

## Description

## Leadership Is Innate To Midwives And Rowers!

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### Introduction



Franka Cadee

My home is in the East of the Netherlands, in a small university town called Wageningen, on The Rhine. I love that river because it is so changeable. The water level can rise and fall by about five metres, depending on the season and rainfall in Germany. So, it varies from a narrow 10m-wide river to a large 1km wide lake covering the flood plains.

Rowing is teamwork

Work and travel permitting, I row on the river Rhine twice a week, in a boat for four rowers called a scull. Rowing is quite a technical sport, so though it might sound strange, the physical exercise of rowing is secondary to the mental effort. It takes focus and good teamwork to scull well, and every time I row, I learn.

I have good and bad rowing days. Most days I enjoy the birds and the freight ships that pass by on their way from Rotterdam to Germany and back. Yet on other days it is hard work, not just because of more wind, rain and strong unpredictable currents but because rowing demands focus as well as perseverance. Indifference or lack of concentration disturbs the teamwork, especially the synchronised efficiency of the oars.

Whatever the situation, I enjoy the challenge of stepping into that scull to navigate whatever comes because I love the boat, the sound of the oars and the river. And I always step out with new energy and ideas. In this way my rowing has many similarities to how I see my leadership role as ICM President.

> Like with sculling, I have enjoyed the challenge of stepping into the role of ICM President to navigate whatever came along because I love ICM and midwives, plus the women we serve.

The person that determines the speed and rhythm of the oars is called the stroke and it is especially that position which I enjoy because it challenges me in my leadership skills. The stroke, like the ICM President, needs to listen to and consider her team constantly.

It’s crucial not to go too fast, nor too slow, and to be predictable and consistent. For both roles it is essential to communicate in clear language about expectations and possible dangers as well as to ask for help and jointly celebrate achievements. The boat’s journey, just like that of the ICM President, is determined by good teamwork.

**Eight characteristics of good leadership**

During my six-year tenure as ICM President I have given quite a few presentations about leadership, and although my insights have developed with time, I have found the eight characteristics of good leadership as described by Dr Lorri Sulpizio, the Director of Leadership Academy in San Diego, California, inspirational.

These eight characteristics; being optimistic, being persistent, using your voice, living a life of passion and purpose, asking and offering help, being authentic, embracing change, and embodying a strong sense of self and confidence, appear to be so obvious because they are achievable for all of us.

Yet they have a depth to them, and just like with rowing, it requires focus, being open to constantly learn and accept mistakes, as well as good teamwork to achieve them. So, while I row, I practise my leadership. Because leadership requires constant practise.

I believe all midwives are innate leaders and Sulpizio’s eight characteristics manifest themselves in all of us to a greater or lesser extent and this constantly changes, depending on our circumstances and our learning curve.



**How we lead**

So, what makes leadership innate to midwifery? The Oxford dictionary defines leadership as “the action of leading a group of people or organisation”. Which is all very well, but in my opinion the crux of the matter does not so much lie in the fact that we lead, but how we lead that makes midwives innate leaders.

Just a quick search on the internet shows the various ways we define a leader. Leaders can be authoritative, affiliative, democratic or pacesetting. Then we have the whole issue of female versus male – or patriarchal versus matriarchal leadership. As midwives and rowers, we know different styles of leadership can be appropriate depending on the context.

**Trust**

I can be authoritative when a large and heavily loaded cargo ship is approaching the scull, at times I set the pace when we need to get back before sunset, yet when we have time, it is more likely to be a democratic process. And the other rowers trust my intentions and even though I am the stroke, they have their own responsibility and I trust that they will intervene when necessary. However, whatever style is used I am aware that I may never abuse the power that comes along with the privileged position of being ICM President, or the stroke of the scull, or the midwife next to the birthing person.

> All midwives will understand the nuance of using different leadership styles with different people adapting to different contexts, because midwives are innate leaders.

Over the last six years of my tenure as ICM President I have learned to recognise and grow the leader within me. I have also learned to recognise the leadership characteristics in the midwives and rowers that I’ve had the privilege to meet. And I trust that the next generation of midwives will discover and grow their own inner leader so that they can navigate ICM and midwives to a brighter future for the sake of sexual and reproductive justice for all!

The 33rd ICM Triennial Conference takes place in Bali, Indonesia 11-14 June 2023 – see here for more details and registration.




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