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Leading Ladies: Women University and College Presidents: What They Say about Effective Leadership

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In this paper, we report the importance five women community college, college, and university presidents place on certain leadership tenets. Interestingly, the advice they offer for other women who aspire to leadership often ties to the perceived importance of certain tenets. We report these data and speculate about implications for future women leaders in higher education.

Slightly more than 20% of college and university presidents are women, with the majority of them at the helm of community colleges or small private four-year colleges (Corrigan, 2002; Fisher & Koch, 2004). Although much has been written about leaders and leadership, we unfortunately know little about women who fill the role of college or university president.

Few studies focus on women as leaders and those that do are limited in scope. For instance, Astin and Leland (1991) and Morrison (1996) combined women in staff and line positions in order to generate large enough samples for their studies. Helgesen (1990) interviewed five women CEOs, and Jamieson (1995) based her findings on the examination of media ·representation of women in prominent positions over time. Despite such limitations, the conclusions drawn by these authors and others suggest that women leaders interpret effective leadership differently than men do (Chliwniak, 1997; Eagly & Johnson, 1995; Helegsen, 1995; Kanter, 1977; Tinley, 1994).

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We challenged conventional wisdom about gender-based differences in leadership and assumed that women leaders across industries would be more similar than different in their views about what is important if a leader is to be effective. One basic assumption undergirded this study: Effective leaders hold decidedly similar views of what constitutes effective leadership, regardless of gender or work environment (Wolverton, 2002; Wolverton & Poch, 2001).

Fisher and Koch (2004), after surveying more than 700 college presidents (19% female, 11% minority) concluded, "[G]ender is a nonfactor as a determinant of presidential leadership" (p. 114). They did discover

differences in behavior but suggested that these differences stem from demographic differences. The evidence of distinct behavior attributed to women presidents was somewhat contradictory. Women placed a higher value on consensus and reported that they are more likely to be described as warm and affable than are men, findings generally supportive of conclusions drawn by Chiwniak (1997), Helgesen (1990, 1995), and others. Women considered themselves more assertive, less likely to believe that one-on-one interactions are productive, and less likely to delegate responsibilities— findings inconsistent with a collaborative image (e.g., Astin & Leland, 1991; Helgesen, 1990, 1995). Furthermore, Fisher and Koch (2004) found that women were more apt to use email and other forms of technology that insulate them from direct personal contact with others, which seems to be at odds with the notion of a "supportive, democratic, participative, caring, sharing" form of leadership that women supposedly exhibit (p. 89).

Fisher and Koch (2004) found significant demographic differences between men and women in their study. Fewer women held doctorates. Women were younger and had spent less time in higher education, in a previous presidency, and in their current presidency than their male counterparts. They noted that these differences in background and experience, not a fundamental predisposition toward a unique approach to leadership, account for differences in behavior.

Two threads ran through the current articles, books, and research about effective leadership. First, this body of knowledge is disjointed. Authors investigated divergent yet equally important aspects of effective leadership. Second, much of the literature is written by men about men, particularly white men. We created from the existing literature a series of tenets, of effective leadership that built a base of knowledge about what men contribute to effective leadership. The determination of these tenets required our judgment. We believe we are justified and accurate. Participants in the study agreed with the tenets and when given the opportunity to add to the list, failed to do so.

Our primary research question was; Do women differ from their male counterparts in how they interpret what each tenet means? We asked the women in the study to interpret each of the tenets and provide examples of how they were manifested in their own leadership activities. In addition, the women related their experiences as leaders in terms of tenet relevance, the best and worst decisions they have made as leaders, the challenges they faced, and advice they gave for aspiring leaders.

In this paper, we report the importance five women community college, college, and university presidents placed on these leadership tenets. The

advice they offered for other women who aspire to leadership tied to the perceived importance of certain tenets. We report these data and speculate about implications for future women leaders in higher education.

The Nine Tenets of Effective Leadership

Nine tenets defined in the literature include passion, reflection, competency, communication, cultural sensitivity, stamina, energy, resiliency, the ability to be focused yet engaged in forward thinking, respect for individuality, and credibility. Some are multidimensional.

