



Advancing Women in Leadership Journal

The first online professional, refereed journal for women in leadership

Editor: Dr. Genevieve Brown
College of Education
Sam Houston State University

Editor: Dr. Beverly J. Irby
College of Education
Sam Houston State University

Volume 29, Number 5

May 03, 2009

ISSN 1093-7099

Female High School Principals: Leadership Practices and Individual Traits

Dr. Tony Horst Giese
Dr. John R. Slate
Dr. Michelle Stallone Brown
Dr. Carmen Tejeda-Delgado

Abstract

The views of 56 female high school principals in the State of Texas were obtained regarding their leadership practices in three areas (i.e., relationship building and decision making, giving and seeking information, and influencing people) which they believed had been beneficial in their positions as high school principals. Respondents viewed supporting employees by being helpful, developing employee skills, and managing conflict as being essential to their success as principals. Moreover, they reported involving their employees in decision-making practices, particularly when critically important decisions must be made. Motivating and inspiring employees was rated highly, although providing tangible rewards was regarded as less important. Individual traits of communication skills, trustworthiness, honesty and sincerity, and good listening skills were very important factors in their success as high school principals. The two individual traits deemed to be less relevant for success in their positions were aggressiveness and tolerance for ambiguity. Finally, cautions regarding generalizability are offered.

Key Words: Female, leadership, high school, principal

Citation: Giese, T., Slate, J., Brown, M., & Delgado, C. (2009). Female high school principals: Leadership practices and individual traits. *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal*, 29(5). Retrieved [date] from http://advancingwomen.com/awl/awl_wordpress/

Introduction

As a result of the current trends in educational reform, the role of the principal has experienced dramatic change (Hess & Kelly, 2007). Various examinations into this phenomenon increasingly point to new and demanding leadership standards by which today's campus administrators must operate (Atkinson & Wilmore, 1993; Cistone & Stevenson, 2000; Hallinger, 2005). Across the country, school districts are holding principals more accountable for how their schools perform (Kimball & Sirotnik, 2000; O'Donnell & White, 2005) than in previous years. *Education Week*, in January 2000, published a series of articles indicating that school leadership is key to success with the standards-based accountability systems in place in many states (Olsen, 2000). Steinberg (2000) suggested that "a growing number of schools are rudderless, struggling to replace a graying corps of principals at a time when the pressure to raise test scores and other new demands have made an already difficult job an increasingly thankless one" (p. 3). Practicing administrators, in a recent survey, cited increased demands: escalating expectations for accountability; lack of support, statutes, and mandates that dictate practices; and long hours and stressful political environments as major factors that tend to dissuade many from accepting positions as school administrators (Leighwood, Steinbach, & Jantzi, 2002; Su, Adams, & Mininberg, 2000; Trevino, Braley, Stallone-Brown, & Slate, 2008). Researchers have also noted that the principalship requires a high degree of political acuity, visibility and accessibility, the ability to delegate tasks, and the ability to see the big picture (Davis, 1998).

The school principalship is today an increasingly complex and demanding position (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002). New conditions and expectations in education and society are combining to create newly emerging challenges and perspectives for the contemporary role of the principal (Cistone & Stevenson, 2000). Davis (1998) suggested that the precarious nature of the principalship reinforces the need for continued research on factors related to leadership behavior.

Principals in today's environment must rely more on their abilities and skills as decision makers and problem solvers than in the past (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002). Further, they are now required, at least in the State of Texas, to foster a new commitment to the vision of the Learner-Centered community (Texas Education Agency, 1995). To accomplish this task, principals must be not only creative in their decision-making responsibilities, but also must build cohesive working relationships within their school's community of stakeholders. In the State of Texas, the Texas Education Agency (1995) has mandated that school administrators base their decisions on new and ever-changing ethical and legal principles.

Davis (1998) suggested that, at best, principals strive to provide vision and unity of purpose within challenging, dynamic, and highly political settings. School districts flounder without and flourish with leadership (Cooley & Shen, 2000). This situation is evident in the variety of factors related to leadership behavior by principals. Differences may be great or minimal, however, most researchers note that some overall leadership practices appear to be common to decision makers.

