

Women Learners in Higher Education: Transformational vs. Transactional Leadership Development

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Abstract: The purpose of this research is to gain a greater understanding of how women learn to be leaders in higher educational institutions.

In higher education, women have entered and will continue to enter leadership positions as college presidents and vice presidents, executive directors, deans and department chairs, and faculty members. The number of women holding president positions in higher education grew from 9.5 percent to 19 percent between the years of 1986 and 1998 (Amey, VanDerLinden, & Brown, 2002). Kim (2001) and Kezar (2000) have discovered through their research that men have a tendency to demonstrate transactional leadership characteristics, such as being more assertive and rewarding and punishing subordinates, whereas women have a tendency to demonstrate transformational leadership characteristics, such as being more nurturing, inclusive, and collaborative. The internal workings of the processes and procedures of higher education institutions, however, are structured to encourage leaders to develop transactional leadership characteristics in order to succeed (Reay & Ball, 2000).

The problem that this research explores is the conflict in which women in leadership positions in higher education are engaged when they are trained and developed within higher education institutions to demonstrate transformational leadership characteristics yet seem to be evaluated by other leaders and subordinates on transactional leadership characteristics. The purpose of this research is to gain a greater understanding of how women learn to be leaders in higher educational institutions. Our research questions are: (a) What leadership characteristics do these women perceive they possess as women leaders in higher education? And (b) How did these women develop and how do they continue to develop the leadership characteristics expected of them as leaders in higher education in order to succeed?

This research project was approached from a critical feminist perspective (Olesen, 2000). Using a feminist perspective allowed the researchers and participants to share power during the interviews. Through sharing their voices and power they and other women will gain an understanding of the conflict they face as women leaders of higher education institutions. The three research methods used to conduct this research were autoethnography, in order for one of the authors to share her story, ethnographic interviews, to capture the stories of the women leaders who participated in the interviews, and a focus group interview to allow the participants of the ethnographic interviews the opportunity to share their stories with others and to discover the other participants' untold stories. These three methods of qualitative research allowed us to see and feel the stories of how the participants, as women, experienced the conflict of being transformational leaders in institutions that demand transactional leaders.

A Midwestern community college was chosen as the site to conduct the research. This research consists of the stories of six woman participants, including one of the authors. All of these women work for the same higher educational institution and are demographically similar in regards to age, position, and socioeconomic status. Four of the participants were European

Americans and the other two were African Americans. All of the participants are women who are leaders, representing faculty, dean, and executive positions. One major source of data is an autoethnography of one of the authors of her reflective thoughts regarding her current and past positions, personal experiences, and areas of her development as a leader. To further enhance and bring to life the research, interviews with five other women in leadership positions was incorporated into a written dialogue. To be able to triangulate data, a focus group comprised of three interviewees and one of the author's was incorporated.

Through the participants' stories and the experiences, we analyzed the language the women used, gaining a greater understanding of the conflicts that women encountered in their leadership positions. Several findings emerged in our study that showed that the women wanted, believed, and were developed to be transformational leaders. The first key finding was that there was a consistency of the terms these women used and how they used them as they talked about being transformational leaders. All of the participants discussed the importance of establishing relationships, teambuilding, or collaboration. Data further revealed that the structure of the institution dictates how these women lead. They talked about transformational leadership, and they tried to incorporate transformational leadership into their leadership styles, but ultimately because of the structure of the institution, these women lead as transactional leaders.

A second key finding was that these six women were developed and trained as transformational leaders but were evaluated on their transactional leadership characteristics. The participants were not necessarily confused about this conflict, but instead they came to accept that this is the norm in their institution. These women did not say they felt devalued, but they struggled with balancing their transformational leadership characteristics in an institution that evaluates them as transactional leaders. They talked about transformational leadership, and they tried to incorporate transformational leadership into their leadership styles, but ultimately because of the structure of the institution, these women lead as transactional leaders. One of the participants was very open about how success is measured within this institution and explained that as long as full-time equivalency is used to determine budgets, transactional leadership is necessary.

Through this research, we gained awareness of the conflict the participants experience and how this clash can be caused by the structures in higher education institution, as well as how leadership development programs are implemented to develop women leaders. With this knowledge, more appropriate training and development programs can be created for leaders and subordinates that encourage women to demonstrate their transformational leadership styles and be rewarded for them by their institutions. Higher education institutions will be better able to plan, develop and put in place mechanisms that value the leadership characteristics and allows women to prepare themselves as they grow and develop as leaders in their societal contexts.

References

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The remainder of references are available upon request.