GENDER AND COMMUNICATION IN SCHOOL MANAGEMENT: RISING ABOVE CULTURAL BARRIERS

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─Abstract─

This paper is based on the findings of an ethnographic qualitative case study that was conducted at a rural secondary school in the Limpopo province of South Africa. The aim of the study was to explore the communication strategies of a woman principal at a secondary school. The school was identified through purposive sampling in which reputational, typical case and criterion referenced sampling techniques were employed. Findings of the study reveal that a rural woman school principal rises above the constraints of cultural traditional communication barriers. This success was achieved by using a hybrid communication style. A hybrid communication style is associated with transformational leadership, which is associated with successful organizations. The principal in this study also used diverse channels of communication, such as personal encounters, meetings, delegation, and written communication. It is thus recommended that communication may be improved by combining both feminine and masculine styles of communication as both female and male leaders can adapt to the demands of leadership in the transformational mode. Further, Leadership skills training should include hybrid communication. Moreover, skill in this contemporary way of leading may not necessarily come naturally without some effort and thought.

1. INTRODUCTION

The theory of a 'female' style of management is hotly debated globally. This is because the need to achieve gender equality is currently a priority for all countries. In the same sense that women are not a homogenous group, women managers are also not a homogeneous group and may operate, using a variety of managerial styles depending on the different situations in which they find themselves. The theory of the risks of a woman's management style creates a meta-narrative, which universalises the category of women and idealises characteristics such as self-sacrificing and caring (Blackmore, 1999). Moreover, many women managers are forced to adopt the male *modus operandi* in order to succeed in male-dominated environments (Wolpe, 2012). Similarly, researchers caution on formulating sociolinguistic universals (Holmes, 1998). However, as indicated earlier, a large body of research confirms the distinctive communication patterns of women across diverse contexts (Holmes, 2013). Mangers have to communicate in order to discharge their responsibilities. For communication to be effective, educational managers have to overcome communication barriers constantly and effectively.

For as long as the traditionalist classification of communication with stereotypical male attributes continues and is influential in public perceptions, women will be disadvantaged, since they define women's communication styles as deficient (Coleman, 2001). Currently, there is a move towards recognising female communication styles as effective and critical for organisations to succeed. This is because female communication styles are said to be more in agreement with the transformational style of management (Vinkenburg, Engen, Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2011; Lopez-Zafra, 2012).

Reflecting on the findings of a qualitative study conducted into a woman school principal in South Africa, this article argues that the woman principal utilised a transformational leadership style by following a hybrid communication style, given that transformational leadership involves mobilising social interactions in support of institutional goals (Lopez-Zafra, 2012). In the case of this study, she displayed both feminine communication styles and traditional male characteristics of independence and strength in the public sphere, yet teachers in her school do not associate her

character with masculinity.

The study on which this article is based extends the current literature by investigating the extent to which the principal's communication in the school reflects transformational leadership. By doing so, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the tools that interact with transformational leadership to enhance school effectiveness thus, expanding and existing body of academic knowledge and scholarship. It is therefore critical for organizations to maintain a gender balance in management because this addresses a number of aspects within the organization.

Women managers bring various fundamental values within an organization. Lumby and Azaola (2014) declare that the qualities of motherhood in women can have implications for many other contexts in their lives. They point out that women have become actors who build meaning as they try out different strategies in their interaction with staff members and children. Some principals use this mothering characteristic to enrich their managerial experiences. The Grant Thornton Report (2013) emphasizes the gains of gender parity in organizations. This report goes on to point out that a recent review of 100 companies against Organizational Health Index found that companies with more than three women in top management positions scored higher than their male peers. Therefore, organizations can benefit when there have more women at the helm. Female representation at top management has a potential to engender enhanced motivation and commitment in lower-level women managers, "leading them to improve their individual performance and contributions to the managerial groups to which they belong" (Dezso & Ross, 2012).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Literature review will focus on Conceptualising women communication styleand the Theoretical Framework.

