Women Leaders Tell Their Stories

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Marilyn L. Grady, Virginia Russell Curley and Barbara Lacost

The purpose of this research study was to identify examples of women education leaders at their best. There were two parts to the study procedures. First, the women were asked to write a case story about a time when they were involved in a successful leadership experience. Second, the women were divided into small groups of 5–8. In the small groups, each participant was invited to present her story and allow an opportunity for group participants to ask clarifying questions and to comment on the stories. Each of the stories is presented as told by the participant. A title has been given to each story. The stories are then examined in relation to Kouzes and Posner’s five leadership practices and ten leadership commitments.

The purpose of this research study was to identify examples of women education leaders at their best. The study followed the work of Kouzes and Posner (2007). In their work, “they wanted to know what people did when they were at their “personal best” in leading others . . . how ordinary people exercise leadership at its best” (p. xiii).

Fifty women were invited to participate in the study. All agreed to participate. There were two parts to the study procedures.

Telling Their Stories

The design of the study was a collaborative inquiry approach. (Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman, 1997; Maslin-Ostrowski, 1998). First, the women were asked to write a case story about a time when they were involved in a successful leadership experience. They were asked to describe the experience and their actions in detail so that they could share the experiences in a conversation with others. Second, the women were divided into small groups of 5–8. In the small groups, each participant was invited to present her story and allow an opportunity for group participants to ask clarifying questions and to comment on the stories.

The group conversations were audio recorded and the tapes were transcribed verbatim. The written stories were collected and were transcribed. All transcriptions were completed by a professional transcriptionist. The transcripts provided 50 stories of women education leaders at their best. For this research study, nine stories are presented. The stories reflect a small portion of the range of experiences reported by the participants.
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Accreditation

In Louisiana we’re accredited by the Southern Association of Acts. I was chosen after the person that was designated to do it left to take an administrative position at another institution. And so he had initiated the plan and then he left. And we had to start meeting in two days. They asked me on a Friday and I had to start on a Monday if I was going to do it. It was to be the chair of the steering committee. There were two years left in the cycle. So get prepared, and also be the director of the self study itself. Sometimes they split that, but it was joined together there and so anyway, my boss, the Vice President of Academic Affairs didn’t really feel like I should do it. I didn’t have my doctorate. They try to put people with their doctorate in all the different positions. But I was faculty senate president. I had an accredited program that was in a discipline area that I taught. So I had some different pieces that the chancellor, the president at the time, felt like I could pull things together and keep people relatively happy and cheer ’em on and keep them working for two years. Which is sometimes difficult when you’re doing accreditation and nobody really wants to do it. So as far as leadership, I had to provide the training and plans to implement the training, much like a strategic plan to carry it out and get broad-based participation, create and implement the committee structure, and set up meetings continually, keep everything on track, prepare the document and all the things that went with it, also to organize the visit itself, work the benefits of it, and all those dif-
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It was a lot to learn in a very short period of time with a lot of people watching me and a lot of pressure. I felt that the accreditation for the college, it was a community college, was kind of resting on my shoulders. And then in the midst of that, we had been under K–12 as a community college for thirty years. In the midst of that we shifted government to higher education. So we had the self study so far along and had to write an amendment to it that was probably as long as the self study because of the change of governance. So it was a difficult thing and people were not happy with what they had to do. It took a lot of time and it was trying to keep everybody going. So that was a leadership challenge, but I think it also made me have a very, very broad understanding of the operation of an institution and what was required and what was expected. I really think that’s helped to drive me into a doctoral program. I didn’t see the need for what I was doing at a community college. I wanted to be able to move forward, to be able to lead more. So I’m a division chair now.

It ended up being a lot of liaison between faculty and administration. They had to open their doors to things that they had kept secret. It was difficult to get the [faculty] acceptance as well the administration’s [acceptance].

