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Authentic Leadership Traits: The Influence of Women

Kristina M. Gill

Ph.D. student – Higher Education Administration, Texas Tech University

Mathematics Instructor, West Texas A&M University

Abstract

Much of the scholarly research shows that women display specific leadership characteristics. Until recently, many of these "feminist" leadership traits have not been considered positive assets for effective leadership. Women tend to provide leadership that is grounded in cooperation and a sense of community. This appears to be the direction in which higher education leadership is headed in the twenty-first century.

Authentic Leadership Traits: The Influence of Women

"Only 16% of college and university women are presidents, only 13% of chief business officers are women, and only 25% of chief academic officers are women. Yet, women comprise more than 52% of the current student body" (Chliwniak, 1997, p. 5). Why is there such a large difference between the number of women being educated and the number of women in administration? Hindrances exist that keep women below what many term the "glass ceiling" in higher education. For example, Charol Shakeshaft (as cited in Hanson, 2003) identifies three conceptual models she used to analyze the lack of success of women in entering higher education administration: (a) the *Women's Place Model*, which assumes women belong at home not at work; (b) the *Discrimination Model*, which assumes men conspire to keep women out of administrative positions; and (c) the *Meritocracy Model*; which assumes only men have the skills and abilities to be successful in administration.

Traditionally, the administration of higher education has been a male-dominated field, thus not providing women many opportunities for mentorship by other women. Some of the hindrances to women being successful in leadership positions are falling away as a result of changes in society and changes of view concerning leadership. Thus it is the opportune time for women leaders to "dare to make drastic changes in the organization, leadership and management styles…to move us to new and more effective institutions" (Evans, 2001, p. 181). Much of the scholarly research pinpoints specific characteristics of women's leadership. Until recently, many of these "feminist" leadership traits have not been considered positive traits for effective leadership. According to Chliwniak (1997), "several scholars contend that a leader with an emerging,

inclusive style of leadership could provide an institution with new values and ethics grounded in cooperation, community, and relationships within the community" (p. 7). This appears to be the direction in which higher education leadership in the twenty-first century is headed.

Affirmative action was supposed to aid women and minorities in achieving equal opportunity and status in the workplace. To some extent, it has been effective; institutions of higher education have used affirmative action to diversify their faculty and administration. However, one problem with this solution to equality issues in higher education is that "recruitment has taken place without an understanding of the social forces that shape the professional socialization and workplace satisfaction of women and minority faculty" (Aguirre, 2000, p. 2). Research by Barbezat (as cited in Bentley, 2003) found that men and women place value on different factors in the work context:

> Salary and benefits are more important to men than they are to women. Women, however, place a higher preference than men do on student quality, teaching load, collegiality and interaction within academic departments, opportunities for joint work, and female representation on the faculty. (p. 5).

Women often feel they are hired to pursue roles that fulfill the institutional goal of diversity which leads them to a peripheral role in the academic workplace (Aguirre, 2000). According to Young's (2004) research study, some comments made by women in managerial positions implied that they had to have a great deal of determination and self-discipline because extreme effort is required for them to remain in their administrative positions.

Feminism in the United States has taken many forms and created significant changes in society. Yet, women's academic leadership has not been fully explored or recognized as significant. Robert Schwartz (1997) thinks that deans of women have not

received proper credit for their many accomplishments in the university and in their furthering of women's leadership. He sees these deans as important contributors in setting "the foundations for professional practice for higher education administration and student services" (Schwartz, 1997, p. 504). These deans of women worked diligently to portray themselves as academically equivalent to males and through their work "ensured the place and role of women in twentieth-century higher education" (p. 518).

According to Warren Bennis (as cited in Giannini, 2001), leadership in the 1990's required qualities such as concern for people, empowerment, intuitive management, creative problem solving, and the ability to create a vision. He also sees leadership shifting to a flexible and visionary network. Feminism suggests that all of society will benefit from learning to redefine leadership and valuing its multiple forms (Ropers-Huilman, 1998). But, much of the older literature discusses the apparent powerlessness of feminism. Because of this, women have had to redefine the terms associated with authority and power. Two such authors, Bloom and Monro (as cited in Ropers-Huilman, 1998), point out that most women desire "a professional environment in which they can participate and enact systemic change within a context of community and without giving up what it means for them to enjoy being women" (p. 9).