2.1. Conceptualising women communication style

The theory of 'female' style of management is fervently debated globally (Isaac, 2011). As mentioned in the introduction, women are different, and as managers they may operate use a variety of managerial styles depending on the contexts in which they find themselves in. As expressed by Blackmore (2010), the theory of a woman's style of management risks creating a meta-narrative that is universalizing the category of women and idealizing characteristics such as self-sacrifice and caring. Moreover, to succeed in male environments many women managers are forced to adopt the male *modus operandi* (Wolpe, 2012). Interestingly, as indicated earlier by Holmes (2013), women communicate differently in various contexts. Katuna (2014) cautions that reporting on the differences of women's communication styles should not be considered as 'gender essentialist' because the researchers explain why women may have developed the feminine style.

Currently, there is a move towards recognising female management styles as effective and critical for organizations to succeed and the reason for this move is that female management styles are said to be more in agreement with the transformational style of management (Martos, 2012). Research in leadership and management argues that transformational leadership is associated with successful contemporary organizations (Eagly, 2013). The same sentiment is expressed by Noddings (2013) when stating that "…it is time for the voice of the mother to be heard in education".

2.2. Theoretical Framework

Research suggests that a hybrid style known as transformational leadership is highly effective in most contemporary organisational contexts (Eagly, 2013). 'Transformational' leaders motivate others to excel, encourage creativity and foster human relationships. This type of leadership is effective because it promotes strong interpersonal connections based on a leader's charisma and consideration of others. These connections enable leaders to stimulate high-quality performance by encouraging workers rather than threatening them, thus motivating them to perform exceptionally well. By bringing out the best in others, transformational leaders enhance the performance of groups and organisations, including schools (Eagly, 2013).

Transformational leadership is genderless because it incorporates both culturally masculine and feminine behaviours. This androgynous mixing of masculine and feminine leadership skills calls for some effort and thought – men have to work on their social skills and women on being assertive enough to inspire others (Eagly, 2013). Both women and men leaders can adapt to the demands of leadership in the transformational mode therefore optimising leadership and management in contemporary institutions (Eagly & Chin, 2010).

According to Kwadzo (2010), a number of studies that have been conducted on gender leadership suggest that the leadership and management of modern institutions need to be non-coercive, based on team work, and proficient in building relationships, which is the leadership style naturally employed by women. Therefore, women bring different qualities to leadership and management positions and help organisations to maintain a competitive advantage (Broadbridge, 2007).

Interestingly enough, literature about transformational leadership has illustrated that women are more transformational than men, since the characteristics of a transformational leadership style are related to feminine gender characteristics (Vinkenburg, Engen, Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, 2011). Women specifically surpass men in their attention to human relationships. Moreover, when giving incentives, women leaders are more prone to practicing a more positive, reward-based approach and men a more negative, threat-based approach which is less likely to be effective (Lopez-Zafra, 2012). It, therefore, seems as if women come across as better leaders.

Grogan and Shakeshaft (2010) pointed out in her research that a feminine style of leadership is democratic, participatory, caring. They (Grogan and Shakeshaft, 2010) further assert that feminine leadership style is more inclined to encourage inclusiveness and motivation than the masculine style of leadership which emphasises individualism, duty and rules. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2010) also alluded that the characteristics of female leadership fit well with notions of how to run successful schools.

The feminine style of leadership which comprises caring, creativity, intuition, awareness of individual differences, non-competitiveness, tolerance, subjectivity and informality is appropriate to educational organisations (Merchant, 2012). This includes their communication style which is used to enhance social connections and relationships (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010). Hence, female principals are better than males in the area of communicating school goals, supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating curriculums, maintaining high visibility, promoting professional development and providing incentives for learning (Lad, 2000). The following section presents discussion of the findings of the study.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design
A qualitative research design was used to understand and describe the communication strategies of a woman principal in a secondary school. The research was conducted in a secondary school in Limpopo, South Africa, which was identified by means of reputational sampling. It was an ethnographic case study, where the principal and the teachers working under her supervision were investigated, in depth, for an unbroken period of six months.

