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# A Leadership Perspective From Women Superintendents

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The prevailing model of educational administration evolved over the last part of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth centuries (Callahan, cited in Adkison, 1981). This leadership model paralleled the managerial changes in business, industry, and government; it defined the professional manager as a person who had an "internal decision-making monopoly and authority over others" (Kanter, cited in Adkison, p. 313, 1981) and relied on rigid hierarchical structure, competition, and control to bring about results (Ortiz & Marshall, 1988).

There are serious questions about the efficacy of this leadership model. As early as 1988, researchers in educational administration were asking two fundamental questions that highlighted this dilemma: "To what extent does a system of hierarchical control enhance teaching and learning? . . . To what extent do traditional ranking and emphasis on competition square with the enhancement of educators as people and of instructional services?" (Ortiz & Marshall, 1988, p. 138).

Experts in business management (Aburdene & Naisbitt, 1992; Block, 1991; Covey, 1990; Helgesen, 1990; Peters, 1988; Wheatley, 1992) have discussed the changes in leadership models. These changes are depicted as a shift toward a more flexible organizational structure based on units that are more lateral and cooperative. Wheatley (1992) considers the need for these kinds of changes when she says:

> Scientists in many different disciplines are questioning whether we can adequately explain how the world works by using the machine imagery created in the seventeenth century, most notably by Sir Isaac Newton. In the machine model, one must understand parts. . . . The assumption is that by comprehending the workings of each piece, the whole can be understood. The Newtonian model of the world is characterized by materialism and reductionism—a focus on things rather than relationships. (p. 9)

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In her view, organizational change is taking place in part because the new sciences have changed the way in which we view the world. Defining the new sciences as the disciplines of physics, biology, chemistry, and theories of evolution and chaos that cross several disciplines, she explains the nature of these changes:

> In the new science, the underlying currents are a movement toward holism, toward understanding the system as a system and giving primary value to the relationships that exist among seemingly discrete parts. Our concept of organizations is moving away from the mechanistic creations that flourished in the age of bureaucracy. We have begun to speak in earnest of fluid, organic structures, even boundaryless organizations. (Wheatley, 1992, p. 13)

Those in education also have articulated a need for a paradigm shift in educational administration (Giroux, 1991; Sergiovanni, 1984); beginning with the educational reform movement in the 1980s, there have been serious discussions about the need for changes in the traditional, hierarchial, control-and-command environments found in many schools (Wesson & Grady, 1994). These kinds of changes could transform school into viable communities. As Wood (1990) notes:

> We take for granted that our schools are communities, when, in fact, they are merely institutions that can become communities only when we work at it. But, with proper attention to all the individuals within the school, we can create an experience for students that demonstrates what it means to be a compassionate, involved citizen. For it is only within a community, not an institution, that we learn how to hold fast to such principles as working for the common good, empathy, equity, and self-respect. ( p. 33)

Educational leaders in these "communities of learners" value leadership over management and emphasize collaboration, consensus building, and empowerment. Emphasis is placed on vision, values, and guiding principles (Sergiovanni, 1990). The critical theorist, Giroux (1993), expresses the distinctive nature of this kind of educational leadership:

> Instead of weaving dreams limited to the ever-accelerating demand for tougher tests, accountability schemes, and leadership models forged in the discourse of a sterile technician, schools of education need programs which are part of a collective effort to build and revitalize a democratic culture which is open rather than fixed, disputed rather than given, and supportive rather than intolerant of cultural difference. (p. 22–23)

This research was conducted to see if women superintendents are in fact using leadership practices that fit this kind of paradigm shift in educational administration.

## Methodology

To understand more about the leadership practices of women superintendents, the researchers conducted a national study which was two-fold in nature. First, we interviewed a national sample of women superintendents about their perceived sources of job satisfaction, the benefits accrued on the job, their sense of self-fulfillment in the work place, and personal strengths they brought to the job. Second, we assessed the leadership practices of women superintendents using the Leadership Practices Inventory-Self (Kouzes & Posner, 1988).

