MAAM

MOTHERHOOD AS A MASTER'S

Empowering Both Men and Women



Riccarda Zezza • Andrea Vitullo

MAAM

Motherhood as a Master's

Empowering Both Men and Women

Riccarda Zezza and Andrea Vitullo

Riccarda Zezza and Andrea Vitullo

First edition printed in Italy, 2014 - 7 reprints in 2024

First English edition: January 2025 – self-published

Contact the authors

https://www.linkedin.com/in/zezza/

https://www.linkedin.com/in/andrea-vitullo-a074b8/

Revised English edition.

Contents

1 Being a manager without even knowing it 5

2 Taking a step back makes a complicated life seem simpler 29

3 A master at reading feelings and building alliances 53

4 Maternal leadership is just what we need today 92

5 Raising them to be stronger than we are 124

6 The new man already exists: set him free! 147

Conclusions 164

About the authors 168

CHAPTER 1



Being a manager without even knowing it

When you bring a new baby home, your home becomes a business school (forever)

This book tells a story, the oldest one in the world: the story of motherhood

Above all, we want to talk about how motherhood has evolved: like the fairytale princess who no longer sleeps and goes into battle, today's mothers seem well-equipped to be a positive force for change in the professional world. Warmth, mental agility, a natural desire to help everyone win. Qualities that are taken for granted in the home can be valuable agents of change at work. The very same qualities that organizations are always seeking out, not recognizing what's already in front of them.

Motherhood, with all its wonders and shadows, shows us something very interesting - something that, deep down, we already know: we need to change the way we do business. We need to scrap some of the old rules to make room for new possibilities, to change things and see what happens. So that people can enjoy every chapter of life, instead of sacrificing one aspect for another.

This paradigm shift affects both women and men, with or without children. It concerns all of us. We can start from the experience of care to change the world, especially the world of work. Today's society is not working, and we need to "fix" it.

We can do this by going back to the basics: life, birth, the unexpected. Let's throw away the old rulebook and write a new one!

This is a book for mothers, who want to play a bigger role in the economy and in society, and who no longer accept the limitations being placed on them. It's a book for fathers, who are faced with reverse discrimination and would like to break free from the confined role of "part-time dad". It's also a book for employers, who have both the duty and the opportunity to draw on a wealth of skills they already have at their disposal.

This book isn't meant to be easy reading; it's not about a "quick fix". It's a book that invites us to reflect, and then to reflect some more, to think outside the box: women, men, beyond gender distinctions. Beyond personal, professional and family stereotypes. To regain a sense of what is possible in our own lives, of what we can accomplish, if we just set our minds to it.

What motherhood means today: some surprising research results

Mom and manager: are they two completely different roles? Are these two important aspects of life truly incompatible, locked in eternal competition for our hearts and minds?

We grow up believing that caring for children and enjoying a successful career are two separate paths that we must choose between. Women tell themselves that, sooner or later, they will be forced to make a choice: family or career.

But today, biological and human sciences, as well as statistics, tell a different story: a much more positive one, with a happy ending. In these pages, we will explain how becoming parents can endow you with skills and abilities that make you stronger, more independent and determined. Real leaders at home, amid children, family and the daily routine, and at work, amid colleagues, pressures and passions, in open offices that can foster community as easily as collective neuroses. Motherhood brings added value that companies should recognize and use, because it helps us develop new skills and gives us more energy. Women and employers alike could experience motherhood as a period of professional growth and learning.

> **In the third millennium, motherhood has become a difficult role to choose - almost a challenge, rather than something "natural".**

The natural urge to have children is still there, but it's offset by discouraging factors surrounding motherhood and employment, a lack of support services, and a widespread perception of parenthood as a risky step, especially for those with jobs. It signals the decline or even the end of a career, stirring resentment at the idea of having studied and worked and tried to make a difference, only to wind up in a part-time role that exists in our bosses' minds before it ever shows up on their timesheets. And so the choice becomes increasingly difficult and unfair: the choice between being a parent, or a full-fledged member of the professional world.

Statistics indicate that the second option is by far the more prevalent. In Italy, for example, the birthrate continues to fall: according to the World Bank, the country is ranked 205th out of 226 countries, with barely 1.4 children for each woman.