Luba Chlinwiak's (1997) work, *Higher education leadership: Analyzing the gender gap,* illustrates this challenge when discussing the historical context of women in leadership. Women who appear authoritative are considered "bossy", and are not accepted by either gender. If a woman then tempers her authoritativeness, she lacks the power traditionally associated with leadership. Historically, a successful leader is portrayed as being assertive, decisive and authoritative. Chlinwiak then states, "women

must choose whether to challenge the social norms or become socialized to fit traditional, often masculinized, organizational expectations of leaders" (p. 63). Other writers suggest that many women in administrative positions can unconsciously adopt male behaviors to gain acceptance (Young, 2004). The upbringing of most women encourages them to be more aware of group needs than personal needs. They use consensus management and caring processes to obtain group goals. This makes them great human resource managers and builders at a time when universities are most requiring this type of leader (Evans, 2001).

The characteristics that have been traditionally ascribed to women – such as a tendency for caring and collaborative practices, shared decision-making, and flattened hierarchies – are increasingly being seen as essential to effective leadership. "Because of innate skills and abilities, women often move into leadership roles" (Giannini, 2001, p. 205). Women's intuition is another skill that makes them effective leaders. This ability to recognize patterns and questions and store them for future use is often discounted. Intuition is one of many traits, not unique to women, but found more often in women that is specifically adapted to help leaders bring learning and change into society (Giannini, 2001).

Margaret Madden (2005), in a presidential address, reviews her leadership practices using the framework of five principles derived from feminist psychology. *Principle 1 is that sociocultural context influences leadership situations;* this principle is described as being a tenet of most versions of feminist theory. She describes most women in higher education as career women. Madden also states that "much of the mechanism for [gender] discrimination may derive from unconscious stereotyping" (p.

4). This stereotyping motivates women in higher education pursuing administrative careers to develop expertise in areas where they might be viewed as being weak. This also may cause women to take on a more masculine leadership style. In this context, women usually use two management strategies; understanding behavior in context and focusing on structural change. Both of these styles are transformative in nature.

Principle 2 is that power dynamics are present in all sociocultural structures; this includes the "emphasis on the central, pervasive role of power in human interactions, particularly in hierarchical organizations" (Madden, 2005, p. 7). Research findings show that "women are often deeply ambivalent about power, feeling pleasure at its influence, but fearful of it because it can play into the masculine definitions of leadership" (Madden, 2005, p. 8). Women must be aware of the power dynamics and politics in their institutions if they are to be successful leaders.

Principle 3 is that people are active agents who use diverse strategies to cope and grow as individuals and to change their environments; feminism is often accused of encouraging women to be passive victims. Some survival strategies exhibited by women leaders include developing a strong sense of their own values, beliefs, and abilities, finding professional and spiritual role models, and using family support.

Principle 4 says that multiple perspectives are more useful than dichotomous interpretations, which are both ineffective and unrealistic; "people in academic environments often set up false dichotomies and straw arguments, which inevitably involve oversimplification" (Madden, 2005, p. 9). Rigid disciplinary boundaries often limit the effectiveness of universities. One important tenet of feminist theory promotes interdisciplinarity, which can be accomplished by encouraging women leaders to think

critically about their own experiences, speak confidently about their ideas, and value diversity of opinions.

Principle 5 states that as a strategy to change organizations, collaboration is both effective and desirable; collaboration is more satisfying to those involved, because everyone can feel included in the decision making, and it is a fundamental tenet of feminist leadership. While it is a good trait, collaboration can also limit women's ability to be seen as leaders: "Women presidents may be misunderstood if their methods are so disparate from conventional views of leadership" (Madden, 2005, p. 10).

Vicki Rosser (2001) of the University of Missouri-Columbia researched some of these differences.

