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Advancing Women In Leadership

## **A Personal Account of Leadership in an Academic Setting**

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"I learned that leadership for a woman like me is partly being out in front,'in the lead' and partly about stewardship of power"

The Combination of intuition, compassion, social skills and direction became my leadership task during two years as a faculty senate chair. I developed my leadership style in an academic setting that was experiencing a period of rapid fundamental change. Both our campus and our university system were going through major leadership changes and shifts in strategic directions. My leadership style in this context was of both the weaver and the warrior. There was a constant need to scan the organization to see who was affected, or disaffected, by change and to build networks between faculty members and decision makers that would give voice to concerns while silencing the meddlers and mischievous.

Leadership styles tend to be dichotomized between "task focused" and "follower focused" or "direction and collaboration" or "democratic and autocratic" (Eagley and Johnston, 1990; Regan 1990; Dunlap and Goldman 1991; Parsons and Bales, 1955) However, Bell and Chase (1995) suggest an integration of these dichotomies. In their qualitative study of 27 women school superintendents, Bell and Chase (1995) found that such distinctions broke down "when we listen closely to how leaders talk about what they actually do. Thus we propose a conception of leadership that integrates rather than separates orientations to tasks and followers" (p. 4). This is the starting point for my account of a two-year leadership experience. I want to suggest that I integrated the above orientations by developing four traits. These were internal dispositions of Intuition and Compassion and external behaviors of Social/Political Skill and Direction. In some ways, I'm returning to the old leadership literature of the first half of this century that has been referred to as the "Great Man" era of leadership theory. I'm suggesting a "Great Woman" approach to understanding leadership. This is offered, not as a replacement of current dichotomous contextual theories, but a supplement to such ideas.

### **Intuition**

By intuition, I mean a sense of when and how to communicate with whom.. For me, it was also a growing capacity to predict reactions to events and know how to preempt or respond. It was also about

trusting my instincts. I had no set of objectives or identified goals at the start of my tenure as Faculty Senate Chair. I simply wanted to play a role in stewardship of power and decision-making. I wanted to be a team builder in an academic community where individuality and competitive territoriality tended to be rewarded. I was surprised to find that others, who know more than I do, were prepared to go along with my desire.

## **Compassion**

My compassion matured as I developed a belief system that suggested the organizational community is a positive force and its leaders have a responsibility to develop that positive force. It is difficult to hold on to a naive trust and awe of people when confronted by cynical, self-serving territoriality. A leader who appears trusting, is either dismissed as weak or judged as "slick" by the cynical. Once, I was scathingly dismissed as someone who believes that the Emperor is wearing clothes! However, I knew that compassion was a key to getting permission to lead.

## **Social/Political Skills**

I honed those "day to day" human contact skills that allow people to feel comfortable with me and slowly learn to trust me as an opinion leader and organizer. There is tension between interpersonal leadership where human contact creates trust and re-energizes people and efficiency where paperwork gets handled and reports get written. I found that the first gave me a personal network and the second gave me credibility as someone who "follows through" on projects.

## **Direction**

This is a polite way of suggesting that my style of leadership combined my feminine compassion with a need to set boundaries. On the one hand, I needed to listen and facilitate, on the other, I needed to be known for predictability and consistency.

## **The Setting**

Our university is a member of a twenty-two campus state university system. We have approximately 12,000 students. Our primary mandate is teaching although faculty members are expected to also develop a publishing track record. We offer four-year undergraduate degrees. In addition, 25% of our students are in graduate programs. The campus is unionized, and a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) negotiated between the Faculty Union and the university system governs much of what we do. We have about 400 faculty members, 1000 staff and various part time and adjunct faculty.

In this setting during my tenure as senate chair, I was involved in both high profile projects and routine events that I will describe below. These included a merit pay initiative, selection of a new president, strategic planning and routine meetings and functions. I will tell the story of these activities, give my perception of my role, and suggest how each event taught me the leadership traits noted above.

## **Merit Pay**

Merit pay was introduced after a faculty vote on an MOU developed as a result of the most recent round of collective bargaining. Our campus had been a "union shop" with automatic pay increases each year tied to a favorable annual promotion and tenure review. The introduction of merit pay was a major change in the campus faculty culture. However, faculty salaries had been frozen for four years. Some faculty members saw merit pay as the only way of "thawing" salaries. The campus had voted overwhelmingly

supported this new MOU. However, most faculty members probably did not know exactly what they had endorsed.

The senate was given a very short time span (three months) to develop policy and procedures for measuring merit and selecting meritorious faculty.. The process of developing the policy made the senate chair, i.e. me, one of the link-persons between several factions and leaders: the "old timers"; the union leaders; concerned faculty; the president; the system's central office; the Vice President for Academic Affairs (AVP); the senate; and the larger faculty body. In this role I listened to faculty and administrators, consulted with other campuses, tracked down the source and substance of various conspiracy theories and stayed in touch with the president and AVP on practically a daily basis.

