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WOMEN SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS: PERCEPTIONS OF BEST PRACTICES FOR LEADERSHIP

Susan Katz

In U.S. public schools, a limited number of women have attained the position of superintendent. Consequently, there has been limited research focusing on understanding the position from a woman's perspective. The purpose of this study was to add to the body of literature focusing on women's ideas and beliefs about leading schools.

A survey that measured perceived leadership practices and demographics was sent to women public school superintendents practicing in four Midwestern states during the academic year, 2000-2001. In addition to the survey, face-to-face interviews were conducted with nine respondents. The study's framework was based on a model of leadership developed by Kouzes and Posner (1995) and incorporated into The Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) they developed.

The research questions sought the degree of difference in how the women superintendents perceived their leadership practices based on age, years of administrative experience, and size and structure of their districts. Data analysis revealed differences in perceived leadership practices according to size of school district. The results also revealed that women had ways to talk about how they have succeeded in their roles as superintendents. Women in this study viewed relational leadership as a key component of their leadership style. Findings indicated that the women superintendents believed good hiring practices and specific qualities of a leader were essential elements of effective leadership.

Introduction

Since the creation of the public school superintendency in the United States in the mid-1800s, few women have held this public leadership position. Most

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studies before 1998 reported that males constituted more than 90% of all superintendent positions. In 2002, women comprised about 13% of the nation's school superintendents (Brunner, Grogan, & Prince, 2003).

The question of why there are so few women in the superintendency becomes puzzling when one considers three situations regarding the low incidence of women in the superintendency. One situation has to do with the pathway to the position of superintendent. Glass (1992) found that a typical pathway for women to the superintendency is from the position of teacher, to principal, to central office position, to superintendent. Women comprise 70% of all teachers (Bell & Chase, 1993). Thus one would expect more women superintendents.

The second situation has to do with increased numbers of women in graduate programs of educational administration. The research indicates that, although men historically have dominated the field of educational administration, female enrollment in graduate programs in educational administration has increased. In school administration programs, the percentage of female students now outnumbers males. A 1997 survey of member institutions in the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) showed that 74% of certification programs in institutions responding to the survey had from 51% to 72% women (Logan, 1998). Grogan (1996) pointed out that women have entered educational programs in increasing numbers since the 1970s.

The third situation exists because increasing numbers of women are moving into more central office positions and school principalships. Hodgkinson and Montenegro (1999) found that women occupied 33% of the positions of assistant, associate, deputy, or area superintendents. Representation of women in central office administration was estimated at 57%. In the principalship, women represent 20% of secondary school principals and 53% of elementary school principals (Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999).

Barriers exist for women entering the superintendency. Brunner (1998b) reported that a lack of mentoring contributed to a lower number of women entering the superintendency. Most studies approach leadership from a male perspective (Brunner, 1998a, Shakeshaft, 1989; Wesson & Grady, 1994).

Shakeshaft (1989) explained that educational theories developed from a male-centered, or andocentric framework, are a result of imbalanced and inaccurate research and are not representative of the female paradigm. Campbell (1996) suggested that “narrow definitions of leadership based on male models or theories need to be expanded to include women’s values, beliefs, and experiences” (p. 9).

Purpose of the Study

A greater number of studies exploring how women school superintendents perceive themselves as leaders of their school districts will assist women who aspire to the superintendency to learn about leadership practices. Women aspiring to the superintendency want to understand the approaches to everyday problems inherent in the superintendency from a female perspective. The purpose of this study was two-fold: (a) to explore women’s work lives as superintendents through an investigation of their leadership practices, and (b) to give voice to women. Kouzes and Posner (1995), who defined leadership as “the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations” (p. 30), established five leadership practices and incorporated them into the Leadership Practices Inventory-Self (LPI-Self). The LPI was used in this study to measure the perceptions women superintendents held about their leadership practices. The five practices are (a) challenging the process, (b) inspiring a shared vision, (c) enabling others to act, (d) modeling the way, and (e) encouraging the heart. The study was based on the following questions:

1. Are there differences in how women superintendents perceive their leadership practices based on age, years of administrative experience, and size and structure of their districts?
2. How do women superintendents describe effective leadership practices?
3. How do women describe their enactment of leadership practices?