3.2 Sampling and selection

Purposive sampling was used and as such reputational, typical case and criterion referenced sampling techniques were employed. A school in Limpopo province, SA, was chosen because there were few women principals, its cultural embeddedness, researchers familiarity with context and also, because there was little research on gender in the province. The principal was nominated by a senior official in the regional department of education on the basis of the principal's years of experience as a principal (11 years), sound management of the school and the consistently good matriculation results obtained by learners. Six teachers, three males and three females, were selected by the researcher, by means of judgement sampling. The findings of the inquiry were exploratory and descriptive. The primary aim was to understand and describe the communication strategies of the principal as experienced by her and the staff from their own frame of reference.

3.2 Data collection

The data collection strategies were individual in-depth interviews with the principal and teachers, respectively, school documents analysis and non-participant observations. Interviews were recorded using a digital device and later transcribed. The interview data has not been edited for expression. However, because the participants were second language speakers of the English language, the data has been partially edited for linguistic accuracy to eschew from incomprehensible meaning of what they expressed. The researcher did not completely alter the style and rhythm of the participants' speech patterns. The period of field work also allowed the researcher to 'shadow' the principal as she carried out her daily tasks. Moreover, the researcher attended all formal meetings held at the school and observations were recorded as extensive field notes. School documents, used by the principal in the execution of her school administrative duties, included the school's minutes book, information book, school journal and school policies. Multiple data gathering strategies enabled me to validate the interview data.

3.3 Data analysis

Analysis of data obtained from the observations, individual interviews and documents was done thematically, which entailed identifying, coding and categorising the primary patterns in the data (Yin, 2015). Transcriptions of interviews and field notes were read and re-read and tentative categories and sub-categories emerged. Literature, observation and experience assisted the researcher in identifying the final categories. The research was limited to a single site and a small sample (1 Woman principal and sis teachers), typical of qualitative research. The findings show patterns that are useful, particularly where they are corroborated by the large quantity of literature dealing with women in education management and gender specific styles of communication, which has been carried out in a variety of contexts.

3.4 Ethical considerations

The researcher ensured the use of informed consent forms, discussion of the interview agenda and timeframe, and the use of tape recorder to ensure accuracy of information. In addition, the participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. The principal and the teachers were given pseudonyms when

reporting. Ethical clearance was given by the University and the department of education gave me permission to conduct the study.

4. CONTEXTUALISING THE STUDY

The school manager, Martha, (pseudonym) is a woman in her early fifties and consequently is regarded as quite elderly by members of her small, very rural community and in the school. She was born and raised in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. She has an honours degree in English and a professional qualification. She has been in the teaching profession for more than thirty years, moving slowly up the career ladder from senior teacher to head of the department and then to her present position as school manager. Thathe school (pseudonym) is a large secondary school which had an enrolment of 1 025 learners at the time of the research. The school has boasted the best matric results in the area. The school is located in a small township surrounded by farmlands. Martha manages a teaching staff of 28 and support staff of three. Only seven teachers are female and twenty-one are male. Observations showed that Martha is an organized person and her office is spotless and attractive. She moves gracefully and never does things in a hurry. She is a controlled speaker who formulates her viewpoints with care and takes time, even lengthy monologues, to explain a point. She regards herself as a talkative person, confessing: "I think I talk too much ... that is my greatest weakness in communication".

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings and discussions will focus on channels of communication as they emerged from data analysis. At times messages are not well communicated because communicators use wrong channels of communication (Williams, 2011). The study showed that Martha overcame the barriers to communication by using diverse channels of communication. She used personal encounters, delegation, communicating through meetings, and written communication.

5.1 Personal encounters

One-to-one communication is good building interpersonal relationship (Debroux, 2013) and for the direct intention of improving employee performance and conduct (Williams, 2011:588).   Findings revealed that Martha used both traditional channels of communication and feminine channels of communication. In addition to other usual channels of communication, to fulfil daily administration of the school, Martha preferred personal conversations, in which the teacher is called to her office.

> I usually call them to the office to talk to them ... (Martha). … you call somebody to the office, to discuss the issues. (Martha).

