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# The Synergistic Leadership Theory: Contextualizing Multiple Realities of Female Leaders

Genevieve Brown and Beverly Irby

The authors describe the Synergistic Leadership Theory (SLT), which includes four factors: Leadership Behavior, Organizational Structure, External Factors, and Beliefs, Attitudes, and Values. The factors are described and contributions to existing leadership theory are explained. They further apply the factors to four cases in order to illustrate the application of the theory to leadership practice. The authors conclude that SLT, in including the female perspective, provides an expanded framework for taking a macro-perspective of the interactions among beliefs, external forces, people, and organizations.

Susan had been an outstanding teacher, had completed her graduate program in educational leadership with a 4.0, and had spent two years in an affluent rural district as a successful and respected assistant principal. Considered an “up and coming star,” she easily landed the job as principal of an urban middle school. However, at the end of her first semester, she felt defeated, demoralized, and unsuccessful. Nothing she had tried seemed to work. Overwhelmed, she questioned her leadership style, which had been so effective in the past. What had she done wrong? What had she failed to do?

Assuming total responsibility for the problems evidenced in her school, Susan concluded that her leadership was the sole cause of her dismal first semester. We propose that Susan took a myopic view, failing to recognize the multiple realities of the situation and that her leadership skills were a part of a broader context and were impacted by organizational structure, external forces, and her own and others' values, beliefs, and attitudes. In assessing a situation such as Susan's, it is important to embrace a holistic perspective of the context of leadership and organizations, as well as how that context impacts what leaders can do and how organizations function. The Synergistic Leadership Theory (Irby, Brown, Duffy, & Trautman, 2002) offers a framework for such a holistic view. This article describes the Synergistic Leadership Theory (SLT) and provides vignettes that demonstrate the theory in action.

### About the Authors

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### The Synergistic Leadership Theory Described

The Synergistic Leadership Theory was developed by female researchers, utilized a female sample, and included the female perspective (Irby, Brown & Duffy, 1999). The SLT, a gender-inclusive theory, includes attributes, experiences, and abilities inherent in both male and female leaders (Trautman, 2000). Major assumptions of the SLT include:

1. Leadership is the interaction among leadership behavior, organizational structure, external forces, and values, attitudes, and beliefs.
2. Females bring a particular set of leadership behaviors to leadership positions.
3. No theory/model exists in current literature that is all inclusive of female leadership characteristics or female perspectives (Trautman, 2000).

Five aspects of the Synergistic Leadership Theory make it unique:

1. Female leaders were included in its development.
2. Female leaders may be impacted by external forces, organizational structures, or values, attitudes, and beliefs in ways male leaders are not, and visa versa.
3. Female leadership behaviors may interact with the factors of the SLT in ways unlike the leadership behaviors of males.
4. Leaders at various positions or levels (i.e., teacher leaders to superintendents) may be impacted by the factors in different ways.
5. All four factors are interactive (Holtkamp, 2001; Irby, Brown & Duffy, 1999; Trautman, 2000).

Based on a systems theory approach and inclusive of female leaders' experiences and voices, yet applicable to both male and female leaders, the SLT is rational and interactive. The SLT focuses on the interconnectedness of four particular factors:

1. Beliefs and Values.
2. Leadership Behaviors.
3. External Factors.
4. Organizational Structure.

These factors are depicted as stellar points on the tetrahedral model (Figure 1) with all of the factors working in tandem. The SLT asserts that this interconnectedness among the four factors is critical and that tension occurs if any one of the factors is not congruent with any of the other three.

### **Factor 1: Attitudes, Beliefs, and Values**

In the SLT, attitudes, beliefs, and values are depicted as dichotomous, i.e., individual or group would either adhere or not adhere to specific attitudes, beliefs, or values at a certain point in time. Examples include:

1. Believes in the importance of professional growth for all individuals including self, or does not believe that professional development is important.
2. Has an openness to change; does not have an openness to change.
3. Values diversity; does not value diversity.
4. Believes that integrity is important for all involved in schooling; does not value integrity.