And in the home? Even at home, motherhood remains a challenge. Women ask themselves whether they are ready for "the big one": the change that affects every aspect of life, disrupting everything in its wake.

The woman herself will never be the same again; she'll have to cope with pressures, often conflicting, from all sides. But typically, women like to "prepare in advance". At school, at work, and for life in general. Bookstores are full of guides on being a good mother: how to give birth, how to breastfeed, how to get children to sleep, how to raise them, how to stay sane.

These books explain that you may feel tired because you're "making" the baby's eyelashes; that nausea is caused by the eyelashes tickling the placenta. That breastfeeding will be difficult, even painful, if you don't position the baby's mouth just right. Expectant mothers now learn these things from books. They used to hear them from a "magic circle" of women, who passed on what they knew and made it all a little less frightening. Women today face motherhood quite alone.

Pregnancy has been the same for thousands of years, but today's women are less prepared than ever before.

Yet something wonderful and unexpected happens, even before giving birth. The sense of imminent change, the total uncertainty about what is to come, reactivates dormant parts of the brain.

We start to "learn" again. *To listen, to be curious, to explore a world that, until just now, we thought we already knew quite well.*

Our brain gets back to work, as though we were in school again. Back when marks on a sheet of paper magically turned into words, where numbers moved in mysterious ways and there was something new to discover each day. This is what

it's like for our children. And it's the same for women during pregnancy, whatever their age: they undergo a complete transformation that makes them start learning all over again. Of course, the transformation is physical as well. Unfortunately, society doesn't teach us how to have a natural relationship with our bodies. This is especially true for women, who tend to be categorized based on appearance (either beautiful, to be exhibited; or imperfect, to be hidden away). No attention is paid to all the wonderfully complex components of female existence – menstruation, moods, cycles. With pregnancy, it all begins to make sense. Some parts grow, others soften; everything has a purpose.

The woman goes from being one person to two people in the same body. The machine is set in motion to do what it has been programmed for. First comes the nausea, then the sense of omnipotence. Knowing that she is now responsible for more than just herself, with every action directly affecting another human being, makes the woman suddenly feel strong. She feels a level of intimacy with herself and with her own sense of being, a sort of inner dialogue, which can probably never be fully shared with anyone else.

This intimacy translates into a solitude that is not isolation but rather a sense of purpose, of getting things ready. The most obvious symptom is "nesting": building a nest. So strong is the primitive instinct to create a safe space for her baby, the expectant mother becomes an expert at building alliances with relatives and friends, involving them all in buying furniture, equipment, sometimes even a house. An unstoppable force! Her determination derives from the certainty that nurturing the new arrival is her responsibility. This puts her in a completely new position: in a sense, this is when she becomes an adult.

Perhaps it's the loss of that spontaneous community that helped our grandmothers and great-grandmothers cope with maternity, which gives us this unique opportunity today to develop, through motherhood, leadership qualities that otherwise wouldn't be needed.

> ***Alone, but stronger and more determined to create a safe space in the face of uncertainty, expectant mothers become natural born leaders.***
>
> ***They just don't know it.***

And they can't know it because meanwhile, they're surrounded by signals telling them the opposite. In the office, their responsibilities are reduced, day after day. Increasingly, people forget to invite them to meetings or include them in email exchanges. The prospect of a prolonged absence followed by a return to work somehow "diminished" by time out for breastfeeding, new priorities and childhood illnesses, drives their work environment to gradually push them out. All this while they are still in the office, when at home they're investing resources and energy worthy of super-professionals. Resources and energy that, unnoticed and untapped, end up disappearing. Because environmental conditioning is stronger than everything else. "**What happens to a mother depends on her personality, her goals and the context in which she mothers**"[1].

Women are unaware of this because even the most formative experiences, such as motherhood, are seen as a simple fact of life unless they are studied and interpreted using the right tools.

And yet all it takes is a change of context for a life phase to become a leadership experience. "Knowing" certain things

changes your point of view, and seeing things in a new way can then change reality.

This is how humans evolve in thought and behavior: things happen in our minds, and the outside world follows. If women think of pregnancy as something difficult, lonely and a source of problems at work, then any potential for growth and strength hits a brick wall. And is eventually quashed.

