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Terrie Hale Scheckelhoff

Introduction

Throughout history, men have dominated leadership roles, yet women are creating a new force of energy. They are actively involved as leaders in business, health care, politics, education, and sports, as well as on economic, social, and environmental issues. This involvement of all people in leadership means that [women] will have more opportunities to lead people and develop [their] leadership skills. (Karnes & Bean, 1993, p. 130)

Leadership, or “the position or function of a leader; ability to lead; an act or instance of leading; guidance; direction; the leaders of a group” (Dictionary.com, 2006), enables women to make societal change.

Astin and Leland (1991) interviewed women leaders and noted that they are, “Predisposed to leadership by their heritage, perhaps, or propelled by their special skills and talents, the women leaders also persuasively demonstrate the critical significance of experiences that allow leadership practice” (p. 54). Women leaders come from all types of homes, from large cities and small cities, from varying backgrounds and experiences, but there are common themes that emerge from these leaders. As noted by Shriberg, Shriberg, and Kumari (2005), successful leadership is studied and analyzed by many people and organizations because it is difficult to understand, define, and articulate, and yet, it is one of the key elements to success of a project or organization. To better understand women and leadership, focusing on past and present successful women leaders and hearing their recommendations and suggestions will inform us.

In summary, there is much to learn from women leaders as they reflect on their experiences and offer advice. The opportunities and challenges that they have experienced position them well to “tell the story” to the next generation of women leaders. Helgesen (1990), after interviewing women and reviewing diaries of women, stated, “Each has mastered the Warrior skills of discipline, will, and struggle necessary to achieve success in the public realm, but then moved beyond them to provide models of what leadership can become when guided by the feminine principles” (p. 258).

Women Leaders Reflect on Their Experiences

Research about women and leadership continues to expand. Researchers

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are beginning to identify “formulas” for success and challenges of leadership after interviewing numbers of women leaders, past and present. According to Gallese (1985) from her interviews with the women in the class of 1975 Harvard Business School

for all of their problems [including the challenge of balancing family, work, and relationships], they appeared as a group to be satisfied that they had gone to the Harvard Business School, that they had taken the risk to reach for their dreams. The happiest seemed to be those who were still reaching, still risking. (p. 252)

Gallese noted that women who take risks seem to be more fulfilled and satisfied, but the pressure of home and work exist.

Other researchers have focused on the elements of what makes the women leaders successful and satisfied. Astin and Leland (1991) interviewed women leaders and found, “Consistent among the investigators, [women leaders being interviewed], was the sense that parents and families modeled, encouraged or, at the very least, allowed them to develop as independent women infused with strong beliefs in social justice and work ethic” (p. 42). The majority of the women leaders investigated by Astin and Leland (1991) were first born children and as a result were “adored by parents and grandparents, and hopes and expectations for them to achieve were high on the parental agenda” (p. 46). So, having families that are loving and supportive emerges as a common theme of successful women leaders. Bell, Jackson, Schwarzwald, Sullivan, Sunami, and Conte (2005) phrase it differently, but offer the similar advice when they note that, “Support from your employer, support from your family and friends, support from other sources” (pp. 25–27) are vital.

When questioned about the challenging experiences in their lives that impact their leadership, the women interviewed by Astin and Leland (1991) “gave examples of both push and pull in their roles as wives, mothers, and leaders” (p. 53). They discussed the constant pressure of attending to their significant others, their children, and their jobs. The demands of responding to the 24/7 lifestyle in the United States causes many of these women to run an organization during the day and to jump into their cars to do carpool for piano lessons and soccer practices in the evenings, all while

deciding what to have for dinner. They appreciate having the opportunity to have leadership positions in companies, to have a significant other, and to have children, but they note the pressure that they feel with each responsibility. Balance is a word that creeps into many of the interviews and discussions regarding women and leadership, and according to Bell et al. (2005), “Strategies to Achieve Balance [include]: integrating, . . . narrowing, . . . moderating, . . . sequencing, . . . adding resources” (p. 27). They go on to say, “Even though today’s women don’t have to choose between a family and leadership, the caution is: you can have it all, but you may not be able to have it all at the same time” (p. 23).

