

Full Length Research Paper

Mentoring and Support Systems: Keys to Leadership

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The descriptive study examines mentoring research in education, leadership, and female career development. Sixty-six female faculty and administrators completed women in leadership surveys. Most respondents believe that hard work, perseverance and dedication are the essential keys to success. Many had a mentor or someone who significantly influenced or supported their career choices. Adherence to non-traditional female roles and a positive attitude greatly affected their career choices and contributed to leadership roles. The respondents answered questions about their professional training and provided suggestions to those aspiring upper level leadership responsibilities.

Key words: support systems, gender equity, mentoring, discrimination, effective leader

Introduction

Researchers of gender in career development have examined career choice, work, achievement, motivation, and factors influencing occupational status (Costello & Stone, 2001). Findings from such research have direct implications for schools and postsecondary institutions in two main areas: expanded programs for women in educational administration and career-related education and counseling in the pre-kindergarten through post-secondary schools.

The vocational role for women is not as clearly established for them by ages 20-35 as it is for men. College women may choose a job instead of a career or selected occupation because of roles as wife and mother. Researchers of feminist research show women's life patterns are more variable than men's and have a higher rate of individual change from more gains and losses of work and family roles (Eldridge, 1997; Mascia-Lees & Sharpe, 2000). Education and emotional support systems are more critical for women than for men in attaining occupational status and earnings.

Secondary and Postsecondary Education

Discrimination in postsecondary education is to some extent a continuation of what is found in the elementary and secondary schools. Because of widespread belief that the male is more suited for leadership, positions of authority, and dominant roles – in the school administration, top elected student office, and higher education – both males and females are socialized to accept these stereotypes (McBride-Stetson, 2004; McLaughlin, 2003).

Gender equity research has shown that a large number of highly qualified females are prevented from using their full capabilities because of discriminatory admission practices, lack of financial support, and other difficulties (McBride-Stetson, 2004; McLaughlin, 2003). Successful role models and mentors are not often provided for females since the highest-ranking faculty members and administrators have been traditionally males.

Traditional mentoring grew from the concept of the older and wiser guiding the young and aspiring. Contemporary mentoring has many forms and frequently people regard each other as partners, colleagues or peers ignoring age, status or power (Rolf, 2007). Mentoring is a gift that is shared. It is a relationship that enables purposeful conversation. The conversation assists the mentored to reflect on their own experience, make informed decisions and act upon the ideas that are generated. In mentoring, people develop a synergetic relationship through a conversation that enables them to set and achieve goals, make decisions and solve problems. Any one who has the skill to facilitate the mentoring process may be a mentor (Rolf, 2007).

In spite of research indicative of their competence, women do face problems of establishing a professional identity and discrimination (McBride-Stetson, 2004; McLaughlin, 2003; Newman, 1999). First, social attitudes about women's competency levels have been documented in recent years. Data have suggested that *to make the grade* women must be superior

to men or that the greater striving and loneliness required in the process of ascending the career ladder ensures that only the best women will succeed.

Women are evaluated differently due to differences in attitudes which are problematic. Women are judged as being competent in their feminine as well as their occupational roles. Feminist researchers have indicated that in spite of beliefs there is no difference in leadership abilities of males and females, males prefer working for male administrators (McLaren, 2002; McLaughlin, 2003; Newman, 1999).

Women who are interested in becoming educational leaders, or who have been chosen for a leadership position, find that their working life is partly shaped by the constraints and contingencies of being a woman (McLaughlin, 2003; Strom, 2003). Although a woman may face family constraints because of the conflicting expectations regarding traditional values involving a woman's place and coordinating family and work life, she can become an effective leader.

Leadership

Leadership is the activity of helping others work toward common goals or purposes (Fletcher, 2004; Giammatteo, 1981). According to Fletcher (2004), leadership takes on many forms and one such leadership form is post heroic leadership. Post heroic leadership requires "enacting a model of 'power with' as opposed to the more common association of leadership with 'power over'" (Fletcher, 2004, p. 653). The most effective leaders of the 21st century will help individuals and teams to coordinate and integrate their differing styles to drive change through a process of applied creativity that includes continuously discovering and defining new problems, solving those problems, and implementing the new solutions. The strategies leaders use to manage can have a significant effect on performance.

Leadership may be regarded as a series of functions that (a) builds and maintains the group and organization, (b) gets the job done, (c) helps the group feel comfortable and at ease, (d) helps to set and clearly define objectives, and (e) cooperatively works toward the organization's mission, vision and objectives (Giammatteo, 1981). The ability to work effectively with groups in a leadership role can be learned through conscientious effort, study, observation and practice (Bardwick, 1991; Wheatley, 1992). Leadership is both an art and a science, of which the scientific principles are learnable. The art of leadership is the way in which one applies leadership principles (Robbins, 1991). Individuals, teams, and organizations differ in their creative problem solving styles.