Tenet One
Effective leaders are passionate about their organizations. They exhibit extraordinary commitment not only to the organization but to its people. Passionate leaders see their organizations and people for what they can become. They build capacity by fostering professional growth in those around them so that they can share power by working through others in the pursuit of organizational goals. This willingness to invest in individuals and to work with them to move the organization forward instills loyalty and encourages the generation of creative solutions to real problems. In other words, leaders who are passionate about their organizations inspire those around them to strive to reach their potential (Allen & Meyer, 1996; Argyris, 1998; Astin & Leland, 1991; Bensimon & Naumann, 1993; Fisher & Koch, 2004; Gardner, 1993; Goffee & Jones, 2000; Greenleaf, 1998; Kotter, 1990; Mintzberg, 1998; Peck, 1983; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Padilla, 2005; Reichheld, 2001; Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002; Yukl, 1998).

Tenet Two
Effective leaders are reflective. They are self-aware, self-disciplined, self-confident, and self-assured. *Self-awareness* manifests itself in a sense of conviction undergirded by an unerring sense of right and wrong. They trust their own intuition. They believe they can make a difference. *Self-discipline* refers to an ability to manage oneself by understanding personal and leadership priorities, challenging one's assumptions and excuses, and examining one's actions. It allows effective leaders to establish professional and personal balance in life. *Self-confidence* refers to a belief in one's abilities and sense of timing. It grows over time and is the direct result of leadership experiences as children, youths, and adults in family, school, and athletic activities. *Self-assuredness* derives from awareness, discipline, and confidence. It provides leaders with the ability to accept and make sense out

of ambiguity, the courage to take intelligently thought out risks and act decisively, and the humility to admit when they are wrong. Self-assuredness allows leaders to laugh at themselves as well as with others. In other words, to be themselves and to lead in their own way. In essence, it gives them executive presence. The combination of these four personal resources constitutes reflectiveness (Bass, 1990; Bensimon, Neumann, & Birnbaum, 1989; Collins, 2001; Drucker, 1993, 1999; Fisher & Koch, 2004; Fisher, Tack, & Wheeler, 1988; Goleman, 2000; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002; Heitfetz, 1994; Morrison, 1996; O'Toole, 1995; Padilla, 2005; Sorcher, & Brant, 2002; Thomas & Gabarro, 1999; Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002; Zaleznik, 1989).

Tenet Three
Effective leaders are competent. They possess the intelligence and mental capacity to get the job done. They continue to learn from their surroundings, mentors, and exemplars. They possess a strong work ethic, hold high self-expectations, and make constructive use of feedback. And, they possess a deep reservoir of tacit knowledge—that invisible understanding called common sense, which lies behind intelligent action. Competence affords them the opportunity to shape their environments in ways that enable the organization to accomplish its results-oriented goals (Collins, 2001; Drucker, 1999; Goleman, 2000; Goleman et al., 2002; Hansen, Nohria, & Tierney, 1999; Jamieson, 1995; Kanter, 1977; Mintzberg, 1973; Morden, 1997; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Sorcher & Brant, 2002; Thomas & Gabarro, 1999; Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002; Yukl, 1998).

Tenet Four
Effective leaders are great communicators. They have their finger on the pulse of the organization. They are informed. They read people well. They listen and learn from individuals at all levels of the organization and from those outside the organization with whom it interfaces. They are open, share information, and continually communicate the values of the organization and a clear, compelling, and motivating reason for why it exists. In short, they possess well-honed interpersonal skills (Conger, 1992, 1998; Cox, 1994; Drucker, 1999; Gardner, 1993; Goleman et al., 2002; Hesselbein, Goldsmith, & Beckhard, 1996; Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994; Jamieson, 1995; Mintzberg, 1973; Padilla, 2005; Pestrak, 2001; Robertson, 1998; Useem, 2001).

Tenet Five

Effective leaders understand the role that culture plays in shaping the way they lead. On a *personal* level, effective leaders grasp how race, ethnicity, gender, and family influence their thought processes and actions. *Organizationally*, they pay close attention to the culture that exists within the workplace and how it shapes what gets accomplished, the way in which it gets accomplished and by whom. Leaders must also possess a comprehension of the basic framework within which scientific and technological change take place within their organizations. On a broader *societal* level, effective leaders sense the political and economic climate within which they and their organizations must function. Possessing these multiple layers of understanding helps effective leaders delineate their organizations' responsibilities to the larger communities in which they reside (Bass, 1998; Cox, 1994; DePree, 1992; Fisher & Koch, 2004; Gardner, 1993; Gherardi, 1995; Heifetz, 1994; Helgesen, 1990, 1995; Hesselbein et al., 1996; Joplin & Daus, 1997; McCracken, 2000; Morrison, 1996; Padilla, 2005; Schein, 1992; Wheatley, 1992; Yukl, 1998).