Yukl (1994), in his work, examined managerial practices in four general categories: (a) making decisions; (b) influencing people; (c) building relationships; and (d) giving-seeking

information. Within these four practices, Yukl noted 14 specific leadership practices that may influence the managerial practices of school leaders. These practices as identified by Yukl included: (a) developing and mentoring; (b) clarifying roles and objectives; (c) motivating and inspiring; and (d) consulting.

In a study of outstanding female superintendents, Funk, Pankake, and Schroth (2002) suggested the presence of eight recurring leadership themes: (a) vision, shared vision, and visioning; (b) ethical and professional practices; (c) dreaming, thinking, creating, intuiting, and introspecting; (d) communication; (e) motivation; (f) commitment; (g) work ethic and industry; and (h) energy and stamina. In an Israeli study on women principals, Fuchs and Hertz-Lazarowitz (1992) stated that the role of career planning and aspiration in attaining the principalship was ambiguous. However, they suggested that the respondents' leadership styles, based on interpersonal relations and communication skills, contributed to school effectiveness and to positive school climates. Additional characteristics related to success included diligence, a need for change, and the capacity to turn hardships into challenges.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the leadership practices of female high school principals. A dearth of literature is available in which the leadership practices of female educational leaders has been investigated. Given the recent report by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2007) that "Between 1993–94 and 2003–04, the percentage of public school principals who were female increased from 41 to 56 percent in elementary schools and from 14 to 26 percent in secondary schools" (Indicator 34, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2007), more information is needed about the leadership practices of female principals.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What are the relationship building practices of female high school principals?
2. What are the decision-making practices of female high school principals?
3. What are the giving and seeking information practices of female high school principals?
4. What are the influencing people practices of female high school principals?
5. What are the views of female high school principals concerning individual traits that have facilitated their success as high school principals?

Method

Participants

From a target population of all public high school principals in Texas ($n = 1,176$), a random sample of female ($n = 222$) high school principals were selected for the study. Female participants were identified by first names from a list of principals developed using the 2004-

2005 Texas School Directory (Texas Education Agency, 2004) in which public high school principals in Texas were identified.

From the 222 female high school principals who were sent surveys, 56 returned completed surveys for a return rate of 25.2%. The majority of the respondents were White ($n = 44, 78.6\%$), followed by Hispanic ($n = 8, 14.3\%$), African-American ($n = 3, 5.4\%$), and 1 person of Other ethnic membership (1.8%).

Instrumentation

A review of the literature was conducted to identify factors associated with managerial practices among high school principals. From the literature reviewed, particularly Yukl’s 14 Managerial Practices (Yukl, 1994) and Lopez’s Personal Attributes (Lopez, 1994), an instrument titled, *Individual Traits and Organizational Factors Associated with Managerial Practices of High School Principals in Texas*, was developed. With the exception of the demographic items, respondents were asked to respond to a five point scale concerning the extent to which each item (i.e., behavior) had been helpful to them in their position as a high school principal.

The initial version of this questionnaire was used in a pilot study to obtain the opinions of educational administration graduate students and faculty members concerning the instrument’s content, clarity, grammar, and appropriateness. From feedback provided by these 33 students and 3 faculty members, the initial version of the survey was modified to incorporate their opinions and suggestions. After the survey had been administered to the participants in this study, a Varimax factor rotation was performed to determine the extent to which these items would cluster together. To determine the number of factors to retain in conducting the Varimax factor rotation, K1, or the eigenvalue-greater-than-one rule (Kaiser, 1958), was used. By using this rule, three factors were yielded. An analysis of the scree test, a plot of eigenvalues in descending order against the three factors, provided support for the three factors (Cattell, 1966; Zwick & Velicer, 1986), which are depicted in Table 1. In determining the minimum value for structure/pattern coefficients, we used the recommended cutoff correlation of .3 (Lambert & Durand, 1975).

