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Advancing Women In Leadership

Reflections of a Female School Executive

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Women rising in school leadership positions is becoming more of a reality than in years past. I believe this accomplishment is attributed to women taking more control of their careers instead of acting in a passive role waiting to be selected or appointed.

Many people have told me and continue to tell me that I am making a difference. Well, that is a matter of opinion but I would like to believe that I am making a difference. The question of some persons might be, in what way am I making a difference. Before I make a transition to the history of my position, let me share with you a little bit of my background.

I am told that I am the fourth female director of athletics in the history of the State of Texas. Along with that, I am told that I am the first black female director of athletics in the State of Texas. What follows is not tooting my own horn nor is it meant to be delivered in a bragging manner. My intent is to reveal two thoughts. I am a thirty-four year old educator who graduated from high school at the age of sixteen and college at the age of nineteen. I was a teacher and coach for five and one-half years before moving into administration at the age of twenty-five. I reveal these facts to you to emphasize two important points: success is a choice and the sky is not the limit - you and I are.

As I reflect on the past twenty years and the road I have traveled to reach my present destination, I often think about key persons who have crossed my path. Through their negativity or positivity, all have made a significant impact on many decisions that I have made in my personal and professional life. I shall never forget persons telling my mom as I prepared to go to high school and college that I would never make it in either place because I was too young. Thank God my mom had the keen insight at each level to know that I would survive in spite of my age. I recall persons implying that I could not survive as a young black female teacher in a predominantly Anglo, suburban school district. As recently as two years ago, when I submitted my resume for the position I now hold, I heard some people say I would not get the position because of the traditional male dominance in athletic director positions. I draw upon these experiences often to remind myself to stay away from people whom I have identified as having "stinking thinking." Those past experiences speak to me in a voice that says - flee from those who have buckets full

of pessimism in hand to dump all over my dreams, goals, and aspirations. Instead, I surround myself with innumerable people who have buckets full of optimism. Those people are the ones who have goals similar to mine and are headed in the same direction I am going.

Recently, I read a book that I highly recommend. Rick Pitino, author of *Success Is A Choice*, highlights ten steps one should take toward overachieving in business and life. The steps, which include several principles, are not steps for quitters or those looking for the easy road to success. Instead they are for those who have a will and a why for success. Often women executives find themselves having to operate in pressure situations. In Pitino's book, he has a chapter entitled, "Thrive on Pressure." Within this chapter he speaks to a "stress versus pressure" concept. Mr Pitino (1997) writes, "most people will tell you that there's good pressure and there's bad pressure, I don't believe that. If you use it to your advantage, it's good pressure. Let it control you and it becomes bad pressure, or stress" (p.166).

Women executives, in my opinion, face challenges daily that require a tremendous amount of persistence. There is a perception floating around in our society that sets forth the idea that it takes women longer to land the higher paid positions than it does men. Furthermore, there is the belief that women who acquire high-paying jobs have done so through a company's need to meet a quota. I operate under the notion that you do whatever it takes to reach a level that you wish to reach. If by chance you are awarded a job because of a quota, affirmative action, or for other reasons, so what? I have had people imply that I have acquired the position of athletic director because of various reasons - without entertaining the thought that perhaps I am best qualified for the position. There goes that "stinking thinking" again. Persistence in attaining a goal may require years for some and a few short days for others. The important component I have found in persistence is developing a "never-give-up" attitude. In Pitino's (1997) book, he addresses being ferociously persistent by offering the following: "A man is a hero, not because he is braver than anyone else, but because he is brave for ten minutes longer." I have truly come to know that there is a direct, positive correlation between persistence and success.

Sometimes, I am still awestruck when I consider the fact that, for the position I currently hold, a committee recommended me - the only female applicant for the position. Do not get me wrong. I am not awestruck because I knew and still believe that I am the most qualified, but I am still awestruck because I am glad to know that a committee made a recommendation based on an interview and not any predetermined ideas. What I am going around to the back door to say is this: You never know who is watching and listening. I believe women executives have to be better at salesmanship than men. We must sell ourselves and our ideas harder and stronger. To this day, I am thankful the recommending committee listened to each applicant express how he or she would carry the school district above and beyond in the area of athletics.

There is something I must say about contentment and comfort. I do not discredit anyone for feeling content in their position in life. I do believe we should be content in what our Heavenly Father has blessed us with, but I also believe He has provided us opportunities for self-improvement. It has always been a personal challenge given by me to myself to linger no longer than five years in one position. Thus far I have come close to meeting that personal challenge - with a little coaxing in some cases from others. There is also something to be said about coming out of our comfort zones. My fourteen years in education have been spent in this manner: five and one-half years as a teacher and coach, five and one-half years as an assistant athletic director, two years as an assistant principal, and one year as a director of athletics.

I believe that every now and then someone comes into your life to let you know you are becoming a little too comfortable where you are. That happened to me in 1994. I was enjoying my position as an assistant athletic director, hoping to become an athletic director someday. I had made my wishes known to several persons in our administration, including our superintendent. It was he who encouraged me to seek some building experience so that I could make myself more marketable if and when a director of athletics

positions surfaced. I want to make it clear that he never promised me anything but advised me to seek positions at the building level. I had a decision to make. I could heed his advice and seek building-level positions or I could remain in my area of comfort as an assistant athletic director. I sought a building-level position and was fortunate to receive one. I truly believe the experience I gained as a high school assistant principal was a key factor in my getting the position that I currently hold. Without a doubt, I believe those two years of building experience have enhanced my effectiveness as a central office administrator. Yes, I chose the risky option which was to seek building-level experience. Sometimes what we want in the long run requires us to be a risk-taker in the short run. As I stated earlier, my superintendent did not make any promises to me and I took a chance in leaving an area in which I enjoyed and felt comfortable.

Women rising in school leadership positions is becoming more of a reality than in years past. I believe this accomplishment is attributed to women taking more control of their careers instead of acting in a passive role waiting to be selected or appointed. Commanding control of our careers by promoting ourselves and making our wishes known is the most important tool we can use in attempting to rise to school executive positions.

Lessons Learned

You must have a "why." Determine for what reason you want what you want. When that is determined, you will succeed through a strategy of what it is you aspire to do.

Flee from those persons who have "stinking thinking." Pessimistic people will not help you get where you are trying to go. They can, however, be a source for helping you develop an "I can" attitude.

Develop a "never-give-up" attitude. Remember to persevere and be persistent. The end result is what you are seeking. From start to finish, you may not experience pleasure or happiness, but the final outcome makes struggles worthwhile.

Take command of your destination. Do not allow someone other than yourself to control the direction in which you would like to go. Instead, get behind the driver's wheel. If you get lost, it is up to you to find your way back through whatever means are necessary.

Move out of your comfort zone. Many of us sometimes get too comfortable where we are. Too much comfort stagnates our growth and we can dry up and die.

Have a game plan. Develop multiple offenses and defenses so that when one offense or defense does not work, you can try another one and another one until you accomplish your goal of winning.

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