Tenet Six

Effective leaders possess the physical and emotional stamina, energy, and resilience needed to persevere in the long run. Such tenacity provides a bedrock of stability for the organization. It fosters patience, optimism, a tolerance for ambiguity, an air of personal control, and reliability. These leaders are neither crushed by defeat nor over-elated by victory. They simply persevere (Contu, 2002; Gardner, 1993; Goleman, 1998; Goleman et al., 2002; Jones, 2002; Loehr & Schwartz, 2001; Padilla, 2005; Sheriff, 1968).

Tenet Seven

Effective leaders are focused yet forward thinking. They provide purposeful, pragmatic leadership that is based on a comprehensive broad-based view of the organization's current direction and an anticipation of where the organization needs to head in the future. They perceive opportunities and push their organizations to pursue them. They create new environments through innovation (Bass, 1998; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Bruch & Ghoshal, 2002; Burns, 1978; Conger, 1992; Drucker, 1999; Fisher & Koch, 2004; Gardner, 1993; Greenleaf, 1998; Heifetz, 1994; Hesselbein et al., 1996; Kanter, 1977; Kotter, 1990; Lerner & Almor, 2002; Mintzberg, 1973; Peck, 1983; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Sheriff, 1968; Wheatley, 1992; Wolverton, Gmelch, Montez, & Nies, 2001; Yukl, 1998; Zaleznik, 1989).

Tenet Eight

Effective leaders respect and value individuality. They treat people fairly and appreciate and acknowledge the contributions that others make to the organization. They understand that diversity in gender, race, culture, background, and perspective within the workforce strengthens and enriches their organizations (Argyris, 1998; Burns, 1978; Cox, 1994; DePree, 1992; Drucker, 1999; Friedman, Christensen & DeGroot, 1998; Gardner, 1993; Gherardi, 1995; Helgesen, 1990, 1995; Joplin & Daus, 1997; Mintzberg, 1998; Morrison, 1996; Padilla, 2005; Wheatley, 1992).

Tenet Nine

Effective leaders possess credibility. Leaders do not control or even create credibility. They can put in place some of the basic building blocks of credibility, but those with whom they interface determine who is credible and who is not. The building blocks of credibility are trust, integrity, and power. *Trust* is a multifaceted concept. A leader's ability to create an atmosphere of trust depends on a demonstrated willingness to be vulnerable (which springs from self-assuredness), confidence, benevolence (showing respect to others), competence, honesty (doing what you say you are going to do and being willing to admit your mistakes), openness (which signals reciprocal trust), authenticity (which comes with self-assuredness), and being forward thinking and inspiring. *Integrity* is possessing a sense of right and wrong (self-awareness) and taking responsibility for one's actions. And finally, *power* arises from demonstrated performance (competence), but it depends on a willingness to share it with others for the good of the organization (passion). To some extent it rests on an individual's ability to build community within the organization, based on widely communicated shared values. Credibility, coupled with a sense of direction and the ability to get things done, provides a telling definition of leadership (Burns, 1978; Conger, 1992, 1998; Drucker, 1999; Fisher, 1984; French & Raven, 1959; Gardner, 1993; Heifetz, 1994; Hesselbein et al., 1996; Johnson, 2001; Kouzes & Posner; 1993, 1995; Nester-Baker & Tschannen-Moran, 2001; O'Toole, 1995; Thomas & Gabarro, 1999; Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002; Yukl, 1998).

Participant Selection and Data Collection

We purposefully selected women, thought to be effective by their peers, based on who had at least three years in their current position. We believe that especially for women, longevity in the position suggests effectiveness. The parents control over organizational budgets and more than five

employees reported directly to them. Researchers involved in the project suggested some of the participants and colleagues unattached to the project identified potential participants. Participants were selected based on their ability to inform the study.

Two university presidents, one four-year college president, and two community college presidents were interviewed. These five women led institutions in northeastern (2), southeastern (1), midwestern (1) and western (1) states. They were ethnically diverse; one African American, one Latina, one Native American, and two Anglo women. Together these women represented nine decades of higher education administrative experience.

This was a qualitative case study (Yin, 2003). This design allowed comparison of women across institution types to determine whether common threads or patterns in their views about and experiences in leadership existed (Babbie, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2003). A semi-structured interview protocol was developed and piloted prior to participant interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2003). All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Interviews ranged in length from 2 to 3 1/2 hours. ATLAS.ti software was used to categorize the data by themes and patterns (Babbie, 2001; Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In addition, archival materials were gathered on each participant and the organization she led (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003).