Promotion and Tenure Committee

As a faculty member, most of my leadership training was as chair of different committees. One in particular, a couple of years ago, was chairman of the Promotion and Tenure Committee at our institution. I’m in the Business College. So when I started accumulating all these promotion and tenure materials and getting them from the five different colleges on our campus, I was appalled at the lack of uniformity. Some portfolios were this thin; some came in four-inch binders. Some used a three-point scale to rate their faculty; some used a five [point scale]. Some didn’t have a scale. It was just chaos. We had to take that into the system and decide who to promote and who to give tenure to. After that was over, I went to the Provost and said I pity the poor person that ever has to do this again. I said, could I sit down and just write a process for this? And he just said “yes.” So I worked with the committee and we put together a list of criteria, a list of specific documents that need to be submitted, a rating scale, and a questionnaire. Then we worked with the provost. He agreed to write into the contract your appointment letter and that when you’re coming up for promotion or tenure, you would receive this document from the promotion team or committee [and a letter that says,] by such and such date next year you have to submit this, this, and this. You have to sign this, you have to give back. So that they would know and their dean would know a whole six or seven months in advance what was due when and to whom to submit it. I rotated off the committee after that. After that, I worked with the chairs that succeeded me. They were very good. Another thing I did along with that is I sat down and
wrote out a job description for the committee chair. No one had an official document before that. It was all just sort of handed down verbally. So I made up a job description for that committee chair. The successive chairs were grateful to have everything in writing to go by instead of just trying to wing it.

It was well received. The deans and department chairs were relieved to finally have something that was useful.

In a way I think that again is a gender issue. In that, at least at our institution, at our university, men seem to have more coaching, more mentoring, that there are unwritten rules. They seem to find them out and the women don’t. And I mean I don’t think it’s a conspiracy, but sometimes I’ve wondered. But you know, it seems to be the women who are having difficulty with, with tenure and promotion, and you know I really don’t think it is an intended slight against women, but they don’t seem to know the unwritten things, and they are out of the loop and I think the good old boy club uses information that they have.

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**The School Nurse**

When I was the school nurse, I was asked to be the director of special education. This was back in 1978 right after 1994 142 passed. The goal was to have all the kids back in the state schools. So they hired me to do that. I was pregnant with my second daughter at the time. I think that what I was able to do with that job was, exercise a lot of leadership. I was able to accredit that program along with early childhood, gifted education. I got every kid in the community immunized. It’s a school district with 2500 kids including all of the girls, which was a really, in rural communities, it’s a real sticky wicket, ‘cause we had to do counseling for the measles immunization. And in fact, the front page of the [paper’s headlines was] “Counsels Girls about Pregnancy.” We had to counsel girls about pregnancy.

I started the early childhood screening which, which the first year we did 70 and then by the time I left we were doing about 400 kids that time. So I was the first female administrator hired in that district except for an old superintendent of schools they hired way back in the 1920’s and 1930’s. They hadn’t hired a female since that time. I think I got a lot done. I even drove the bus.

Oh I think it was my ignorance that helped me. So when I did the immunizations I think it was nothing to go outside the boundaries and call the public health people to say come on in. We need to work together to get this accomplished. So things were being done that had never been done before, ‘cause it wasn’t the way you did it.

And so part of that was because I was an outsider I suppose and didn’t think that way. So nothing was out of bounds for me I think.

So there’s a lot of community engagement, a lot of bringing in a lot of people from the community to do that. To do those kinds of things. I had fifty parent volunteers come in and do the screening by the fourth year.
Yeah. And most of the teachers did that. Most of the teachers did that that way. You know engaging all of that. You just let it flow.

Well I had to go to the Board and explain that I wasn’t really counseling the girls about pregnancy. You had to counsel them before they got the measles shot. And it was very sensitive. And so we had to, you know, segregate the girls to talk to them.

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**Public Office and A Student Place**

I currently hold an elected position in my village. The one time I ran for office I was successful; and I had to be in a primary, and I had to be in a final. That’s a different concept of leadership coming out of the public school sector where I’ve been and also from studying about it. And it’s a real interesting way to look at leadership because you are supposed to be a leader. I’m proud to say that there are many votes that go to one, and I’m the one. And I’m not ashamed of it, and I’m not ashamed of where I stand, and they know where I stand. And I’ve been very clear to speak. And I can watch this sort of wave that’s happened. So that’s slow because you don’t get to do a lot and it’s all very political.

