

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Journal of Women in Educational Leadership

Educational Administration, Department of

7-2009

Book Review of On Becoming a Woman Leader: Learning From the Experiences of University Presidents & Women at the Top: What Women University and College Presidents Say About Effective Leadership

Catherine L. Morgan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/jwel>



Part of the [Educational Administration and Supervision Commons](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Educational Administration, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Women in Educational Leadership by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Book Review

Catherine L. Morgan

On Becoming a Woman Leader: Learning From the Experiences of University Presidents, Susan R. Madsen. San Francisco, CA 2008. John Wiley & Sons. 321 pages.

Women at the Top: What Women University and College Presidents Say About Effective Leadership, Mimi Wolverton, Beverly L. Bower, and Adrienne E. Hyle. Sterling, VA 2009. Stylus Publishing, LLC. 157 pages.

Introduction

Readers who enjoy learning about women who are successful leaders in higher education have two more books to add to their libraries. The authors of these two books had similar motivations for their research and subsequent publications. Their research methodologies were similar in that both works are based on qualitative studies of women college and university presidents. The analysis and synthesis of the information gleaned from the studies, and the presentation of that information, differ in ways that make for interesting comparisons.

The subtitles of each book provide clues as to the motivations behind the research. Madsen wants us to learn from the experiences of the women she interviewed; Wolverton, Bower and Hyle rely on the women in their study to speak to us in first person about leadership. Madsen is motivated to tell us what experiences make for successful women presidents. Wolverton, et al. want to let the women in their study tell us what makes for an effective leader.

The intended audiences for the books overlap considerably. Wolverton, et al. write for an audience that can find inspiration in reading about women who have succeeded in leadership in higher education. The authors are clear that their purpose is to celebrate the women in the book and to inspire others to follow in the footsteps of those women. Madsen writes for the same audience but she focuses more on providing the reader with ideas that will help them develop as leaders. She also writes for an audience of readers who may be in a position to help girls and women develop to take advantage of leadership opportunities. The professor who wrote the preface to *On Becoming a Woman Leader* said that the book gave her hope to see how people can contribute when their goal is to make a difference. Madsen's purpose in writing the book is to help others have the same hope for themselves and for

About the Author

Catherine Morgan is Dean of the School of Business at Bridgewater State in Bridgewater, Massachusetts. Prior to this position, she was acting president to a private university. Email: C2morgan@bridgew.edu.

others. She also wants to write the “definitive work” on women presidents in their fifties and mid-sixties.

Susan R. Madsen has a doctorate in work, community, and family education with a specialization in human resource development. At the time of publication of her book, she was an associate professor of management. She has conducted significant research and published in the fields of leadership, change, and professional development. She serves on the editorial board of the journal *Advances in Developing Human Resources*.

Mimi Wolverton is a retired professor of higher education. Beverly L. Bower is professor, Don A. Buchholz Endowed Chair, and director of the Bill J. Priest Center for Community College Education, University of North Texas. Adrienne E. Hyle, at Oklahoma State University at the time of publication, is professor of educational leadership at The University of Texas-Arlington. Wolverton and Bower co-authored an earlier version of this research in the *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership* (2006), “Leading ladies: Women university and college presidents: what they say about effective leadership. “

Overview

Since Peters and Waterman published *In Search of Excellence* (1982), authors have incorporated their model of identifying exemplars in various fields. Through interviews and data analysis, they seek to find commonalities that explain excellence in corporations, nonprofit organizations and individual leaders. Jim Collins, for example, employed the same methodology in his highly successful management book, *Good to Great*. The implication is that if those commonalities can be duplicated in other businesses and organizations, they too can be ‘excellent’ and ‘great.’

Both books in this review are based on face-to-face interviews with women who were, at the time, either presidents or recently retired presidents of higher education institutions. Madsen’s book is based on interviews with 10 women presidents; Wolverton, et al. based their book on interviews with nine women presidents. In each case, the authors conducted face-to-face interviews lasting two to four hours with each president. For both books, the authors studied transcripts of the interviews, looked for themes of differences and similarities, drew conclusions, and verified their analysis with the interviewees. Wolverton, et al. supplemented their interview material with other printed and web sources, includ-

ing college documents, newspaper stories, and interviews conducted by others.

From that basic methodological approach, the two works diverge. *Women at the Top* is structured as nine stories, each about one woman president. Each woman, who is identified by name and institution, tells her story in her own words and the authors supplement the stories with third person perspectives. Each chapter is devoted to a single president's story; the chapters are short, highly readable, and use some part of the president's story to create a message. For example, one chapter is titled "Having Fun," another "I Never Met an Opportunity I Didn't Like." The book is a small paperback and can be, but should not be, a quick read.

