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Advancing Women In Leadership

## The View From The Female Principal's Desk

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More than in past years, females are enrolling in educational administration programs and aspiring to be to school principals, central office administrators, and superintendents. Efforts to increase the number of female employees by businesses, industries, and public agencies encourage women to work toward advanced degrees and apply for administrative positions typically regarded as male positions. Successful women are written about in newspaper articles and magazine features more often than ever before. These women leaders serve as role models to inspire other women to follow in their professional wake.

Aburdene and Naisbitt (1992) write that “the women’s movement has reached ‘critical mass,’ the point at which a trend becomes a megatrend.” If this trend continues, opportunities for professional advancement and increased salaries for women will result.

While this news is good news, women continue to struggle with social biases, to face expectations unique to their gender, and to compromise their orientation to leadership responsibilities. According to Imbra, Steffens, McCartney, Gerber, and O’Neill (1995), girls’ experience a measured drop in self-esteem in “response to systemic messages that tell them they are second class citizens and ascribes to them identities and roles based not on who they are, but rather on who society thinks they should be.” Women are forced to “act like men” (Daresh, 2001) if they choose to compete for leadership roles and jobs. Signals and established expectations such as these stifle the more positive qualities that women are socialized to develop and must be studied for women to consistently achieve success in educational leadership positions. Women who aspire to be school administrators must identify gender specific factors that impede their professional growth and must develop skills to surmount these obstacles.

### Contemporary Problems Faced by Women

The school environment of 2001-2002 presents pressures and challenges unique to this time. School administrators at all levels deal with a lack of respect for authority, and sometimes, violence. While the

numbers of women in school administrative positions are increasing, these challenges present problems for women appointed to traditional male roles. Among the challenges women school administrators face in today's times are differing expectations from those with whom they work, a feminine orientation to life, and leadership qualities that differ from those of men.

The authors of this article interviewed sixteen female colleagues from five different school districts about the challenges faced by women school administrators. One of the most striking conclusions drawn from stories of these principals is that sometimes parents, students, and teachers hold different expectations for women administrators than for male administrators. For example, participants interviewed for this study described situations when they felt that parents unhappy with circumstances at school approached them as though they were easier to intimidate than male principals. When interviewed, one female principal described a confrontation with a parent who tried to intimidate her. The father tried unsuccessfully to have the principal change his son's consequences for a disciplinary incident from off-campus suspension to on-campus suspension. He resorted to yelling and threatening to call school board members if the principal did not comply with his request. The female principal countered his arguments with a calm and forceful resolve. When the father left the principal's office, he was heard to remark to his son, "I thought I could change her mind, son, but she's as tough as a man."

Students tend to view female principals as easier to manipulate than male principals. One of the participants in this study described working with two male students in a disciplinary situation during her first year as principal. As the two students left the principals' office. She overheard one student remark to the other, "I don't believe it. She's as tough as Mr. Jones." (Mr. Jones was the former principal.)

One participant in this study noted the resistance she encountered from other women when she was first appointed principal. An older female teacher frustrated with changes in the school lashed out at the female principal saying, "Who do you think you are? We've never had to work with a woman as boss before." This principal described much less resistance from male teachers on her staff than from female teachers.

Another participant in this study described a situation in which a male custodian sought the advice of a male teacher, because the custodian did not expect the female principal to have knowledge of certain information. The situation centered on a task the principal assigned the custodian. She asked him to weed and prepare flowerbeds for spring. When the custodian had a question about where to place the bedding plants, he asked a male teacher who, in turn, asked the principal. The custodian explained that he did not think a female would know much about gardening or plants.

A third female principal interviewed about challenges women administrators face today told of a parent who called the superintendent to ask that a man be appointed principal when the administrative vacancy was advertised. Tallerico (2000) suggests that women in traditional male leadership roles are "given less leeway to make mistakes and that this pressure and scrutiny can lead to high turnover."

Another problem women in school administrative positions face is an orientation to life that is different than men. Carol Gilligan (1992) studied all major development theories from the perspective that the theories perpetuated a bias against women. Gilligan asserted the two main points "that women are typically different in their basic orientations to life and that existing psychological theories devalue the female orientation." The notion is raised by Imbra, et.al, (1995) that women may value ideas based on their cultural, racial, and moral beliefs, while resisting ideas valued by society.

One of the secondary female principals, the first woman assigned to the top administrative position where she was principal, recounted changes she initiated in the teaching staff. She hired highly effective teachers who coached as a secondary responsibility, while her male predecessors had always hired highly effective

coaches who could teach if they had to.

Albino (1992) suggests that female leaders must learn how to develop and use work strategies, because women often perceive risk as potential for failure, while men perceive risk as potential for success. Two of the female principals interviewed by the authors said that although they were encouraged to apply for a newly created assistant superintendent's position, they didn't because they were afraid of failure, while their male principal colleagues readily applied expressing a 'nothing to lose' attitude.

A third contemporary problem faced by women school administrators relates to leadership skills different from their male counterparts that women exhibit. Helgesen (1990) states that while similar in many ways, male and female leaders are very different in others. Helgesen's study is significant because of the emphasis on what organizations, such as schools and public agencies, can learn from the ways women lead. For example, Helgesen proposes that females appreciate mail as a way to enhance collaboration and connect with others, while males see it as interference.