I was an assistant principal in a very large high school, suburban high school, for five years. And many times—we didn’t have an official principal. We had a superintendent, so I was principal. So I was the next, and so many times I was a principal without title, is what I called myself. And I started to think about what was best in what I did. And most of what I did was make things happen. I made things happen for teachers. I made things happen for students. I helped them with major events, a lot of that kind of stuff. So then I thought about the reason. So, you know, the assistant principal does a lot of discipline. But I was able to do a major health program for the team of teachers and students and a major service project for seniors. And I made it happen. I made sure that the machinery happened that facilitated it. I did things. Now as an assistant principal, I’m in a very small department. And I see myself showing my leadership among a group of people. I’m not the department chair. I have no seniority. I have no tenure. I’m just sort of new. But I still make things happen. The best example that I can give, and the most recent, is we’ve been complaining, the students are complaining, and even the Dean has noticed this, that we don’t have a place for students to congregate. And so this summer I said, I guess it was the end of the year, why don’t we take this old room that we’re not using and put some furniture in it. I said, I’ll go buy the furniture. So I did. I bought some furniture. I looked after it. I got it installed. And then I noticed that the students didn’t come just because they were nice comfortable leather sofas. And in the building next door we have this huge computer lab. And the building has been closed. I said, why don’t we just move those [old computers]. Oh, you can’t. I said, “just move ‘em. Just bring those six computers and put
them on these tables and watch.” So I made it happen and the students are using them. So that was my best story.

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**Cultural Diversity**

My story centers around cultural diversity. My very first conference was back in 1990, ’91. And I had an opportunity after that to be invited to go to Russia. And one young woman that I met at the conference came from Maine. But she was living in Ohio. And she said that she happened to notice what I was going to talk about. And she came to hear me and I didn’t know who she was, but I knew who her major professor was. So we kind of got together as two new people. And then I was invited to attend this conference in Russia for two weeks. And they said, do you know anyone? We need somebody else. So I took this other person. And together we came back to the conference the following year and did research on women in administration that we did as a survey there. But I went back to my dean at the university and said that was fun having people from all over the nation. But what about having superintendents that work in the area get together because in the metro Atlanta area we have a growing population. So we were able to do that. And because of all of the superintendents and principals, three counties in the metro Atlanta area developed an International Center.

And then, in 1998, I was invited to go to India to do a two and a half-week workshop. And I asked questions like, “how did you become the principal of your school?” or, “the dean of your school?” as they call the principal the dean of principals. And “how do you supervise your faculty?” And it was just by seniority, or only by what students said; nothing else. So I decided that since I got involved in [web-based] learning, that perhaps we could put people on line from India, so we started with ten women from India taking my course and coming over to our rural area outside of Atlanta for two weeks to live with faculty, take courses, and visit the schools. We ended up having more from here going over there. I ended up going to visit there for five and a half months on a Rotary scholarship. And because of that, it’s now in its fourth year. Four other universities in the metro Atlanta area have jumped on the bandwagon, and we have students now coming twelve at a time. And because it’s difficult to put them in rural areas, because we didn’t have the transportation, we have four and five students in each of the four different universities. So they come together as a group and meet. But what we’ve done is, is to expand the cultural diversity in the area, because there’s something like 57 thousand people from India in the Atlanta area, and about 30 thousand from the former Soviet Union. So between those two programs, I’m really excited that I have been the catalyst for so many people to understand culture and the differences and we have the exchange where they’ve been able to go over there to study. And, having some small part in it to me is exciting.

Now I’ve gone to a different school, and part of what excited me there
was the fact that there's a whole exchange program with Jamaica. With Masters and specialists and the opportunity to expand even my horizons, and learn something about another culture. And I've always gone to these places because I was probably more biased about those particular areas. It gave me a chance to learn more about them. And I learned. I learned more about women than schools and administration. And their feelings were exactly the same as mine. So I discovered that we're all the same after all.