Her preference for personal interaction to give instructions was confirmed by the teachers:

> She communicates to us through private conversations, and that is done very well. She is exceptionally very good in such matters… (Teacher)

Alimo-Metcalfe (2010) and Debroux (2013) postulate that personal contact is a particular preference among women managers and they use it to reinforce interpersonal relationships. Moreover, she makes an effort to understand the personal preferences of teachers in order to avoid offending them. This is in line with literature which suggests that women are concerned with emotion and personal relationships (Merchant, 2012). This is also in agreement with the notion that women are more transformational than men (Lopez-Zafra, 2012).

The woman principal also preferred personal encounters to solve issues outside the school. Moreover, when the school experienced a problem with resources (electricity) with the education department, she and members of the school's governing body (SGB) went to the regional department's offices in order to raise the complaint:

> So we went personally to regional office, eventually with the SGB members and we were promised. (Martha)

As a principal she also spoke personally with the learners. This was mostly done during morning assembly which was held every morning:

> During morning devotion also I do a lot of talking usually especially if there are issues to be addressed. (Martha).

Again, this shows that the principal did not only use the teachers or heads of departments to communicate with the learners. She occasionally still preferred to have personal conversations with the learners like she had with the members of her staff; an aspect of transformational leadership which fosters good relationships. Martha ensures that personal encounters take place by making it part of the school policies. In the Learner Representative Council (LRC) Vision, Mission, and Code of Conduct document, it was pointed out how the learners should communicate with one another and their class teachers; it was pointed out how the learners should communicate with one another, their class teachers, and management. Therefore, there was upward communication, that is, learners communicating with staff, and also horizontal communication, that is learners communicating with learners. Most importantly, the school policy also showed upward communication by stating that 'all teachers are free to contact management on any issue related to their duties'.

Martha's preference for personal conversations is also confirmed by Thakhathi (1996) who conducted a research in the area prior this study was conducted found that relationships and interpersonal skills seem to be a concern for many women managers. It is, therefore, not surprising that Martha knew how to speak to each individual, as mentioned by her teachers, because research conducted by Walker in Holmes (2013) also shows that women think about the feelings of other people. By bringing out the best in others, transformational leaders like Martha enhance the performance of the school. Taking other people's feelings into account may, however, create problems as some people might think that it is an indication that women are weak and can be manipulated. In her case, though, communication was effective, confirming the advantages of using both masculine and feminine ways of communication which are characteristics of transformational leadership. Indeed, women negotiate multiple and contradictory discourses in order to make sense of their leadership situations (Holmes, 2013).

5.2 Delegation

Apart from personal conversations Martha also delegates instructions to heads of departments who take the messages to the relevant teachers. According to Grimsley (2018) delegation occurs when someone with authority confers upon another person the power to do a particular task. Delegation is usually a one-way street and superiors delegate authority to subordinates. However, ultimate responsibility for task completion usually remains the responsibility of the person who delegated the authority to complete it. This is what she said:

> ... and sometimes she does send Heads of Departments [HoDs]. (Teacher).
> She uses the HoDs ... and information from the HoDs. (Teacher).

The use of diverse channels of communication is in line with transformational leadership (Shakeshaft, 2010, Merchant, 2012), and it is not surprising why her school was one of the best performing schools. In this case she ensures good performance of both teachers and learners, thus bringing different qualities to leadership and management positions in schools and maintaining a competitive advantage (Broadbridge, 2007). A good leader must delegate and delegation allows the subordinates to acquire leadership skills. By doing that she is practising transformational leadership because transformational leaders enhance the performance of colleagues by bringing out the best in them.

5.3 Communicating through meetings

Formal meetings are used for collective communication regarding general school matters. According to the staff minutes' book, six staff meetings are held on average each year. Management meetings between the principal and the heads of departments and the subject heads take place three times a year. Data collected from the minutes showed that these meetings were mainly informative. In addition, Martha also relies on regular meetings to communicate with the parents or guardians. However, the researcher observed that she was willing to communicate on an *ad hoc* individual basis with parents who came to see her at the school:

> …when we have a formal meeting …I usually talk and make sure that I have communicated well. Say it's a staff meeting, say it's a parent's

meeting, you see. (Martha).
We also have meetings where we communicate if there's a need like when there are reports and stuff, we'll gather around and then have a meeting. (Teacher).
... She talks to us in staff meetings. (Teacher).