> Men characterized their days by interruption, discontinuity, and fragmentation. In contrast, women did not view unscheduled tasks and encounters as interruptions. Women made time for activities not directly related to their work, but their emphasis was to keep relationships in good repair. Men spared little time for activities not related to their work. Women scheduled time for sharing organizational information; men, on the other hand, had difficulty sharing information. Women saw their own identities as complex and multifaceted; men identified themselves with their jobs and position. (p. 2)

In a study by Astin and Leland (as cited in Rosser, 2001), women "describe important elements to their leadership effectiveness as: networks (e.g., organization, community), collective action (e.g., collaborative interaction), and the capacity for self-analysis (e.g., critical reflection)" (p. 4). Rosser's study also investigated the effectiveness of deans as rated by faculty and staff. The leadership dimensions she studied included quality of education, research/community/professional endeavors, support for institutional diversity, management of the unit, communication skills, vision and goal setting, and interpersonal relations. She found that the faculty and staff rated the female deans higher on all seven leadership dimensions.

Research into the leadership of men and women deans of education suggests that there are two dimensions to their approaches to leadership: (a) their understanding of power and (b) their ability to establish balance. As stated earlier, women tend to work within networks and through people. Women share information with others and try to empower their employees. Women tend to have a higher tolerance for disruptions and tend to lead through "structured permissiveness". They interact on a more personal level and do not typically give directives and ultimatums. "In the end, women view power as a means of achieving change through people" (Wolverton, 2003, p. 36). Women tend to look at their life in terms of a "big-picture" which places their job as one part of their life. Men, on the other hand, often focus on their professional life and job at the expense of their family. Women's big-picture perspective does put a heavy load on their shoulders and research indicates "that women in the deanship find this balancing act significantly more difficult and stressful than men do" (Wolverton, 2003, p. 44).

Research based on in-depth interviews with 30 senior women administrators found that they "largely constructed their leadership identity in response to organizational expectations and norms grounded in the experience of men" (Tedrow & Rhoads, 1998, p. 9). The research narrowed their leadership strategies to three prominent categories: adaptation, reconciliation, and resistance. The women who used adaptation constructed their leadership by duplicating the behavior of their male colleagues. This made the women into strong authority figures who kept their distance from the faculty and staff. In this style, they tended to minimize or deny any gender issues. They also alienated themselves from other women in the organization, but were still not fully accepted by the men. The women who used reconciliation set up their leadership style to match the

organizational context or situation. Without a set agenda, the women learned to navigate both instrumental and relational styles, but were never comfortable with either men or women. The women who used resistance as a leadership style saw themselves as change agents and played their roles as the collaborative leader. This strategy seemed to lead them into a more inclusive and diverse environment (Tedrow & Rhoads, 1998).

Patricia Hawk (1995) conducted an analytic case-study comprising 15 interviews with top female executives selected from higher education, state government, private corporations and other not-for-profit organizations. This research showed five major themes related to women's leadership. First, the women viewed their management style as participative. "They described their work place as one that encouraged consensus building and collaboration. They also noted that, in their experience, women managers were more likely than men managers to give credit where credit was due" (Hawk, 1995, p. 3). Second, the women all faced similar challenges including "juggling career and family, contending with gender bias, being the token woman at professional meetings, being caught between generations and being left out of decision-making arenas" (Hawk, 1995, p. 4). Third, the female executives seemed to have some of the same factors that contributed to their success: "a supportive spouse and family, hard work and passion, a college education and being a risk-taker" (Hawk, 1995, p. 5). Fourth, mentoring played a role in all of their careers, but it was in the background: "Although the majority of the informants believed their careers were influenced by some type of mentoring experience; there were few informants who believed their careers were shaped by the lack of mentoring" (Hawk, 1995, p. 6). Mentoring is an important aspect of leadership. Women often lack female mentors to guide them through the specific gender-related struggles.

Fifth, the women all gave similar pieces of advice for other women seeking top management positions. "They suggested women need to develop a strong sense of self-awareness and confidence. They encouraged women to cultivate a strong network and establish long-range goals" (Hawk, 1995, p. 7).

Lynn Veach Sadler (1991) is the president of Johnson State College. In a speech, she described some of the differences of female leaders.