Table 1: *Factor Loadings of Survey Items*

Survey Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Developing employee skills and mentoring employees in their career aspirations.	.76	.10	.13
Solving problems decisively, systematically, and effectively.	.74	.09	.37
Managing conflict and team building.	.73	.31	.20
Planning long-term objectives and organizing human and material resources efficiently.	.71	.07	.31
Allowing employees to assume important job responsibilities and delegating tasks.	.07	.76	.12
Recognizing the special contributions and efforts of employees.	.11	.76	.17
Networking through formal and informal contacts with	.13	.69	-.04

other professionals.			
Motivating and inspiring others.	.42	.59	.31
Supporting employees by being approachable, considerate, patient, and helpful.	.09	.54	.50
Informing employees of key decisions and information necessary to accomplish organizational tasks and goals.	.39	.18	.73
Clarifying employee roles and objectives.	.28	.22	.70
Monitoring employee work, organizational outcomes, and environmental influences.	.28	.07	.70
Consulting with employees and inviting their participation in critical decisions.	.20	.49	.50
Rewarding employee performance with tangible rewards.	.50	.39	-.508

The internal consistency of the first factor, labeled Relationship Building and Decision-Making, was ascertained by using Cronbach’s coefficient alpha. This analysis resulted in an internal consistency of .81 for the four items, with the corrected item-total correlations ranging from .56 to .69. The second factor, termed Giving and Seeking Information, had a Cronbach’s coefficient of .74 for the five items. Corrected item-total correlations for these five items ranged from a low of .44 to a high of .61. For the third factor, labeled Influencing People, the Cronbach’s coefficient alpha was .79 for the four items. Corrected item-total correlations were again good, ranging from .50 to .71. The 14th survey item was discarded from further analysis, even though it had a significant factor loading. The reason for this item being discarded was that the coefficient alpha for factors two and three were significantly lower when this item was present than when it was removed from the analysis. All three factor scores had coefficient alphas that were more than sufficiently reliable for research purposes (cf. Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Procedures

Participants who had been randomly selected were sent a copy of the survey along with a cover letter in which the purpose of the study was explained. To permit a follow-up letter to be sent to non-respondents, surveys were numbered for identification. Using a master list to record returned surveys, a reminder letter, along with a second survey and self-addressed stamped envelope, was sent two weeks after the initial request to participants who had not responded. Participants were assured that their anonymity was protected.

Results

Concerning research questions one and two about the relationship building and decision-making practices of female high school principals, participants’ responses to the four survey questions in this area are depicted in Table 2. More than three fourths of the sample reported that supporting employees by being approachable and supportive had helped them a great deal in their position as a high school principal. Managing conflict was also ranked as a behavior that had helped them a great deal in their position. Both planning long-term objectives and solving problems decisively were related highly.

Table 2: *Participant Responses in Percentages to Relationship Building and Decision-Making Survey Items*

Survey Item	A Great Deal	Quite a Bit	Some	Very Little	Not at All
Developing employee skills and mentoring employees in their career aspirations.	39.3	46.4	12.5	1.8	0.0
Managing conflict and team building.	50.0	35.7	12.5	1.8	0.0
Planning long-term objectives and organizing human and material resources efficiently.	48.2	42.9	7.1	1.8	0.0
Solving problems decisively, systematically, and effectively.	69.6	25.0	5.4	0.0	0.0

Concerning research question three, in which participants were asked about their giving and seeking information practices that they found helpful, responses can be found in Table 3. Informing employees of key decisions was rated by almost all respondents as being quite a bit or a great deal of help in their positions as high school principals. A similar response was present for monitoring employee work and organizational outcomes. Also rated highly was consulting with employees and inviting their participation in critical decisions. Clarifying employee roles and objectives, though not rated as highly, was still viewed as being helpful in their positions.

Table 3: *Participant Responses in Percentages to Giving and Seeking Information Survey Items*

Survey Item	A Great Deal	Quite a Bit	Some	Very Little	Not at All
Informing employees of key decisions and information necessary to accomplish organizational tasks and goals.	64.3	32.1	3.6	0.0	0.0
Clarifying employee roles and objectives.	51.8	35.7	12.5	0.0	0.0
Monitoring employee work, organizational outcomes, and environmental influences.	53.6	42.9	3.6	0.0	0.0
Consulting with employees and inviting their participation in critical decisions.	55.4	41.1	3.6	0.0	0.0

Participants’ responses to the fourth research question regarding their influencing people practices are depicted in Table 4. Being approachable, considerate, patient, and helpful to employees was rated as being a great deal to quite a bit helpful by 100% of these female principals. Motivating and inspiring others, as well as recognizing the special contributions and efforts of employees, were ranked as being quite a bit to a great deal important in their positions as high school principals. Interestingly, networking received the lowest rating of these items in terms of being helpful in their current work position.