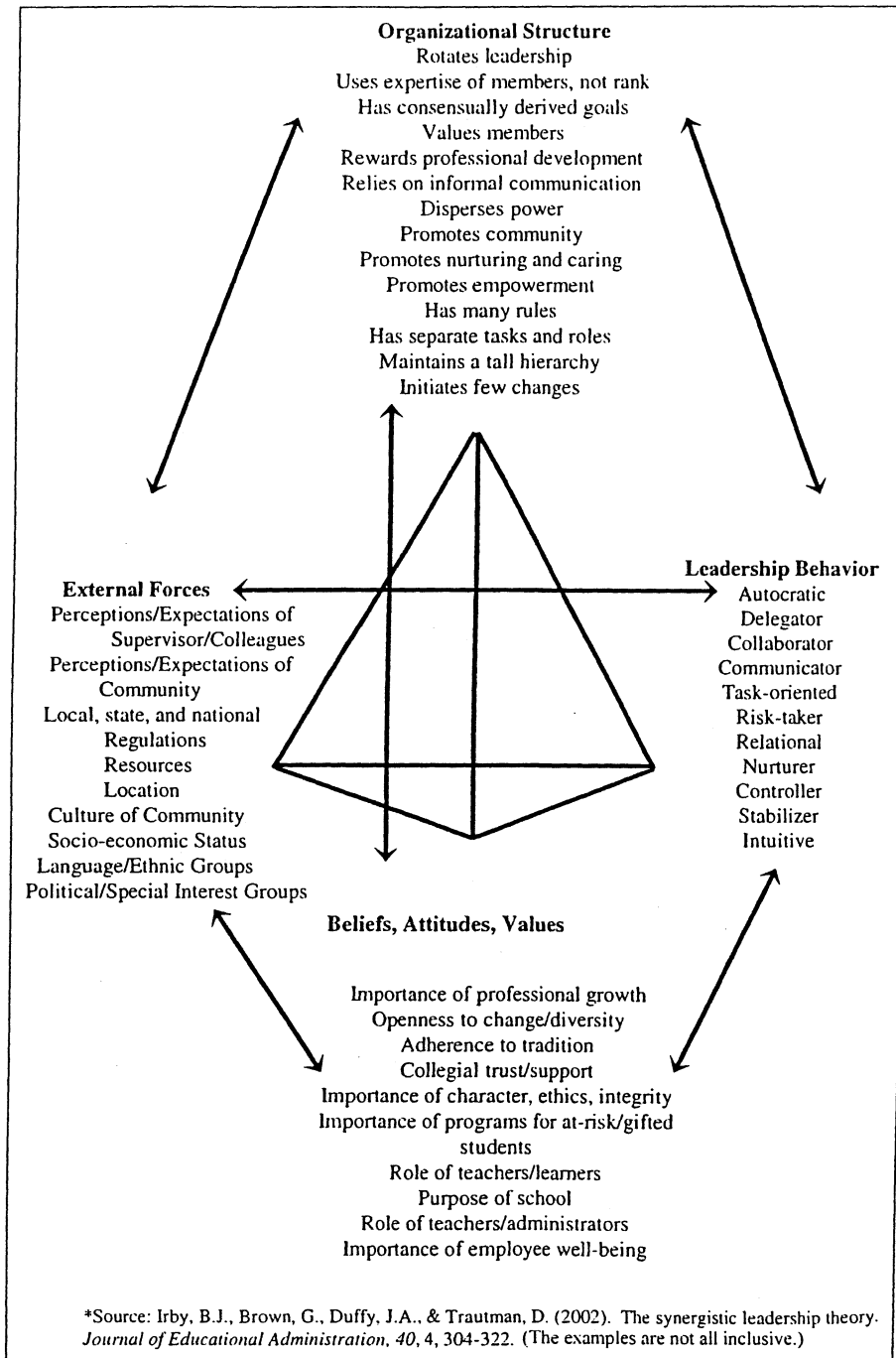
According to Wolff and Ball (1999), personal, community, and organizational perceptions and decisions are influenced by beliefs, attitudes, and values. Daresh (2001) pointed out the importance of a leader's recognition of values and acknowledged that leaders must develop the capacity to examine their own values because they must also be able to examine the values of those with whom they work. Furthermore, Daresh (2001) recognized the interconnectedness of attitudes, values, and beliefs with the leader, others, and the organization.