Advice for Women Aspiring to be Leaders

Advice for women aspiring to be leaders is growing. As the number of women leaders grows, so does the advice. Bennis (2003) simply states that successful leaders have a “guiding vision, . . . passion, . . . and integrity” (pp. 31–32). His clarity is appreciated, but his definition lacks the detail possibly needed by many women wanting to become leaders. Larson (2005) offers ten leadership tips for university or college women leaders which can add some depth to Bennis’ foundation of leadership:

- Know your leadership style.
- Learn about your organization’s history and culture.
- Begin with the end in mind.
- Hone your communication skills.
- Learn to negotiate.
- Say what you are going to do and then do it, fix it and try it.
- Help create future leaders by taking time to mentor and/or be mentored.
- Empower people at all levels.
- Develop your networking skills.
- Keep your sense of humor. (pp. 1–2)

Larson’s (2005) list provides a concrete map for leading; it provides direction on varying aspects of leadership including people, relationships, skill development, communication, culture, and understanding of self. The importance of building relationships and honoring and valuing people when leading are crucial to success. People are what make change and progress; people need to be informed, educated, supported, and encouraged. Listening to people and their thoughts and ideas will provide a foundation of information on which to build future work. Milliken (1998), as a result of his research on the cult of academic leadership, states, “It must, however, always be remembered that people are the key variable in effective change, and a leader is only as good as his or her staff” (p. 513).

Larson (2005) emphasizes the importance of skill development. Women leaders must know their work and its history and future; they must read daily—not just work-related materials, but about art, history, culture. A diversified person is a better leader. Skill development comes in many ways,

with reading as one of those ways. Developing better skills in communication will strengthen leadership. Information must flow two ways in organizations and be regular and predictable—and always honest and genuine.

Larson (2005) continues by discussing the importance of understanding the culture of the organization and helping guide the culture of the organization. Leaders must remind others of the mission of the organization and then work toward achieving that mission in a positive way.

Last, Larson (2005) notes that the women leaders interviewed discussed the importance of knowing oneself. Leaders must understand their strengths and weaknesses. They must understand their risk tolerance, their communication skills, their values, their personal goals, and their needed skills to move the organization forward.

Advice for women leaders from six women leaders in Columbus, Ohio, including a judge, a former CEO of the YWCA, and an astronaut and oceanographer, women leaders are most successful when they are:

- *Acting Authentically*: They work on developing self-awareness and assessing their behaviors, choices and tradeoffs. They take action to align their lives with their values. They believe in themselves and get support when they need it.
- *Making Connections*: They take time for people and get involved in groups. They find a mentor or become a mentor, reconnect with people from their past and tap their networks.
- *[Achieving] Agency*: They set realistic, specific goals and develop a plan for achieving them, seek feedback from others and act on it, remain open to possibilities and empower themselves.
- *Achieving Wholeness*: They establish clear priorities and set boundaries by scheduling and delegating. They share responsibilities. They say no and make time for spirituality, reflection and meditation.
- *[Seeking] Self-Clarity*: They examine their behaviors and seek feedback; they look for patterns in their lives, pay attention to the organizational environment and make self-learning a priority. (Bell et al., 2005, p. 4)

Bell et al. (2005) conclude by saying that, “Young women should give careful thought to, not so much the position or role, but more to the personal characteristics within them that draw them to certain career opportunities” (p. 5). They also should “make conscious choices” (p. 23)—choices about their own careers and the work and opportunities that lie ahead of them.

Universities and colleges can offer women leadership opportunities and according to Little (2005), to lead and succeed as president of a college or university, the leader must: “envision and affirm Goals and Values, . . . articulate Goals and Values, . . . Implement Goals and Values, . . . Serve as Keeper of the Goals and Values” (p. 8). Little (2005) also lists the following as important skills for a president:

ability to deal creatively and effectively with conflict, . . . ability to deal effectively with groups, . . . ability to listen, . . . ability to be assertive with people at all

levels, . . . ability to move others to ‘yes’, . . . ability to use power effectively, . . . ability to motivate others” (p. 8).

These skills, although designed for campus leadership, are applicable in other leadership areas.

Lorenzetti (2003) states that key ingredients for presidents of colleges and universities include having the willingness to assert their authority, to understand the power of technology, to be alert to opportunities, and to create an environment where it is safe to change. The influence and authority secured by titles and positions can be useful when trying to make change. Investigating and exploring opportunities help keep the organization current and moving forward. Last, creating a culture of safe change will position the organization for multiple changes that will occur over its existence.

Hammer (2006) studied the culture of leadership and how to create such a culture. He provided suggestions for leaders interested in creating a culture of leadership including “start with yourself, . . . link theory to reality, . . . [go] beyond positional leadership” (p. 7). Although, his suggestions are simplistic, they offer a theoretical grounding for the work of leaders. Show that you are a change agent and can make change yourself; collect and analyze data to be able to link theory and reality; and finally, expand your leadership abilities.