At each stage of the policy's incarnation, different factions would start to understand the form that was emerging. They were not always pleased with what they saw. The first group to recognize and react to the implications of the new policy was the old timers. One of them, after several meetings, expressing protest, agreed to write the first draft of the policy. The next group was the Faculty Affairs committee, the lead committee working with the administration. Although suspicious, these two groups were convinced that it was better to develop the policy ourselves than to have something imposed on us in three months by the system office.

After passing this milestone things were progressing quite well until the central system office called in all the presidents to a private meeting and gave them a briefing on what they would and would not accept in campus policies. Presidents were assured that if campuses did not follow these instructions then their merit pay policies and procedures would be rejected at the system office. News of this meeting leaked out through conspiratorial gossip. Once I heard the gossip, I had to go directly to the president and ask about the meeting. He responded promptly and supplied the new set of instructions. These were quite restrictive but I, and other leaders, were still able to persuade a critical mass of the factions noted above that it was worth continuing to develop our own merit pay policy and procedures. We did this by again appealing to these faculty members' desire for autonomy.

However, many faculty leaders were disgruntled and the process was barely alive. My nurturing and social/political skills were over-taxed and finally I had to move to a directive mode and make threats! We had no choice. If we did not develop an acceptable policy by the three-month deadline then the administration would impose a policy. If this were to happen, our credibility as faculty leaders would be seriously undermined. This was a risky threat because many felt that having anything to do with developing the policy was undermining our credibility. However, there were enough key leaders willing to continue with policy development, the deadline was met and merit pay was implemented on our campus.

The merit pay initiative emerged during the first month of my period of office. It was a major policy change and I was an untested leader on campus. I stayed informed of the policy process although I did not always know the content of the current version of our policy. I insisted on being consulted by both the administrative leadership and the faculty leaders writing the policy. I was new, including me in their deliberations was not the habit of these leaders but, once reminded, they did make me a habit. In fact a key leader invited me to one particular meeting to help him force a decision in that committee. I was there and so was the academic Vice President (AVP). We were both directive in insisting that decisions should be made to move the policy to the next stage. Later, that meeting was referred to as having brought out the "big guns". I knew I had arrived when, as a woman, I was being referred to with war metaphors.

This whole process tested and stretched my: intuition, in terms of knowing who was going to be critical of the process and how to convince them that it was worth continuing; my compassion, in terms of trying

to see criticisms of my integrity for being involved in this, not as personal attacks, but as expressions of concern for our community; my social/political skills, in terms of building credibility and trust across a number of entrenched interest and power groups; and my direction, in terms of being a new leader but having to insist on continued work on the policy. I did not always succeed. For example, when I needed the vote of the Senate Executive Committee on the final draft of the merit pay policy; they were suddenly out of town. The senate leadership basically abandoned the project and was unavailable for final votes. This led to a fairly tense meeting where we clarified our definitions of leadership.

## **Presidential Search**

My most "high profile" task as senate chair was to serve on the committee that was selecting a new president for our campus. Since our campus opened in the 1960s, we had had only two presidents. So this was another major upheaval for our community. A recruitment committee was established by the system office comprising of system Trustees, representatives of the local community, students, alumni, staff, and faculty. Thus, the system gave campus representatives a say, but not final control of the appointment decision. Faculty, staff, and student representatives on the selection committee were elected and we (five) became the guardians of the selection process for the campus. Since the system-wide Board of Trustees had the final say on the appointment of Presidents, the campus representatives on the committee had to convince the Trustees on the committee that campus concerns should be a major factor in Trustee decision-making. Campus paranoia suggested the new President had already been selected and we were just "puppets of the regime" going through the motions of a pretence of shared decision-making.

There were various stages of the appointment process. Stage one was the formation of the "First Tier" committee, which was responsible for short-listing the candidates and the first round of interviews. Three faculty members, representing the 400 faculty on campus, were to be elected to this committee. I facilitated this election and ran for one of the positions. To do this I had to educate interested faculty on the new electoral process we were using while having a "hands off" approach to the administration of the election. I did get elected and, along with my two colleagues, proceeded to a series of meetings of that "First Tier" committee to select the interview pool. We campus representatives quickly realized that we should caucus often on potential candidates and present a united front to the Trustees.

The next stage of the appointment process was the selection of a "Second Tier" committee, which involved expanding campus representation in the process to about twenty faculty, staff, students and administrators who could give feedback but not be a part of the final decision making.