### Theoretical Framework for the LPI

Kouzes and Posner framed leadership from information they gathered from managers and executives in the public and private sector who described their "personal best;" that is, the leadership behavior used by the managers and executives

when they received outstanding results (Kouzes & Posner, 1987). These "personal best" leadership practices can best be described by the following five practices, each of which has two attendant behaviors:

I. Challenging the process : A. Search for opportunities B. Experiment and take risks
II. Inspiring a shared vision: A. Envision the future B. Enlist others
III. Enabling others to act: A. Foster collaboration B. Strengthen others
IV. Modeling the way: A. Set the example B. Plan small wins
V. Encouraging the heart: A. Recognize contributions B. Celebrate accomplishments

The Leadership Practices Inventory-Self (Kouzes & Posner, 1988) measures the extent leaders have adopted these five leadership practices and ten behaviors.

**Procedures**

Since we were unable to locate a comprehensive directory of women superintendents, we solicited assistance from the American Association of School Administrators, state associations of school administrators, U. S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), state departments of education, and other researchers. We did receive lists of superintendents' names from state departments of education and state administrators' groups. However, some states would not release the names of their superintendents. Thus we were able to identify 346 women superintendents in twenty-nine states and unable to secure names of women superintendents in the other twenty-one states. All 346 women superintendents received a letter explaining the study and were asked two questions: Would you be willing to participate in the study and how many years have you been a superintendent? After one mailing 263 (76%) of the superintendents responded. Of the 263 respondents, 249 (95%) agreed to take part in the study.

Because we were interested in differences in rural and urban superintendents, we classified superintendents working in population centers of 50,000 or more or in an area adjacent to such a population center as urban. All others were classified as rural/small school superintendents. In the initial study all 31 superintendents identified as urban were selected for telephone interviews. We randomly selected 31 rural/small school superintendents for interviews so that we could have an equivalent number of rural/small school superintendents for comparison with the urban subjects.

Twenty-one urban and 30 rural superintendents were available for a telephone interview during January, 1993. The superintendents answered ten open-ended questions in sequence during interviews of 30 to 45 minutes in length. The researchers independently reviewed the transcripts of the interviews and identified major themes. The researchers compared their findings to verify accurate identification and naming of the themes. Independently, the researchers developed categories of themes. The researchers then compared the categories and developed the final analysis. (For a full discussion of this study see Grady, Ourada–Sieb, and Wesson, 1994.)

With the permission of the authors, the Leadership Practices Inventory-Self (Kouzes & Posner, 1988) was mailed in July of 1993 to the 249 women superintendents who agreed to take part in the study. One hundred seventy-four (70%) of these women completed and returned the Leadership Practices Inventory-Self.

**Findings**

The initial study investigated these superintendents' perceived sources of job satisfaction, the benefits accrued on the job, their sense of self-fulfillment in the work place, and personal strengths they brought to the job. The results of this study, which consisted of telephone interviews with 21 urban and 30 rural women superintendents, can be described as follows: Most of the urban and rural/small school women superintendents have been hired to be change agents, and they describe their leadership characteristics in similar ways. Whether in a highly bureaucratic, urban organization or a small rural setting, these women superintendents are successfully building collegial-collaborative organizations. Both are operationalizing leadership skills that fit a new leadership paradigm that values change and connectiveness (Shakeshaft, 1987).

The results of the follow-up study delineate more clearly the leadership practices of the superintendents in this country, but did not delineate differences in urban and rural/small school superintendents. An analysis of the scores on the five categories of the Leadership Practices Inventory-Self (Kouzes & Posner, 1993) reveals mean scores for the 174 women superintendents who completed and returned the LPI at or above the eightieth percentile.[1] This percentile ranking is classified by Posner and Kouzes (1992) in the self-assessment and analysis manual as a high ranking. In fact, they state that "studies indicate that a high score is one at or above the seventieth percentile" (p. 12).