Methods

Participants

All female public school superintendents whose names appeared on superintendent lists in 2000-2001 in Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan were asked to complete the LPI-Self survey and a demographic

questionnaire. The questionnaire addressed teaching and administrative experience, amount of time spent seeking the superintendency, degrees held, years in present position, population of the school district, and questions regarding central office administrators and school buildings.

Selection of Sample

The primary factor for selection of interview participants was size of school district and then, secondarily, the interview participants were chosen for age differences and years of experience as a superintendent.

Fourteen women superintendents had left their positions, which reduced the population from 210 to 196 women superintendents in the four states. Of that population, 76% (n = 148) returned usable surveys.

Design of the Study

The design was both quantitative and qualitative. Years of administrative experience were defined as years of experience as a superintendent. Size of school district referred to student population. All 148 cases had student populations that fell within three categories: large districts of 10,000 to 29,999 students, mid-size districts of 2,500 to 9,999 students, and small districts of less than 2,500 students. Structure of the district was defined as the ratio of the number of central office staff to the number of school buildings in the district.

In-depth interviews were conducted with nine women superintendents from the four states of Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan. The purposes of the interviews were: (a) to gain a better understanding of the women superintendents' responses on the LPI, an inventory that assesses the self-perceptions of leadership practices; (b) to encourage descriptions of effective leadership practices; and (c) to explain how they enacted those practices.

Findings

Sixty-five percent (n = 96) of the participants were between the ages of 50 and 56. The mean age of the participants was 52 years with a range in age of 38 to 65 years. Almost 95% of the participants indicated that they were European-American. Eighty-five percent reported that they were married. The professional data are displayed in Table 1. Professionally, 66% of the respondents held earned doctorates, 50% indicated that it took less than one year to obtain a superintendency after gaining certification. Additional professional data are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Data

Variables	<u>N</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	Minimum	Maximum
Age	148	51.99	4.62	38.00	65.00
Age at first superintendency	148	45.70	5.67	30.00	59.00
# years in present position	148	5.40	3.76	1.00	20.00
# years teaching prior to administration	147	10.58	4.97	0.00	29.00
# administrative positions before superintendency	148	2.90	2.43	0.00	8.00
# superintendent jobs applied for before 1st job	148	1.47	2.48	0.00	15.00
# school buildings	148	6.26	8.71	1.00	78.00
# building administrators	148	9.65	12.11	1.00	78.00
# central office staff	148	5.23	5.68	1.00	50.00
structure of district—ratio of # central office staff/# buildings	148	1.17	0.75	0.22	4.00

Participants

Nine women superintendents participated in the interviews. Two were superintendents of large school districts ranging in student population from 19,500 to 23,000; two were from mid-size districts ranging in student population from 5,600 to 6,700; and five were superintendents of small school districts ranging in student population from 100 students to 2,100 students. The mean age of the women was 51 years with a range of 42 to 62 years. Three of the women held masters degrees and six held doctorates. The number of administrative positions the participants held prior to obtaining a superintendency ranged from 0 to 5 positions with a mean of three positions.

Years of experience in the superintendency ranged from 1 to 20 years with a mean of 7 years. Time spent seeking a superintendency after gaining certification ranged from 0 to 5 years.

Kouzes and Posner (1995) reported that of the five leadership practices on the Leadership Practices Inventory, inspiring a shared vision is the practice frequently applied the least and the one most uncomfortable to implement. Confirming their findings, women superintendents in this study perceived themselves to be using the five leadership practices in the following order: enabling others to act, modeling the way, challenging the process, encouraging the heart, and inspiring a shared vision.

Individual Profiles

A profile of each of the nine interview participants presented in the next section establishes the women's individuality. Names are pseudonyms to protect identities. In response to one interview question, I asked participants to provide perceptions of leadership in different size districts. Responses contribute to the "portraits" of the women.

The following sections present the women superintendents according to the size of the district they lead: small, medium, and large districts. The first section profiles five women leading small districts.