What Women Presidents and Policy Makers Say is Important and Why

Although some differences in perception of importance exist across these women, three tenets, in particular, were listed as most important to the majority of the participants—competence, credibility, and communication. Each of the participants placed competence on her list of most important tenets—indicating that this characteristic was an important building block for success. One leader stated, "You know, we can talk about the importance of good communication skills and good human relations skills and enthusiasm and commitment and so forth, but if you're not competent, it doesn't matter." A second leader said, "As a woman, you're dead if you aren't extremely competent." In relaying the importance of competence, another indicated that leaders have to be competent if they expect others to be competent, "You take the lead; you set the standard; you set the expectations—people rise to high expectations not low ones."

The participants said it was vital that effective leaders develop and maintain credibility with all groups they encounter. "If you want people to

follow you, they have to be able to take to the bank what you say," was the way one leader described the importance of credibility. Another indicated that to be effective, the people you work with must believe that "my word is my bond." Reputation for these leaders is an important component of getting the job done. They indicated that trust and reputation are earned over a period of time and difficult to rebuild if broken or tarnished. They also pointed out that it is difficult to build a team without a credible reputation for integrity. As stated by one of the leaders, "People have to know who they are following." In other words they have to be able to trust that the opinions, values, priorities, and attitudes that the leader presents to them today are the true core of that leader and that core will remain essentially the same.

In the view of these women, the ability to be a great communicator is an essential for an effective leader. One leader emphasized, it is important to communicate "in a variety of formats to a variety of people." The leaders believed that a great communicator communicates through oral and written language, listening, and being visible. The participants suggested that it is important to "walk around a lot," (i.e., be visible and accessible to as many individuals in the organization as possible). One of the women noted that open communication is one of the best ways to defeat "the grapevine" (i.e., the often destructive rumor mill that can flourish when leaders do not communicate sufficiently with those within the organization). Another woman commented that she makes sure to be aware of what is on the grapevine so that she can keep it in check and correct any misinformation. Participants also stated that a great communicator knows when to be succinct in delivering information and when to elaborate and understands that the purpose of the message (e.g., information, persuasion) shapes the communication. The participants also talked about the need to encourage the people they work with to also be good communicators. In addition, leaders commented on remembering the purpose of communication. One said, "You can't build teams if you're not a good communicator." Another said: "You can't be a leader without being able to communicate goals, vision, aspirations."

For two presidents, passion was essential. One woman said: "It's number one." Another suggested that "you must understand the organization, understand its people, and demonstrate that you are committed to it and them. You model commitment." It is the passion that some of the leaders say helps them be good communicators as they represent the organization to its constituents and that helps fuel the physical and emotional stamina and energy they need to perform effectively. The need to be forward-thinking also surfaced, with one leader stating that a future orientation is the most

important characteristic of an effective president. "Any CEO who is not future-oriented is going to quickly have the organization in a non-viable place . . . you can't live in the status quo."

Today's Women Leaders Speak to Aspiring Women Leaders

The five presidents in our study were very encouraged about the possibilities for women who wish to follow them into leadership positions in higher education administration. One of them said, "I think the notion that women aren't taken seriously is fast fading." They also recognized that women who aspire to leadership will face serious challenges. One of the leaders stated, "There is no door that can't be opened," but, women must be very careful about making the correct choices for themselves.

One participant cautions in her view of the opportunities; "I think there are a lot of opportunities out there, but I think the barriers are high. I believe there is a backlash at women as powerful, assertive women." Another president expressed concern that not enough women are preparing for higher education administrative positions because they can pursue more lucrative fields. Concern was also expressed that prospective female leaders are getting a negative perception of higher education leadership positions. One president noted, "[M]y concern is that many women . . . see long hours; they see the challenges; the issues; the stress . . . [and] aren't willing to make the sacrifice that they perceive to be involved with being president and vice-president." She said that sitting presidents and other leaders should do a better job of presenting the rewards of leadership positions. This president acknowledged that when family is involved these choices can be very difficult, a perspective presented by the leaders who mentioned the importance of balancing work and family. Several made statements such as,

> Now women, I think, are sometimes conflicted, particularly if they want to be married and raise a family. And I think they have to decide where their balance is going to be and what's most important, which may mean that they wait until their children are older before they go into administrative positions, when they have the time and aren't conflicted about the demands at home.