At the same time as this second election was being carried out, the "First Tier" committee interviewed the short list of nine candidates, where we had surprising consensus on most of the candidates, and reduced the pool to six candidates. The newly elected Second Tier committee now interviewed these six candidates and developed a strong consensus on the leading candidates. There was then a meeting of First and Second Tier committees to exchange impressions and build consensus. However, at the end of this meeting many faculty members questioned the intent of the First Tier committee assuming that the First Tier committee would not take the opinions of the Second Tier committee into consideration when making the final decision. Indeed, at the meeting that selected the final three candidates, although there was general consensus, the Trustees made it clear that they had the power to ignore the opinions of both committees. Then came campus visits by final candidates, where there was a surprisingly up-beat sense of the campus community coming together to consider its leader and glimpse its future.

At each stage of the above process I found that all my developing leadership traits got a thorough workout. During election phases I had to negotiate with the system to structure the elections so that the campus's limited representation was spread across as many constituent groups as possible. To do this I

developed a strong collegial contact with, a key administrator at the system office. I spent considerable time assuring him that our campus would cooperate with his administrative procedures. On campus I had to convince faculty that it was worth running for a position on either of the committees given such a limited role in the process. I had to talk to faculty members about the worth of at least having a minimal role in such a dramatic change for us. In the First Tier committee meetings I had to, on the one hand, hold firm with my campus colleagues and on the other, develop credibility with the Trustees. Thus in heated discussions I walked a fine line between mindless agreement with either group and independence of thought. I was establishing myself as both an opinion leader and collaborator.

In the end we got the leader that we wanted and I learned about the costs of trying to be credible to all factions. At worst my campus colleagues saw me as a collaborator with the enemy (The Trustees) and the Trustees saw me as a faculty member who, by definition, has no expertise in running a university. At best, both sides saw me as an independent leader tied to neither group. One incident in the process illustrates the dichotomy. The earlier stages of the presidential search process were confidential. However, the short list was leaked to the local press. Every faction blamed another faction for the leak. The Trustees and the system-wide chancellor quickly informed me that this confirmed their assessments of the immaturity and irresponsibility of faculty members. The faculty quickly let me know that they had a conspiracy theory that involved the Trustees (and maybe me) in purposely leaking the list to implicate faculty. My theory was that any student reporter could have found out about the list if they tried hard enough. This incident was never satisfactorily explained away and I was unable to allay anybody's suspicions. At the end of the process I wrote a report on the selection experience from the campus perspective. I got a letter from the Chancellor of the system, thanking me for my work but assuring me that I was part of the irresponsible faction that he held responsible for the press leak. So, I had a welcome to leadership. As a facilitator of decision-making, I was getting recognition but I was also arousing suspicion.

## Strategic Planning

I spent two years of weekly meetings on strategic planning. It was one of those experiences that can only be written about in a "Dave Barry" kind of style. So here goes (with apologies for my poor imitation of his style). This is what I learned about Strategic Planning and leadership. Strategic Planning is a process whereby you bring a group of leaders together to do what nobody can do, **predict the future**. Consequently, everybody gets frustrated with the vagueness of the task and starts to criticize the process. On the one hand, the leadership group likes to feel it has expertise, so lots of models are "trotted out" on how to **predict the future** but of course we can always criticize each model because we are on safe ground. We don't have models that **predict the future**. On the other hand, at some level we are all aware that we cannot **predict the future** so we sort through the present and the past to explain why we are where we are today. We turn over issues like diversity, distance learning, budget cutbacks, demographic trends, political attacks on higher education and soon, but the core problem is that we cannot **predict the future**. After a year of not **predicting the future**, we get frustrated and decide that we need a common vision and so we go on a retreat to do "team building." We do one of those exercises, usually revolving around a plane crash of some kind, and we get the message from our facilitator that we are not a team, therefore we will not be able to **predict the future**. We all go home feeling better somehow and write our interim reports.

These reports basically list the issues we have currently identified, suggest how we could do what we do now more effectively and have a "get-out" clauses suggesting that all of this could of course change if something totally unpredictable should happen, or not happen.

This was a process that tested both my compassion and intuition. I wanted to believe that all this talking about planning was worthwhile and would give our campus a direction and vision for the future.

However, I did not really understand my role. I would leave meetings with a mixed feeling of excitement that I had spent time discussing some exciting possibilities with the most talented leaders on campus and frustration with our inability to focus. In the end I concluded that strategic planning is really a strategy for getting people to talk to each other about what matters to them. It is the emotional investment that is the product and this, hopefully, adds energy and life to the organization. In terms of leadership, in this context, my role was to struggle, along with everybody else.

## **Everyday Politics**

There were various routine activities that required my attention. These included curriculum issues, linking our campus with the larger system, regular committee meetings, and general politicking.