Profiles of Superintendents Leading Small Districts

Laura. Laura was 49 years of age, European-American, and married. She had a Ph.D., taught 11 years before working in administration, and had held four administrative positions before becoming a superintendent. Laura required one year to acquire a superintendency after receiving certification. This superintendency was Laura's first; and she was in her third year as superintendent of a small, rural district consisting of one building housing grades K-8 with 98 students. On the LPI-Self, Laura used "encouraging the heart," and Laura was the only interviewee who perceived herself in this way. This practice deals with recognizing people when their work is well done and celebrating accomplishments as a team.

Laura described herself as the superintendent, principal, curriculum director, transportation director, and business manager. She had worked as a central office administrator in a large district of more than 2,000 students, but this position in a very small district contributed to her sense of community.

Laura expressed positive feelings for her position in a small district, yet she noted problems.

I think in a small district the disadvantage is that you have to be everything and so you never feel like you do one thing particularly well. And that's problematic for me. In a small district there are so many hats to wear. [Nevertheless] I don't have hours and I don't have contractual restraints. I can say, "Why don't we go for pizza and get back together at 7:00 tonight to work on math?" and whoever can come, comes. And nobody's going to be harping at me. It's a luxury. We're all in it together.

Ruth. Ruth was 42, European-American, and single. She had taught school for six years prior to receiving her Ph.D. and accepting her first administrative position as superintendent at age 30, one year after she received the certification. Ruth's LPI assessment revealed that she perceived herself as using the leadership practice of "enabling others to act," which involves building trust and offering support as followers develop competence.

Speaking of her leadership in a small school district of 400 students, Ruth said

I want to be hands on. I don't want to sit at a desk; I want to be out with the children. When I first started this job, people would say, "Don't you miss teaching?" and I would say that I teach every day; I'm with the children and no, I don't miss teaching.

Ruth indicated that she considered age a barrier. She became a superintendent at age 30 (relatively young for a superintendent) and had experienced age discrimination from parents and community more than teachers. She did not, however, experience gender discrimination.

Vivian. Vivian, 62, was European-American and married. She had a masters degree and had been a superintendent of a district consisting of one building housing 700 students in grades K-8 for 20 years. Vivian taught for 10 years and was a principal, curriculum director, and administrative assistant in the same district. She gained the superintendency in less than one year after earning certification. On the LPI-Self, Vivian perceived herself to use the leadership practice "modeling the way," which involves setting the example consistent with the belief in shared values.

Vivian, the oldest woman in the sample, was the one superintendent who had been at her position the most years. Vivian talked about her age as a possible barrier to continued success. She stated that she still "clings to the old principles that I think are good." She was adamant when she talked about her strong feelings of leadership. She reported that she told her staff that she

is in charge and if “they don’t like what she does, they need to do something about it.” Vivian questioned her strong stance on issues.

I’ve told the board the same thing because I feel so strongly about some of those principles, and sometimes, I question myself and say, “Are you carrying that a little too far?” So it might be my own self-evaluation that could be a barrier at this time and my age.

Vivian also commented on the sense of community created in a small district. When Vivian first started teaching in the district, the student population was 295 students.

Even at 300 and at 400 I knew every student by their first name. I don’t anymore. I feel sorry for those superintendents who are isolated from the children because it is the children who make this job worthwhile. You know that whenever things look bad and when everything looks sort of gloomy, I just need to walk over to the kindergarten room and I feel rejuvenated. I don’t want to be isolated from children and I do not want to be isolated from staff . . . I wind up doing my board work at night, which can be very taxing and it builds up. We just had two days off and I spent those entire days in this office just trying to clear my desk, believe it or not. So I hear that too.

Joan. Joan was 57, European-American, and married. She had a Ph.D. and had taught for six years before serving in principal positions in four different buildings. She was in the first year of her first superintendency. Joan’s office was located at one end of the elementary school in a district that has two schools serving students in grades K-6 and 7-12. Student population was 964 students. On the LPI-Self, Joan perceived herself as using “enabling others to act” as the primary leadership practice.

After the interview, Joan drove me around the district and showed the new addition that was under construction at the high school. She talked about enjoying her job.

I really enjoy it and wish I had done it sooner. I really do. I notice there’s a good support base among superintendents for each other. It’s a position where you can influence others. I just thoroughly love it. Working with the community and working with the board; I’ve really enjoyed [both].