### **Factor 2: Leadership Behavior**

The second factor of the SLT depicts a range of leadership behaviors from autocratic to nurturer. Specific behaviors include those ascribed to female leaders such as interdependence, cooperation, receptivity, merging, acceptance, and being aware of patterns, wholes, and context (Grogan, 1998; Gupton & Slick, 1996, LeCompte, 1996), as well as those ascribed to male leaders, including self-assertion, separation, independence, control, and competition (Marshall, 1993).

A feminist leader is concerned and seeks to resolve inequities concerning gender, race, class, sexuality, and economic status (Tong, 1989). This type

**Figure 1**  
Tetrahedral Model for the Synergistic Leadership Theory\*



of leader publicly protects individual freedoms, gender biases, racial discrimination, and class equality, and promotes collective action as a way of attacking social problems (McCall, 1995). A feminist leader works closely with personnel and develops personal relationships with co-workers that bond the members of the organization. Personal relationships are the foundation of developing a network at the workplace. These relationships can also transfer to social and political settings (Morgen, 1994).

### **Factor 3: External Forces**

External forces are those influencers outside the control of the organization or the leader that interact with the organization and the leader and that inherently embody a set of values, attitudes and beliefs. Bolman and Deal (1997) acknowledged there are uncontrollable forces outside the organization that affect the system itself and cause dissatisfaction for various groups within the system. External forces that impact educational organizations are diverse. Outside forces that significantly affect schools and/or leaders include: perceptions or expectations of supervisors or colleagues, local, state, and national laws and regulations, technological advances, resources, location, culture of the community, socioeconomic and ethnic communities, special interest groups, taxpayers, political climate, culture and expectations of the community (Irby, Brown, & Trautman, 1999b).

### **Factor 4: Organizational Structure**

Organizational structure refers to characteristics of organizations and how they operate. The SLT depicts organizational structures as ranging from open, feminist organizations to tightly bureaucratic ones. Bureaucratic organizations include division of labor, rules, hierarchy of authority, impersonality, and competence (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1996); feminist organizations are characterized by practices such as participative decision making, systems of rotating leadership, promotion of community and cooperation, and power sharing (Koen, 1984; Martin, 1993; Rothschild, 1992). The feminist organization is simultaneously a workplace, a site of political engagement, and the social center of employees' lives. In contrast to the bureaucratic model where employees are expected to leave their personal problems at home, here personal problems are often shared (Morgen, 1994).

Studies of feminist organizations have rarely surfaced in the well-known leadership and management literature (Ferguson, 1994; Feree & Martin, 1995), nor have they surfaced in mainstream leadership theory (Irby, Brown, & Trautman, 1999). There exist organizational theories that depict a contingency approach to organizational structure and which embrace some female leadership behaviors<sup>1</sup>; however, no leadership theory, other

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<sup>1</sup>Bolman and Deal's (1991) organizational framework; Etzioni's (1975) complex organizations; Mintzberg's (1983) five structures for effective organizations; Senge's (1990) learning organization; Lambert's, et al. (1995) constructivist leader; Lambert's (1998) building leadership capacity.

than The Synergistic Leadership Theory, openly acknowledges the feminist organization as a major component.

### **Contributions of the Synergistic Leadership Theory**

The Synergistic Leadership Theory: (a) adds a theory reflective of female's leadership experiences and voice to existing male-biased leadership theories, (b) enhances relevancy of theory presented in leadership training programs, and (c) creates a framework for describing interactions and dynamic tensions among leadership behaviors, organizational structures, external forces, and attitudes and beliefs.