Have you ever wondered why no one has studied leadership tendencies in relation to motherhood? Why do we never talk about mothers as natural leaders? The media and public opinion, social trends, the internet: wherever the issue comes up, motherhood is associated with the creation of life, but also with the continued, quasi-automatic exclusion of mothers from economic life. Which undermines their value in terms of "human capital", since this, too, is measured in terms of "productivity". As a result, women end up being considered only half as valuable as men. And yet maternal leadership stands out as soon as we look closely at how women lead.

This was explored in research by the Wellesley Centers for Women in 2001[2]. The aim was to study the feminine characteristics of leadership among a sample of powerful American women. The research did not include specific chapters or questions about motherhood. However, most of the women interviewed had so much to say about motherhood that a separate report was published in 2006[3].

> *This paper is based on interviews conducted with 60 prominent women leaders featured in Inside Women's Power (Sumru Erkut & Winds of Change Foundation). It is an elaboration of two unexpected themes that emerged in the interviews:*
>
> *(1) motherhood and other family roles as training ground for leadership and (2) motherhood as a*

> *metaphor for leadership. Recognizing good mothering as a metaphor and training for leadership was unexpected because it represents a radical departure from the early traditional advice for women aspiring to leadership to 'become more like men'. Some of the leaders in this study were secure enough in their work roles that they could describe leadership using language derived from their lived experience as women. At least among women who have reached top levels of leadership, there was a level of comfort that allowed them to bring to their work a more integrated sense of being a woman and a leader.*

Several interesting elements emerge from this research. First, all of the women interviewed (all recognized leaders within their firms and organizations), spontaneously and without prompting, referred to **motherhood as a sort of "training ground for leadership"**. Note the use of the term: "training ground". It means a place for constant, daily practice. Competitive matches are only played now and then, but a training ground is where you build the capacity to win.

Ten sets of negotiations with a child constitute training for any kind of negotiation on the job. Patience is a skill that can be learned. The same is true for the art of listening; regular interaction with adolescents sharpens the ability to read between the lines and pick up unspoken cues. There could hardly be a more fitting expression to describe how motherhood engenders leadership qualities: it is daily practice, as relentless as an athlete's training, and it hones certain skills to a professional level.

Another point worth noting is that, to define some aspects of workplace leadership, interviewees used terms directly derived from their mothering experiences. In this way, motherhood becomes a **metaphor for leadership**:

*Women — because we're not supposed to be in control, because we're not supposed to give orders, we're supposed to serve, right? — have a very different leadership style and it really is modeled on the normative ideal for mothering. It's a normative ideal, you know, not that all mothers by any stretch of the imagination do this, but the normative ideal is what I mean... **It's empowering rather than disempowering leadership** where you inspire others, where you elicit from others their highest capacities.*

That's what a mom is supposed to do, guide... It's drawing the power, it's supporting, it's nurturing the power [and] everybody has some kind of power.

***It's power to create, power to care for others: the truly human power that we have**.*

I guide others warmly, like a mom. I try to lead like a parent. And I'm proud of what I consider my woman-like characteristics. I'm warm, I'm very huggy. I have a sense of humor that lets me kind of fit...into very threatening subjects. I listen and listen and listen and listen.

None of the women interviewed used sporting metaphors for leadership, even though many of them were athletes - including some at a competitive level. Over the past thirty years or so, leadership vocabulary has been dominated by metaphors related first to war, and then to sports. Whatever the rules and level of team play, the goal has been the same: to "win", and to leave the loser behind. By contrast, **when applying the motherhood metaphor, the goal changes: the aim is to foster growth, and everyone is a winner**.

Clearly, only very capable women, confident in their role as leaders, could alter the language of leadership and associate it

with motherhood. **Changing jargon is no easy task**: vocabulary is a form of cultural identity to which we become attached, and which conditions us in many ways. Adopting new terminology is always risky: it requires courage, and openness to discussion. But changing vocabulary is the fastest way to change the underlying reality, and using motherhood as a metaphor for leadership brings an unexpected, controversial, intrinsically feminine touch to an area that has always been dominated by masculine terminology.

A leader, unexpectedly: at the center of decision-making

The thoughts that run through a woman's mind when she discovers she's pregnant, the range of emotions that arise, the physical changes, all of these coinciding factors are difficult to handle - especially given the magnitude of change within such a short time frame.

Motherhood transforms a woman from an independent individual, with a simple life based on her own needs and rhythms, into the involuntary center of a complex universe, to whom everyone suddenly turns for any decision concerning the child.