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A Magical Moment

I feel like I'm at my best when others are. And so I was working in Student Services in Residential Life at the University in Oklahoma. It was my first job out of graduate school, and I'd just gotten my Masters. I was a hall director of a large women's hall, residence hall there. And I was hired on about a week prior to starting. It holds about four hundred and forty-five, if I remember correctly, women. And I had about a week to prepare before the resident assistants, or RAs came in. And to do all their training for them. And thankfully I was young and energetic, because I slept very little getting ready for them. There was just an enormous amount of preparation, because I had about five days with them from 8:00 to 5:00 and sometimes till 9:00 or 10:00 at night with them to prepare. I recall very little of the preparation, and assigning students' rooms, and at the time it was all manual. But I remember having lots of opportunities to work with them. And I remember us being in a room and I've got this visual memory of it. It just was one of those times that I hope everybody else has experienced too, when you just really felt like your team clicked. You just, you just knew. You just knew. I felt like all of the RAs knew. That was the first time I'd ever done it. To this day I haven't had anything quite like that. It was really validated. We had a crisis in dealing with a mentally ill woman who had just come to campus about a week or so into the classes starting. She was causing a huge disturbance with screaming and things like that. There were three floors that are connected. So people were coming up from . . . she was in the center floor, in the center section, so people were coming from either side and down to find out if something awful had happened, something terrible. And to this woman there was. She was hallucinating. The RAs all happened to be there at the time. This was in the evening around 9:00. I was just so incredibly proud that we operated like some well-oiled machine, but without preparation. Everybody did her part. There was no, "you do this," and "you do this." It was just everyone did it, keeping people back and trying to keep this woman calm. At the same time, keeping her thinking and fixed on someone else because she was fixed on the idea that someone was trying to hurt her. She was in a dangerous position for herself and others. Each RA did her part so very well, I didn't even have a chance to ask for help. They did it. It was just one of those magical mo-
ments. So that really validated that this was a really well working team. So they all played an integral part, and no one could have handled it by themselves or herself. Nobody needed direction. So it was a team effort with ease. I really have always felt really good about that, because it was a very bad thing that was going on, and a very good thing that happened with the team. So that’s my story.

There were a lot of crises during that year, and it was a true test of fire. But they were wonderful. You know 18, 19, 20-year-old women to work with. And, you know, I think we all matured together. That was part of it, ‘cause we did go through some pretty horrendous times that year, with some special incidents with students. And they, we just pulled through it. They were just, they cared for each other, and they, without any theory of leadership or anything, knew what to do. And to be good to each other. So it was, they were really a solid, solid team, Never let each other down.

**Persuasion**

I came out of public schools. I was a music teacher and then a media specialist in schools. And so in those positions and those subjects, I was in charge of doing my thing. Nobody knew what I was supposed to do. So as music teacher I did the concerts and got them together, and events, special events. As a media specialist, it was very program oriented. I expanded National Library Week to a month, and did special activities. I don’t know why. I was crazy I guess. But I was used to just doing it, and telling the principal here’s what I want to do. And the two principals in those schools were very supportive. And that was great.

And when I made the leap to academia and had ideas for programming that were going to cost money, I had to learn about persuasion. And so the incident that I wrote down because of that was, I was at a smaller university, not where I am now. And every two years we had an academic conference. And this was the president’s brainchild. We were in a small, southwest Oklahoma town, relatively speaking. And the university was a lifeline to academics and to culture and to different things. And so he was bringing in name speakers every two years. So we were all tasked with coming up with ideas to make this really special. And so I came up with a program about censorship. Because that’s something kind of vital in a small town to expand minds and try to get at it. And you know, I was teaching Children’s Literature at the time, and so that was an issue that we dealt with, with the children’s class. And so, and being a librarian, it’s kind of a near and dear thing. So I had to learn how to persuade, come up with the idea, and of course find the numbers. They wanted to know the cost, and persuade up the line. I think for me that was a real test of learning how to present it professionally and with enthusiasm, and here’s what it’s gonna be. I had no idea what it was gonna turn out to be. It was from the Texas Humanities Council and looked good on paper. You know it was one of those things. It
was a thousand dollars. They shipped it; we set it up. But you know, that’s a thousand dollars. And it was one of those, if I flub up here, I’m probably gone, ‘cause it was my profile. So... but it was a wonderful success. The higher administration got many very positive comments about it. And I was just the lowly instructor. I didn’t even have a doctorate yet. So that was a wonderful thing for me to learn how to persuade up the line. “Sounds good, but you need to talk to this person.” “Okay, sounds good, but you need to talk,” you know. And, I just remember that being very empowering at the time. Now it’s not so hard, but at the time it was. So it’s not major like some of the things you have done, but it was a step I think in becoming more assertive as a leader. And that’s helped me later.