### **Contribution 1: Add to Existing Male-Biased Leadership Theories and, in General, to the Discourse of Leadership Theory**

Leadership theories in education and business management traditionally have omitted the female perspective. Most of those theories are gender biased, were written using the masculine voice, and were validated using male participants (Holtkamp, 2001). For several years, major researchers in the field of women's leadership issues have called for a reconceptualization of management and organizational theory which takes females into account (Brown & Irby, 1995; Gossetti & Rusch, 1995; Hartsock, 1987; Shakeshaft, 1992; Tallerico, 1999), and Irby and Brown (2000) emphasized the need for a theory that includes the female experience, yet which is relevant for both male and female leaders.

Shakeshaft's (1989) analysis of five leadership theories indicated gender-biased language and the lack of females in research studies. Irby and Brown (1995) examined 13 leadership theories (Table 1) consistently found in educational administration textbooks and courses for:

**Table 1**  
Leadership/Management/Organizational Theories

<b>Name of Theory</b>	<b>Primary Developer</b>
Social Systems Theory	Getzels & Guba, 1955
Needs Hierarchy Theory	Maslow, 1955
Needs Satisfaction Questionnaire	Porter, 1964
Total Quality Management	Deming, 1988
Iowa Studies	Lewin et al., 1939
Ohio State Studies	Halpin & Winer, 1957; Hemphill & Coons, 1957
Theory X&Y	McGregor, 1957
Michigan Studies	Likert, 1961
Contingency Theory	Fiedler, 1967
Leadership Grid Styles	Blake & Mouton, 1968
Situational Leadership	Hersey & Blanchard, 1969
Path-Goal Theory	Evans, 1970
Leadership Style Continuum	Tannenbaum & Schmidt, 1973

1. The inclusion of the female experience and attitudes.
2. Gender as a significant variable in development of the theory.
3. Females in the sample population.
4. Use of non-sexist language.
5. Generalizability of the theory to both male and female leaders.

Eight generalizations emerged and are displayed in Table 2.

An analysis of nine additional leadership theories in 1999 by Irby, Brown, and Trautman (1999a) further validated the outmoded and exclusionary premises related to leadership theory. These analyses reaffirmed Shakeshaft and Nowell's (1984) allegation that conceptualization of leadership theory was formulated through "a male lens" and was "subsequently applied to both males and females" (p.187). The SLT purposefully includes the female voice and adds to the discourse.

### **Contribution 2: Enhance Relevancy of Theory in Leadership Preparation Programs**

Leadership theories included in the curriculum for preparing educational administrators have a male, or andocentric, bias (Irby, Brown, & Trautman,

**Table 2**  
**Leadership Theory Generalizations**

- 
1. "Great men" leadership models excluded the female experience in theory development.
  2. Theory development was limited to males, as corporate leadership positions were exclusive to males.
  3. Male-dominated agencies and/or corporations sponsored many of the studies which led to leadership theories: military, Xerox corporation, General Electric, American Management Association, Exxon, Bell Telephone Labs, Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.
  4. Sexist language was present, as leader/manager was defined in male terms: "he," "his," "fine fellow."
  5. Females, when mentioned, were not expected to have the same career aspirations as males. Further, females were expected to behave like males and/or to achieve like males. If females did not produce the same results as males, their results were simply ignored.
  6. While some of the theories advocated democratic leadership styles, the theories themselves were undemocratic because only one gender was represented in the theory development. The theories were generalized to both males and females, even though they did not take into account the female experience or significantly include females in the sample population for development.
  7. Several theories opposed paternalism as a leadership style, yet they affirmed it in gender-biased descriptions of leaders.
  8. Some of the theories recognized the need for a participative, democratic, employee-friendly, and consensus-building approach to leadership; however, when these models were not present, theorists did not consider this absence as attributable to the fact that female leaders were not included in the theory development.
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1999b). Research has indicated that theories taught in educational administration programs were written by males and based largely upon theories from a corporate or military setting (Gossetti & Rusch, 1995) and experiences of white males in the field of school administration (Blackmore, 1989; Capper, 1993; Glazer, 1991). Further, the leadership and management theory base predominant in administration courses today is not parallel to current leadership practices, including collaborative arrangements, site-based decision-making, teacher empowerment, community-building, and inquiry group problem solving ascribed to female leaders (Brown & Irby, 1995).