Table 4: *Participant Responses in Percentages to Influencing People Survey Items*

Survey Item	A Great Deal	Quite a Bit	Some	Very Little	Not at All
Supporting employees by being approachable, considerate, patient, and helpful.	80.4	19.6	0.0	0.0	0.0
Recognizing the special contributions and efforts of employees.	48.2	41.1	10.7	0.0	0.0
Motivating and inspiring others.	55.4	32.1	10.7	1.8	0.0
Allowing employees to assume important job responsibilities and delegating tasks.	46.4	41.1	10.7	1.8	0.0
Networking through formal and informal contacts with other professionals.	33.9	25.0	33.9	3.6	3.6

Whereas the previous four research questions have examined principals’ managerial practices, research question five deals with the perceptions of these principals concerning individual traits that have facilitated their success as high school principals. Table 5 contains participants’ responses to these 13 individual traits. The highest rated individual traits were communication skills, trustworthiness, honesty and sincerity, and good listening skills. Traits rated as less important were aggressiveness and having a tolerance for ambiguity.

Table 5: *Participant Responses in Percentages to Individual Traits Items*

Survey Item	A Great Deal	Quite a Bit	Some	Very Little	Not at All
Aggressiveness	12.5	33.9	33.9	17.9	1.8
Honesty and sincerity	83.9	16.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
Self-confidence	71.4	25.0	3.6	0.0	0.0
Communication skills	89.3	10.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
Human relations	75.0	25.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Tolerance for ambiguity	25.0	32.1	28.6	12.5	1.8
A cohesive value system	60.7	32.1	5.4	1.8	0.0
Critical thinking skills	66.1	30.4	3.6	0.0	0.0
Trustworthiness	87.5	12.5	0.0	0.0	0.0
A sense of humor	67.9	21.4	10.7	0.0	0.0
Knowledge of oneself	67.9	26.8	3.6	1.8	0.0
Well defined organizational vision & purpose	64.3	33.9	1.8	0.0	0.0
Good listening skills	80.4	17.9	1.8	0.0	0.0

Discussion

The female high school principals in this study indicated that they viewed supporting their employees, developing their employees' skills, and managing conflict and team building as being important in their positions as high school principals. Moreover, respondents indicated that involving their employees in key decisions, monitoring their employees' work, and clarifying employee roles and objectives were essential for the principals to be effective. Motivating and inspiring employees and recognizing their special contributions, albeit not necessarily in tangible ways, were regarded as important elements of being successful. Making decisions in decisive ways, while seeking input from employees, was deemed to be helpful in their positions as high school principals.

Concerning the individual traits deemed as important, this sample of female high school principals reported that communication skills, trustworthiness, honesty and sincerity, and good listening skills were very important traits in their success as high school principals. The two individual traits deemed to be less relevant for success in their positions were aggressiveness and tolerance for ambiguity. Participants' views regarding tolerance for ambiguity are incongruent with Vornberg's (1996) conclusion that people who cannot tolerate ambiguity in their lives should never consider being a school administrator. It may be that this sample of respondents tolerate ambiguity quite well and simply do not assign it the degree of importance to which Vornberg (1996) attributed.

Research on the impact of gender on decision-making and other leadership practices is essential. Despite the growing numbers of women in administrative positions in schools, a lack of research exists regarding the experiences of women (Kripiwnicki & Shapiro, 2001). The current investigation sought to add to the existing body of knowledge regarding the leadership practices and individual traits of female high school principals.

Readers are urged to be cautious in the extent to which they generalize from this study. For several reasons, this study has substantial limitations. First, the sample size is small and from a geographically limited region of the country. Second, data regarding leadership practices were obtained from a researcher-developed instrument. Though the instrument scores had a high degree of reliability for participants in this study, more research is needed on the validity of this survey. Finally, the extent to which the female principals who participated in this study were successful or unsuccessful in their schools is unknown. Thus, the leadership practices depicted in this study may not be limited to only those female principals who are successful in leading their respective school campuses.

