

[Home](#) | [Business](#) | [Career](#) | [Workplace](#) | [Community](#) | [Money](#) | [International](#)

Advancing Women In Leadership

Making It Work: Women's Ways of Leading

Charlotte Matthews Harris, Ed.D.

Penny L Smith, Ph.D.

Rosalind Pijaux Hale, Ed.D.

HARRIS, SMITH, & HALE, SPECIAL RWE ISSUE, FALL, 2002

In order to be successful in the male-dominated public sphere, women in educational leadership have had to effectively integrate the best of what is stereotypically feminine (private) with the best of what is stereotypically masculine (public).

An examination of women in leadership from a feminine perspective or point of view reveals that a female organizational culture exists and that women exhibit ways of leading that are distinctively different from the ways men lead. Women's ways of leading are consistent with recent trends in leadership research and theory and provide a model for education that could lead to "a more caring community and a safer world" (Noddings, 1991, p. 70). Yet, historically, society has been viewed as divided into two domains—the public sphere and the private sphere. Predominantly male, the public sphere "demands independence, rationality, and self-reliance," whereas the private sphere, predominantly female, reflects "dependence, emotionality, and support" (Forisha, 1981, p. 10). That which is public is primary, and that which is private is secondary. Since women have been relegated to the private sphere, their values and experiences have not been considered until recently.

Recent trends in research on power and leadership "reflect a shift in focus from a leader-dominated view to a broader one of follower involvement in expanding power" and "presume the willingness of leaders themselves to embrace the notion of sharing power with subordinates," thereby fostering "the development of leadership in others" (Hollander & Offermann, 1990, pp. 179-185). Such approaches promote good interpersonal relations, team leadership, worker participation in decision making, and the establishment of a climate of openness, mutual trust, respect, concern, and receptiveness. The shift in the way of thinking about leadership to a less bureaucratic, more interactive process, which is adaptive to the nature of the task, the talents of the individuals in the group, and the talents of the leader herself, allows for individual differences and encourages leadership behavior in others. This leadership paradigm is less male-centered, more holistic, more closely aligned with women's worldview, and more conducive to change.

Using an electronic discussion format, we three women in higher education administration shared and reflected upon our stories of assuming positions of leadership in schools, colleges, or departments of education while untenured assistant professors. The excerpt below provides a glimpse of our personal perspective on a topic we feel is of interest to many other women in leadership positions.

It All Started This Way

Woman #1. Oh my! I often wonder about how and really why I said yes. I had been hired as a new tenure track assistant professor in the department right from a middle school principalship. Prior to my position as a principal, I had been a high school principal and had been in other positions of leadership in my school district for a number of years. In addition, I had 21 years of experience in K-12 schools and a doctorate in educational leadership. After I had been a member of the department of educational leadership and foundations for one year, the chair decided to leave. Rather than search for another person who would also be chair, a veteran faculty member asked me to do it. In turn I asked him why not him. He had been at the university for as long as I had been in K-12 education. However, he said my leadership background and the fact that we had a large number of students in the graduate program who were majoring in educational administration indicated we needed someone as chair who had that background. What a convincing argument! There was no discussion about getting tenure. I did not ask and he provided no additional input about it. So, I said yes. And now that I think back, I think I was somewhat honored that he asked me since he was a veteran full professor.