> Many are gentle, using a soft and reasoning approach even with belligerent detractors. Many favor change and risk-taking and want to get better and better and want others to get better and better. Many want to learn and learn and want others to learn and learn. Many are honest and open. (Sadler, 1991, p. 617).

Many view feminine leadership traits as being positive contributors to women as leaders, but these traits alone are often not enough. Women need to see other people in leadership positions and learn adaptive characteristics so that they can handle problems in different contexts (Williamson, 2001).

Successful administrators often credit their mentors with helping them achieve their success. Mentors and mentorship are critical to women wanting to move into higher education administration (Brown, 2005). "Good mentorship of women requires a sensitivity to nontraditional approaches to dealing with people and to getting work done" (Wolverton, 2003, p. 45). At this point, many of the women in academia do not have female mentors in administrative positions, so they often turn to the males in this arena (sometimes without much success). One researcher observed a female senior administrator who "has learned to conform to the organizational culture and has adapted an instrumental style of leadership…she is following the leadership steps of the men who mentored her throughout her career" (Tedrow & Rhoads, 1998, p. 2). This tends to happen to those women who are put into leadership positions, but research shows that

"the most successful women presidents capitalized on the strengths most people expect in a woman, instead of trying to act like a man" (Vanderslice, 1998, p. 7). Having female mentors who are higher education administrators enables women to better understand how they can balance their personal and professional lives thus having a positive impact on both the university and the community (Brown, 2005).

A study by Dasgupta and Asgari (2004) looks at how exposure to counterstereotypic women leaders effect gender stereotypes. In part, they concluded that:

> seeing women in high profile and counterstereotypic leadership positions as judges, business leaders, scientists, politicians, and so on, has robust effect on women's non conscious beliefs about their ingroup…. The more participants believed that other women including themselves could become as successful as the famous [female] leaders the less likely they were to express automatic gender stereotypes. (p. 648).

These results show that there are factors which reduce the incongruity between leadership roles and gender roles, namely that women's leadership practices undermine authority and the ability to lead. As more women move into high profile leadership roles and serve as examples of success, this will create increased access by females into leadership positions and more females will be able to mentor others into leadership roles (Dasgupta, 2004). Another way to encourage women to seek higher education administrative positions is through professional development opportunities. Brown's (2005) research found that a majority (72.5%) of 91 female college presidents interviewed participated in one or more professional development programs. Brown also reports that "participation in these professional development programs enhanced professional skills, provided networking opportunities, enhanced self-esteem, and increased desire to seek college president appointments" (p. 663). In summary, future female administrators need to be

conscious of their own professional needs and strategize about how to meet these needs and receive appropriate mentoring.

Some authors argue that a change in the structure of higher education needs to take place before women and their style of leadership will be fully accepted. Tedrow and Rhoads (1998) think that the higher education organization is suffering because, at its core, it is still a male centered world. Vanderslice (1998) argues that by closing the gender gap "institutions would become more centered on process and persons (described as feminine concerns) rather than focused on tasks and outcomes (attributed to masculine styles of leadership)" (p. 6).

In order for higher education to make these cultural changes, there will have to be a shift "to more inclusive structures that incorporate relational styles of leadership" (Tedrow & Rhoads, 1998, p. 6). Universities today seem to be looking for a more comprehensive and balanced form of leadership; so development efforts should be geared toward helping women gain some characteristics that make men effective (tactical areas such as crisis management, budgeting, and planning) and helping men gain some characteristics that make women effective (such as relation building and multidirectional communication) (Wolverton, 2002). As women are acquiring more of the tools they need to be successful in leadership positions and higher education is shifting to accommodate the female leadership style, the field is ripe for women to begin assuming more administrative positions. At that point, as argued by Young (2004), change may occur: "leadership styles necessary for educational change are more often adopted by women; who also more frequently display transformational leadership" (p. 102). Women will embrace their female leadership traits and resist gender socialization to old organizational

norms (Williamson, 2001). And as change progresses these "female" leadership traits may emerge as accepted and integrated approaches to leadership in higher education without reference to gender.

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