“People will always ascribe greater authority to your words that you intend”… “you need to play it (power) down”. This lesson in leadership from Lisa Paul, Secretary to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations underscores a common theme that emerged from the series of interviews conducted by Virginia Haussegger with women in leadership positions in the Australian public sector, namely the personal perceptions of authority and power that those leadership positions bestowed on the incumbents, and how, often, women leaders, were far more aware of and mindful of this than many of their male peers appear to be.

So how did these perceptions of leadership develop for the three woman interviewed by Virginia in November 2010.

- Lisa Paul, PSM Secretary of the Commonwealth Department of education. Employment and Workplace Relation;
- Tu Pham, ACT Auditor-General;
- Roxanne Missingham, Parliamentary Librarian, Parliament of Australia.

1. All recognised that they didn’t see their careers as they evolved as “a ladder”, and that they did not initially have a goal of heading an organisation nor particularly that upward promotion was the main purpose of their working life. All took career choices that represented interesting opportunities at the time rather than were seen as the next upward step in a career ladder with a single goal to reach. What they found was that, as they journeyed around and across many varied jobs and pursued happenstance opportunities, they succeeded in meeting the challenges facing them. Lisa focussed on opportunities to learn and never turned down an opportunity to do something new. She didn’t have a “5 year plan”. Roxanne took similar opportunities, including jobs which she didn’t particularly like, but from which she felt she would learn. Tu recognised that she might have been “too timid” at points in her career, and accepting jobs
which were probably below her capacity. This meant that they were very flexible and could take breaks in their careers whether from childbirth, or periods of illness and still flourished in meeting new challenges. All were able to recognise that they could deal with situations and people better than many of their superiors. Tu keenly observed poor management of herself and others and that the capacity of individuals to contribute was often squandered by senior managers.

2. In their journeys, mentors were seen as important contributors to their emerging leadership confidence, and aspirations, and a source of sound advice on which directions to take. Mentors of both genders were, and are, recognised as important. The women recognised their responsibility as role models as well as mentors themselves. When asked whether this was particularly so in fostering women over men, they said that was not the case. Tu said woman need support and she would give it where she could.

3. None approached their careers as a gender driven ambition. Lisa’s motivation was from the start in the public sector that “you could make a difference”. Rox indicated that being flexible and open to opportunities was the way she had approached work, and in spending a great part of the career in woman dominated workplaces did not see gender as a motivating aspect.

4. Tu recalled that she observed such poor treatment of individuals by managers in organisations she swore she would not act in such a fashion herself should she be a manager. Lisa Paul has similarly recognised that respect for those who work for you, and creating a respectful workplace as a fundamental leadership attribute. Rox said leadership was about achieving outcomes by working with people to achieve them - “leadership was leading people and working with your people, not sitting in a room researching”.

5. Do women lead differently? Tu said yes, observed that it is different in her experience, with women more likely to seek out consensus, be open to listen to and take advice from others in the organisation. Roxanne agreed that women do not usually play “the power lever”, but sought others contribution more so than male leaders. Lisa indicated that while she hasn’t experienced that good leadership was gender based, with both good male and female leaders in her experience, she recognised that women are often “read” differently to men in similar positions and this may lead to perceptions of difference.

In summary, all reflected that respectful, conscious leadership of organisation that didn’t rely or involve overt exercise of power was the way to achieve goals, and a direct, personal engagement with those they lead was their leadership style. That they all came to positions of leadership through such an approach, and not one of any ambition to exercise power, underscored the genuineness of their leadership, and ultimately their success as leaders.