The exclusionary leadership theories currently prevalent in preparation programs should be enhanced with an additional theory inclusive of female perspectives and practices (Brown & Irby, 1994). The field of educational leadership will be negatively impacted, according to Brown and Irby (1995), if the female point of view continues to be ignored in theory. The result will be leadership theory that guides action, yet: (a) is not reflective of currently advocated leadership practice, (b) does not consider the concerns, needs, and realities of females, and (c) fails to prepare males or females to create or work effectively in inclusive systems. The SLT, inclusive of the female leadership perspective and practices, must be introduced into the discipline of educational leadership in order to provide gender balance in the body of leadership theory currently taught in preparation programs.

### **Contribution 3: Create a Framework for Analyzing Interactions and Dynamic Tensions Within the Context of Leadership**

The Synergistic Leadership Theory calls attention to a number of interconnected behaviors, beliefs, values, structures, and forces that impact the leader, the people within the organization, and the structure of the organization. Such a framework enables leaders to analyze and describe particular interactions that may account for tension, conflict, or harmony at specific points in time or over time. If an analysis of all factors is conducted and tension is found to exist between even two of the factors, it is highly probable that, unless purposeful interventions are put in place, the effectiveness of the leader or the organization, itself, will be diminished.

In analyzing the interactions of the four factors within the leadership context, a leader may use the SLT or the Organizational Leadership and Effectiveness Inventory (OLEI). The OLEI is an instrument specifically designed to assess each of the factors of the SLT (Irby, Brown, & Duffy, 1999; Irby, Brown, Duffy, & Holtkamp, 2001). The inventory is divided into four sections: leadership behaviors (55 items), external forces (17 items), organizational structure (12 items), beliefs, attitudes and values (12 items). Participants record their responses on a Likert-type scale ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement.

Two national studies have served to validate, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the SLT and the OLEI. In her study, Trautman (2000) reported that:

1. Male and female leaders confirmed that all four factors of the Synergistic Leadership Theory interact in relevant and meaningful ways.
2. The leadership behavior factor of the Synergistic Leadership Theory, as specified in the OLEI, acknowledged a range of male and female leadership behaviors, suggesting validity and meaning for both males and females.
3. Female leaders at different levels found the theory to be relevant. Additionally, female leaders validated the assumption of the Synergistic Leadership Theory that females at different levels of management may perceive the interactions among the factors of the Synergistic Leadership Theory to vary.
4. The Synergistic Leadership Theory provided inclusive female leadership behaviors drawn from research and the female perspective.
5. Where previously excluded from theory development and validation, females were acknowledged in the SLT's development and validation as "contributors" to leadership theory and "knowers or agents" of knowledge (Trautman, 2000, p. 153-154).

Additionally, Holtkamp (2001) determined:

1. The OLEI aligned with the four factors of the SLT.
2. Responses from the OLEI were independent of gender, ethnicity, management level, and years of experience.
3. Based on the first and second findings, the researcher suggested the SLT was responsive to gender, ethnicity, management level, and years of experience.
4. The OLEI, in conjunction with the SLT, was viable for use by administrators in assessing strengths and weaknesses of the organization and in assessing the leaders within the organization.

Holtkamp (2001) suggested that if problems existed within the organization, the OLEI could be administered to determine if leadership behaviors aligned with the organizational structure, the external forces, and with values, attitudes, and beliefs. Additionally, the OLEI could be used by individuals to determine their "fit" within an organization.