Planning for yourself and perhaps one other self-sufficient person, your partner, is fairly straightforward. There's plenty of room for mistakes and last-minute adjustments.

But the moment a child is born, even experienced hospital midwives immediately turn to the new mother for instructions: keep the baby in the mother's room, or take it to the nursery? Breastfeed or bottle? What clothes should the baby wear? And much more. All of this in front of a father who is present, but tends to remain silent.

From that moment on, it's a whirlwind of continual decision-making on every conceivable topic, regarding every minute and physical detail of the child's existence. In short, the mother undergoes **a substantial restructuring of herself and her own mentality**. Being faced with decisions on so many different issues (both trivial and important) is, in fact, excellent training; it develops the ability to analyze information and context, as well as to find quick and increasingly effective solutions.

> *My first reaction, I recall, was one of total dismay. Who decided that I should make all the decisions? Why did everyone, even the night nanny, defer to me for everything? I was used to "being the boss" in the office but never expected I would need this skill – and bear this responsibility – at home as well. And I didn't connect the dots: with grandparents, father, nannies and aunts, I didn't use the management techniques I had honed over ten years of working in multinational companies.*
>
> *I went right back to square one, thinking that in this new context, different rules would apply. It seemed only normal that the child depended on me, but I hadn't anticipated all of the organization and management surrounding the new arrival.*
>
> *Catapulted into a new role that was much more all-encompassing than I'd expected, I was making a hundred decisions a day and learning as I went; using trial-and-error techniques to prevent the next leaky diaper, the next fatigue-driven meltdown, the next diaper-run mixup with Gran and Pop. In short, my speed and decisiveness were crucial to the well-being of at least six family members and the survival of a newborn*[4].

KNOWING HOW TO MAKE DECISIONS

maam at work

Being a problem solver means knowing how to make decisions. The "knowing how" is what makes the difference. But where does this know-how come from? What are the fundamentals for problem-solving?

We can see what makes for better decisions by looking at mothers and at fathers who get the same daily practice:

1. **A sense of responsibility**: (from the Latin respondere - the capacity to respond). Making decisions means responding to requests from others. Parental responsibility is a two-way street:
    - Parents are responsible for the way in which the outside world relates to their child (problems at school, with friends, etc.).
    - Parents are also responsible for protecting their child from external factors, and from things he/she is too young to understand.

This very caretaking experience makes us more "adult" in the workplace too. We become more confident, more assertive, more decisive in expressing and defending our own opinions. We get straight to the point, without beating around the bush.

2. **Assessing the available information and resources quickly.** Research and focus groups have shown that women and others with parenting experience are quick at analyzing "big data" - databases that are complicated to read and interpret. In fact, caregiving experience improves our ability to simplify complex issues and make them more understandable.

You learn to "read" quickly, identify what matters, and decide what information to use.

3. **Intuition**: (from the Latin intueor, in = "inside", tueor = "watch" – enter inside with our eyes). This kind of knowledge is linked to quality number 2 (I'm intuitive if I can process more of the available information more quickly), and is transcendent in origin. But transcendence – so the wisdom goes – is achieved when you are able to perceive reality in full. Intuition is not only innate, but something that can "happen". It's a message that arrives when you least expect it, when you perceive the reality of things. When you're completely present during a conversation, listening to a complaint or a request. If you are truly present, if you "enter inside with your eyes", intuition strikes like a thunderbolt. It comes, it dazzles, it illuminates!
4. **Knowing how to make mistakes**: try, fail, and try again. A decision is not always permanent. A decision is situational; it is whatever needs to be done at that precise moment, based on a specific reading of reality. Every decision, right or wrong, leads to consequences. Once the decision has been made, you can revise, re-assess or change direction if necessary.
5. **Knowing how to involve others**: listening, empathizing, sharing both what we're sure of and what we still have doubts about. Understanding how to analyze problems and opportunities in concert with others. Sharing views, intentions, goals, anxieties, and opportunities. Knowing how to focus authentically on a desired outcome.
6. **Being willing to show vulnerability without making light of our fragility or insecurity.**

Strength and vulnerability help us understand the problem, find a way forward and make a sound decision.