Before Joan came to the superintendency, she was a high school principal. Joan reported that she can effect more change as a superintendent. “The places that you can effect change are the places that I enjoy. I

thoroughly enjoyed working with the budget this year because it is the way that you [are able to] provide for programs.”

Joan said there were differences in leading large vs. small districts.

One of the things that is very, very true in a situation with smaller numbers is that you pretty much do everything. You just are involved with it all. I like that kind of thing but it is very demanding and it does keep you away sometimes from that modeling and that shared vision and so forth and that's interesting because those are two things that I would say are very important. And I think probably the vision that comes out that's very important for me is that I set those as priorities instead of just the day-to-day management.

Marilyn. Marilyn was 48, European-American, married and held a masters degree. She noted that she was “all but dissertation.” Marilyn had taught for five years and had held several administrative positions before applying for a superintendency. She indicated that it took less than a year to obtain her position after earning certification. Marilyn has held her current position for four years.

Marilyn's primary leadership practice on the LPI-Self was “enabling others to act.” Marilyn spoke about leadership in a small district.

You know the process of networking is the same. When I was the number two person in a district of 8,600 students, we had a staff of about 500 or so. Their needs were not a lot different than they are in a small district. People want to feel valued, they want to feel appreciated, they want to be heard and they want to be supported, especially as they come to grips with changes that they need to make. You know as adults, especially more mature adults, they're used to looking competent.

Marilyn was enjoying her position as superintendent:

I would absolutely pursue this career path again. I love it. It's got its down moments but you have to keep a balance in your life. That's real key to it. You need that balance to recover and to have perspective. Perspective is critically important when you're looking from a bird's eye view at the whole dynamics of your district, trying to respond well to everything that's going on.

The next section profiles two women superintendents leading mid-size school districts.

Profiles of Superintendents Leading Mid-Size Districts

Maxine. The central office for this district was in a separate building located near the downtown. The student population consists of 5,600 students in grades K-12 in 13 school buildings. Maxine, at 53, had been in her position for 6 years. It was her first superintendency. She was European-American, married, and held a masters degree. She had taught for 15 years before serving in several school administrative positions, including principal, curriculum director, and assistant superintendent. It took Maxine less than a year to achieve a superintendency after earning certification. According to the LPI-Self, Maxine perceived herself to be using “inspiring a shared vision” as her preferred leadership practice. Inspiring a shared vision involves enlisting followers to carry out the work of the organization. She solidified several groups in the district who had been at odds with each other in the past. Inspiring a shared vision served Maxine well as she fostered collaboration in the district.

Maxine related her interview policy.

I usually don't grant interviews. But I do them on women's topics because I think that for those of us who are in leadership it may help other women determine what characteristics they have that might be a match for them and so that's one of the reasons I was willing to do it.

Maxine provided a description of the district.

We have a large Latino population. We're diverse in terms of socio-economic status. I was hired to bring a dysfunctional system together. There were several civil rights suits on the table. The board and the teachers were in contentious negotiations. I came from a very secure assistant superintendency that paid more than this job. I was secure there; I had 20 some years in the system. I came here to a system that everybody would have said was dysfunctional and was on its third superintendent in seven years. I guess that was a risk. I knew I had to move real fast because they hired me to fix things and they forget real fast what they want to fix.

Barb. Barb's office was located in an old school building that housed the central office for the school district as well as an early childhood center. The district had 6,700 students in grades K-12 housed in 16 school buildings with 22 administrators. Barb was 49, European-American, married, and had a Ph.D. She had taught 10 years before obtaining administrative positions as principal, curriculum director, and assistant superintendent. On the LPI-Self, Barb perceived herself as “enabling others to act.” Barb's superintendency was her second, and she had been in her position for three years. She indicated that she had applied for six different superintendent positions, and

it took four years to gain her first superintendency after earning the certification.

The community was one of the poorest in the state and half of the children were on free and reduced lunch. She described her staff as warm-hearted. She expressed a belief that adults influence students' achievement.

The new approach to student achievement is that the only thing that is going to happen is the change in adults. The parents are not keeping the good ones at home and sending the bad ones. The only reform that is going to happen is with us and meaning me too.

Barb said that her greatest accomplishment was breaking down barriers that were erected in the district.