### **The Synergistic Leadership Theory as a Framework for Analysis**

The Synergistic Leadership Theory, used as a framework for analysis of the following narrative vignettes of four female leaders, contextualizes leadership and illuminates the multiple realities inherent in each situation.

#### **Narrative Vignette #1: Carla**

Carla, as reported by Reese and Czaja (1998), had been superintendent in a minority majority school district for eight years. Gang activity was increasing. When parents and community became vocal in expressing their fears for the

safety of the children and in insisting that all gang activity be eliminated, Carla determined an urgent need for communication among all stakeholders. Recognizing the need to provide information, to seek input, and to find out who had particular concerns and questions, she immediately called a community meeting. When a potentially volatile situation arose at the beginning of the meeting, she read the needs of the group and responded positively. After the community meeting, Carla continued to involve all stakeholders. She aligned the police, community, business, school officials and parents in the development of an action plan to address the problem—bonding the various groups through the process. Carla was able to diffuse a negative situation and to redirect the energy of all constituent groups at the same enemy; she garnered praise for her actions.

**Analysis of Carla's vignette.** Carla's actions demonstrated her recognition of the holistic and contextualized nature of leadership. By reading the *external forces*, anticipating actions, and redirecting constituents' energy, she built a shared vision that connected all people and aligned beliefs, attitudes, and values of the board, the community, and the organization with her own. The SLT is an appropriate framework for analyzing this vignette. Aware of the *beliefs, attitudes, and values* of the community, Carla purposefully aligned her *leadership behavior*, emphasizing communication, community and consensus building, inclusiveness, and networking. She was attuned to *external forces*—the perceptions and expectations of the community, the board, and her colleagues. Carla comprehended the synergistic nature of her environment and the importance of taking into account the impact her decisions would have on the organization and external forces. Aligning all four factors, Carla was able to avert a crisis in the community and to maintain a positive perception of her own leadership.

### **Narrative Vignette #2: Carol**

Carol was superintendent in a small school district experiencing increasing enrollment, low academic ratings, and high teacher turnover (Czaja, 1998). Teacher pay was low; there was no central office support staff for the superintendent and district, and the superintendent was expected to fill the roles of curriculum director, program evaluator, business manager, and personnel director. Although the board expected higher academic ratings, they did not support a tax increase. Further, the new board president was president of the anti-tax league. Despite the board's lack of support, Carol remained convinced that she was correct, and she continued to advocate the tax raise. As tensions and opposition to the tax increase mounted, altercations with the board became more and more frequent. Finally, the board attacked Carol in an executive session that became so heated that community members heard loud and angry voices through a folding wall partition. Shortly thereafter, the board brought legal charges against Carol, accusing her of mismanagement, misappropriation of funds, and over-expenditure on administrative costs.

**Analysis of Carol's vignette.** This vignette vividly demonstrates that disharmony among any of the four factors of the SLT can create conflict

and subsequent negative perceptions of the leader. The three factors obviously out of alignment in Carol's vignette include (a) *beliefs, attitudes, and values*, (b) *leadership behaviors*, and (c) *external forces*.

Carol's belief that there was no way to improve student achievement without a tax increase that would retain good teachers, provide professional development, and hire support staff was in direct conflict with the beliefs and values of the board, the critical *external factor* in this vignette. Her failure to acknowledge and positively act on the disharmony among the factors exacerbated tensions between the board and the superintendent. Carol was unable to analyze and describe particular interactions of the four factors that may have accounted for tension, conflict, or disharmony and for her perceived ineffectiveness as a leader. In the end, she was devastated by the situation and took her own life.