They never said no. It’s just that I had to, “oh, that sounds good, but you need to tell this person.” And I guess I was surprised at the lack of authority certain people didn’t have. That they had to get that amount okayed. Because I thought a dean was much more powerful. And I don’t know if the times were tight and they had to, you know, convince. ‘Cause it was a university-wide thing, I think that was the thing. If it had just been in the college... It probably would have been fine. Probably would have been okay. But this was gonna be public, it was gonna be media oriented publicity. Censorship was a sensitive... Censorship is a hot button... particularly in a small town. So it was kinda hangin’ out there for a little bit. But it went real well. It worked out. Maybe we enlightened a few people.

Another Chance

I think one of my favorite things that I do is mentoring student teachers. I guess there was one that failed. In her other experience, she had a very negative experience from a cooperating teacher who didn’t give her warning when she went through the whole semester. And then failed it. And when I talked to the professor at the university about this student and then he talked to me about it. And I said, she really has potential. She’s always had good reviews from her practicums. I think it’s a problem with the cooperating teacher. She gave her no input. And then all of a sudden, she told her she should never teach. I mean this was really bad. You know. She was debating before she should do that, become a teacher. So I offered to take it. So I gave her another experience. When she left, she thanked me. And she even sent some flowers to me, and it was really nice. Because, now she is enjoying it. She said she’s going to enjoy teaching. She said after—she was really scared to come. She almost didn’t come with me, because she had had such a negative thing. She was scared to get in front of students again and she just honestly could not stand it. And she almost hyperventilated. She did an awesome job. She really did. And I mentored her by just critiquing what she did and said well, you know, this or that, but hopefully positive. You know I said, this was good. Maybe you could add this. And a little role modeling. And let her ask questions. And by the time she left she felt better about her-
self. And I was, I feel really good about that. I think mentoring student teachers is probably one of my favorite things to do. I’ve had so many and it’s just something I enjoy.

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**Care for One Another**

I was going to grad school and took on a job. It was a new career path. . . . As a teacher at a community college. The first night that I taught my composition class, a woman stayed behind when everybody left. And she just started to cry as we were walking to the door, to the cars. I said, what’s the matter? And she said, you came in here and you said, get into groups. Get ready to participate. Get to know each other and support one another. Care for one another. And she said, “now I know I can do it.” And it’s because you gave that to me.

And I was crying the whole day. I was so grateful that she said that to me, because, I was scared to death. I had no idea. And I had kind, I had an idea that I had good ideas, but I wasn’t sure. And then boy it was so good. And that was it. That’s my issue.

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**The Women’s Stories and Leadership Practices and Commitments**

The women who participated in this study affirmed the five practices and ten commitments identified by Kouzes and Posner in *The Leadership Challenge* (2002). Leaders gave voice to experiences that allowed them to “model the way,” “inspire a shared vision,” “challenge the process,” “enable others to act,” and “encourage the heart.” As participants shared vignettes, a second layer of assurance became evident. In addition to their ability to give voice to the five practices as exemplary leaders, they also identified the steps necessary for them to become these leaders. The first step each leader had to take included seeking opportunities to develop confidence and skills when they did not see themselves as leaders. Excerpts from the transcripts illuminate the developmental process required to move from novice to exemplary leader. Finally, a number of women focused their attention on the expansion of leadership opportunities to include women.

**Model the Way**

As Kouzes and Posner suggest, effective leaders must have a clear set of values that guide interactions and decisions. Before you can “Model the Way” for others, you “must know what you care about” (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 52). A novice leader may find this statement more of a challenge
than a support. Yet she need look no further than her collection of books and the stories she retells of those who have served as her inspirations in life. “The leaders we personally admire are rich sources of information about our own values and beliefs” (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 54).

The women in these interviews shared a commitment to personal excellence. Whether they were developing educational programs on censorship or shoveling the school walks after a snowstorm, they each identified experiences that were an outgrowth of their personal values. A librarian recalled her position in a small Oklahoma town when she “came up with a program about censorship. Because that’s something kind of vital in a small town to expand minds and try to get at it.” This participant’s values led her to develop a project that she cared about and would serve her community. As she embarked on the project, she discovered even more about herself and her values. Kouzes and Posner suggest that this is a vital component of Modeling the Way. “When you engage with the world, and you try on other voices and other styles, you learn what fits you and what does not.” Leaders who advocate for values that are consistent with who they are, model integrity and become persuasive in their leadership. The inconsistency of words and actions can destroy the credibility of a leader and make it difficult, if not impossible, to regain the trust of followers.

