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A Woman's Perspective on Leadership in K-12 Education

About the Author(s)

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Keywords

women and leadership, K-12 education, qualitative research



A WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE ON LEADERSHIP IN K-12 EDUCATION

Randolph B. Muhammad

Abstract

This qualitative research is the outcome of an interview with a woman on her experiences as a K-12 leader and her perspective of cultural differences and women leadership. The overall viewpoint of leadership was on a leader's ability to be transformative. Transformational leadership in this context referred to a leaders' ability to capitalize on the differences within a multicultural society, societal changes, and social justice. Northouse (2010) in the opening chapter of his book on leadership, *Leadership; Theory and Practice; 5th Edition*, speaks of how leadership has become conceptualized. One such concept is that transformational leadership is a process that motivates followers to accomplish more than what is usually expected. However, for leadership to be transformational it must reflect cultural intelligence. Cultural intelligence is defined as an individual's capability to function effectively across cultures, nationalities, ethnicities, and organizations, as well as other types of culture (Van Dyne, Ang, & Livermore, 2010).

Introduction

Incorporating gender as a component of cultural intelligence is relevant; as it allows individuals the opportunity to view gender as a specific culture within a society's overall culture; thereby gender becomes a micro-culture. Therefore, gender in relations to the leadership experiences of women was the focus of the interview. The interviewee for this study was a retired 34-years public school educator and former school board member for Charlotte-Mecklenburg County Schools in Charlotte, North Carolina, and for the purpose of this study is referenced as Ms. M. During the time of the interview, Ms. M. was s a school board "at-large" member, elected in November 2011.

Leadership Experience

It is ironic that in most cases, the experiences of women leaders tend not to be of importance to many people. In most people's viewpoints, women leadership experiences are not as significant as are their male counterparts. However, in many cases, women are known to be effective leaders and a leading voice for change. The willingness to be a voice is what begun Ms. M's leadership experiences. Ms. M. identified a need for elementary school teachers to have union representation at the district level, which would give them a collective voice. The existing void is what prompted Ms. M. to approach the district school board for change in representation for elementary school teachers. Ms. M. helped draft the proposal for the school district that solicited for diversity in representation on all grade levels, meaning that diversity would be reflected in the race and gender among the district elected school representatives. As a result, the local educators' association became more gender inclusive, as opposed to previously being

exclusive. Ms. M. volunteered her services to the association, and later elected to lead the association. Her school board leadership consisted of being an association representative for the respective schools of assignment from 1985 to 2003, association vice-president 2003 to 2006, and association president from 2006 to 2011. Ms. M. demonstrated conceptual leadership defined by Northouse (2010) as a leader who is at the center of change and activity and a leader who embodies the will of the group. She employed transformational leadership that changed and transformed people.

Leader Skills, Traits, Style

When discussing with Ms. M. her leadership traits and she immediately reflected on her skills for getting along with others. Ms. M. expressed that leaders are expected to be knowledgeable, proficient, and observant in their occupational realm. Additionally, one thing Ms. M. believed that added to her leadership skills was the empowerment she experienced early in her career with organizing elementary schools. She expressed that her role in public education leadership was to empower other women and share her knowledge by supporting the leadership development of other women by promoting and enhancing their educational endeavors. She further noted that she was not bias in her empowerment, as she empowered males too. Empowerment is both essential and key to developing leaders, specifically women. It is important to note, according to Ms. M.; women continue to face institutional discrimination globally. In an article titled, *Women Empowerment through Transformational Leadership: Case of Satya Jyoti* (Mukherji & Jain, 2009), stated that when women are empowered, it gives them the opportunity to exercise control over the decision-making process in home, community, society and the nation. Mukherji and Jain addressed the courageous act of two India women empowered by an idea and became transformational leaders, when they established a non-profit vocational training center in a rural community.