5.4 Written communication

Written communication was also a frequently used strategy, especially when communicating official notices. Martha used circulars, the school journal, the notice board, and the information book. Circulars were disseminated to the senior teachers. The same applies to the information book. The latter is a book where the principal records essential information for the staff to read and to counter sign. Teachers often referred to the information book as a most effective means of communicating routine information. Scrutiny of the information book showed that it was used frequently for notices and information in contrast to issuing directives, which were always given personally to teachers. A noticeboard was also used to reiterate information and Martha insisted that deadlines were posted on the board 14 days before work was due.

A school journal or log book was used for communication between the principal and officials from the regional office. This practice had been instituted during the previous dispensation by the inspectorate. However, Martha still deemed it useful for recording cases of staff discipline and other important events. She executed this task thoroughly. All conflicts and problems encountered, especially with teachers, were recorded. The researcher's presence at the school to conduct the study was also recorded. Although the journal is seldom checked by circuit managers, Martha regarded it as an important strategy for personnel management:

> If you have a teacher maybe who gives you problems, then at some stage you record it, then it will help you. Maybe if the matter gets out of hand, and you've got to take the matter up, the circuit manager is likely to say, 'Now that you are bringing the matter to me how long has it been going on, and have you got any record to show?' then you may refer to it.

Clearly, Martha appreciated the value of written communication. Written communication is vital to management since it allows the manager to carefully organise his or her thoughts, and provides a record for future reference (Bartol & Martin, 1994:440). By using multiple communication styles and communication channels, Martha took up multiple discourses to construct and negotiate her leadership identity within her unique working context in which tradition is still strictly followed. Indeed, as poststructuralists argue, social identities are not static and homogeneous, but are complex and heterogeneous; hence their rejection of essentialist notions of identity (Weiner, 1994).

6. CONCLUSION

This article reported on the findings of a qualitative case study conducted on a woman school principal and her staff in rural South Africa. The study aimed to understand a woman's communication in support of the wider global initiatives to improve communication in educational management. Although the research was limited to a single site and a small sample, typical of qualitative research, the findings did suggest patterns that are useful, particularly where they are corroborated by the large quantity of literature dealing with women in education management and gender specific styles of communication, which has been carried out in a variety of contexts.

The findings revealed that a woman principal in a rural setting experienced communication barriers like language barriers, perceptual barriers, distrust and marginal listening. However, she was able to manage the challenges brought by these barriers by using diverse channels of communication which helped her to succeed in minimising miscommunication. Data from generated from interviews with the principal, teachers and from the documents analysed show that she preferred to use personal encounters and meetings with teachers, learners, and parents. Furthermore, she used other conventional channels of communication such as delegation and written communication.

I also emerged that the woman principal managed communication barriers by using a hybrid style of communication. She did that by combining both feminine and masculine communication styles. By doing this her management was more

aligned with the practices of transformational leadership which is argued to optimise leadership and management in contemporary leadership as discussed in the literature section. Literature also shows that transformational leadership may be viewed as genderless because it integrates culturally masculine and feminine behaviours (Eagly, 2013). As a woman leader in a rural area where cultural tradition can play a role in shaping communication styles, her usage of different communication channels assisted her in managing communication barriers, and minimise miscommunication as such.

The findings also suggest that women principals in a rural setting are able to transcend communication barriers firstly by transcending cultural barriers to communication in management where necessary; and secondly by using a hybrid communication style with diverse channels of communication, including personal encounters. The woman principal practiced transformational leadership by following a hybrid communication style, and by mobilising social interactions in support of institutional goals. In this case study she displayed both feminine communication styles and traditional male characteristics of independence and strength in the public sphere, yet teachers in her school did not associate her character with masculinity. It is therefore recommended that school principals adopt a hybrid style of managing communication as it seems to yield good results for organisations.

This article extends the current literature by investigating the extent to which a woman principal's communication in the school is reflective of transformational leadership. Consequently, the article adds to a deeper understanding of the communication tools that interact with Transformational Leadership to enhance school effectiveness. Using the hybrid style of communication can also lead to improved management. In this way principals may be able to surpass most communication barriers.

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