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Voices of Women in the Field— Creating Conversations: A Networking Approach for Women Leaders

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Professional networking is critical for school leaders. Networking has emerged in the literature as one of the major needs in attracting and retaining quality school leaders. Advice and insights gathered from veteran adminis-trators on how to support the next generation of educational administrators identified networking as a key recommendation for leadership development (Michael & Young, 2006). In general, men have traditionally been more suc-cessful than women in establishing and maintaining professional connec-tions. For women leaders, networking challenges are associated with absence of access, issues of gender bias, and challenges with life balance.

Women in leadership positions have limited access to networks or are ex-cluded from informal interaction networks (Ibarra, 1993). This creates prob-lems for women leaders because these networks provide a variety of essen-tial resources that are critical for job success and career advancement. These networks also provide benefits such as friendship, mentoring opportunities, and social support (Noel-Batiste, 2009). When women have limited access to interaction networks multiple disadvantages occur, including restricted knowledge of what is going on in their field or organization and limited op-portunities to form alliances which, in turn, can be associated to the "glass ceiling" effect experienced by many women leaders (Ibarra, 1993; Noel-Ba-tiste, 2009; O'Leary & Ickovics, 1992).

Gender bias also plays a role in women's limited access or exclusion from professional networking. Noel-Batiste (2009) found, in a study of 110 wom-en school leaders, that 84% believed women are still frequently perceived in stereotyped roles. Based on a research study involving 35 women superinten-dents, Banuelos (2008) noted,

> Women superintendents reported they were aware of their gender from the time they got dressed for work in the morning. Women superintendents identi-fied how they were negatively perceived as leaders because they were women, and described the stress that caused. The women said men were treated with deference and respect, whereas the women felt they were treated with disre-

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spect and their authority questioned. They internalized those experiences by questioning their skills, abilities and competencies. (p. 2)

The lack of professional networking for women limits opportunities for them to work and meet with coworkers who can provide honest reflection and assessment concerning their skills, strengths, and competence.

Finding a balance between professional and personal life is a third barrier for women trying to establish meaningful networking experiences. Sherman (2005) notes that studies on life balance and women leaders concluded that for women school administrators a major obstacle is the negative effective of trying to balance home and work lives. Research also shows that women who are successful in integrating work and home are much more satisfied with their careers. Sherman states, "If women aspiring to administrative positions are provided with greater opportunities to connect with practicing women administrators, they may have greater opportunities to discuss strategies for successfully juggling both family and school responsibilities" (p. 711).

The Value of Conversation with Networking

School leaders seem to find themselves in a constant state of movement. With a heighten sense of accountability, changing demographics, and financial constraints, there is little time to pause and reflect on what or why decisions are being made. Given the constraints of time and the magnitude of challenges school leaders face, intentional conversations framed around purposeful relevant questions that matter can result in the development of a professional network beneficial to school leaders and school systems alike. Conversation is how people think together. Urick (2009) notes, "[W]isdom is in all of us, not only in one leader, but in all of us as leaders. It reminds us that the knowledge and insight we need to solve our problems is at hand in our conversations together" (p. 238).

Now is the time to reconsider the value of conversation with networking. "[A]s we slow down the conversation to a pace that encourages thinking, we become wise and courageous actors in our world" (Wheatley, 2002, p. 9).

"Large and successful change efforts start with conversations among friends, not those in power" (p. 25). The power of conversation occurs when the process allows for stories, learnings, and ideas to weave together to formulate collective patterns and insights. Wheatley notes through conversations we can "experience broader insight, wider wisdom, and the magic of collective thinking" (Brown & Issac, 2005, p. xiii).

Creating Meaningful Conversations for Women

For individuals and organizations intent on increasing the number of women leaders and on supporting them in their leadership roles, consideration should be given to creating opportunities for meaningful conversations and deeper connections. The World Café provides a process for supporting such opportunities. In addition, World Café conversations can "improve people's collective capacity to share knowledge and shape the future together" (Brown & Isaacs, 2005, p. 3).

The seven integrated principles of the World Café demonstrate the concept and the design of the process:

- *Set the context:* Clarify the purpose and broad parameters within which the dialogue will unfold.
- *Create hospitable space:* Ensure the welcoming environment and psychological safety that nurtures personal comfort and mutual respect.
- *Explore questions that matter:* Focus collective attention on powerful questions that attract collaborative engagement.
- *Encourage everyone's contribution:* Enliven the relationship between the "me" and the "we" by inviting full participation and mutual giving.
- *Cross-pollinate and connect diverse perspectives:* Use the living-system dynamics of emergence through intentionally increasing the diversity and density of connections among perspectives while retaining a common focus on core questions.
- *Listen together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions:* Focus shared attention in ways that nurture coherence of thought without losing individual contributions.
- *Harvest and share collective discoveries:* Make collective knowledge and insight visible and actionable. (Brown & Issacs, 2005, p. 20)

"These simple principles, when used in combination, provide guidance for anyone seeking creative ways to foster authentic dialogue in which the goal is thinking together and creating actionable knowledge" (p. 20).