Leaders must appreciate individuals' differing preferences for various stages of this process. Giammatteo (1981) advocated the following are some skills that are important to learn and to practice:

1. Skills of personal behavior. The effective leader:

- Is sensitive to the feelings of the group.
 - Refrains from criticizing, arguing or ridiculing others' suggestions.
 - Helps others feel important and needed.
2. Skills of communication. The effective leader makes sure that everyone understands not only what is needed but why.
 3. Skills in equality. The effective leader recognizes that leadership is to be shared and is not a monopoly.
 4. Skills of organization. The effective leader helps the group plan, act, follow up, and evaluate.
 5. Skills of self-examination. The effective leader helps the group to become aware of their own forces, attitudes and values.

These leadership concepts, knowledge of the self and understanding the power and effects of one's behavior on others are needed for effective leadership and mentorship. They are highly developed cognitive processes and affective behaviors whereby leaders actualize the human potentials of self and others to effect change. Effective leadership is the combined cognitive efforts of the shared leadership and the willingness to become an agent of change (Bardwick, 1991; Walters, 1994). Effective leaders and mentors know how to release the creative talents of those with whom they work.

Are females being given equal access to high-level leadership positions? Does the female have the appropriate professional training and the appropriate support system that are necessary for advancement into top leadership positions as they become available? The next section deals with the methodology of the study.

Methodology

This study was a quantitative inquiry in which data were collected through a questionnaire designed to examine female educators' perceptions of the leadership and career opportunities. The questionnaire contained 32 questions that were divided into sections designed to investigate areas such as the participants' educational background, number of years in the position, goals and career aspirations, training, secondary level education, influences on the career choice, mentorship, supporter network, perceptions of gender bias, and leadership opportunities.

Participants

A cover letter introducing the purpose of the study, consent letter and survey were mailed to 82 female faculty and administrators at the university and 18 female administrators and teachers at the school district. The participants were guaranteed confidentiality and urged to participate. At the close of the two-week survey period, the researcher received 66 surveys. There was not a follow-up survey. Some participants did not respond to each question. In these instances no data was reported. After comparing and examining the surveys for patterns in the participants' responses, the researcher recorded

and coded responses. An analysis and transcription of the responses were recorded and the conclusions and recommendations were then reported.

Data Analysis and Findings

The surveys consisted of a series of questions and the participants were requested to respond to as many questions as possible. The participants in administrative positions ranged from Assistant Principal to Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, while those in faculty positions ranged from Instructor to Full Professor. The participants' ages ranged from 25 to 65 years. The types of degrees earned by the participants ranged from the bachelor's to doctoral in such disciplines as philosophy, education, chemistry, mathematics, and jurisprudence. The postsecondary education institutions attended by the participants ranged from local to international universities.

The number of years that the participants were employed at the university or school district ranged from nine months to 39 years. When listing the previous employment positions, 50 of the respondents listed jobs/careers that ranged from graduate assistant to clerk typist. In examining the respondents' professional education and their previous positions, 48 had positions that were in their area of specialty. The number of years in the current positions ranged from two months to 26 years. In summarizing the participants' responses regarding the highest administrative levels they would like to achieve: one respondent aspired to become president of a university; two aspired to become vice presidents; five wanted to become superintendents; eight aspired to become principals and five chose the other category.

The participants' responses regarding the highest faculty positions they would like to achieve were: eight aspired to become deans; three aspired to become associate deans; two wanted to become assistant deans; three aspired to become department chairpersons; 20 aspired to become full professors, four wanted to become associate professors and four aspired to become assistant professors. The responses to the type of training or preparation that the participants received for their current positions ranged from having a male mentor and learning through the school of "hard knocks" to course preparation via formal academic training.

I requested that respondents recall their elementary and secondary schooling and reflect upon a critical event that may have occurred because of their gender. Thirty-four respondents did not remember a negative incident that occurred because of their gender. Although 21 could remember an incident that occurred, it did not negatively affect their ability to achieve. This was also true if the now achieved area was different from an earlier goal. The most dominant factor narrowing the career horizon for 20 respondents was the lack of information about career choices. Three respondents considered becoming an administrator/faculty member at the junior high level, six at the

secondary level, 38 at the postsecondary level and 17 at some other level. Table 1 contains influences on the respondents' career goals.

Table 1
Influences on Participants' Career Choices

Influence on career choice	Number of Participants choosing this factor
• Husband relocating	2
• High school choral director	1
• Vacant position	2
• Self-motivation	6
• Male peers	3
• Personal aspiration	6
• Teaching colleagues	2
• Strong mentors	4
• Elementary teachers	3
• Secondary teachers	3
• Professors	15
• School principal	2
• Mother/parents	7
• Neighbor	1
• Spouse	4
• Department chair	1
• Relative	1
• Nursing leaders	2

Twenty-four respondents did not pursue certain careers or options because of societal expectations concerning females and professional careers. Thirty-three respondents pursued the careers they had always wanted. Some of the careers or options not pursued were: medical school, professional golfer, geology, anthropology, lawyer, chemist, chemical engineer, archeology, fashion designer and biology.

