

10-2004

## Voices of Women in the Field-S is for Survival: Tips for Surviving Administrative Change

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*Raymond Central Schools*

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Gould, Harriet, "Voices of Women in the Field-S is for Survival: Tips for Surviving Administrative Change" (2004). *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*. 131.

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# VOICES OF WOMEN IN THE FIELD

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## **S is for Survival: Tips for Surviving Administrative Change**

Harriet Gould

Women educators work in a variety of leadership roles. The roles vary from principal, to staff developer, to central office personnel. As women, they bring unique qualities to their positions. When change occurs in the superintendent position, a leadership style change often follows. Women need to adapt to this change although often the change can be difficult. Just like the kindergarten student who must learn the alphabet code to master language skills, the female leader often must learn new skills to work effectively with the new superintendent.

Superintendent tenure averages about five years in any district. With frequent turnover, most women leaders encounter many administrative changes during their careers. As the new *super* begins leading the district, stress, tension and even anger can develop. Team dynamics may fall apart or never develop. If this is the direction your administrative relationship is headed, these alphabet tips may be a helpful resource for survival.

**A – Attitude:** Choose your attitude. Keep it positive and upbeat. When leaders whine and complain, productivity decreases. Adopt a school mission that supports this. Check out FISH! A Remarkable Way to Boost Morale and Improve Results by Lundin, Paul and Christensen. Positive attitudes improve the climate everywhere and work becomes much more enjoyable for all.

**B – Be there:** When change rocks the boat, it is important to *be there* for your colleagues and staff. Acknowledge their accomplishments, listen to their concerns and support their ideas. This will help calm the waters and make the boat ride smoother. Be there for them.

**C – Communicate:** Effective communication is essential for success. Be clear and specific. When things are not clear, seek clarity through questioning. *In your face* confrontation may not be the wisest way to question. Smile and say, “help me understand this a little better.” Or ask, “could you restate this in a different way?” Perhaps you could restate the topic by saying, “let me tell you what I think I heard.....Is this correct?” When communication

### About the Author

*Harriet Gould* is an elementary principal/K-12 curriculum director at Raymond Central Schools, where her two elementary buildings are 10 miles apart. Harriet is well known by her colleagues as an innovative leader. She is past president of the Phi Delta Kappa Chapter. She has taught at Creighton University and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her dissertation, *The History of Nebraska Public School Finance Law*, was a Morphet Award winner in 1999. In her spare time she enjoys reading, swimming, and cooking for the family run bed and breakfast.

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barriers exist, frustration results. Do everything possible to keep the lines of communication open and flowing.

**D** – Decision making model: Discover the decision making model used by the new boss. Is input important or not? Is there an informal model as well as a formal decision making structure in place? Is consensus used? Understanding how decisions are to be made will reduce stress.

**E** – Evaluate leadership styles: There are many leadership styles. Study her/his style. Is it compatible with how you operate? If not, what do you need to do to co-exist? Take the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* or another self-assessment and share results with the administrative team. Evaluating leadership styles should be a priority.

**F** – FUN: Have fun in your job. Even if you're bucking heads with a bozo leader, fun is an essential ingredient in your work. The fun may be spontaneous or planned. Try a game of ruler tag, a crazy scarf or hat day, or even a backward clothes day. Putting fun in the school day re-energizes all.

**G** – Giggle: Laughter is important to living a healthy lifestyle and surviving change. Sponsor a comedian to come to a faculty meeting, find a place where "The Joke of the Day" can be posted, or share funny emails. Giggling isn't just for little girls; women need it too.

**H** – Heart: You gotta have heart. Caring about what happens in the personal lives of your staff is very important. Take time to visit with colleagues on a personal level about their families, interests and hobbies. Your caring and concern about their lives outside of school shows you have heart!

**I – Innovate:** Be willing to take risks and try different things. When you focus your energy on new projects, like starting a Children's Classics Reading Class or implementing *Brain Gym* moves, positive energy abounds. Creativity and innovation redirects stress into positive thinking.

**J – Journal:** Begin each day with writing. Give yourself an extra 30 minutes each morning to free write at least three pages. You won't believe how powerful this activity is for coping with stress and change. If you need guidance, use The Artist's Way by Julia Cameron as a companion for study and reflection. If you haven't done this, make it a priority. You'll be amazed at the results.