References

- Atkinson, J. N., & Wilmore, B. E. (1993). The management profile: Identification of the management and leadership skills of school administrators. *Journal of Leadership*, 3, 566-578.
- Cattell, R. B. (1966). The scree test for the number of factors. *Multivariate Behavioral Research*, 1, 245-276.
- Cistone, P. J., & Stevenson, J. M. (2000). Perspectives on the urban school principalship. *Education & Urban Society*, 32(4), 435-442.
- Cooley, V. E., & Shen, J. ((2000). Factors influencing applying for the urban principalship. *Education and Urban Society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Davis, S. H. (1998). Climbing the administrative career ladder: Who goes up might come down. *NASSP Bulletin*, 82(602), 49-59.
- DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Karhanek, G. (2004). *Whatever it takes: How professional learning communities respond when kids don't learn*. Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.
- Fuchs, I., & Hertz-Lazarowitz, R. (1992). *Transition from teacher to principal: An Israeli Woman's perspective*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 349671). Israel; 1992-04-00.
- Funk, C., Pankake, A., & Schroth, G. (2002). *Archetypes of outstanding female superintendents*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 481622).
- Goldring, E., & Greenfield, W. (2002). Understanding the evolving concept of leadership to education: Roles, expectations, and dilemmas. *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, 101(1), 1-19.
- Kimball, K., & Sirotnik, K. A. (2000). *The urban school principalship: Take this job and...!* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Hallinger, P. (2005). Instructional leadership and the school principal: A passing fancy that refuses to face away. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 4(3), 221-239.
- Hess, F. M., & Kelly, A. P. (2007). Learning to lead: What gets taught in principal-preparation programs. *Teachers College Record*, 109(1), 244-274.
- Kaiser, H. F. (1958). The varimax criterion for analytic rotation in factor analysis. *Psychometrika*, 23, 187-200.
- Kropiewnicki, M. I., & Shapiro, J. P. (2001, April). *Female leadership and the ethic of care: Three case studies*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED453599).
- Lambert, Z. V., & Durand, R. M. (1975). Some precautions in using canonical analysis. *Journal of Market Research*, XII, 468-475.
- Lane, B. L. (2002). *The impact of gender on decision making among customized training administrators within the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System (MnSCU)*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 468132). U.S.
- Leighwood, K., Steinbach, R., & Jantzi, D. (2002). School leadership and teachers' motivation to implement accountability policies. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 38(1), 94-119.
- Lopez, B. (1994). *Mexican American public school administration: Perceptions on factors affecting career mobility*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Texas A&M University.

- Marks, H. M., & Louis, K. S. (1997). Does teacher empowerment affect the classroom? The implications of teacher empowerment for instructional practice and student academic performance. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 19(3), 245-275.
- Nunnally, J. C., & Bernstein, I. H. (1994). *Psychometric theory* (3rd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- O'Donnell, R. J., & White, G. P. (2005). Within the accountability era: Principals' instructional leadership behaviors and student achievement. *NASSP Bulletin*, 89(645), 56-71.
- Olson, L. (2000, January 12). *Policy focus converges on leadership*. *Education Week Special Report*.
- Orvando, M. (1996). Teacher leadership: Opportunities and challenges. *Planning and Changing*, 27, 30-44.
- Schlechty, P. (2002). *Working on the work*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Steinberg, J. (2000, September 3). Nation's schools struggling to find enough principals. *New York Times*.
- Su, Z. A., Adams, J. P., & Mininberg, E. (2000). Profiles and preparation of urban school principals: A comparative study in the United States and China. [Feature] *Education & Urban Society*, 32(4), 455-480.
- Texas Education Agency. (1995). *Learner-centered schools for Texas: A vision of Texas educators*. Austin, TX: Texas Education Agency.
- Texas Education Agency. (2004-2005). *Texas school directory*. Austin, TX. Texas Education Agency.
- Trevino, D., Jr., Braley, R. T., Stallone-Brown, M., & Slate, J. R. (2008). Challenges of the school superintendency: Differences by tenure, school size, and school location. *Florida Journal of Educational Administration & Policy*, 1(2), 98-109. Available online at <http://www.coe.ufl.edu/Leadership/FJEAP/v1-2.html>
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2007). *The Condition of Education 2007 (NCES 2007-064)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Vornberg, A. J. (Ed.). (1996). *Texas public school organization and administration: 1996* (5th ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co.
- Wallin, D., & Sackney, L. (2003). Career patterns of rural female educational administrators. *Rural Educator*, 25(1), 11-25.
- Yukl, G. A. (1994). *Leadership in organizations* (3rd ed.) Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Zwick, W. R., & Velicer, W. F. (1986). Comparison of five rules for determining the number of components to retain. *Psychological Bulletin*, 99, 432-442.