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Pathways to Administrative Positions

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Women Leaders: Structuring Success

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Preparing for the job search, acquiring administrative skills, being part of a network, being in the "right place at the right time," and being the most qualified for a position are all pathways to administrative positions.

Throughout the United States, the majority of students enrolled in educational administration preparation programs are women. The struggle by women to gain leadership positions continues in the 1990s. A survey conducted by The Executive Educator and Xavier University shows that women are best represented among the ranks of elementary school principals (39.7%), followed by junior high/middle school principals (20.5%), and high school principals (12.1%). The lowest percentage (10.5%) of female school administrators work as school superintendents. However, the percentages are increasing; in 1991, fewer than 6% of superintendents were female (Grady & Gosmire, 1995).

Based on the findings of a series of studies concerning women in educational leadership, women need to be encouraged to seek administrative positions. Assistance in seeking positions can and should be supported by a variety of sources including family, peers, colleagues, professional organizations and associations, school board members, state department officials, and college/university preparation programs. Further study is needed to investigate the role of women administrators in supporting other women seeking administrative positions in K-12 settings. Professional organizations and associations may be able to serve in a more systematic manner in this area. Continuing professional development seminars, courses, and workshops
may be useful in increasing awareness levels of the need to have more women employed in K-12 educational administration positions (Grady & O'Connell, 1993).

In a study concerning women who hold administrative certification, subjects were asked whether they received encouragement to become educational administrators. Thirty-seven percent indicated that they received such encouragement. As a follow-up question, subjects were asked to indicate how they were encouraged. The primary form of encouragement was verbal. In 21% of the cases, women were told of an administrative position (18% by a university professor), and were encouraged to take graduate courses in educational administration (19%) (Grady, 1992).

Those successful in acquiring administrative positions reported that their successes were the result of a variety of factors. Preparing for the job search, acquiring administrative skills, being part of a network, being in the “right place at the right time,” and being the most qualified for a position are all pathways to administrative positions.

**Credential Building**

**Experiences**

Your credentials may be the key to an administrative job. Credentials reflect your work experience, the network you develop and the mentoring you receive. They include the administrative certification you hold, and they reflect your administrative skills including scheduling, managing student discipline, providing staff or professional development opportunities, monitoring school attendance, engaging in teacher appraisal, and resolving conflicts. Many activities can be used to build your resume; special trainings are excellent resume builders. Training in the Boys Town Model of Discipline, Instructional Theory into Practice (ITIP), and Peer Mediation are examples. Coaching is one way of demonstrating that you have the skills to handle conflict and manage the activities of a diverse group of people. Individuals who seek to increase their administrative experiences might consider volunteering to coordinate activities or to serve as coaches or assistant coaches in sports programs.

**Skills**

Those who have succeeded in acquiring administrative roles recommend developing your administrative skills. Career advancement is no longer based on seniority alone but is increasingly dependent on the competencies that individual workers have acquired (Quintero, 1995). Men and women have differing characteristic work behaviors and attitudes that affect their career advancement. A study of women identified three abilities of successful women: strong sense of self, working hard and setting priorities; interpersonal skills, including listening and mediating; and ability to use strategy (Albino, 1992). Responses from a survey of 175 administrators revealed that communication skills, goal setting, resource and stress management, and self-confidence were considered crucial characteristics of administrators (Bridges, 1996).

Daresh and Playko (1992) reported that aspiring administrators placed a much higher value on the demonstration of technical managerial skills, while practicing administrators valued socialization skills. Variables which generated highly positive responses for both workplace
performance and career advancement were self-worth, amount of education, verbal skills, writing skills, and leadership ability (Johnson, et al., 1991).

Socialization and skill development remain important management training needs. The importance of communication, networking, power, and politics indicate areas that need significant training (Larwood & Wood, 1995).

In a study of 325 K-12 and postsecondary education women administrators, the respondents reported a need for training in administrative skills. The skills included: motivating personnel, managing conflict, self-assessment of administrative strengths, evaluating and appraising personnel, and developing and training personnel (Grady & Bohling-Philippi, 1988).

Women seeking administrative positions are advised to examine and readjust their leadership styles, become qualified, pursue administrative experiences, publicize career goals to influential persons, and form alliances (Gregory & Reid, 1983).