**Inspire a Shared Vision**

The second leadership practice is “Inspire a Shared Vision.” Kouzes and Posner suggest this practice is intimately tied to the previous practice of Modeling the Way. Once leaders identify their deepest held values, they transform these individual values into a picture of the future that is shared by their followers. “Vision is about the common good, and not just about what the leader wants” (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 125). As the leader works to create the future, she must consistently help followers understand how they fit into that future. Kouzes and Posner suggest, “Inspiring a shared vision is the least frequently applied of the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership” (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 144). Analysis of the transcripts in this study are consistent with this finding. Two of the 9 participants shared stories of how they sought to inspire a shared vision.

One of those participants, a faculty member at a community college, shared her experience as faculty senate president and chair of the steering committee for accreditation during the institution’s reaccreditation process. The participant acknowledged that it was important to “keep people relatively happy and cheer ‘em on and keep them working for two years . . . when nobody really wants to do it.” The participant’s description of her effort to guide the institution included multiple references to the need for a shared focus. Her efforts were not focused on persuading others to see her vision, but flowed from the shared vision of the followers. “That was a leadership challenge, but I think it also made me have a very, very broad understanding of the operation of an institution and what was required and what
was expected.” By keeping her focus on the shared values and vision of the followers, this participant was able to remain grounded in a common purpose and help others retain the shared vision while simultaneously working to create it.

Another participant reinforced the concept that the vision is not formed in isolation by the leader. When the participant returned from an academic exchange program in Russia, she mentioned to her dean, “That was fun having people from all over the nation. But what about having superintendents that work in the area get together?” From this gathering of superintendents, “Three counties in the metro Atlanta area developed an International Center.” The participant never stated that she had the vision of an International Center before gathering the superintendents. She did, however, model Kouzes and Posner’s challenge that, “Leaders have to understand others’ dreams, and they have to find common ground on which to build a shared dream” (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 148). Based on the leader’s success in this project, it is likely her listening went beyond the type that seeks out information to confirm existing ideas or biases. Instead, she listened for common interests and worked to bring those interests together. No doubt, a degree of challenge was present in each situation.

**Challenge the Process**

The third of the five Best Practices involves both an internal and external action: Challenge the Process. According to the Kouzes and Posner research and others cited in their work, individuals do best when they are motivated by a challenge. Complacency is the enemy of innovation. Leaders recognize that organizations thrive when they are able to adapt to new environments and demands. As leaders seek new opportunities they also revisit old operations for the opportunity to bring new life to an organization’s systems and procedures.

The participants in this study named numerous examples of times when they were able to challenge the status quo and came out with an invigorated sense of their own leadership capacity. One participant shared her early experiences as a school nurse and director of special education. As she recounted her experience of implementing a new immunization program, she commented, “I think it was my ignorance that helped me.” She was not stuck in the isolated patterns of previous administrators. “It was nothing to go outside the boundaries and call the public health people to say, ‘Come on in. We need to work together to get this accomplished.’ So things were being done that had never been done before, ‘cause it wasn’t the way you did it.” Her ability to look beyond the confines of traditional boundaries, allowed her to reach the goal of getting “every kid in the community immunized. It’s a school district with 2500 kids.” As this participant partnered her personal values with the values of the district, she found personal resources that helped her exercise innovative practices.
Another participant found herself working from her professional expertise to challenge others in her community about censoring. “Being a librarian, it is kind of a near and dear thing. So I had to learn how to persuade, come up with the idea, and of course, find the numbers. . . . It was a wonderful thing for me to learn how to persuade up the line.” Numerous participants shared examples of challenging the process that were as much about challenging their own perceptions of their abilities as they were about challenging an external entity. Indeed, it is difficult to find the confidence to push an issue when we lack a sense of personal efficacy. This leader summarized her experience by saying, “It’s not major like some of the things you have done, but it was a step I think in becoming more assertive as a leader. And that’s helped me later.” When leaders see early experiences as necessary building blocks for future abilities, they are able to seek out challenging opportunities. They are also able to look beyond their own perspective.

One participant shared an experience as an expert consultant for a chamber of commerce strategy forum. Gathered in a group representing a wide variety of industries and organizations in the community, the educator noted,

> It became very apparent how different the perspectives were of these leaders that were sitting around the table and what their thoughts were about children. What their thoughts were about education. What their thoughts were about care. And it was quite a growing experience, because sometimes I think as educators we sit in isolation. And even though we talk to community members and we think we know what the community wants, I’m not sure we always do.