### **Narrative Vignette #3: Nancy**

Nancy served as superintendent of a rapidly growing district in a community with sharp socioeconomic and racial divisions (Reese & Czaja, 1998). Reflective of those rifts, two discrimination lawsuits had been filed against the district. When Nancy decided to initiate a cooperative effort with area superintendents to build an alternative school in her district, many parents began to attack not only the plan for the alternative school, but also some of the previously agreed-upon curriculum plans, including outcome-based education and the National Reading Initiative with computers. The goal of the disgruntled group was to bring a halt to all new initiatives. One vocal, wealthy parent began a letter-writing campaign to the local paper. Even the churches and the Eagle Forum became involved in the attack. Because Nancy had failed to establish a participatory environment that could foster change, she was unable to garner support for her decisions. As negativity mounted in the community toward Nancy's initiatives, the board began to perceive her as unsuccessful, and, ultimately, Nancy was relieved of her duties as superintendent.

***Analysis of Nancy's vignette.*** Clearly factors of the SLT were not aligned in this vignette. Nancy failing to recognize the importance of external forces, did not take into account the special interest groups and their alliance with the board; nor, was she attentive to the conservative nature of the *beliefs and values* of a very vocal segment of the community. Despite the fact that the community was already divided, she did not anticipate potential problems related to her decision and adamantly pushed forward her agenda.

Had Nancy determined the specific tension or lack of harmony among the factors of the SLT, she would have been better positioned to alter the course of events by: (a) recognizing and acknowledging the power of the *external forces*, (b) attempting to modify her own *leadership behaviors*, and/or (c) realigning *personal values and belief* structures to that of the external forces.

If she been more aware of the context of her leadership, Nancy could have determined that she simply did not "fit" in that community or that the

challenge related to needed changes would have been too great. In that case, exiting the position might have been the best decision for her. Had she analyzed the situation using the SLT, she, as opposed to the board, could have controlled the outcome.

#### **Narrative Vignette #4: Dr. Osburn**

Dr. Osburn, high school principal of New View, was known as a collaborative leader who used participative decision making to build coalitions and who promoted empowerment (Brunner, 2000). Board members in New View School District were initiating a search for a new superintendent who could build the public's confidence in the schools in order to gain community approval of a bond to finance a new high school. The superintendent search committee did not believe that including a female as a superintendent nominee would be controversial, even though New View had never had a female superintendent, and there were only two female superintendents in the entire state.

As a principal, Dr. Osburn had developed strong lines of communication throughout her school and the community. She was known as a listener who actively sought the input of the teachers and others and who "got the best out of people." Perceived as a collaborator, she was strongly supported by the community, her campus, and the entire district.

The New View superintendency appeared to be the perfect job for Dr. Osburn. The board's expectations of leadership were aligned with her own *leadership behaviors*; she and the board *shared the same values and the same vision* of how to attain the District's goals; and the community was open to the notion of a female superintendent. Dr. Osburn was offered and accepted the position.

***Analysis of Dr. Osburn's vignette.*** The SLT offers the individual a model for analyzing her own *leadership behaviors*, her *own beliefs, values, and attitudes*, as well as those held by others in the organization and the community, and the perspective *organizational structure* and *external forces*. Such an analysis assists in determining the potential alignment of the four factors of the SLT. Congruency among the four factors would indicate success or a "fit" for a particular position. The analysis of Dr. Osburn's situation indicates that all four factors of the SLT—Leadership Behaviors, External Forces, Organizational Structure, and Attitudes, Beliefs, and Values—are aligned; thus, it is logical to conclude that Dr. Osburn will be successful as superintendent of New View and will be able to maximize the organization's success.

### **Concluding Comments**

In the introductory vignette, Susan focused solely on her own leadership behaviors, overlooking other pertinent information and failing to consider the broader context. The use of the SLT in analyzing the four other vignettes illustrates its practical application for female leaders in a variety of educational

contexts and allows for consideration of many tensions and dynamics (the multiple realities) interacting to create the perception of the “ineffective” or “effective” leader. Thus, the SLT provides a needed framework for taking a macro-perspective of the interactions among beliefs, external forces, leadership behaviors, and organizations. Such perspectives are critical in understanding the context of leadership and the impact of multiple realities on leadership success.

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