Woman #2. I think being flattered as well as the perceived status attracted me. I think I have always had this quiet ambitiousness about me. It started this way with me. I was a high school English teacher in Maryland for 11 years when I was offered a position in development and public relations at an HBCU in Ohio. This was my introduction into higher education administration and, spending eight years there, I learned a lot about the culture of higher education. While there I pursued and completed a doctorate in Educational Foundations at a large university in the area and decided to pursue an academic position. I was hired as an assistant professor at a small university in middle Georgia to coordinate a master's level teacher education program in secondary education. I really enjoyed this position. It was a position that required some administrative duties as well as teaching, advising, and field supervision. I loved the variety of it and the autonomy it allowed. During my second year, my department chair, who had been acting chair since my arrival, was taking the spring quarter off for maternity leave. She did not desire to continue as chair. The dean asked for two recommendations to fill the position from within the department. She asked me if I would consider it because I was the only faculty member in the Department of Foundations and Secondary Education whose background was in educational foundations. Being "flattered," I agreed to consider it as long as I could continue doing what I was currently doing. One other person in the department, one who had been there for several years, was interested, so both of us were recommended to the dean. I was appointed acting chair for the remainder of that quarter and then received the permanent appointment beginning July 1. I was the most junior member in the department, but the dean chose me. I served three years doing both the job of department chair and the full-time job of coordinating the Master of Arts in Teaching program.

Woman #1. Wow, do we work this hard all of the time? I continue to look at how women have to serve in a variety of positions prior to being selected for a leadership role. Why is that? Why does it seem like we have to prove ourselves? Or is this just me being...oh, I don't know how to describe the feeling. It just seems like we really come into our positions of leadership with an awful lot of experience. Oh, I know it helps. But could we have been ready earlier if we had been given the chance in K-12 education?

Woman #3. My career in leadership began when I had been teaching third grade for three years at an elementary school. The day I completed my last class to add-on educational leadership certification at the master's level, the assistant superintendent for instruction called and asked if I would interview for the

assistant principal's position at another elementary school in the county. Why, of course, I was quite "flattered" (This is definitely one of the themes I see emerging!) and willingly agreed to take the challenge. I like risk-taking and new beginnings, so an opportunity like this one was hard to pass by. After two years as an elementary assistant principal, I was approached by an assistant professor at a local university who asked if I would come to the university level. Who me? Teach college? I had never thought of doing that. But, of course, being "flattered" I gladly accepted. I served in that position for two years when the chair resigned to take another position. I was asked by the assistant dean, whom I greatly admired, to take the position of acting chair of early childhood education. Having had no university administrative experience, I could not fathom why she would ask me. There were others whom I felt could have done the job, but I took the challenge. There was no discussion of tenure or promotion at that point and, like Woman #1, I did not ask. At the end of that year, I applied for the chair's job when a national search was conducted. I got the job and the rest, as they say, is history. I served in this position three years. When the chair of the middle grades department resigned to take another position, the dean combined the departments of early childhood and middle grades into one department and asked that I be chair of both. After much discussion and negotiation, I was compensated for accepting another department as part of my already heavy teaching and administrative load. It is interesting to note that when I accepted the position of chair of early childhood and middle grades, I didn't feel flattered. I guess I'm getting wiser in this progression of leadership opportunities.

Woman #2. OK, so why do you think we were asked to assume these positions? What were the characteristics that we exhibited? What are the characteristics that make it work? Do you think our paths to leadership were different from that of men?

Woman #1. Why were we asked? I'm sorry but I think our skills were only part of it. I do not mean to blow anyone's bubble, but I mean it. Now that I think back, I really feel we were asked because they (men) knew we would be flattered and not ask the same kinds of questions a man might ask, especially the kind about tenure, promotion, and salary. Ladies, we were naïve! Yes, we just have to admit it. Now, we are getting better, I mean smarter, but back then we were just naïve. I know a female who just accepted a position as dean and asked for an assistant up front. That is smart. Did Woman #3 think about asking for an assistant when she was given an extra department? Maybe, but I doubt it.

Now what skills do we have? We are planners; we are communicators; we are doers. We have had to be all of our lives so it just comes naturally. We have never taken anything or anyone for granted so we do a lot ourselves. Others call this characteristic being a workaholic. I hate that term, and it seems that term and being aggressive are used to describe women more than men. It is unfair. We are smart and we need to be given credit for that. Do we have different paths to leadership than men? Yes and no. I tend to think we have more time in the trenches, but then I meet people like Woman #3 and I think maybe not. But Woman #3 is a White female. Then I meet people like Woman #2 and then I think maybe not. She is a Black female and she moved up pretty quick. But, both were naïve because, whereas I had been a principal and had a large number of administrative jobs behind me, neither of you had that kind of experience. Still I think that if we look at the paths of women versus men, we will see more years of varied experience by women, whether in leadership positions or not, than by men prior to getting into a dean's or chair's position.