Internships, practica, or working with mentors are other ways to gain administrative experience. These experiences provide the basic administrative skills that are sought by hiring officials and include planning, organizing, staffing, directing, coordinating, organizing, reporting, and budgeting. Internship or practica experiences should be planned with a variety of individuals so that the aspiring administrator has the opportunity to learn from role models who have expertise in diverse areas.

✓ Mentoring

Mentoring is also frequently cited in the literature as an ideal way of increasing one's visibility. The ideal in mentoring is for one mentor to take someone along or “pull someone else up the ladder.” A university advisor can serve as an advocate for you. An initial step in mentoring is for the aspiring individual to ask for the help of a mentor. When seeking a mentor, it is useful to know who will be helpful and who will not be helpful in the mentoring role. Individuals are often criticized for stepping on the people below them as they “climb the ladder of success.” Mentoring requires that you think of those below you as well as those above you on the ladder.

Mentoring is defined as the process of developing people in organizations. Successful mentoring occurs when top-level executives teach selected junior persons the “rules of the game”; provide opportunities for them to demonstrate their skills; challenge them; give them critical performance feedback; and sponsor them into higher level positions (Mertz et al., 1990). Mentoring which has become a vehicle to enhance the skills and abilities of one’s associates, colleagues, and proteges is a creative alternative to direct instruction and teaching that provides an emotionally supportive relationship for the protege. Skills of the mentor travel with the protege long after the relationship has ended. Typically, an older, wiser adult is paired or matched with a younger colleague in a relationship designed to foster growth and development (Shaughnessy, 1995).

Carr-Fuffino suggests ways that a mentor can help a protege. These include: (a) teach, advise, counsel, coach, guide, and sponsor; (b) give insights; (c) serve as a sounding board for decision-making; (d) be a constructive critic; (e) provide information for career advancement; and, (f) show how to move effectively through the system (Hopson, 1995). Mentors can increase the visibility of the protege, provide informal training, and increase the network (Fleming, 1991).

The most frequently perceived functions of mentors are building self-confidence, heightening self-esteem, and strengthening motivation. The second most frequently identified function
is socializing proteges regarding role requirements, expectations, and organizational imperatives (Howard-Vital & Morgan, 1993).

Mentoring is very important for females and minorities because of the obstacles they often face in career advancement; yet mentor pools are largely comprised of White males. Cross-gender mentoring also brings difficulties, particularly involving females who are reluctant to engage in late work sessions or socialization with their mentors for fear of negative outside reactions or gossip.

Significant issues in mentoring are the cultural taboos that are associated with those advocating for someone who is different in race or gender. Often men serve as hiring officials and so men are ideal mentors. Because of this, it is necessary for both men and women to overcome the taboos that bar men from serving as mentors for women and women from seeking men as mentors.

According to Pavan & Robinson (1991), mentoring occurred as frequently with women as with men. External barriers tended to be systemic and closely tied to sex stereotyping. Strategies used to overcome these barriers included determination, open communication, and patience.

If the reality is that womentors—women who are mentoring other women—seek out those most like themselves, women of color may seldom be sought out as proteges. By sharing power and womentoring women of color, administrators will build effective work teams and enhance cross-cultural understanding and appreciation (Hetherington & Barcelo, 1985).

Matcynski and Comer (1991) identify four basic states of a mentoring relationship: (a) initiation; (b) cultivation; (c) separation; and (d) redefinition. The stages define the progression of the relationship beginning with the protege’s need for help and support from a mentor who is admired and respected, to the protege becoming independent and shifting the relationship to one of collegiality and friendship, or anger and permanent separation (Matcynski & Comer, 1991).

Data suggest four critical factors, above and beyond competence and potential, that mentors use, knowingly and unknowingly, in selecting potential mentees: fit, risk predictability, and payoff. From a review of the research, it appears that use of these factors in screening potential mentees helps explain why women may receive less mentoring and have a harder time attracting mentors (Mertz et al., 1987).

**Resume Building**

Your resume may be the most important means of communicating your qualifications to a potential employer. Use the resume to represent your professional accomplishments and work to build the strongest resume you can. Women often have absences from the professional workforce. The resume should reflect the myriad civic and volunteer activities that women engage in during those periods of absence from the professional education workforce. Individuals who are new to a career should maximize their professional experiences. No one is ever “just a teacher.” Community, church, and social activities often provide opportunities for leadership and administrative skills. Do not diminish the contributions that you have made in these areas.