## **Curriculum Issues**

Curriculum, you would think, is the heart and sole of the university function. It's the blue print for what we do each day. On our campus there is a curriculum committee that has procedures for curriculum development and change.. They have trouble getting people to come to their meetings. Also, the issues that become "hot issues" revolve around the affects of any decision on faculty workload and/or departmental power over certain courses. Heated discussion of whether the content of courses is of an adequate standard, whether the type of courses we teach are appropriate for our university and our students or about the rationales for various approaches to learning, take place between a small group of dedicated souls. For the rest, the full senate is a rubber stamp and the curriculum development process is a bureaucratic procedure rather than a hot bed of intellectual discussion of ideas and cutting edge knowledge. I had accepted my minimal role in this process as normal, until once during an open with an uncomprehending look, "but you have power over curriculum, what more power could you have". To us, as faculty, this was a new idea. I did not change my role but it gave me fodder to feed my compassion and intuition.

## **Links with the Larger System**

Our university is part of a system of universities, and every so often we meet together to compare notes and review system wide issues. For me, a Senate Chair at a small campus distant from the central office, this was a time of revelation. I would have no idea about the hot issues at central office and would arrive to find a fiery battle going on about, say, "The outstanding faculty member award" and be able to make no sense of the strength of feeling being expressed. However, this was the time when I was introduced to the "big picture." Questions would be raised and answered. What are the central administration issues that are making Distance Learning such an urgent issue? What are the political pressures that are forcing a "yes" or a "no" on remedial education? Who is the key player, at the central office, on merit pay who is dictating campus policies? Who are the key players overall? What is the culture of the central administration and where does our campus fit in all of this? I usually got caught up in the intensity and self-importance of these one-day meetings. However, when I got back to campus it all lost its significance. Knowing these things gave me credibility in conversations over a beer but they didn't seem to affect our lives.

## **Committee Meetings**

My schedule, as faculty senate chair, was filled with meetings. I would sit through, sometimes focused sometimes rambling, discussions of what was on people's minds. This seemed to be the most crucial activity for all of us since we spent so much time at it. And, although we complained, we seemed to enjoy the company. We would catch up with each other and we had an excuse for not producing a report at our

desks. We had no guilt because we were at an "important" meeting and, therefore, were "working". Ultimately, it was a bonding strategy, I think. It was the foundation that made it possible to get something done when the time came to act. The danger, of course, was that sometimes we didn't act because we were busy at our meetings..

## **Everyday Politicking**

I should not end this section without saying something about the routine politics of it all. This role of predicting who the ambushing party was and heading them off at the pass! As well as that other role of finding the supporters of an initiative and getting them into the pass! In an open active process this means a lot of consultation before a meeting, in a closed process this means cynical exclusions and limited information. Again we come down to compassion and intuition. I concluded that open communication was the most pragmatic long-term strategy. Cynical manipulation might get one policy through but the damage to trust and shared community would be so profound that there would be a long-term loss of involvement and energy from the community.

## **Conclusion**

And so, where did all this lead? Well at the end of the two years, I stepped down as senate chair and became a departmental chair. I grew from being a naive leader to someone who was a little more hardheaded but was still guided by intuition and compassion. Since I had been the first female senate chair on our campus in the last fifteen years, I began my tenure with a feminist notion of being a follower-focused leader who would revolutionize the senates understanding of leadership! However, as I was challenged by both the high profile projects and the routine politics of leadership, I held onto an internal perspective of compassion and intuition towards my colleagues and community but I developed my task-focused social/political and direction skills..

I learned that leadership for a woman like me is partly being out in front, "in the lead" and partly about stewardship of power. I was new to the campus leadership group that was mostly a male group. For them to respect my authority, there were times such as with merit pay and moving the presidential selection process along, where I simply had to tell the faculty leadership group that, although there were attempts to sabotage, we would proceed with our leadership tasks. There were some who suggested that carrying out policy was somehow "collaborating" with the enemy. After trying to address their concerns but still getting resistance, I eventually had to insist that we would proceed with our assigned responsibilities.

The stewardship of power was much more of a facilitator role. Faculty had trusted me with representing their interests in decision-making situations. I needed to be mindful of this. However, I also needed to understand how my role as a faculty leader interwove with the roles of the vice presidents, campus president and the union leaders. This meant comprehending their agendas, pressures and needs and acting accordingly. For example, with the implementation of merit pay, I needed to understand and work with the bureaucratic pressures on the President, the ideological orientation of the union leadership and the administrative responsibilities of the vice president for academic affairs. I would look for information and support as the processes moved on with this in mind.

Overall, I learned a lot and hope that I made a difference. This is a role that female faculty may decide to take on to test the waters for further leadership roles. I hope my account of my experiences and reflections will help.

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