Woman #3. I like to think that I was asked to assume the chair's position because of my work ethic and personality. The dean knew he had a hard worker who would at least try to get along with people. Like Woman #1, I am a workaholic. He mentioned my organizational skills, my ability to see the future and plan for it, and my tact and skill in dealing with people. Boy, was I flattered! So much so that I didn't ask for anything...except the great title of being chair. Nothing about tenure, promotion, assistants, etc. When I was asked to take on another department, I successfully negotiated for compensation. All the while, I quietly contemplated if the negotiation would have been that difficult if a male had been asked to do the

same job.

Woman #2. Yes, our work ethic is different. We do. And we do everything. We don't expect anyone else to do anything that we won't do ourselves. We are self-directed. The leadership potential, I think, is evident. We're smart, critical and creative thinkers, who work well with our colleagues. I am really curious to know who and why our male peers were tapped for leadership. And we always get the job done and done well.

I really don't think I would have been asked to assume a chair position, being a second-year untenured assistant professor, at another institution. Yet, having returned to Ohio, I have assumed the position of assistant to the chair in my second year as an untenured assistant professor in a college of education in a larger university. I just think the potential and the aptitude show. I mean, Woman #3, why were you tapped to be assistant principal after just three years of teaching? Your flair for leadership exudes.

Woman #3. What does all of this mean for us now? What do you think we do on a daily basis that allows us to survive? Obviously, we are all very busy with many tasks. Do you ever notice others don't seem as busy? Do we bring this on ourselves? Do we work harder and longer because we're women in a "man's" world or because we are who we are?

Woman #2. I must say that I think I do what I do because of who I am. I don't feel in competition with men—like I have to prove something. I like doing things for myself; I always have. It's as if no one could do it as well, or like I want it done. I like multi-tasking. I like challenge; I like change. I like being in control, but I also like sharing control—team leadership. I just like to be in control of my own destiny. I guess I have a lot of confidence in what I do and how I do it. I like knowing and growing; understanding how things work. I find that I believe more in what people do than in what they say. I find that there are a number of folks in leadership positions who do not know which end is up, so I find that people have to show me that they know what they are doing and what they are talking about before I will trust enough to let go. I know that I try to do too much. I do think there is something in the how we are socialized as women that makes us want to make sure that everything comes together right. I think traditionally women are the worker bees. So when you put leading and doing together, you get us—SUPERWOMEN!

Woman #3. Like Woman #2, I am independent. I too do not feel that I am competing with men...or other women for that matter. I am competing with myself. I have always had very high expectations for who I am and my actions. If I see a task that needs to be done, I like to research all angles and carry it out to fruition. I take great pride in my work, but that same pride and accomplishment is what tends to make me a very tired soul. In terms of survival, what do I do? I listen to jazz music, light candles in my office, and try to focus on one task at a time. The most important thing for me is to keep life in perspective. I am living and breathing and hopefully making a positive impact on those around me. That is what keeps me going.

Women's Ways of Leading

Although the topic of our conversation is untenured women in higher education administration, our conversation itself, particularly the communicative style, is consistent with the literature on women's ways of leading. A conceptual framework for women's ways of leading can be found in the work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986). In their discussion of women's ways of knowing, they describe a way of viewing the world that is characteristic of what they refer to as "constructed knowledge," "a position in which women view all knowledge as contextual, experience themselves as creators of knowledge, and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing" (p. 15). Constructivist women "show a high tolerance for internal contradiction and ambiguity" and completely abandon the "either/or" way of thinking so characteristic of a man's worldview—"the

tendency to compartmentalize thought and feeling, home and work, self and other” (p. 137).

