Advancing Women In Leadership

Redefining the Voice of Women Administrators

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Voice has multiple meanings. Voice is individual and unique, while at the same time requires another to listen and react. The journey towards an authentic voice requires courage and persistence (Issacs, 1999). Voice in feminist literature refers to a way of being that defines female development and encompasses women's value for connectedness (Gilligan, 1982). Voice is compared to vision, a leadership buzzword (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Helgesen, 1990). Voice differs from seeing (vision) which is a one-way process that can exist even if it is not communicated to others. Voice and listening, on the other hand, suggest dialogue and interaction (Helgesen, 1990, Issacs, 1999). This paper chronicles the dialogue of an organization of women administrators as they redefined their collective voice.

The board of Illinois Women Administrators (hereafter referred to as IWA) decided in February 1999 to devote extraordinary time, attention, and resources to a process in order to discover the relevancy of IWA for women educational leaders. Board members were concerned that IWA was not organized to provide necessary services and support to potential and current women administrators. Membership activity of IWA was episodic and growing more limited to specific geographic areas, with most activity occurring in western and central Illinois. The Board wanted to know more about the status of the organization to determine if women administrators continued to need a professional organization like IWA and if so, how that organization should look.

This action research project was based on the process employed by IWA, a statewide organization of women school administrators, as part of an organizational redefinition of purpose. Action research is defined as "a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the "actor in improving and/or refining his or her actions" (Sagor, 2000). The purpose of this research project was to understand the unique strengths and challenges faced by IWA and, from new understandings, to redefine the direction of organization. The results are not necessarily considered to be generalizable to other statewide women's administrative organizations (Mills, 2000).

The paper reviews the literature from the perspectives of challenges and opportunities for women's leadership. Following is a description of the methodology and results of the IWA data collection of the membership through three distinct processes. The last section summarizes the actions taken by IWA to recreate the organization.

Challenges Faced by Women's Leadership Organizations

Women's networks can powerfully impact the culture and policy of organizations and professions. They provide women avenues to develop talents, build relationships, and support job equity (Catlyst, 1999). Women administrators need support, encouragement, and a sense of connection with others who understand the world in which they live (Helgesen, 1990, Irby & Brown, 1998). Levine (as cited in Irby & Brown, 1998) reported that women participating in a small informal peer support group of professional women derived benefits from their association including new perspectives, opportunities to share stories, as resources to one another, and professional networks. Levine concluded that small support groups for women leaders can have a significant impact upon women's potential and be a "mechanism for broadening perspectives, generating alternative solutions to managerial problems, and enhancing professional and personal esteem" (Irby & Brown, 1998, pp. 75).

At the same time, many women's networking organizations struggle, based in part on members' ambivalence about identification with woman's groups. Due to the pressures of working in androcentric cultures that do not recognize or support them, many women are ambivalent about women's rights and feminism. Some women administrators, because they work in male dominated fields, are reluctant to join networks of women and consequently have few means to develop a strong identity of leadership. The resulting isolation results in inhibition of collective political action for social change (Bell, 1995).

In the year 2003, being a woman administrator was neither simple nor easy. The literature revealed internal conflicts women face as they move into traditional male roles in education (Dunlap & Schmuck, 1995; Gosetti & Rusch, 1995; Kanter, 1977; Schmuck & Schubert, 1995; and Shakeshaft, 1987). Shakeshaft (1987) cited evidence from anthropological, psychological, sociological, biological, and political literature that supports a theory of the world in which men, in most cultures,

occupy the most prestigious positions. She went on to assert that while there are differences among societies and cultures, in all cultures men and women divide labor on the basis of sex and male tasks are more valued that female tasks. This male worldview, called androcentrism, elevates masculine pursuits to an ideal. This tradition reinforces the belief in male superiority and a masculine value system in which female values, experiences, and behaviors are viewed as inferior. The system accepts two sets of rules, one for men, the other for women. Discrimination can be overt or covert, but there is strong evidence that biases against women continue (Shakeshaft, 1987).

As they train to become leaders in education, women learn from theories that exclude their experiences and voice. Administrative research and theory traditionally reflect a white male worldview (Gosetti & Rusch, 1995, Shakeshaft, 1987, Sergiovanni, 1999) that prizes competition and winning. The problem is not so much the singular white male orientation of research and theory as it is the lack of balance from other perspectives and experiences. When the behaviors of women or other minorities contradict androcentric theories, their leadership, and not the theory, is found inadequate (Shakeshaft, 1987).

Women assuming leadership positions are confronted with the realities of their positions as outsiders in an androcentric culture. Denial of this reality in one form or another is a common method of coping (Crosby as cited in Gupton and Slick, 1996). Schmuck and Schubert (1995) illustrated women's ambivalence by using interviews with women who denied experiencing sex discrimination and, during the same conversation, reported being treated differently than men. Denial protects women from the realities of discrimination, even as they voice examples of inequality.