This district has an image problem. This city is a depressed area. This district and one other [in the state] are probably the two most property poor districts. Well, that isn't good for self-esteem. Our whole community suffers this esteem problem. I had applied to be superintendent here before and someone else was chosen.

When the position became vacant again, Barb reapplied.

I wanted to come back to some place that I felt I could do some things. This district needed someone who values them. I felt that if we can make a difference in this town, it can be done anywhere. If I can be part of mobilizing this district to overcome that poverty barrier and make the difference for these children, then that will be my most significant contribution.

The next section profiles two women leading two large school districts.

Profiles of Superintendents Leading Large Districts

Martha. Martha, an African-American, was married, and held a Ph.D. She was in her first superintendency at age 43 and had been in the position for three years. She taught for 3 years and held administrative positions for 13 years prior to taking a superintendency. On the LPI-Self Martha perceived herself as using the leadership practice "modeling the way."

Martha applied for two positions before acquiring her current superintendency in less than a year after earning certification. As a teacher she was a leader in her building, and her principal encouraged her to pursue educational administration. She was one of the youngest superintendents in the study and "enjoyed a pretty healthy successful leadership career." She

encouraged people she thought “possessed the qualities of a good leader to move into the career path.”

The school district had a student population of approximately 19,500 students in grades K-12 housed in 45 buildings with 59 building administrators. Her central office staff consisted of three assistant superintendents, each with responsibilities for multiple directors, coordinators, supervisors, and facilitators.

Martha suggested that the processes of leadership were the same in leading small, medium, or large districts. “You have got to build consensus for what you want to do and you’ve got to engender the support of the people that you work with no matter what the environment.” Martha indicated that work in a large district encouraged her to be “intimately involved in the day-to-day operations of the school district.”

I said to a principal applicant yesterday that one of the things that I regret most about being in a district this size is that I cannot hand pick principals. I have to rely on the recommendations of our people. I can pick a principal. I am good at that. And because I don’t have the opportunity to get out in the schools and interface with and talk to the teachers about principal candidates, I’m not able to hand pick them. That would be something you could do in a smaller district vs. a larger district. Because I view the principalship to be the most important position in the school district, that’s a little frustrating.

Geri. Geri was 54, European-American, married and held a Ph.D. She taught five years. She held positions of principal, curriculum director, and assistant superintendent before obtaining a superintendency at age 41. It took five more years to gain her first superintendency after earning certification and after applying for eight positions. She had been in the superintendency for six years. The LPI-Self revealed her preference for “modeling the way.”

The interview was conducted in Geri’s office in a new building housing 16 central office staff and an early childhood center. The building, close to one of the elementary schools, was located on an expanse of land in the center of a school district that served three communities. The district was a fast growing suburb of a major metropolitan area. Geri commented on the growth,

This district is change personified. We grew 1,500 to 2,000 students in a year in the past 5 years. And with that has come the opening of 14 schools since I’ve been here. We are 28 buildings now. In this district we hired 380 people last year and we hired 340 some the year before. . . .

The district employed 47 building administrators in 28 buildings housing 23,000 students in grades K-12.

Geri expressed strong feelings on the differences in leading large vs. small districts.

I was used to a superintendent [of a smaller district] knowing absolutely every new teacher that came into the district. I could go up, call you by name and tell you where you were teaching. You can't do that here. You just begin to realize that when you are hiring 300+ people in a year it's not going to happen. And so it is very difficult. You have to figure out what you can insert yourself into and what you let those assistant superintendents and those building principals deal with.

Interview Data Analysis

I used an interview guide consisting of 18 questions of which many were modeled after Kouzes and Posner's (1987) qualitative study of leaders "personal best." Kouzes and Posner asked leaders to describe their personal best times while leading organizations. Their analysis revealed themes that eventually developed into the five leadership practices incorporated into the LPI-Self (Kouzes & Posner, 1997): (a) challenging the process; (b) inspiring a shared vision; (c) enabling others to act; (d) modeling the way; and (e) encouraging the heart. Each leadership practice has key behaviors associated with it. In the next section each of these key behaviors is described and accompanied by interview data from the interviewees in the study.