In summary, the advice from experienced and successful women leaders includes building a vision, having passion, being a person of integrity, having self-knowledge, creating a positive culture, communicating, networking, building relationships, strengthening skills, and achieving balance. This is an ominous list, but with daily work, it is possible to grow in each of these areas and to be successful. Most important, as noted by Bell et al. (2005), “Keep the balance; work; play and enjoy both” (p. 63).

Essential Preparation for Future Women Leaders

To prepare for leadership, women should pursue formal education, utilize their experiences to gain knowledge, develop their skills, network with all different types of people, conduct a self-assessment, and read a variety of books and materials. Formal education provides the underpinning for the work of a leader. It provides new knowledge, new perspectives, new ideas, and new ways of thinking. Leaders must utilize their experiences to gain additional knowledge. Experiences provide a rich collection of how things can be done, or should be done. They inform us about what works and what does not work. Leaders must develop their skills. It is essential to have effective communication skills, technology skills, and organization skills.

Networking with all types of people diversifies the leaders’ perspectives and ways of thinking. According to Moore (2000),

Networks of trusted advisors serve women entrepreneurs in a variety of ways. They can be an important confidential sounding board for voicing concerns and

sharing solutions. They are usually an integral part of an interactive strategy to build and develop successful businesses (p. 61).

Conducting a self-assessment provides self-knowledge. Self-assessment should include:

- *Context and Expectations*: Exploring your current and potential leadership roles, expectations and realities.
- *Vision*: Determining what your personal vision is and how leadership fits in that vision and comparing your personal vision to your leadership vision.
- *Values*: Understanding how your personal and leadership visions are based on your core values.
- *Self-Awareness*: Assessing how your personal qualities support your work as a leader and give your work its distinctive style.
- *Balance*: Evaluating the balance that integrates your leadership work with other aspects of your life (Bell et al., 2005, p. 2).

And last, read a variety of books and materials. Leaders who are well read have a wealth of information at their fingertips and are more interesting and vibrant. “It is important to pay attention to the world and resources around you” (Bell et al., 2005, p. 6).

In summary, formal education, experiences, skill development, networking, self-assessment, and reading are the foundation for preparing to be a leader—female or male, but as noted by Sagaria (1988), “The most helpful programs for developing women’s leadership seem to be those intended primarily or exclusively for women” (p. 9).

Author’s Reflections on “What Works” in Leadership

As an administrator in education for over 25 years, I have come to realize that successful leadership is grounded in communication, integrity, honesty, strength, passion, and vision. Much like Warren Bennis’ (2003) thoughts, without integrity, honesty, passion, and vision, true leadership can never be achieved. People must be able to predict that you will always be honest and genuine with them, as evidenced over time. Integrity must be a foundation on which a leader builds his/her work. Without integrity, what else matters? Leaders must have passion and excitement to inspire and motivate other people to make change to support the forward movement of the organization or work. Communication is the foundation on which leadership rests. Without effective two-way communication, work and efforts will not be maximized. People want/need to be informed and educated; they need to hear the passion in your heart as a leader; they need to be heard. Listening to others provides information and direction about the future.

In summary, in addition to the above-mentioned qualities, two others are essential to success in anything—having a sense of humor and loving what you are doing!

Conclusion

Women in leadership face challenges, but they also have many opportunities. Leaders should be informed and educated and solicit the advice of successful leaders to strengthen their chances for success. As noted by Kotter (1996),

The key to creating and sustaining the kind of successful 21st century organization . . . is leadership—not only at the top of the hierarchy, with a capital L, but also in a more modest sense (l) throughout the enterprise” (p. 175).

And when women leaders need a little inspiration, they might turn to these quotes found in Karnes’ and Bean’s (1993) book:

- “Love what you are doing. Believe in what you are doing. Select good people.” by Debbi Fields, CEO and President, Mrs. Fields, Incorporated
- “It is important that we, as women, pursue our goals and dreams—not because we are women, but because we are people with goals and dreams that shape who we are as individuals,” By Elaine L. Chao, Director, Peace Corps
- “Be the absolute best you can,” Cathleen Black, President and CEO, Newspaper Association of America. (p. 137)

In conclusion, Madden (2005) says it well when she offers the following inspirational comment to female leaders, “May a shared vision, and faith in the power of collective action give us the energy and determination to persist” (p. 12). Women leaders provide a new way of thinking and leading and complement the work of male leaders, and thus, make the world a better place.

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