Women in administration tend to cope with gender identity by remaining self-oriented. They dissociate themselves from their female identity because they are the minority. These women tend to not identify with other women and instead identify with male gatekeepers of the profession. Too often the consequence of women's denial perpetuates the status quo because women do not offer a different voice (Matthews as cited in Gupton and Slick, 1996).

The careers of most school administrators are relatively lonely (Gupton &Slick, 1996). Women are especially isolated in that they function in an androcentric culture. Edson (1995) conducted a ten-year longitudinal study on successful women administrators. She concluded "that despite all the obstacles for women trying to advance in a largely male arena, these female educators continue to be committed, resilient, and for the most part, successful." (Edson, 1995, p.46). She went on to reflect on how little is needed to encourage women in administration with the recommendation for further study on the process of encouraging and supporting women professionals.

Opportunities for Women's Leadership Organizations

When Illinois Women Administrators came into existence over twenty-five years

ago, the obstacles to women's entrance and advancement in educational administration were clear. Male administrator attitudes against hiring women were prevalent and overt, women were not motivated to seek administrative positions, and organizational procedures perpetuated discrimination in hiring and promoting women administrators (Shakeshaft, 1987).

While it is true that traditional leadership theory is based on male models of competition (Sergiovanni, 1999), there are significant indications that change is under way. As society changes, female values of inclusion and connection are emerging as valuable leadership qualities. The female view that one strengthens oneself by strengthening others is finding greater acceptance (Helgeson, 1990). In advocating for new dimensions of leadership through moral leadership, Sergiovanni (1999, p. x) recognized the accomplishments of women's style of leadership when he wrote, " My reading of the literature on successful schools shows that while women are underrepresented in principalships, they are overrepresented in successful principalships, so there must be something to it" (that women's concern for community and caring is responsible for effective leadership). "Studies of good administrators, male or female, find that they subscribe to many of the practices and approaches that women administrators in general hold" (Shakeshaft, 1987, p. 216).

Shakeshaft (1987) in her study of women superintendents identified differences between leadership practices of men and women. For the women in her study, relationships with others were central to all actions. These women administrators spent more time with people, communicated more, cared more about individual differences, and were concerned more with teachers and marginal students. The major foci of their work was teaching and learning. These women had strong knowledge of teaching methods and techniques. They emphasized achievement, coordinated instructional programs, and evaluated student progress. They created climate for learning that was safe, orderly and quiet. And lastly, the women in Shakeshaft's study emphasized building of community as an essential part of their administrative style. They were democratic and used a participatory style that encouraged inclusiveness through their speech and decision making styles.

Coming from the outsider status held so long by women administrators, women school leaders have unique and valuable perspectives to offer schools who are facing pressures to adapt and change. Experiences outside the predominantly male value system have taught women to consider other points of view. Dunlap & Schmuck (1995) described the situation faced by successful women working in a culture that does not recognize them as marginalized. "Those who are marginal in the dominant society, who experience life in more than one 'world', have access to more than one point of view. Thus those who stand on the fringes of established roles can offer insights less available to individuals more thoroughly and consistently integrated into the established categories (Ferguson as quoted in Bell, 1995, p. 288).

Marginality can result in pro-equity action if women develop a sense of identity among themselves (minority consciousness). The opportunity exists for women to

collaborate politically to reform the organization of schools. The first step is to acknowledge the contradictory perspectives in women administrators' work lives. Women have both insider and outsider status that enables them to understand the "possibility of seeing the relations between dominant activities and beliefs and those that arise on the 'outside' "(Harding, 1991, p. 131-32). Women's organizations have the potential for action through outsider perspectives to transform schools into inclusive learning organizations that value all participants.

Women do not have a monopoly on democratic values of inclusiveness. Many men share them as well. Men are becoming increasingly alienated from and critical of the top-down hierarchies that organize the public world (Helgeson, 1990). Men see the results of bad decisions made by insulated executives issuing directives down the organizations from the top. The critical issue for women in leadership today is to clearly articulate those values within, understand the strengths of feminine leadership, and join forces with others, men and women alike, who are equally passionate about relationships, the strengths of diversity, and ways of organizing organizations that affirm everyone.

IWA Data Collection

The IWA quest for meaning began at the 1999 Annual Dare to Be Great Conference attended by approximately fifty women. Participants grouped according to the decade in which they entered administration to express their beliefs related to the purpose of IWA. The second stage of the data collection involved a two-day retreat for twenty-four women (including one charter member of IWA) working with a consultant through a strategic planning process. The final stage of data collection was a survey designed to determine member's hopes, dreams and frustrations with IWA that sent to all members of IWA. Twenty-two members of IWA responded to the survey.