Challenging the Process

The two key behaviors that characterize leaders who challenge the process include searching for opportunities and experimenting and taking risks (Kouzes & Posner, 1995). Geri, involved in a district that had experienced tremendous growth and had opened 14 buildings in the six years of her superintendency, realized that change was a way of life in her district and knew she needed to help her administrators deal with the kind of change that comes with opening new buildings, reconstituting staff from other buildings, and hiring new staff members.

One of the things with that change, as a superintendent [is that] I have to decide how much change can we deal with and be sane. Because if you try too many different things you have people too stressed. In this district we hired 380 people last year and we hired 340 some [people] the year before

so those are all new to us. When you have that kind of newness there's enough issues of just trying to get culture in the building down so you don't want to do more.

Marilyn expressed a similar idea about being careful not to push her staff too hard when effecting change.

You have to have a good bead on what's happening with people so that you know how hard and fast to push them on some institutional, organizational change that needs to take place. There's only so much [people at] different levels can handle. I'm very thoughtful when we're trying to make changes in terms of how much change can they make and how do we facilitate it. Risk is something that people will do if they feel safe and as the leader of the organization I find that people need to be reassured often that they're safe.

Barb described changing the status quo and repeatedly asked two questions to challenge her staff: "What is your greatest fear and what is the worst that can happen?" This procedure helped her staff understand how benefits outweigh risks. "It's that comfort level; [I need] to shake them out of their comfort level." She wanted educators to become more reflective about the efficacy of educational programs.

One of the things we don't do well in education is the reflective part where we actually sit down and say, "Why didn't this work?" I think that one of the best ways to change the status quo is to give time for that reflection and have people actually intellectualize what happened.

When Barb talked about change, she wanted everyone to understand her. She tried to create a common language so that everyone had an understanding of the framework of the change initiative. "And the more fun and humor you can put into it, the better it is." She related that use of books such as *Who Moved My Cheese* helped.

Martha had a weekly cabinet meeting to share information in areas that needed improvement.

I call it push people out of their comfort zone. We identify where we think the risk may be in making a decision to do things differently and determine whether the risk is low or high and whether we are willing to do it. We decide as a cabinet, as a team whether or not we make those kinds of changes.

Kouzes and Posner (1995) reported that part of "challenging the process" grows from the leader's ability to take risks. Several respondents reported

that the biggest risks came from their efforts to reorganize or make major changes in their districts. Martha said that her greatest risk created an opportunity to rebuild her organization.

The reorganization called for administrators to be notified that their contracts would not be renewed until they met with me. And through our dialogue we had to determine whether or not their philosophy and my philosophy as well as the vision of the district were a good match. That allowed me the opportunity to rebuild the staff based upon what I thought was in the best interest of the district.

Maxine reshaped her system in a month by removing an assistant superintendent of personnel and hiring a facilitator for multicultural education "in a community that didn't want to even deal with the term 'multicultural.'" Maxine told me that because of this change, she got hate letters. "Because there are people who still think the word 'multicultural' is a dirty word."

Marilyn knew there were changes that needed to be made in her district when she was initially hired. But she had difficulty instigating change due to a difficult beginning with the union. Marilyn was the first woman superintendent hired by the district, and reported gender discrimination played a role in her initial problems with the union president.

I think primarily because there was an old boys' network here, there was a lot of posturing with me. It would have been the safe thing to do to let things just ride and not try to make changes in the district.

She had to reassure her administrative team that what she needed was "time to connect with people out in the trenches and that it was going to be just fine."

For Joan and Vivian, superintendents in small districts, risk-taking meant being sensitive to what the risks were and preventing the fallout that might occur. Joan said that it was important to determine what are "strongly held beliefs and practices, especially when you are in a new situation" before taking on what might be a big risk. Vivian indicated she was a "strong believer in preventative medicine for everything." Women in small districts talked about assessing the needs before taking on the risk to change the status quo and making an effort to solve any problems the risk might present before they occurred. All of the women in small districts talked about approaching change slowly and methodically—one woman was happy that her staff implemented at least one big change although she would have preferred

many more. She felt good about the work her staff had done prior to implementing the change.