Constructivist women are devoted to “real talk,” which “requires careful listening” and “implies a mutually shared agreement that together you are creating the optimum setting so that half-baked or emergent ideas can grow”; it is “a way of connecting to others and acquiring and communicating new knowledge,” in which “domination is absent” and “reciprocity and cooperation are prominent.” In addition, constructivist women “resist premature generalization about what they would do or what should be done” and “insist on a respectful consideration of the particulars of everyone’s needs and frailties.” With an approach that is humanistic, caring, and empowering, they “show an immense respect for the world and the people in it” and resolve conflict by trying to understand it “in the context of each person’s perspectives, needs, and goals” (Belenky et al., 1986, pp. 144-149).

“Real talk” is a style of communication that is conducive to effective leadership. Managers devote a large percentage of their time to communication, and men and women have very different styles of communicating. Hyman (1980) posits that effective leadership depends on effective interpersonal communication, and that “women have their own uniquely feminine communication style” that fosters good interpersonal relations and transmits “warmth, helpfulness, concern, and satisfaction” (pp. 41-43).

Women tend to use language that encourages community building and is more polite and cheerful than the language of men. A number of studies have documented that in verbal discourse, women are more likely than men to express courtesy, gratitude, respect, and appreciation. Women show respect for their audience through listening, echoing, summarizing, polite speech, and nonantagonistic responses. (Shakeshaft, 1989, p. 181)

Women who have achieved success in educational leadership possess characteristics and demonstrate behaviors that are essential for needed educational reform and the creation of a truly humanistic educational community. In order to be successful in the male-dominated public sphere, women in educational leadership have had to effectively integrate the best of what is stereotypically feminine (private) with the best of what is stereotypically masculine (public). The result is a female organizational culture and women’s ways of leading—a both/and worldview that is holistic, inclusive, and empowering; that can allow both women and men to escape the trap of their stereotypes; and that can potentially lead the way in bridging the gap between theory and practice in education and serve as a model for educational change.

References

Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1986). *Women’s ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind*. New York: Basic Books.

Forisha, B. L. (1981). The inside and the outsider: Women in organizations. In B. L. Forisha & B. H. Goldman (Eds.), *Outsiders on the inside: Women & organizations* (pp. 9-30). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Hollander, E. P., & Offermann, L. R. (1990). Power and leadership in organizations: Relationships in transition. *American Psychologist*, 45, 179-189.

Hyman, B. (1980). Responsive leadership: The woman manager’s asset or liability? *Supervisory Management*, 25(8), 40-43.

Noddings, N. (1991/1992, December/January). The gender issue. *Educational Leadership*, pp. 65-70.

Shakeshaft, C. (1989). *Women in educational administration*. Newbury, CA: Corwin Press.

Authors

Dr. Charlotte Matthews Harris is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education and Human Services at Wright State University.

Dr. Penny L. Smith is an Associate Professor and Chair of Extended Teacher Education in the Tift College of Education at Mercer University.

Dr. Rosalind Pijaux Hale is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Division of Teacher Education at Xavier University of Louisiana.

Copyright Advancing Women in Leadership holds the copyright to each article; however, any article may be reproduced without permission, for educational purposes only, provided that the full and accurate bibliographic citation and the following credit line is cited: Copyright (year) by the Advancing Women in Leadership, Advancing Women Website, www.advancingwomen.com; reproduced with permission from the publisher. Any article cited as a reference in any other form should also report the same such citation, following APA or other style manual guidelines for citing electronic publications.

[Home](#) | [Business](#) | [Career](#) | [Workplace](#) | [Community](#) | [Money](#) | [International](#)

[About Us](#) | [Content Syndication](#) | [Advertising Info](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Site Map](#)

AdvancingWomen Web site Copyright © Advancing Women (TM), 1996 - 2003

For questions or comment regarding content, please contact publisher@advancingwomen.com.

For technical questions or comment regarding this site, please contact webmaster@advancingwomen.com.

Duplication without express written consent is prohibited