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## ***Tough Cookies: Leadership Lessons From 100 Years of the Girl Scouts* by Kathy Cloninger With Fiona Soltes**

**Claudia Harris<sup>1</sup>**

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Through the lens of her own leadership of the Girl Scouts organization, Kathy describes her vision for participants in Girl Scouting to become leaders. Cloninger, who retired from her position as chief executive officer (CEO) of the Girl Scouts in 2011, completely revamped the Girl Scout organization during her tenure of 8 years.

The book is summarized in the following 10 paragraphs. Following those, some uses for the book in teaching management are described.

### **Chapter 1: Leadership Out of Balance**

Cloninger points out the lack of female leadership in the United States. Less than 3% of CEOs are women; girls' achievements are not highlighted like those of boys; girls on television are presented as highly sexualized and objectified. Her conclusion? The United States would benefit from a balance of men and women in leadership positions.

### **Chapter 2: How I Got Here**

Cloninger describes her own professional history and that of Girl Scout founder Juliette Low.

### **Chapter 3: Talk Less, Listen More**

The title of this chapter is a bit confusing, as it is not descriptive of its content. In it, Cloninger reiterates the effects of U.S. cultural norms on girls—their lack of encouragement for leadership positions—and her efforts through the Girls Scouts to change these norms.

### **Chapter 4: A Logical Conclusion**

Cloninger again notes the differences in how men and women are treated. The media focus on the hairstyles, dress, and family concerns of female leaders, while generally ignoring these issues in men. And she highlights the media attention to individual men, such as on basketball teams, while the media document the group outcomes of women's teams.

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### **Chapter 5: Facing the Brutal Truths**

For those who teach in the management discipline, the meat of the book begins in this chapter. As Cloninger began her work as Girl Scout CEO, she read sources from business literature, including Pietersen's *Reinventing Strategy* and Collins's work on leadership. She faced the "brutal truths" of declining membership, a fragmented program, competition for girls' time from other activities, and the need for unification among the 312 independent Girl Scout councils. Given the urgency of the problems facing the Girl Scouts, Cloninger chose to overhaul the entire organization, rather than to work on one problem at a time.

### **Chapter 6: "Trust Me, This Is Going to Work"**

With advisor Willie Pietersen, Professor of the Practice of Management at Columbia University, Cloninger began a consultative process with 26 strategists from across the United States. Noting that the Girl Scout personnel structure contains 100 volunteers for each paid staff member, Cloninger was convinced that listening to the suggestions of volunteers was essential to the success of the reconstruction process. Interestingly, the group decided that the customers of the Girl Scout organization are the volunteers, rather than the girls they are serving. If the volunteers are not satisfied, there will be no Girl Scouts. From this collaborative process emerged a new mission statement, five priorities, and a new organizational structure.

The most difficult part of this overhaul was whittling the 312 local councils down to 109 local councils. Cloninger generously acknowledges the cooperation of Girl Scout staff members who relinquished paying positions, stating that they were willing to put the greater good above their personal interests.

### **Chapter 7: What to Keep, and What to Let Go**

The Girl Scout promise and the bridging ceremonies to the next level of scouting were retained as important symbols of the Girl Scout institution. The wearing of complete uniforms for older girls was let go, in favor of smaller emblems of scouting, such as a badge sash or pin. The Girl Scouts had traditionally met weekly in troops, a model that had become problematic with increasing demands on girls'

time; subsequently, a model of short-term, one-time outreach programs was tried but rejected when girls who participated did not remain committed to scouting. The new method for delivering the scouting experience to girls is called “Pathways,” and allows for flexibility in the length, focus, and location of a variety of activities.

### Chapter 8: Oh, Yeah? Prove It!

By shifting the Girl Scout brand to “leadership for girls,” Cloninger began to measure outcomes of the program. Similar to an outcomes-based performance appraisal system, the Girl Scouts have adopted the practice of documenting specific results of their programs. The organization also implemented an institutionalized system of communication between Girl Scout leaders and headquarters personnel and among Girl Scout leaders, parents, and the girls themselves.

### Chapter 9: Shaking the Money Tree

Cloninger suggests that the Girl Scout organization can engage in more successful fund-raising by approaching donors with specific goals in mind. For example, a firm that hires engineers can be encouraged to help develop more female engineers. These appeals are based on providing support for girls.

### Chapter 10: Girl Scout, Phone Home

In this closing chapter, Cloninger urges readers to become involved in Girl Scouting.

*Tough Cookies* provides some interesting insights for teaching management. One aspect of this narrative is Cloninger’s unabashed use of management principles in creating change. In preparation for the process of transforming the Girl Scouts, despite her background in social services, she read widely in management literature and then applied the principles she had encountered.

Another use of this book for teaching management has to do with the execution of creative problem solving. Many people who teach management classes have used the example of Ideo, a design and innovation consulting firm, to show how teamwork can contribute to creativity. In the video (available on YouTube) of Ideo employees designing a new grocery shopping cart, employees are followed as they generate wilder and wilder ideas for the new cart. Finally, their manager steps in, saying that it is time for “an adult” to intervene, showing that

creativity needs direction. Cloninger begins her task of revamping the Girl Scouts in a leadership role. She invites participation, but it is clear from the beginning of the process that she has some notions about what the end product should look like. Her approach provides another view of the use of employee creativity in problem solving.

Cloninger’s attempt to document the outcomes of Girl Scout programs, especially as she approaches funding sources, is a good example of the difficulties faced when setting up meaningful performance appraisal systems. For example, establishing that a girl has developed self-confidence cannot be easily defined or documented. Thus, her examples of measures used are instructive.

Another management topic illustrated in *Tough Cookies* is the wisdom of making an organizational transformation, rather than seeking incremental change.

Finally, Cloninger’s up-to-date documentation of the images of and expectations for girls in U.S. society adds to studies of diversity in the management classroom.

*Tough Cookies* is a fast read; in fact, it probably could have been shortened, but our publishing industry does not allow for books that are “too” short. In addition, the documentation of sources could be better done. Overall, however, it would be an interesting addition to a supplemental reading list, perhaps for extra credit, and would be a worthy addition to a school library.

### REFERENCE

Cloninger, K. (2011). *Tough cookies: Leadership lessons from 100 years of the Girl Scouts*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Claudia Harris** earned a bachelor’s degree in mathematics and then taught junior high school mathematics. After completing an MBA, she worked as a financial analyst for Hercules, Inc. In 1984, she earned a PhD in management and finance from the University of Utah. She retired as a professor of management from North Carolina Central University. Her research interests include cognitive and ethical development, cultural diversity, the process of change, and using fiction to teach management. She has served in many capacities in the Eastern Academy of Management, publishing more than 40 papers in journals and proceedings. She may be reached at [charris1213@bellsouth.net](mailto:charris1213@bellsouth.net).