By working together to create a shared understanding of the issues in their community revolving around childcare, this participant was able to develop a more holistic understanding of the issues in her community. This, in turn, allowed her to contribute a different level of professional expertise to the discussion of possible responses.

As the Chamber of Commerce group began working on implementing a plan to respond to the identified needs, the reality of the scope of this project sank in.

> During the time that I was on this board, I thought to myself, I have gone out on such a limb, taken such a risk, that if this doesn’t come through, my job is gone. There was no question about that. So it was probably a time when I took some of the biggest risks that I’ve ever taken about anything.

Yet even with this risk, the participant felt invigorated by her participation in a group that was working for a common vision. “There was a lot of blood, sweat and tears. . . . But I did achieve that. So it was a very interesting experience in leadership.” As this leader reflected upon her personal and professional risk, she was able to identify Kouzes and Posner’s fourth leadership practice as she summarized, “There’s a theme that runs through . . .
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bringing people together and collaborating. Listening.” Kouzes and Posner refer to this as “Enabling Others to Act.”

Enable Others to Act

“At the heart of collaboration is trust. It is the central issue in human relationships within and outside organizations” (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 244). Within this context, it is possible to see how trust and action must be in partnership if innovative leadership is the goal. Leaders must also recognize that the action will occur at all levels of the organization. Rather than seeing success as a threat, leaders nurture their followers. One participant stated simply, “I feel like I’m at my best when others are.” This is easier to state when things go well. However, strong leaders also recognize the need to give multiple opportunities for success.

Leaders who desire creative solutions must be open to failure. One participant shared her experience as a mentor to student teachers. In particular, she recounted her experience with a student teacher who had failed student teaching under a different mentor. When approached by the supervising teacher, this participant saw an opportunity to “give her another experience.” Though the student teacher was “afraid to get in front of students again,” the mentor took the opportunity to “mentor her.” She “said this was good. Maybe you could add this. And [did] a little role modeling. And let her ask questions. And by the time she left, she felt better about herself. And I feel really good about that.” The student teacher “thanked me. And she even sent some flowers to me.” The participant recognized that the student teacher’s previous experience did not necessarily indicate she was not capable; it did mean that she needed more direction and feedback. Strong leaders recognize the difference between evaluating and coaching and seek to do more of the latter than the former.

Leaders also recognize that roles will shift within organizations. The participant who worked with the Chamber of Commerce group recalled,

The leadership was shared around the table, back and forth over the two-and-a-half years. And there were times that when one person didn’t have the expertise in an area, they kind of took the back seat and somebody else went into that seat. And it was a very collaborative relationship.

Kouzes and Posner discuss the phenomenon of empowerment by explaining that “exemplary leaders understood how important it was that their constituents felt strong, capable, and efficacious” (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 281). When working from a position of strength and confidence, participants were able to set aside defensiveness and work for the common good.

A participant who worked on a district-wide change to the school-day cited the need for “collaborative planning in light of diverse needs. In other words, if you’re on one side of town, what do you need for your kids in that extra period? If you’re at another, what do you need? And so we initiated . . .
a data planning model that now is sort of the way everybody does things.” By coming to the table in a spirit of collaboration, the group was able to respond to individual needs without compromising the goals of the district. As leaders nurture these qualities of collaboration and strength, followers take on the role of nurturing future leaders. This spirit of collaboration leads to Kouzes and Posner’s fifth practice of Encouraging the Heart.

**Encouraging the Heart**

Quite simply, the final practice that exemplary leaders exert involves information and feedback.

When leaders provide a clear sense of direction and feedback along the way, they encourage people to reach inside and do their best. Information about goals and about progress toward those goals strongly influences our abilities to achieve—and influences how well and how long we live (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 321).

Returning to the first participant who mentioned, the practice was as simple as the decision to “cheer ‘em on and keep them working for two years;” but those who have worked on accreditation know it is never as simple as it sounds. Leaders recognize that followers must know where they are in relation to where they are going. They also deserve individual recognition for how they contribute to the organization’s success. As one participant noted, “After all these years, it’s still a great feeling to know that you’re making a difference. And that feels good.”