Sixty-one respondents felt that in their present positions they can effectively mentor or influence other females to become successful while two did not. Two respondents felt they could not effectively influence colleagues and one felt she could be more effective with female students. In the survey's section regarding who was part of their network of supporters, most of the respondents checked two or more supporters which accounts for the numbers listed below. Fifty-nine respondents have a network of supporters while six do not. This supporter network is listed in Table 2.

Table 2
Network of Supporters

Support Network	*Number of Participants choosing this option
• Spouses	32
• Parents	30
• Siblings	21
• Children	30
• Peers	47
(academic/administrative)	
• Friends	44

* Participants chose as many supporters that would apply; hence, the large number of responses.

Most of the respondents had encountered people who tried to dash their hopes of being a leader, yet they did not allow these negative expectations of others to adversely affect their achievement. While 21 respondents reflected that others' underestimation of their performance worked as an incentive for them, 39 of them felt that high expectation of society increased their confidence level. Respondents said that a sense of knowing who they were, having a support system and believing in themselves were the keys to their success.

Under the leadership opportunities section, 63 respondents said they have been given an opportunity to participate in professional events. One respondent stated that she took the opportunity to participate in professional events by paying her own way to the events.

Twenty-eight respondents have had an opportunity to chair a committee whose decisions have impacted the entire university or school district while 35 have not. Twenty-eight respondents have had an opportunity to be a keynote speaker at a professional meeting and 35 have not. Thirty-five were considered leaders in a religious or civic organization while 28 respondents were not.

Fifty-nine respondents provided suggestions/comments for those aspiring to high level leadership positions. Some suggestions included

- Try to do your job with good interpersonal skills.
- Work hard and efficiently. Always be prepared.
- Network with peers, a mentor; stay in touch with people around you.
- Set clear, definable and obtainable goals.
- Don't accept gender bias. Learn inoffensive ways to deflect snide remarks.
- Believe in yourself and be genuine.
- Find out how the system works.
- Be ethical. You have free will, so do what you think is right.
- Volunteer to do extra assignments. Be cautious in "tooting your own horn."
- Observe, learn and always remain teachable.
- Always expect to win!

Discussion

The researcher's inquiry began by asking, "Do females on university campuses and school districts have access to high level administrative and faculty rank positions? What support systems are in place?" Were the females properly trained for these positions or were they not?

The researcher looked for a correlation in the total number of years at the university or school district with the number of years the respondents had held the current position. Twenty-two respondents' total number of years varied from the number of years in the current position. When observing the last position held by these respondents, most had been promoted to a higher position.

Five respondents, whose total number of years was the same as the current number of years, were hired into high-level administration or faculty positions. The preparation and training of the respondents matched the position that was currently held. All respondents had formal educational training while nine also had professional experience receiving national recognition in their respective fields.

The respondents' number of years at the university or school district ranged from nine months to 39 years. The rate of advancement at the university and school district varied from respondent to respondent. There appears to be no consistent promotion pattern for the women at the university. However, a common refrain was, "The harder a person worked, the more the person can advance to a higher position."

The highest administrative or faculty positions that participants aspired to achieve were in alignment with the respondents' preparation and training. All respondents appeared to have reasonable goals that could be achieved within a five-year period. The results of the survey show that if one is qualified for a position and has proper training, the female administrator or faculty member does have an opportunity to advance to a high level. The recurring themes of each of the surveys were

the belief in self, preparation, support systems and diligence.

Conclusions

Because the female role is more complicated than that of the male, can the female move outside of the traditional female role into top leadership positions? The purpose of the study was twofold: to investigate whether females at a southern university and in a public school district have opportunities for advancement; and what preparation, support systems or training were needed in order to achieve top leadership positions.

Females face constraints in the workforce and research shows that the greater the proportion of women in an occupation, the lower the average salary. As a result of the belief that the male is suited more for leadership, positions of authority, and dominant roles, females may be prevented from using their full potential and advancing to higher level leadership positions.

Although a female may have faced discrimination, she can achieve her career goals. A female can be a successful leader in a school district or on the university campus. How can one become a successful mentor or leader? The recommendations in the following section provide some answers.

Recommendations

Each of the 66 respondents had common traits that included a positive self-concept, a belief that their gender did not limit their achievement, and a strong sense of perseverance. These are all traits that are found in effective leadership and mentorship. A true leader shows the way and encourages others during the journey (Fletcher, 2004). How can women become leaders?

Women have some historical baggage to overcome in the course of learning to be leaders. They must be encouraged to be confident, respectful of their gender and their own abilities. Fifty-nine respondents provided suggestions/comments for those aspiring to high level leadership positions:

1. Begin with self-assessment. What basic leadership skills do I already possess?
 2. Recognize your own potential. Identify realistic goals. Verbalize your career plans. Outline your career goals.
 3. Implement your plan. Systematically study working practices. Seek advice and sustenance from more advanced persons. Emulate their admirable professional qualities. Develop and use professional and personal support systems. Protect yourself.
 4. Remember to have excellence in all phases of the work place and that your performance is the ultimate goal.
- As women keep these suggestions in mind, they can be successful administrators or faculty members and build stronger organizations.

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