A leader, unexpectedly: change management begins at home

Companies talk about "change management", but the concept doesn't take on full meaning until you've experienced the need for it in your own life. A child is a daily source of change: every day involves new processes, different demands, a "product" that is expressed in new ways and reveals unexpected needs with unknown timeframes.

The rules that you've cleverly worked out to facilitate daily routines (to make mealtimes a bit less desperate, for example) suddenly turn out to be useless or even counter-productive, when they worked perfectly just three days before.

We should take consolation in how quickly our children grow and change: soon they'll be eighteen years old, and ready to leave home. But those eighteen years are made up of days (6,570, to be precise - nearly 160,000 hours), and every day is wonderfully and relentlessly different from the one before.

So how do we deal with this constant change?

Why is it that a child who, until yesterday, went to sleep peacefully in her own bed, doesn't sleep a wink for four nights in a row?

How many more teeth are coming in?

Are those red spots chicken pox, dermatitis, an allergic reaction, or something else?

And what about next time?

Why does he like apples today when he hated them yesterday? I left the baby sitting in the living room and he didn't know how to walk. Where is he now?

Was that a word she just said?

Basically, where's the pattern in all of this?

If there is one, only a mother can find it. She's the one who is expected to write the rules, read all the signs and also possess a healthy dose of clairvoyance.

Let's take a look at the term "change management", as defined by Wikipedia:

> *The term change management (which means something like **governing transition**) refers to a structured approach to change in individuals, groups, organizations and societies which makes possible (and/or pilots) transition from a current to a future desired arrangement.*

Change Management, as it is commonly understood, provides tools and processes to recognize and understand change and **manage the human impact of a transition**.

In light of this, the good news is that, after a frustrating period spent trying to come up with set rules, a mother discovers the existence of an underlying pattern - one that keeps repeating itself. Every day sees new changes, but there is an underlying trend.

We mustn't be misled by occasional "jumps" forward ("developmental leaps"); throughout the process, there is a pattern that is shaped by the child's personality and the parenting technique applied.

To each action there is a similar reaction, so long as parents exercise fairly consistent behavior toward their child. A

healthy daily routine, around basic physical needs and safety, provides the essential mix of flexibility and firmness that will prevent disaster and set a pattern that is easy to follow.

And so emerges rule number one: nothing ever stays the same. Daily life is full of the unexpected, and the mother navigates between decisions and improvisation as easily as changing gears while driving.

KNOWING HOW TO MANAGE THE UNEXPECTED

maam at work

In a VUCA context (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous), how do we survive or, better still, thrive? MAAM focus groups revealed a skill parents develop by responding quickly to a child's ever-changing needs.

> *"Since I've become a mother, I've learned to pay much less attention to unimportant little details... I'm much better now at understanding what really matters".*
>
> *"With children, you have to get used to thinking ahead and not just focusing on the here and now".*
>
> *"Zig-zagging between umpteen different issues, I've opened up to new worlds and possibilities."*
>
> *"My job is event planning; motherhood has taught me a lot about staying focused and problem solving: very useful skills in my field, where last-minute problems are constantly popping up".*
>
> *"You get used to continuously providing different levels of service and response, adapting to whatev-*

er situation you're in at a given time. Every stage of development involves different needs. You have to adapt quickly, often improvising. You must learn to unlearn. Just because something worked before, doesn't mean it will work again next time".

Adapting to a child's constant changes is a little like working in a company today; there's no time for detailed market research, you must get by using whatever information is available. Either you adapt quickly and find a new solution, or you risk losing the client. And once a customer is gone, winning them back gets harder!

Being flexible means coping with the unexpected, and "adaptability" has become a sort of mantra in the business world. Why are some organizations better than others at managing change? 7

Some of the best examples come from firefighters, air traffic controllers and flight crews. Among groups that regularly handle emergencies, there is a state of collective awareness that involves the ability to pick up on weak signals, to focus fully, to identify and correct errors before a situation becomes a crisis. These are the main characteristics of high-responsibility groups:

- They are resilient: they know how to cope under pressure, when faced with multiple options in managing difficult and stressful situations.
- They know how to prioritize.
- They know how to handle fast-changing situations with incomplete information. This involves a constant process of "learning to unlearn".
- They communicate accurately and continuously.