Through your resume, identify yourself in terms of your strengths. Be clear about your goals and your beliefs about education. Use the resume to create, for others, the image of who you are and what you represent.
THE JOB SEARCH

✓ Letters of Application

The letter of application may be the first and only paper that a potential employer sees before making a decision about you as an applicant. Develop a spectacular letter of application. Look at various examples of letters of application as you develop yours, making certain that you address the job requirements in your letter of application.

✓ References

Include a list of references with your resume, being sure to select individuals who are 100% supportive of your career. Additionally, the individuals you ask to serve as references should be knowledgeable about your qualifications, your career accomplishments, and your career aspirations. It is helpful to have references who are well known, respected educational professionals. Make sure that your references represent all the professional positions you have held and all the districts where you have worked. Ask permission to use their names and keep your references informed about your job search so that they can provide reliable and accurate information about you.

✓ Interviewing

Job-hunters are advised to look professional; know their audience and communicate properly; be informed about the school’s demographics, achievement trends, successes; refrain from name-dropping; and respect interviewers (Pigford, 1995). In the interview, stress your strengths, model competence, and demonstrate decisiveness in your answers, since this is what is expected in most administrative situations.

As part of the interview, you may be asked to make a presentation. Consider the types of presentations you might be expected to provide as an administrator. These might include presentations at: faculty meetings, staff development activities, parent meetings, and civic organizations. As you prepare the presentation keep the needs of these “possible” audiences in mind.

✓ Portfolios

Aspiring administrators may benefit from portfolio development. The administrative portfolio can be used to assess performance, encourage reflection for improvement, and assist in career advancement. Items selected reveal information about an individual’s philosophy; leadership capacity; commitment to professional growth; ability to anticipate problems; develop alternatives and take risks; and willingness to accept challenging assignments (Brown & Irby, 1995). If you choose to prepare a portfolio, focus on your professional accomplishments, growth and development. Your portfolio might include the following: vita (with reference list), educational philosophy, professional goals, professional honors, awards, organizational memberships, writing samples, articles, and pictures.
Barriers

Barriers to women’s access to administrative roles persist. While focusing on the pathology of these problems is not our intent, all women would be well advised to avoid the barriers noted in the literature.

There are three general categories of barriers that keep women in traditional positions within the work world and at the lower levels of organizational hierarchies within educational administration. In personal barriers, the first category, personality characteristics, background influences, and socialization patterns function to inhibit women’s progress in educational administration. The second category, interpersonal barriers, characterizes the interactions between aspiring women and the dominant power groups (which tend to be White and male). The major types of interpersonal barriers are sex role stereotyping and intergroup polarization. These barriers function to perpetuate myths and biases about women’s abilities and group women together in such a way that all women suffer from the failures of a few. Organizational/structural barriers (the third category) occur in many aspects of an agency’s functions: recruitment, selection, placement, evaluation, norms and expectations. Some strategies for combating these barriers are consciousness raising, career planning, management training, information sharing, mentoring, networking, and retraining (Gupta, 1983).

Major difficulties faced by women include role conflicts, lack of support, and discrimination. Potential solutions involve adopting a personal strategy, changing the existing setting, and/or seeking out alternative settings (structural strategies). Barriers that may exist in graduate school include a paucity of female mentors and a lack of support for career development. After acquiring a job, women may encounter problems with affirmative action, networking, and sexual harassment (Yoder, 1984).

The “glass ceiling” refers to those barriers that have prevented the advancement of women and minorities into the top levels of executive management. Barriers to career advancement include: recruitment practices, lack of opportunity to contribute and participate in professional development, general lack of ownership of equal opportunity principles, performance measures, and mobility. The following methods are cited as successful approaches to removing glass ceiling barriers: tracking women and minorities with advancement potential, ensuring access and visibility, ensuring a bias-free workplace, and continuing placement of women and minorities into entry-level professional positions.

A major impediment to women’s successful pursuit of administrative careers appears to be their unwillingness to apply for administrative positions (Grady, 1992). In a study concerning women with administrative credentials, 127 (65%) of the 196 respondents had not applied for any administrative position during the last five years. The 69 (35%) women who had applied for administrative positions sent a total of 96 applications. These applications included: 43 for elementary principalships, 19 for assistant principalships, 17 for coordinator positions, five for secondary principalships, three for superintendencies, three for special education directors, and three for directors of student services.