Connecting Conversations and Networking

Knowing there are distinct issues for women in establishing professional networks and that there is power in the use of conversation as an approach for networking, we began processing how the two could connect. During a two-year period, we had conversations with women school leaders about what were the most significant needs in supporting them in their leadership roles and what were the most significant issues for encouraging women to seek leadership positions. We found great value in these conversations. It was their insights that lead us to focus on developing more meaningful ways for women to network.

A partnership between the Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA) and the Department of Educational Leadership at Minnesota State University, Mankato was established to take on the responsibility of creating intentional conversations as a networking opportunity for women leaders. A planning committee comprised of three faculty members and MASA Director of Professional Development looked at (1) why a professional network was necessary, (2) what it would look like, and (3) whether or not the network should focus on aspiring women school leaders, practicing women leaders or both.

We needed to hear from current women leaders concerning (1) what type of networking they would value and (2) how more meaningful relationships between current and aspiring women leaders could occur. We also needed to design an experience that addressed the barriers of access, gender bias and life balance. Invitations were extended to a director of special education and two superintendents. All three women were recognized as effective leaders; quality role models for women; and had experienced the networking issues of access, gender bias, and life balance in their professional careers.

The expanded committee reaffirmed that creating focused conversations that matter to women was the needed approach. Equally important was creating a safe and inviting place for women to think, speak, and listen. The committee identified topics that were critical to practicing and aspiring women leaders such as leading from your strengths, networking, life balance, acting as smart as you are, and the joy of leading. Once topics were identified, the committee matched the topic to a practicing woman leader who had expertise in the area.

The event was scheduled as a preconference for the annual spring MASA conference and was named in honor of Dr. Ruth Randall, the first woman Commissioner of Education for the State of Minnesota. The event was called *At Ruth's Table.*

Making Networking Relevant

With the event identified and named, committee members began preparing. Specific strategies were used to invite current women leaders and to connect them with aspiring women leaders. The first strategy was extending personal invitations. Committee members made a commitment to personally call five women leaders and encourage them to attend the event. The second strategy was to ask each invited leader to identify and bring an aspiring woman leader to the event. In addition to the personal approach, traditional methods such as postcards and e-mail invitations were sent to all MASA women leaders. As an incentive to encourage practicing school leaders to bring an aspiring leader to the event, aspiring leaders were admitted to the event at no cost.

The event was a half-day session focused on conversations. The method used to engage practicing and aspiring women leaders was to use techniques from *The World Café*. The event opened with welcome and opening remarks from one of the women superintendents who served on the planning committee. Successful practicing women leaders served as table facilitators. Each facilitator posed questions around a specific topic. Participants had the opportunity to engage in three meaningful conversations around three of ten available topics. At the close of the event a large group conversation occurred where patterns, themes, and insights emerged. Participants were also encouraged to identify future actions and complete an "I Promise" postcard. They were asked to make a promise in writing to either take a leadership challenge or take the time to encourage other women seeking leadership positions. The "I Promise" postcards were mailed to participants six weeks after the event. The event closed with a social gathering that allowed women an informal atmosphere to continue the conversations.

The effectiveness of the event was evident through evaluations, reporting out, and table discussions. One practicing leader stated, "The best part was bringing a rising female star. What a pleasure to 'select' someone for such an honor." An aspiring leader stated, "There are so many incredible women who have a lot to share about making education exceptional throughout Minnesota." The effectiveness was also evident through the energy and networking observed during the event.

Due to the design and delivery of *At Ruth's Table* a network for current and aspiring women leaders was created. The event initiated relationships and established networking connections. Aspiring women leaders had the opportunity to learn and hone their leadership skills through interaction with successful role models and to develop an appreciation for relevant career challenges of women leaders. Because of the energy and connections created by *At Ruth's Table,* a commitment has been made to ensure it becomes an an-

nual event. And, as our conversations continue, we know we will be able to create additional relevant networking opportunities for women.

Conclusion

There is evidence that professional networking offers a system for women to enhance their career opportunities. However, the evidence shows there are limited professional networking opportunities for women. Consequently, it becomes the responsibility of professional organizations to work in partnership with higher education to ensure these opportunities for women exist. There is an even stronger need to engage practicing school leaders. By developing a triad partnership—professional organizations, higher education, and practicing school leaders—a system of professional networking for women can be established. This is evidenced by the success of *At Ruth's Table*. The development of a professional network will open the career doors for aspiring women leaders. Moreover it will expand the limited pool of quality applications for school leadership positions.

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