Through the three means of data collection, the board learned that IWA members have a strong sense of moral commitment that stems from a sense of purpose related to women's natural leadership strengths. IWA was regarded as a strong voice for women leadership in Illinois. Strengths of the organization included providing opportunities for women to develop relationships with other women through networking and the annual events such as the Dare to Be Great conference. At the same time, the membership voiced a need to develop the strengths of IWA to become a stronger voice for women's leadership in Illinois. The ambivalence that many women experience about association with women's organizations was revealed as an issue that needed to be addressed openly. The membership of IWA also recognized a need to reach out to minority women to develop a more complete voice of women leadership in Illinois.

The board of Illinois Women Administrators reviewed the literature on women's administrator organizations as part of the process of redefining the purpose. In terms of addressing current needs of women administrators, IWA compared favorably to other women's administrative professional organizations (Irby & Brown, 1998). On the basis of membership, number and types of conferences,

frequency of board meetings, and publications, IWA matched or exceeded the level of activity and service of similar statewide professional organizations for women in administration. In regards to recommendations for increasing support for women administrators (Irby & Brown, 1998), IWA was on target in terms of forming coalitions with other state agencies and organizations (IWA collaboration with Illinois Principals Association), publicity about membership and networking, and research on women in leadership. While there was room for growth, the direction taken by IWA in the past few years was congruent with recommendations from the literature.

Specific recommendations from the literature on women's leadership organizations such as IWA centered on actions designed to deliberately transform the focus and emphasis of these organizations to understand and communicate more clearly the leadership strengths women bring to schools. Women's organizations are encouraged through the outsider perspectives to consciously address issues of equity and diversity. (Schmuck & Schubert, 1995, p. 285). Recommendations for action that were considered by the IWA board include the following taken from Dunlap (1995) and Gupton & Slick (1996):

1. Shift from women's lack of aspiration for administrative positions to their need for a better support system for aspirants. Women need role models, mentors, networks, and family support to be successful as well as support systems through women's professional organizations and traditional male networks.

2. Shift from women's lack of necessary qualifications and leadership ability to a greater concern about the quality of preparation and recognition of women's leadership talents. Leadership theory must be broadened to include perspectives beyond white male images, experiences, and metaphors through additional research to increase understanding of women's leadership and how they fit into new organizational structures.

3. Shift from focusing solely on too few women acquiring positions in educational administration to include on-the-job maintenance and retention issues. Women must simultaneously understand the meaning of working as outsiders in traditional organizations and move towards creating new definitions for leadership based on feminine perspectives. Women need to anticipate the creation of conflict as traditional norms are questioned. Where conflict does not exist there are strong possibilities of dominance. Advocates must understand the issues and find ways to use conflict to advance ways of new leadership.

4. Shift from access to jobs in administration to equity of jobs. Women must develop necessary political skills and networks to climb the career ladder. Women already in positions of influence should work to eradicate discriminatory practices that bar advancement for women.

5. Shift from focus on women's equity issues to creation of schools and universities that are good places for adults to work and learn. Women must deliberately address issues of diversity and equity through agendas that are inclusive of all groups and

recognize the emergence of values of inclusion and connection as effective leadership qualities.

Based on the data collection of IWA members, the board drafted a renewed mission to take to the membership with five recommendations to change the organizational by-laws. The proposed "Mission of IWA is to improve schools by networking and mentoring women educational leaders into positions of influence in school administration."

Recommendations to change IWA goals in the by-laws included: (1) To be a voice through which women administrators positively influence Illinois schools (2) To select, plan, and implement "Passionate Projects" that develop leadership in Illinois schools as inclusive learning communities that value, respect, and promote diversity, (3) To mentor, promote, support, and nurture women administrators in all stages of their educational careers, (4) To conduct and/or disseminate research about women in administration.

This research was first presented as a monograph to the IWA membership at the Illinois Women Administrators Dare to Be Great annual conference in April 2000. The revised by-laws and reorganization of local groups were approved at that conference and continue to change the agenda of IWA.

As part of the dream of IWA to develop a voice in administrative leadership, IWA has sponsored a book about Illinois women school leaders. The project is a collaborative effort by twenty women researchers who interviewed nineteen recognized women school leaders. The book seeks to explore relational leadership and discretionary decision making.

Illinois Women Administrators continues to redefine itself through the book project. The women who responded to the invitation to contribute to the book project teach in seven Illinois universities with Educational Administration programs, creating new collaborations for IWA through higher education. The networks that will come from these women interviewing highly successful women administrators can only be imagined at this point. In the process of identification of women to be interviewed, careful consideration was given to inclusion of minority women. The stories of women who have faced and overcome significant gender and cultural barriers will provide positive models to all school leaders. Finally, the excitement and interest generated by the project has been overwhelming. The theme of the proposed book resonates with many women.

The future of IWA the organization and leadership from women in Illinois is very different today than it was when the IWA Board seriously questioned the need for its existence. IWA continues to discover a voice, both individually and as an organization. IWA is becoming their dream.

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