**Table 1. Results of LPI-SELF**

| | Female Superintendents (N = 174) | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean | Standard Deviation | Comparative Percentile |
| Challenging the Process | 25.78 | 4.29 | 83 |
| Inspiring a Shared Vision | 25.67 | 4.27 | 90 |
| Enabling Others to Act | 27.31 | 4.55 | 80 |
| Modeling the Way | 25.25 | 4.20 | 83 |
| Encouraging the Heart | 25.51 | 4.20 | 82 |

The percentile ranks of these women superintendents indicate that they ranked highest in Inspiring a Shared Vision (90th percentile) and lowest in Enabling Others to Act (80th percentile), but what is most remarkable is that they exhibit high mean scores in all of the leadership practices. With thirty points possible in each practice, the lowest mean score for a category was 25.25 and the highest mean score for a category was 27.31. It is evident that these women do well in the five practices and ten accompanying behaviors that have been described by Kouzes and Posner as the "fundamental practices and behaviors in exemplary leadership" (Kouzes & Posner, 1987, p. 279). Although Kouzes and Posner caution against interpreting the LPI-Self scores independently of LPI-Other feedback, the normative data of the LPI-Other have mean scores for each category that are only plus or minus 1.2 points different from the mean scores for each category of the LPI-Self.

Consideration needs to be given to the differences between our sample of women superintendents and the sample used to norm the LPI-Self. The normative sample consisted of 3,601 males and 1,011 females. (See Posner and Kouzes, Psychometric Properties of the Leadership Practices Inventory, 1992, for a full discussion of the LPI.) This sample did not include educators but according to the authors did represent a "full array of functional fields (e.g., management, marketing, finance, manufacturing, accounting, engineering, sales, human resource development, information systems, etc.)" (Posner & Kouzes, 1992, p. 2). The normative sample was only 28% female, but the scores indicate that "male and female respondents are more alike in terms of their leadership practices than they are different . . . although female managers reported that they engaged in Modeling the Way and Encouraging the Heart more frequently than did their male counterparts" (Posner & Kouzes, 1992, p. 14).

## Discussion

We began this research by examining the positive aspects of being a women superintendent since previous studies seem to focus on the pathology of the position rather than its benefits. As the superintendents in the initial study talked about what was satisfying about the job, we found that what they liked about the job was the way they were able to lead—their leadership practices. These leadership practices seemed to be very similar. In general, what they enjoyed was the human relations part of their job—those leadership practices that emphasized the relational aspects of leadership. They recognized the importance and placed value on all kinds of relationships, relationships between and among teachers, children, the community, the school board, and state department personnel. Because the initial study indicated that the superintendents we interviewed were using leadership practices different from the practices that have been traditional in educational administration, the LPI-Self was used to provide quantitative data and discrete terminology to the kinds of practices these superintendents were using; the data also contribute to the triangulation of the initial findings (Mathison, 1988).

We chose the LPI-Self since this inventory came closest to empirically measuring the conceptual leadership framework that became apparent as we interviewed these women superintendents. Also other researchers had used the LPI to measure what is termed transformational or visionary leadership (Stoner–Zemel, 1988; Tarazi, 1990), a term we thought best described the superintendents we had interviewed. We now have quantitative data that corroborates our initial findings. Both urban and rural women superintendents are using leadership practices that are indeed different from the prevailing model of educational administration, and this shift in leadership practices resembles the paradigm shift in leadership depicted in business management literature. As Wheatley (1992) suggests,

> If the physics of our universe is revealing the primacy of relationships, is it any wonder that we are beginning to reconfigure our ideas about management in relational terms? (p. 12)

This research indicates that there is reason to believe that women superintendents in this country are seeing the "primacy of relationships" and do configure their ideas about management in relational terms. It is interesting to speculate if other superintendents are doing the same.

## Endnote

1. The manual for the LPI reports percentile rankings only for the aggregated self ratings and observer ratings and does not separately report percentile equivalents for self and observer ratings, thereby making a direct comparison of our sample subjects with one national sample somewhat problematic. Since self ratings tend to be higher than observer ratings and since our sample data included only self-ratings, it seemed more appropriate to compare our sample data with the national data on self-ratings. To do this, we calculated a weighted mean and standard deviation for the national data, which takes into account the uneven representation of men and women in those data. We then calculated z scores for all possible scores on the LPI-Self. This enabled us to create a table of percentile rankings in self-ratings for the national sample scores. It was then a straightforward procedure to calculate z scores for our sample mean scores of 174 women superintendents in each of the five leadership domains of the LPI using the standard z score formula and then consulting a table of areas under the normal curve to derive percentile rankings for our sample

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