practiced social justice, equality, and had a sense of broadmindedness. Sanger also displayed a high degree of positive other-directed emotions in terms of goodwill and a concern for others. Leaders who exhibit goodwill demonstrate compassion, sympathy, and empathy for individuals and their situations while leaders who demonstrate a concern for others show a degree of interest, courage, and care. As this analysis has demonstrated, Margaret Sanger encompassed all of these components within her leadership and her social activism to improve the lives of women across the globe by promoting birth control. The idea that Sanger exhibited a high degree of self-transcendent values and a high experience of positive other-directed emotions led to a high consistency between her values and behaviors within her time as a leader. Thus, Margaret Sanger is a textbook example of an authentic leader according to Michie and Gooty (2005).

Sanger's authentic leadership created numerous positive outcomes for her cause and ultimately positively affected the future of millions of women across the globe. Her leadership accomplished battles for legislation that allowed for the distribution of family planning materials, the mailing and selling of materials and contraceptives throughout the country, and in her later years, the legalization of birth control consumption for married couples. As an authentic

leader, Sanger developed numerous organizations devoted to the cause including the American Birth Control League (ABCL), the NCFL, and the Birth Control Research Bureau, all of which were dedicated to improving the lives of women through family planning information and services (Murphree & Gower, 2008). Ultimately, Sanger's leadership led to the founding and establishment of The Planned Parenthood Foundation in 1952, which currently provides numerous services to women and families on how to regulate and maintain a healthy family life through birth control and contraceptive knowledge (Witherbee, 2005). Margaret Sanger's harmonization between her self-transcendent values and her positive other-directed emotions led to a high degree of consistency between her personal values and her leadership behaviors. This harmonization and consistency contributed to a birth control revolution and a successful progressive alteration of the lives of women across the globe.

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