Ms. M. attributed her ability to empower others to her listening skills and her talent to understand verbal and non-verbal communications. She felt that possessing these skills were instrumental in the manner in which she responded to questions and issues. Ms. M. was of the mindset that her behavior was parallel to Northouse's description of a leader as directive and supportive. According to Northouse (2010), directive behaviors clarify and supportive behaviors provide comfort and security to group members.

Commonality of Skills and Styles among Women Leaders

Women who are effective leaders are no different from effective men leaders, as both lead with confidence, are knowledgeable, assertive, persuasive, and directive. However, Ms. M. shared that the public perception of male leaders is oftentimes views women who are effective leaders, differently. She advise women who aspire to become leaders that people view them through different lenses than what they view men leaders, and women leaders are assumed by the public too aggressive and bossy. She confessed sadly that this viewpoint about women leadership is also a shared assumption among women about other women, as well.

Although race was not the premise of this interview, it is essential to acknowledge that Ms. M. is African American. This is important given the historical challenges minorities encountered obtaining leadership roles. In a related research article on ethnicity, gender, and leadership, authors, Jean-Marie, Williams, and Sherman examined the leadership experiences of Black women leaders and found a commonality in their leadership skills and styles. They found that Black women were able to ignore racial and gender stereotypes by building consensus and collaborative relationships. These finding are similar to the experience of Ms. M. who led the

reconstruction of the teachers' association by empowering and building relationship with other women. Northouse (2010) stated that relationship building was essential to effective leadership.

Leadership Development Prompts Opportunities and Challenges

Northouse (2010) stated that the increasing numbers of women in leadership positions and women in academia has fueled the interest in the study of women in leadership. Ms. M. was asked whether there were multiple leadership opportunities for women in public education, and she emphatically responded that leadership opportunities for women beyond building level administration. An example of a typical disparity of the opportunities for women in leadership was the 2011-2012 search for district superintendent when the school board hired a male outsider at a considerable higher salary and rejected a local woman with over 30 years of exemplary service. However, in fairness to the district, as of (January 2014), the district had seven community superintendents, and five were women. These five women leaders are members of the superintendent's district management team, which is comprised of 20 individuals who are either area superintendents or district staff executives. To give clarity to women leadership, in regards to the management team, of the 20 positions, 13 are held by women (including the five community superintendents); and of the 13 women leaders, four were African American.

Ms. M. felt that women had a better chance obtaining leadership roles in the K-12 environment, as they tended to face overwhelming challenges when seeking careers outside of public education. Another challenge she felt worth mentioning was the woman-woman challenge. She pointed out her experience while campaigning for the school board and school board member, "at-large" positions. Ms. M. shared that she actually had more male supporters than females, which she considered a researchable phenomenon. The lack of women supporting other women continues to be an issue for women leaders across the country, especially for those who aspire to achieve leadership positions outside K-12 public education. According to Jean-Marie, Williams, and Sherman (2009) Black women who excelled in higher education faced similar challenges of limited power and authority. Although the authors' reference was specific to African American women, this is also applicable to all women who aspire to be organizational leaders. However, in assessing her own career development, Ms. M. was proud to say that she had many opportunities to develop professionally and these opportunities allowed her to make effective changes and to advocate for change at the local, state, and national levels. Ms. M. served in school board leadership roles and in numerous K-12 leadership positions. Privileged to meet and speak with notable people in academia and governmental agencies over the years, such as Hillary Clinton, Ms. M stated being proud of her leadership opportunities.

Final Thoughts

Women, like other minorities, face what the United States has perpetuated over the years, institutional discrimination. White men overwhelmingly lead institutions and agencies, local to national, corporate to government, and K - 12 to Higher Education. Women who wish to excel in leadership tend to overexert themselves beyond the normal leadership expectations and often set higher standards for success. Northouse (2010) found small differences in leadership styles and effectiveness between men and women. Northouse further concluded that women have democratic or participatory leadership styles and are more likely to use transformational leadership behaviors and contingent reward than their male counterparts do. Northouse felt that these leadership styles were often associated with effective leadership. These leadership challenges prompt continued research.

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