### Action Skills for Success

Women appointed to school administrative positions are more than just professional employees. Very often, these women also are mothers, wives, and housekeepers. Each of these roles, if done well, requires full-time effort. The demanding pace of their days and the contemporary problems they face requires that women hone skills and learn strategies to help them cope and achieve success in administrative positions.

One of the most important strategies that women can develop is to internalize the thought that they are not all things to all people. The stereotypical and traditional role for women imagined women who prepared all the meals and washed all the clothes. This role is not possible for women who need to survive in a school administrative position with a schedule that demands a minimum 10-hour workday. Married women administrators, and particularly married with children women administrators, need to establish clear understandings about shared responsibilities with their families. Ludwig (1987) identified four major attributes that women who realize success in administrative positions possess. The ability to set priorities is one of these critical attributes. Successful women administrators develop a list of priorities and refuse to allow non-productive tasks to take precedence over tasks high on their list.

Another strategy that helps women to cope with the responsibilities of an administrative position is to achieve balance in their lives and daily activities. Time for exercise, adequate rest, social activities, and hobbies should be included in the day. All too often, women allow the responsibility of children and housekeeping duties to consume time that should be set aside for exercise or rest. The most experienced principal interviewed by the authors strongly encourages other women to claim the first 20 to 30 minutes each day when they arrive home for themselves. She calls this time her 'time to rejuvenate' and states that she uses these minutes to nap or simply rest quietly. When questioned about how she managed this quiet time when her own children were pre-school age, she said that time for mother to rest was established as a permanent habit in her household. Her children understood that mother's time to rest was not to be imposed upon.

Delegation is an important skill for all administrators, especially women. Women school administrators who distribute responsibility for the many different assignments in a school accomplish three purposes. Firstly, the workload is shared. Deadlines are met and products are better when many people, instead of one individual, contribute to the final product. Secondly, teachers and support employees asked to help with special assignments have a chance to understand other viewpoints and to experience difficulties involved in completing special assignments firsthand. Criticisms are minimized when more people feel ownership and are involved in decision-making groups of a school. Finally, the action of delegation also helps to mentor those who aspire to lead in the future. Those who hope to be school administrators in the

future gain valuable insights from opportunities to identify all factors involved in completing an assignment or resolving a problem and from experiencing the consequences for selecting the best option for the situation.

Helgesen (1990), Gupton and Slick (1996) and Hale (1998) proposed that women also realize professional benefits from networking. Networking with other female school administrators is a measure that helps women deal with daily pressures of the job. Talking with a female school administrator who has shared similar experiences of frustration and discrimination can be reassuring, while sharing the same experiences with a male colleague may elicit a total lack of understanding. The opportunity to voice concerns to others who understand and will respect a confidence can help to place those concerns and difficulties in proper perspective. All of the female school administrators interviewed by the authors described a network of female colleagues on whom they relied for support and encouragement.

In response to this need, more and more professional and community organizations are organizing seminars 'just for women.' These sessions offer encouragement, information, and the chance to meet professional women from many different geographic regions of the country. Also, women participants represent school administrators and managers from many different fields. Mail and email lists sometimes are developed during these conference sessions to provide a communication network for participants to 'stay in touch.'

Acknowledging that women possess leadership skills and approaches that are different than men also is an important action skill for women to develop. Recognizing gender differences affords women the courage to prepare to take risks. Establishing frameworks for assessing possible consequences, as well as benefits, prompts women to accept assignments previously relegated to men. Women need to prepare to take risks when encouraged and to build on the strengths of their gender. Helgesen's (1990) conclusion that women see mail as a way of connecting supports the usefulness of time devoted to personal notes, such as thank-you notes, which results in positive feedback to others and highly positive public relations moments..

Moreover, women have opportunities to capitalize on the natural instinct for women to nurture others. When asked why she did not choose to advance from the principalship to a superintendency, Margaret Jaskulek, principal in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, recounted the satisfaction she realized from helping a student with a serious personal problem. Jaskulek stated, "That's why I don't want to leave this office" (Newton, 2000, p. 7A).

Ludwig (1987) conducted a study to identify attributes of successful women leaders. She concluded that major attributes possessed by women who succeed are a strong sense of self, the ability to work hard and set priorities, interpersonal skills, and the ability to strategize. In her study of verbal and nonverbal micropolitical communication of female school principals, Carr (1994) concluded that communication styles of female principals were characterized by strong interpersonal relationships rather than interpersonal dominance; the use of environmental framing and ceremony as micropolitical strategies to mobilize support; promotion of the welfare of others; involvement with mentors, and use of language that reflects goals of persuasion, collaboration, consensus, and affiliation.

## Conclusion

The new millennium offers promise for female school administrative candidates to maintain the momentum of the 20th century for women educators to gain professional advancements. Business, industry, and educational agencies continue efforts in the year 2001 to increase the number of female managers, supervisors, and administrators. School districts in California and Texas have held seminars specifically to encourage women to apply for superintendent positions (Newton, 2000). What women who

aspire to serve as school administrators must do now is to view current problems from the perspective of the female principal's desk. Identifying problems that women who aspire to be school administrators face is an important component in the process of increasing opportunities for women who seek advancement. Observations and studies related in this article contribute to insights that help women develop skills and techniques to achieve their professional goals. Using action skills to address contemporary problems faced by female school administrators enables current candidates to achieve success.

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