In contrast, Madsen's presentation of her research is more detailed and more rigorous. *On Becoming a Woman Leader* is a scholarly publication. Rather than tell the stories of the women presidents in biographical form, Madsen integrates and synthesizes the interview material into chapters that follow the progression of lifetime experiences from childhood through adolescence through adulthood. Another interesting difference, and a bit disturbing to the reader, is that Madsen does not reveal the names or institutions of her subjects. She notes that some of the women did not want to be identified in the book; to protect their identities, she did not reveal the names of any of them.

In some ways, that takes a personal ingredient out of the work – an ingredient that can be a source of inspiration for the reader when we can find something about that president to identify with. That is, however, a small matter and does not take away in any measure from the significance of Madsen's work. From another perspective, that becomes a strength of Madsen's approach since there is a risk in identifying as excellent a leader who might falter at some point after the book's publication. That happened after the publication of *In Search of Excellence* and after *Good to Great*. It also happened to one of the women presidents in *Leading Ladies*—one has experienced two votes of no confidence from the faculty at her institution. She still enjoys the support of the board, however.

We know the identities of the women in *Leading Ladies*. We know that they are pioneers in the sense that all but one was the first woman presidents of their institutions. Betty Siegel, retired president of Kennesaw State University, was also the first woman president of a public college or university in the state of Georgia. She also distinguished herself by being one of the longest serving presidents (25 years) in the country at the time of her retirement. All but three of the nine presidents are still at the institutions where they served at the time of the book's publication; those three have retired.

The key questions in *On Becoming a Woman Leader* are (a) how did these women develop the knowledge, skills, and competencies that allowed them to become effective leaders; (b) at what stage of their careers did they develop those skills and competencies; and (c) who were the persons who influenced them throughout their careers. The book is structured into three parts, Youth, Adulthood, and Leadership. Madsen enhances readability

and further creates a scholarly tone to the book by placing in appendices her discussion of research methodology, interview question categories, and basic descriptive information about the presidents. She also has created an extensive reference list for readers who want to extend their knowledge and understanding.

Wolverton, et al. note that they selected their women presidents for interview based on participants' ability to inform the study; they amplified that description by stating that these women were deemed to be effective leaders based on criteria of reputation and longevity. Madsen tells us only that she invited twenty-five women college presidents to interview; the ten in the book agreed to be interviewed and were available at a time that she could travel to their institutions. It would have been interesting to know more about the criteria for each of the studies that led to the specific women who were interviewed.

Like the authors of *In Search of Excellence* and *Good to Great*, the authors of these two books summarize their research into succinct themes. Madsen identifies nine motivations for leadership (e.g. to accomplish and achieve; to make a difference, contribution, or impact). She also summarizes the presidents' leadership philosophies into six primary themes: (1) hiring the right people and firing the wrong, (2) power and empowerment, (3) ethics, honesty, and openness, (4) developing and supporting others, (5) collaboration and teamwork, and (6) creating a vision and making a difference. She devotes a chapter to discussing those themes.

Wolverton, et al. concluded their publication with a synthesis of existing literature on leadership to develop a concise list of nine tenets of effective leadership. They identified characteristics of effective leaders as passion, reflection, competency, great communicators, understanding of the role of culture, possessing the stamina to lead, focused and forward thinking, respecting of individuality, and possessing credibility.

Conclusions

The authors of both books offer the reader insights and conclusions that they gleaned from their research. Madsen clearly articulates her inferences at the end of each chapter in the form of "takeaways." Wolverton, et al., do so more subtly in the words they choose to tell the president's story. There are, not surprisingly, some conclusions in the two books that are very similar. For instance, in her chapter on Career Paths and Barriers, Madsen gives us this takeaway. "Women academic leaders do not always intentionally look for leadership positions, but instead work hard and perform to the best of their abilities in their current posts." (p. 152) One of the presidents in *Women at the Top* tells us the same thing, in her own words. "I never aspired to be a president. It happened. But it wouldn't have happened if I had not done a good job as a faculty member, as a chair, as a dean, and so on." (p. 9)

For different reasons, both books are best read in sections, not all in one sitting. *Women at the Top* is a deceptive fast read. If you read *On Becoming*

a Woman Leader too fast, you will get lost in the details of the transcript quotes and references to the scholarly literature. If you read either of these two books without pausing to reflect, you will miss leadership lessons and ideas that could inspire you and, perhaps more importantly, validate you. And that is, after all, why we take pleasure in these books on successful women leaders.