- They talk about mistakes and how to avoid them. They embrace mistakes as learning opportunities.
- They share common experiences and learn from them. They make the most of their colleagues' strengths.
- They encourage different ideas and viewpoints, and exchange opinions on what is important.
- They foster ongoing improvisation.
- They find new solutions quickly, based on past experience.
- They engage often in discussion to find the best options for moving forward.
- They discuss doubts and drawbacks.
- They engage in face-to-face communication.

Leader, unexpectedly: time and resources are melded into a "super-energy"

From day one, the child knows instinctively that he/she has first priority. Knows it, expresses it, demands it. The arrival of a child turns priorities upside down, and absorbs energy we didn't even know we possessed. Since time is finite and cannot be stretched to suit our convenience, parents resort to another useful practice: multitasking.

The so-called "hyperdrive" kicks in: an intensified energy which is the capacity, triggered by motherhood, to shift into high gear. It enables you to remain efficient and focused in chaotic situations, by deciding quickly where shortcuts can and cannot be taken. Seen from the outside, the effect is one of maximum efficiency and an extraordinary ability to focus;

in reality, the mother is simply channeling available resources as effectively as possible, out of sheer necessity.

> *Many people ask me how I manage to stay on top of it all. All I do, quite simply, is become "laser focused" on the most important things. I am always "in the moment". I can deal with some issues at breakneck speed. I've become very protective of my time. My colleagues have learned that my time is valuable and this was an important step forward. They know when they come to me they need to be prepared and focused. The whole team has improved in efficiency.*[8]

This "super-energy" lets us respond to what our children need right now, not in a few minutes, as we keep track of everything happening at home and at work. Ninety percent of the women who participated in the MAAM survey affirmed **that motherhood had increased the amount of energy they put into everything they do.**

But where does this extra energy come from? How does all this additional work and responsibility, rather than driving women crazy, make them stronger and more prepared? Maybe it's because they have a powerful ally: Mother Nature. Have you ever wondered what happens inside a woman's brain, when her body changes to make room for another human being? Does everything stay the same? Are certain functions diminished, as we are sometimes led to think? The reality is something else. It has long been known that the brain is "plastic", that it never stops developing - especially during particularly stimulating or challenging experiences.

"There are times in life when there are windows in brain development, when the brain is more plastic than at other times. Motherhood is one of those times." 9

In fact, gray matter, which is responsible for selecting and transmitting information through the nervous system, increases in the mother's brain after delivery, for a period ranging from 2-4 weeks to 3-4 months. And that's only the start.

While the first changes in the brain occur during pregnancy, it's immediately after delivery that the rate of change becomes really remarkable.

A study by Kelly Lambert, a behavioral neuroscientist at the Randolph-Macon College in Virginia[10], explores enhanced cerebral functions observed among mother rats (whose brains have similar characteristics to those of humans). The rats were confronted with complex, dangerous situations, and changes in brain activity were linked directly to the maternal state.

- Periaqueductal gray matter increases: similar to our gray matter, it serves to elaborate and understand complex situations, through an increased capacity for attention.
- The willingness to take risks in order to feed their offspring increases, due to increased levels of prolactin and oxytocin produced by the hypothalamus.

This same line of research has revealed other significant changes in different areas of the maternal brain:

- In the **hypothalamus**, the central nervous system structure that regulates endocrine activity, the number and size of neurons grows, increasing the production of **oxytocin** and **dopamine**. Oxytocin, also known as the "relationship hormone", lowers stress and increases trust in others; it also heightens feelings of empathy during situation analysis, influencing generosity in the process.
- Dopamine levels rise during stressful situations, improving attention, short-term memory, goal-oriented behavior

and the ability to go without sleep.

- In the **hippocampus**, which is part of the limbic system and plays an important role in long-term memory and spatial navigation, there is a thickening of the dendritic spines, which serve to speed up signal transmission between different parts of the brain.
- In the olfactory **system**, there is neuron growth among both mothers and fathers.

These transformations and new connections are caused not only by hormones, but also by repetitive behavior.

"Brain plasticity, through the influence of hormones, mental stimulation and repetitive behaviors, such as occurs in mothers, contributes to the change and development of the brain throughout life. New neurons and new connections are made all the time"[11].

The stimuli received from children are also a powerful influence on the mother. In responding to these demands, mothers must assimilate emotional and cognitive information about their offspring, and evaluate competing requests before deciding how to act. This process is continual.

