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Voices of Women in the Field

Reflections From a Chair

Clarissa Craig

I did not grow up wanting to be a woman administrator in a community college setting . . . or a woman administrator anywhere for that matter. Until about the sixth grade when my height shot up to almost six feet, I was going to be an airline stewardess and jet set around the world. Liking science and math, my attentions then turned to being a doctor, specifically a pediatrician. How did I get here? It hasn't been a particularly circuitous path. Yet, it is one that does seem to have evolved rather than having been a conscious choice at some point. It would be interesting to compare notes with other women administrators on the subject of how they came to their roles. There are maybe five or six that I know within my community college circle of encounters. I wonder if there was a point at which they made a conscious decision to be a woman administrator. I wonder if our experiences are different from men administrators in our arena.

When I first started teaching, I was hired primarily because I had the right discipline credentials in my health care field and expressed an interest in teaching others the skill and art of the profession. I began teaching by teaching the way I had been taught. It was only a year or so before I realized that I should consider formalizing the skill and art of teaching. Much in the same way, when I first was hired as an administrator, I was hired because I had the right discipline experience for the program I would oversee, was organized, communicated well, and got along with other people. My management skills were much stronger than my leadership skills.

As I reflect on 17 years of being an administrator in a community college setting, I am grateful for the learning and growing opportunities I have had. I have been fortunate to have wonderful role models and mentors along the way. I have also been fortunate to be part of an organization with a strong focus on professional development. The organizational culture has allowed for some personal and professional "stretch" while I maintained the same position.

Being a good administrator requires being both a good manager and a good leader. It is the management side that turns many people away from the

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Clarissa Craig is the Assistant Dean for the Science, Health Care, and Math Division at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas. She has specific oversight of the respiratory therapy program and generic health care related courses. Her 17 years of experience with the college have provided for both formal and informal leadership opportunities. She has an interest in academic leadership, particularly as it applies to the chair position in the community college. cmc532@aol.com

position. But, linking motivational theory to the situation and meeting the basic needs of those around me helps to create a harmonious environment. Additionally, there are many tasks; paper pushing, e-mail routing, fire quenching, and feather smoothing that need to occur as part of the job. In my estimation, developing efficiencies in these areas allows the administrator to concentrate on the more rewarding aspects of leadership.

Kouzes and Posner (2003) espouse five practices for exemplary leaders. I have found that these five practices provide a guiding tenant in the leading role of being an administrator.

Modeling the way means giving attention to personal values and setting an example. I am especially conscious of this when resolving difficulties, managing conflict, or trying to move the department forward. The results are often not only a reflection *on* me but *of* me. Much of this modeling is seen in how I choose to communicate. This requires reflection on what I call the “W’s” of communication: what needs to be communicated? Why does it need to be communicated and to whom? And, when and how should it be communicated? Equally important is determining whether the communication was received and understood. I believe sometimes we forget to close the communication loop.

Listening is a powerful communication tool but one that administrators may need to hone. I am not sure that what we have to say is always important. Typically, we tend to think about improving our communication skills in terms of what we relay rather than concentrating on the equally important aspect of listening with all of our senses. A conscious effort to count to five . . . or ten . . . before speaking sometimes squelches the urge to fill what seems to be a painful lull in conversation. Often this provides the welcome opening for others to initiate what is on their minds.

Inspiring a vision requires that I not only envision possibilities but that I actively encourage others to do the same. As an administrator, the weight of visioning does not lie solely on my shoulders. Being a good listener, with all my senses, opens up the possibilities. Helping others to see and embrace the

possibilities is the challenge we have as administrators. Giving some attention to shared values helps in this process.

Challenge the process is the third principle of exemplary leadership that Kouzes and Posner (2003) described. This involves seeking opportunities, taking risks and learning from mistakes. I believe that it is important that challenging the process in this way is seen as being acceptable for both me, the faculty, staff, and students. Setting the example for myself helps establish it for others.

I have to admit that I am somewhat risk adverse in my thinking. To minimize the influence of my immediate response being a negative one, I try to remember to take the opportunity to strategically think through a situation. Wells (1998) frames strategic thinking by applying three questions to a situation, "what seems to be going on?"; "what are the possibilities?"; and "what should be done?" This little exercise allows me and others to reflect on the situation without immediate dismissal or curtailing of interest.

Enabling others means fostering collaboration and strengthening others. The foundation for collaboration is based on trust. Trust is a precious commodity and one that cannot be taken for granted. Collaboration is also based on building and sustaining relationships. It is important to capitalize on joint efforts and social interactions. Collaboration is difficult to foster via e-mail. Face-to-face opportunities need to occur.

Strengthening others really comes from empowering others. To empower others requires several things. It means that others have a sense that what they are doing is important; they feel competent in what they are asked to do; they have a sense of self-determination in the process; and they feel like they make a difference. When things are not happening as you intend, a reality check in this area may be in order.

The fifth Kouzes and Posner principle is *Encourage the Heart*. This principle gives me a warm feeling just thinking about it. Encouraging the heart means that you recognize contributions and celebrate victories. Unfortunately, it is probably the one principle that I fall short on most frequently as an administrator. There is a litany of reasons I can offer as to why this occurs but they really are irrelevant. Falling short on this principle undermines any of the "good" I may have instilled through the other principles.

Here technology has helped in some ways. Calendar reminders and electronic post-it-notes are great for providing the ticklers I need. Maintaining a "goody" drawer is also helpful. A chocolate bar with a little note can make a difference, as can making the time to go for coffee with someone. Getting to know people helps to tailor the recognition to the individual.

Group celebrations are important in sustaining the sense of “community.” Periodically creating some reflective time will provide you with an opportunity to think of something worth celebrating. How the occasion is recognized is probably of less importance. Of related importance, however, is truly recognizing situations worthy of attention and not creating artificial moments for celebration. Recognizing the occasions that deserve to be noted requires attentiveness.

What I have described are my attempts at commitments to the principles of exemplary leadership. These are not specific to being a woman administrator or one whose position is within the community college. Hopefully, it has provoked some thought on what it means to be an administrator, whether from the perspective of an administrator, of an aspiring administrator or of a faculty or staff member.

References

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