As one put it, "The presidency is all consuming. You must make a conscious decision to pursue it in lieu of something else—something has to give. Because women stop out to have families, it slows the move of women into

the presidency." This person added, "You need to be young enough to survive—don't wait too long."

The participants also discussed the importance of appropriate preparation for leadership. Although presidents from different types of institutions disagreed about the details they generally agreed that prospective leaders need to find ways to understand and participate in the prevailing faculty culture of higher education. One president suggested: "Spend time in rank. Get the right types of experience. Be a faculty member. If you are a full-time administrator, then teach as an adjunct. You can't understand the culture if you have not served in the role." Another suggested, "Be the best at whatever you do, if you want to be a president; get a Ph.D. in a discipline, not higher education." They also supported involvement in professional development opportunities available through professional associations as a way to build leadership experiences.

Several noted that it is important that aspiring women leaders find opportunities to educate themselves about the financial aspects of higher education. Understanding the budget was mentioned as an essential skill for effective leaders. During the interviews, each of the leaders discussed budget challenges she faced. Fiscal responsibility is a priority for each of these presidents and experiences gained along the path to the presidency helped prepare them to meet this responsibility. Although the president is not the one directly managing the institutional budget, the president must provide direction for those who do and be able to make sure that her directions are carried out appropriately.

Another important financial aspect of institutional leadership is fundraising. As one participant stated, "The issue of asking for and raising money . . . that's something you have to do now . . . Some [women] are not very comfortable with it . . . I see that as a huge challenge." Another agreed stating, ". . .usually they know nothing about . . . and have little experience with budgeting and fund raising."

Prospective leaders need to adopt strategies for avoiding burnout and for re-kindling their energies. The women shared the importance of taking care of oneself if one is to be successful and effective in the presidency. As one stated, "I came in running a short sprint and recognized that this is a marathon.... [S]o you have to pace yourself more." To maintain the energy level needed to be an effective leader, each of the presidents made sure to make time to exercise on a regular basis. This sentiment expressed by one of the leaders was shared by all. "It takes a lot of energy just to face the challenges that leaders in education have to face." Another offered,

> And this gets back to that time that you need to reflect and take care of oneself. Whether you take an hour out of each day or you take a day out of a week or a day a month. However you do that, you need to have some time just for yourself to re-energize and to get your emotional stability together and to do something physical.

"These jobs are absolutely endless . . . [Sometimes you have to] say, 'Hey, for my well-being, I just ain't gonna go to that event tonight.'"

Implications

At one time it was not uncommon for women to find themselves "falling into positions" (i.e., they advanced within the organization without conscious preparation or direction). As higher education has taken on more of a business model and the skills needed to be an effective institutional leader have become more complex, these incidental advancements are disappearing. Women must be purposeful in obtaining the education and experiences that prepare them for leadership. They must engage in deliberate, long range career planning that moves them through a series of jobs that provide professional development through hands-on experience.

Women who aspire to leadership positions as presidents build their careers. They need to be sure that they develop a reputation of competency in their fields and in their ability to perform administrative tasks. The five presidents indicated women in their positions are scrutinized carefully and criticized freely and must demonstrate their competence for the positions they hold.

Competence is a cornerstone for an effective presidency, and each president interviewed placed this among the top characteristics for effective leaders. Along with a reputation for competence, aspiring women leaders must build a reputation for being credible. Their interactions with co-workers, staff, students and upper administrators must prove to constituents that the prospective leader has integrity, authenticity, and can be trusted to act honestly. In addition, would-be women leaders should seize opportunities to practice their written, oral, and interpersonal communication skills. According to the presidents, an effective leader needs to be able to communicate clearly her passion, energy, values, and vision to all the institution's constituencies. With good communication skills, a leader stays connected to the pulse of the organization and can "rally the troops" to her cause—both important aspects of effective leadership.

Although the leadership literature is based primarily on the views and experiences of male leaders, we found that the nine tenets we distilled from

the leadership literature have meaning and significance for the women we interviewed. The implication of this finding for women who aspire to leadership is that their preparation should be very similar to that of aspiring male leaders. Competence, credibility, and communication, the most important tenets for the presidents who participated in this study, are important for all leaders. Since women still are shaped by societal expectations and influences, we may have more work to do in certain areas but our male counterparts also have their special challenges. Although gender parity has not been achieved in higher education, a woman who aspires to be a leader in higher education and prepares herself for leadership through education, experience, and professional development can expect to enjoy the success that has been attained by the women leaders in this study.

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