Laudatio by Daan van Knippenberg, Professor of Organizational Behavior, RSM, Erasmus University

Dies Natalis Erasmus University Rotterdam, 8 November 2012

On the occasion of the 99th Dies Natalis of our university, we honor Professor Alice Eagly from Northwestern University, where she is Professor of Psychology, Faculty Fellow of the Institute for Policy Research, and Professor of Management & Organizations, for her outstanding contributions to the study of gender and leadership.

Honoring Professor Eagly for her contributions to behavioral science is not an original idea. I could fill this laudatio telling you about the academic awards and recognitions she received. I could for instance tell you about a study that identifies Alice Eagly as one of the most influential social psychologists of all times. I won’t. The honorary doctorate we award Professor Eagly today is in honor of her contributions to the study of gender and leadership, but we should also recognize that her contributions to behavioral science are far from limited to that. There would also be a strong case for an honorary doctorate in recognition of her major contributions to the study of attitudes and attitude change, or for her outstanding work in sex differences outside of the leadership domain. I could easily fill my time slot on this program telling you about these other contributions because they are major indeed. I could for instance tell you about her work in evolutionary psychology in which she addresses some important and widely shared misinterpretations in the field. I won’t. What I do want to do in bringing up these other issues is recognize that in honoring Professor Eagly we are honoring a truly great scholar indeed. Now, allow me to make that case for Professor Eagly’s contributions to the study of gender and leadership.

It is not too difficult to see that gender and leadership is an issue of great societal importance. Women are seriously underrepresented in leadership positions and it is hard to see this as anything other than an injustice. Even when the number of women in leadership positions is slowly but steadily rising, it is clear that at the current rate it will take quite some time before women are no longer underrepresented in leadership positions. This raises the simple but important question, “what is going on here?”.

Professor Eagly’s work stands out in the contributions it has made to answering this
question. The question is deceivingly simple, but as her research shows, gender and leadership is one of those thorny issues where facts are easily misinterpreted and people’s reliance on their own subjective judgment is an important part of the problem. In short, it is an issue in demand of good science. This is exactly what Professor Eagly’s work has brought to the scene. In this respect, I would highlight three things to illustrate her contribution to the study of gender and leadership.

First, Professor Eagly has developed well-grounded and well-supported theory to capture the gendered nature of leadership. In a nutshell, this research shows that the combination of gender stereotypes and leader stereotypes creates two major hurdles for female leadership. For one, there is a pervasive but misguided belief in the superior qualities of men as leaders. Our leader stereotypes are masculine much more than feminine and this leads us to see greater leadership qualities in men than in women. People believe they see evidence of the superiority of male leadership in their personal experience as well as in the current state of affairs in which men have been selected into leadership positions much more than women, presumably by people quite capable of making such selection decisions. People do not realize, however, how much these personal judgments and selection decisions are influenced by gender stereotypes and leadership stereotypes rather than by objective evidence of effective leadership. Moreover, gender stereotypes also tend to prescribe what is seen as appropriate: women behaving in “masculine, leader-like” ways rather than in more feminine ways are seen as acting less appropriately and penalized for their deviation from the gender stereotype. The importance of this work lies in that it identifies the cognitive and social mechanisms that make us fall into the trap of our own stereotypes.

Second, in developing her analysis, Professor Eagly has systematically documented the evidence for gender differences in leadership in a series of meta-analyses – analyses that quantitatively summarize the available empirical evidence. It is not an exaggeration to say that her meta-analyses capture the strongest, most robust evidence we have regarding gender and leadership. This is not the time and place to tell you about the results of these analyses, but let me just mention that one of these analysis in fact shows that women are more likely than men to show a leadership style associated with leadership effectiveness. These meta-analyses are tremendously important, because they provide the strongest possible empirical counterpoint to the subjective beliefs about gender and leadership that
seem to legitimize the current state of affairs. This is critical in countering beliefs in the value of subjective personal experience that might suggest that men are better leaders, as well as in countering misinterpretations of the fact that men are overrepresented in leadership positions as evidence of men’s greater qualifications as leaders.

A third contribution of great importance to our understanding of the issue of gender and leadership is Professor Eagly's analysis that demonstrates that the challenges faced by women seeking leadership positions is not just the so-called *glass ceiling* that would only apply at higher hierarchical levels. Rather, these challenges are better captured by the analogy of a *labyrinth* – challenges that are encountered right from entry into the system and not just after having risen through the ranks as the glass ceiling suggests. The importance of this insight lies at least in part in the implications it suggests for managing and changing these leadership challenges. In that respect, Professor Eagly's work stands out in not only delivering the diagnosis – developing the fundamental research – but also in prescribing the treatment – developing the implications for practice. From the perspective of research in management, this is all we could ask for: the development of strong fundamental theory leading to well-grounded implications to change organizational practice.

The combination of these three major contributions – theory to advance our understanding of real as well as presumed gender differences in leadership, quantitative integrations of the available evidence to capture the state of the science, and translation of these insights to hands-on implications for practice – makes Professor Eagly's contributions to the study of gender and leadership stand out as the embodiment of what behavioral science should strive for – in the study of gender and leadership as well as in other areas of behavioral science.

It is therefore a great pleasure and a great honor to now move on to formally awarding the honorary doctorate to Professor Eagly in the customary manner.

**By virtue of the powers invested in us by statute and in accordance with the decision of the Doctorate Board, I hereby confer upon you, Alice Eagly, the title of Doctor honoris causa, together with all the rights, which statute and custom attach to this**
degree. As token and proof thereof, I present you with the corresponding charter, duly signed and sealed, and clothe you with the cappa.”