The sense of engagement by a group of individuals has the potential to multiply that sense of commitment to the common good. One participant identified a personal best leadership experience in which she worked hard to train her residence hall staff through an intense week of training. As the year unfolded, she began to sense that her training had paid off.

It was just one of those times that I, and I hope everybody else has experienced this too, when you just really felt like your team clicked. You just, you just knew. You just knew. . . . That was the first time I’d ever done it. To this day, I haven’t had anything quite like that. It was really validating. . . . Each RA did her part so very well, I didn’t even have a chance to ask for help. They did it. It was just one of those magical moments.

Whether a leader can describe a “magical moment” or not, the ability to recognize when others are meeting or exceeding expectations is essential. Exemplary leaders go out of their way to find success. They foster a spirit of collaborative success and keep communication lines open. Kouzes and Posner cite the benefit that “social support enhances productivity, psychological well-being, and physical health” (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 358). Work environments focused on these benefits become self-supporting and are better able to respond to crises when they arise. Exemplary leaders do
not take success for granted, but recognize that the celebration of success breeds a desire for more.

Women Leaders and the Leadership Challenge

As initially indicated, an interesting feature of these interviews was the way women described their development as leaders. For some participants, access to role models and coaches was seen as limited.

At our university, men seem to have more coaching, more mentoring, that there are unwritten rules. They seem to find them out and the women don’t. And I mean, I don’t think it’s a conspiracy, but sometimes I’ve wondered . . . women don’t seem to know the unwritten things, they are out of the loop.

Given the importance of the leader-follower relationship in leadership development, this was an interesting observation. Another participant offered a different perspective of the mentoring that needed to happen.

I think with the second generation of women in leadership, I really think things have changed. I was very nurtured by men. I was mentored by men. I didn’t have a mentor that was not a man . . . Females really are not mentoring other females.

As this participant described the role models in her life, she identified an expanded perspective on leadership. “I frankly think men are changing. I think the whole women’s empowerment has affected men in an incredible way, and given them license to really behave in a much more caring way.”

As she described this expanded role for male leadership, another participant acknowledged the bind that female leaders can face. “You can’t become emotional about things . . . If you’re assertive, sometimes you’re bitchy. If you’re a man, you’re taking care of business.”

As the participants sought to define the issues relating to exemplary female leadership, they identified the struggle to balance the nurturing of home life and the decision-making of work life. As an example, a participant shared one female superintendent’s experience: “When I go home, from 3:00 until 11:00, I am mom. And once my kids go to bed, then I put back on that superintendent hat. And that’s when I do my work. And I thought, our male superintendents aren’t doing that.”

As she recounted this story, another participant suggested, “It’s us. It’s not other people. It’s part of what we put on ourselves.” As the women discussed these relatively recent developments a participant summarized the situation as “I think you can have it all. I just don’t think you can do it all.”

These observations are offered as vignettes to highlight some ways that specific populations may experience Kouzes and Posner’s leadership challenge. The model is sound in its theoretical foundation and individuals’ lived experiences. The participants in this study voiced a nuance to the model that has not been fully explored. If one of the exemplary practices is
enabling others to act, what happens when the leader, through lack of role models or self-doubt, finds it difficult to relinquish the power that comes with a hard-fought spot at the table? Although men experience these same struggles, the participants suggested that there is an additional dynamic when women are exploring leadership.

A faculty member in school leadership stated that “Every woman that took this leadership course tells me that they have difficulty with delegation.” As she processed this statement, she surmised that it is a feature of culturally transmitted expectations. “We want things to be done right, that we have that ownership . . . And I think that that’s a value system that’s transposed from families, because my mother was that way . . . I was thinking about when you were talking about delegating, how many male superintendents I’ve seen that their administrative assistants, their secretaries, are the ones that are really holding them together. Do you all see a difference in the way your administrative assistants relate to you versus if it was a male in that position?” Her comments suggested that women have difficulty asking others to complete tasks that they are able to complete and/or worry that the tasks will not be completed as desired.

These comments are not enough to draw firm conclusions from the existing data about women and the Leadership Challenge. They do point to a need to explore Kouzes and Posner’s work in gender-specific contexts. Do women experience the model differently? Do men and women struggle with different aspects of the model in any significant fashion?

References