**K – Knowledge:** There is so much to know. The more you know, the more you know you don't know. Read journals, read research, read electronic newsletters like "ASCD SmartBrief" ([ascd@smartbrief.com](mailto:ascd@smartbrief.com)) and "PEN Weekly NewsBlast" ([newsblast@lyris.publiceducation.org](mailto:newsblast@lyris.publiceducation.org)). *Phi Delta Kappan* and *Educational Leadership* are two excellent journals to peruse. Continue building your knowledge base. Smart women are powerful.

**L – Learning:** Life long learning is the expectation for school. As a leader, it is important to model this. Take classes, work on your doctorate, attend seminars, and create learning communities. Try using Marzano's text, *Instruction that Works* and form study teams. By challenging your thinking collectively, improved student learning will result. Women are learners. Just do it!

**M – Mission:** Schools have mission statements to guide the direction of the school. Is the mission being followed? When administrative changes happen, revisit the mission of the school to ensure continued buy in from all stakeholders. Effective schools follow their mission.

**N – Never say never:** Keep options open. Don't back yourself in the corner or put yourself in a box. You may find yourself sitting in the corner with a dunce hat on or you may find yourself with the box lid on floating down the river. By keeping options open, decisions – even the most difficult ones – may be easier to make.

**O – Optimistic:** Optimism helps create a positive culture. Like the Little Engine, say "I think I can, I think I can, I know I can." It may seem simplistic

or trite, but believe that it can happen. When working in a dysfunctional workplace, sometimes a daily mantra of optimistic sayings is helpful.

**P – Pick your battles:** If clashes are numerous, pick your battles. If you battle on all issues, get ready to pack your bags. You'll be exhausted and stressed to the max. It is important to stand up for moral and ethical causes. Sometimes it is necessary to just "let go" of an issue. Happiness might not be the outcome, but perhaps a compromise can be reached. By picking the most important causes, energy saved from trivial disagreements will help sustain the fight. Stand up for what is right for children and learning.

**Q - Question:** It is important to ask "why" when decisions are made without input. When some rationale is given it helps one to better understand the decision. Question the emotional price you're paying in your job. Is it worth it? Is there balance in your life? Family, job, spiritual life, mental health, fitness, finances - what does your life circle look like? Is there balance?

**R – Reflect:** Reflection is a priority. There are a variety of ways to reflect – journaling, meditating, praying, walking, swimming, and listening to music. It is critical to take time to reflect and assess personal situations. Talking with a friend can help too. Reflective women will bring renewed energy to the workforce.

**S – Survive:** When a new superintendent comes on board, survival is the key!

**T – Time:** Make time for yourself. When stress and job pressures increase, it is important to schedule time for you. Join a fitness club, take yourself out on a special date, listen to your favorite music. Also, take professional time to attend a conference or seminar. Write these personal time appointments in your calendar. If you don't schedule it, it won't happen.

**U – Understand differences:** Women leaders, like men, have strengths and weaknesses. Remember that men are from Mars and women are from Venus. Take time to discover your strengths and weaknesses as well as those of the new leaders. Understand that differences can complement the organization.

**V – Vision:** Follow the vision. Define it, know it, make decisions keeping the vision at the forefront. Visionary leaders are difference makers. Strive for this by having retreats and discussing the future. Where are we headed? Ask, "what's next and how?" Vision is similar to glue; it holds the group together. Know it and share it with all stakeholders.

**W – Work ethic:** Of course women work hard; but, it is often difficult to balance all the obligations placed on women leaders. Take time to chart what your day looks like. Where can you still find time to do a little more planning or filing? Hard work is a key to success; but, balance is important too. Do what you say you're going to do. This helps build trust, a critical element in surviving administrative change.

**X – X-ray vision:** Be able to see through things. If a new plan or idea is suggested, be able to think with the end in mind. Like the x-ray machine that examines a broken bone, look at the many parts of an issue and determine how to proceed. Share the x-ray with others. Seek advice and input. Develop a plan.

**Y – Yellow:** Be cautious. The yellow flashing light reminds us to slow down and proceed cautiously. New ideas and plans need time to percolate. Faster isn't always the best way to go. When making a change, remember that an implementation dip will result. Move slowly to assure survival.

**Z – Zapped:** Follow the tips so you don't get zapped!