And so the brain learns to "learn":

> *"The mother's rich emotional life enables the most advanced part of the brain "to imagine and simulate" events which have yet to occur, in an attempt to discover elements that the more instinctive structure knows already. The predictions that the mother is capable of thus become increasingly accurate, because she has learned the habit of reflection"*[12].

Constant, intensive nurturing enhances the "paths" used by the brain to process stimuli from interpersonal relationships.

This stems from an improved ability to switch the relevant areas on or off, in response to stimuli received from the child. Unlike other animals though, a human mother's reaction is not automatic; she can choose whether to be selfless or not, and break with instinctive behavior.

Once we've recognized the superpowers at work in a mother's brain, the question remains: **how long do these wonders last?** Dr. Lambert has the answer: "It seems that the effects of motherhood, such as super-perception and brain development, last a very long time, or may even be permanent"[13].

Caring for others builds leadership skills, whether or not you're a parent

In the light of the different transformations involved in maternity, does this mean that motherhood is enough (or essential) to turn women into good leaders?

Although Stephen R. Covey (bestselling author of T*he seven habits of highly effective people* and *The seven habits of highly-effective families*) credits family context for everything he knows about leadership, the answer to the above question is, of course, no.

Not all parents automatically acquire managerial competence through raising their children. And it's possible **to develop excellent leadership qualities through completely different forms of activity**, such as volunteer work or caring for parents or grandchildren.

> *Parents don't have a monopoly on the lessons learned from caring for others*[14].
>
> *Motherhood is simply the most widespread experience of caring for another person. Unfortunately, it is also*

one of the most clearly problematic, from a career point of view.

It is a time of great change, one that disrupts the existing patterns in a woman's life (and increasingly, in the father's life as well).

Motherhood brings about a unique combination of circumstances: extreme feelings of uncertainty due to the unknown (and to a culture that doesn't make things easy), combined with an accelerated learning phase courtesy of Mother Nature, who endows the woman with enough energy and brainpower to ensure survival of the species. The resulting paradox is the emergence of a woman with domestic-life skills that would be a huge asset in the professional world, but who is limited by society's failure to recognize her full value and potential. Another huge paradox is reflected in business schools, which teach leadership skills through a wide range of experiences (from training whales, to survival courses, to cookery classes and even flight simulators), ignoring the most instructive and vital leadership experience of all: that of caring for, nurturing and empowering another human being.

It all depends on how you look at things.

Australian scientist, Allan Snyder, compares pregnant women to Albert Einstein:

"Women's memory doesn't deteriorate with pregnancy: rather, their attention shifts towards everything that is of immediate importance. Einstein was known for forgetting even where he had put high value checks, not due to bad memory, but because his attention was taken by far more important things".

Notes

1. Ravenna Helson, *Research Psychologist at the Institute of Personality and Social Research*, quoted in the book "The Mommy Brain".
2. Samru Erkut, *Inside Women's Power: learning from leaders*, Wellesley Centers for Women 2001.
3. Samru Erkut, *Leadership: What's Motherhood Got to Do with It?*, Wellesley Centers for Women 2006.
4. Interview conducted for MAAM (July–October 2013). Other MAAM interview testimonies in this chapter come from the same research program (2012–2017).
5. Comment by a woman interviewed in Moe Grzelakowski's, *Mother leads best*, Kaplan Business 2005.
6. Definition by Kevin Ochsner, a neuroscientist at Columbia University.
7. Karl E. Weick and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe, *Managing the Unexpected: Resilient Performance in an Age of Uncertainty*, 2nd ed., Jossey-Bass, 2007.
8. Colleen Arnold, General Manager, IBM global communications, in Moe Grzelakowski, *Mother leads best*, Kaplan Business 2005.
9. David Lyons, primatologist at Stanford University.
10. *Scientific American*, January 2006.
11. Dr. Craig Kinsley, Professor of Neuroscience at the University of Richmond.
12. GENES, BRAIN AND MATERNAL BEHAVIOUR, Natalia López-Moratalla. Professor of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. University of Navarre.
13. Dr. Kelly G. Lambert, neuroscientist, Chair of the Psychology Department at Randolph Macon College.
14. Ann Crittenden, *If You've Raised Kids, You Can Manage Anything: Leadership Begins at Home*, Gotham Books, 2004.