Of the 69 respondents who applied for administrative positions within the last five years, 45 (65%) were interviewed. Of these individuals, 22 were interviewed one time, nine were interviewed four times, one was interviewed five times, and one was interviewed six times (Grady, 1992).
In a recent survey of women principals, we asked the subjects how they acquired their first principalships (Grady, Peery, & Krumm, 1997). The following comments represent the responses of these individuals.

I was approached.

I was originally a Title I teacher in the district. I did my internship under the current principal at that time; he left and recommended me. I was hired at the next board meeting. I don’t know if the position was advertised.

I got drafted into being a head teacher. Over the years I just got more and more skilled.

I taught in this district for three years and was asked to prepare for the principalship. I was on the job before I got my Masters. I was a teaching principal for two years, half-time teaching principal for one year, then full time principal for four years.

I was a teacher for 20 years; then I was a head teacher. I got my administrative certificate, applied for my first job and got it as principal.

I applied, . . . I have been in the district for 16 years, 13 years as a teacher, four years as a principal.

I taught for seven years and was then a counselor for four years. I was an assistant principal for four years and I will soon be starting my third year as principal. This has all been in the same district.

I was promoted from the classroom after 12 years of teaching experience to a position where I was acting assistant principal at one building, principal at another building, Title I coordinator for the district and special education director for the district. I taught for two years in the district with my administrative certificate before being promoted. I had applied for a principalship in one other district but didn’t get it. I was hired because I had an administrative certificate in place. I have people skills, and then I was asked by the special education director and principal to apply.

I was teaching first grade for six years in the district. I applied for the principalship and got it.

I was teaching here and had my administrative certificate. I was first a head teacher for one year. I taught for nine years. They came and asked if I would take it.

I was in the district and was promoted from within. I didn’t apply for the position of principal. It was offered to me.

I applied for three jobs before receiving this principalship. The administrator before had the Special Education and Federal programs. He left the system and that job was split up. My first administrative job was to do federal projects; then when this principalship came up, they asked if I could do this principalship plus the federal projects. That was three years ago. The jobs have tripled and the staff has tripled, and the kids since then. I’m still doing all those jobs.

I applied for three jobs before this one. I was the assistant principal at another school after I had taught for two years at that school.
We also asked the women principals why they were hired and what qualities got them their jobs. Their comments follow:

I believe I was hired because of the continuity I provide, my commitments, dependability, and the belief I have in others including staff and students. I will try things and will listen to unhappy staff. I am able to brush off criticism and stay focused.

I am very assertive; I was vocal as a teacher. I am respected and listened to by others. I want what’s best for the children and use that guide in all my decisions. Everyone knows that. It was unusual for me to get this job because I was not from the community.

Since high school I’ve always had leadership qualities. I am organized, and motivated. I have good communication and public relations skills. My speaking and counseling training have caused me to be a good communicator.

I am a very good teacher. I have good organization skills; my background in personnel and business has helped. I had lots of supervisory work and had developed administrative qualities outside of education.

I was hired because of my reputation as a strong disciplinarian, because I am a decision maker and not afraid to take risks.

... my ability to do site-based management and my ability to be innovative and to create trends for the future. ... They wanted a people person, someone who was not afraid to change things needing to be changed.

... because I have been in education a long time. ... I have served on many committees. I am bilingual, I have a bilingual and counseling degree with a Masters in Curriculum and Instruction, Drug Abuse Training, Gang Intervention, and I am very involved with parents.

My leadership qualities, knowledge of school, and commitment to the community got me the job. I am also motivated and dedicated.

I handle things with common sense. I am fair with people.

... because I was motivated, enthusiastic. I have a positive attitude and I am a doer.

I was hired because of my perseverance and I had been Federal Project Director before.

... because I had done well at the junior high as an assistant principal. I knew what we were doing in the district. I knew what our discipline policies were, and I was hired because of my professionalism.

The pathways to administrative roles are varied. The opportunities for success are great.

REFERENCES


Grady, M. L., & Bohling-Philippi, V. (1988). Now that we have all these women graduate students, how should we train them? NFEAS Journal, 5(1), 85–90.