Superintendents in large and mid-size districts spoke of strategies they used to challenge the system, moving people out of their comfort level to learn about and implement new programs that had appeal and efficacy for all students. They took risks such as reorganizing the school district in the first year of employment, reapplying for a superintendency in one of the two poorest districts in the state to make a difference, and hiring a multicultural facilitator in a district that resisted diversity. Three of the four women in large and mid-size districts were hired to specifically reorganize their districts.

These superintendents were cautious in effecting change, preferring to build relationships first, helping the school community to get to know them and what they were about, and assuring staff that they were in a protective environment before they were willing to take the risks needed to change educational practices and programs.

Inspiring a Shared Vision

Leaders who inspire a shared vision use the two main behaviors of “envisioning the future” and “enlisting others” to carry on the work of the organization (Kouzes & Posner, 1995). All of the superintendents answered a direct question about vision. The question was asked in two parts: “Do you have a vision for your school district?” and “How do you enlist others in sharing your vision?” Several respondents solicited input from stakeholders to craft the vision in their respective school districts. In terms of sharing the vision and keeping it in the forefront of all the stakeholders, Maxine said, “When the vision is created synergistically, you get a greater buy in and people have to believe that they can have a part in the positive outcomes towards that.” She noted that she continued to foster the “buy in” of the vision by giving staff credit for what they do “out there in the buildings.”

Martha related her thoughts about the role of the school district in providing for the community to grow and thrive. Before working to solidify the vision for her district she and her staff went to the community to ask about issues important to the school district. As a result, they built a vision “that was supported by anywhere from 25 to 50 individuals representing all segments in the community.” Joan also enlisted stakeholders to craft the vision. “One of the first things I did when I came was to sit down and meet with all of our employees” to find out what was good about the two school buildings in the district, what was positive about working there, and what meaning did working in the district have for them. She shared findings with

the board in what she called her “qualitative study.” “In terms of taking a look at what our strengths were and what our desires were, we formulated a vision statement, formulated the mission and goals for the corporation and that’s been kind of the guideline for us.” This superintendent made sure that the vision and mission statements were “out there in the forefront.” Her weekly memo to staff had

the mission statement . . . at the beginning of that memo every time and we have it there at board meetings. And we have had other retreats and we’ve always talked about how we are doing in terms of that.

Maxine enlisted her administrators to share in the vision and the mission in interesting ways. Foremost she referenced vision “all the time.”

What feels good to me is that I now hear it. What just amazed my administrators is that when they first came in to a meeting, I used to test them on things. We met on a monthly basis because I needed them to hear from me where I thought we needed to go. I used to have them come in and I basically said everybody stand up, form circles and I want you to tell the person across from you what the three focus areas are.

One small district superintendent’s vision was that “we continue to be a school district where kids learn.” She spoke of programmatic issues as impacting her vision. “When I came to the district, there weren’t many computers, veteran staff members had not been evaluated, and staff members had not been to a workshop outside the district in 20 years.” A vision was needed “right off the top that what we want to be about is improving ourselves as instructional people.” To share the vision, she worked with the school board. “I suppose my tact has been to have some good conversations about what are my observations.” To share her vision with teachers she stated, “We get together once a month on a social basis and have come to appreciate each other as people who are engaged in the profession of teaching.”

Several superintendents spoke about ways to build consensus among staff. One built consensus through a shared decision making model.

Part of my philosophy is that you walk your talk and you feel like all of your people are equally important. We are all leaders in our own unique way and it is our job to foster the leadership in everyone, in each of us. Each one of us in this organization is going to have ownership and control of what’s going on.

Geri, the superintendent whose district had grown by 14 buildings in six years, related what she did to build consensus among her staff:

We do a lot of referendums in this district. There is a value to process and there is a value to allowing some processes to work. As much as you would like to just go tell them what the decision is, you know it wouldn't be a success. You have to be willing for it not to be your decision. The superintendent makes relatively few decisions. It's more making a decision to have a process to make it. Maybe the knowledge is knowing when you need the process.

Martha commented that whatever the size of the district is "the processes of leadership are the same. You have got to build consensus for what you want to do and you've got to engender the support of the people that you work with no matter what the environment." Another built consensus as a result of "getting people to own the system, the people in it, and the vision and mission of the organization," but stated, "I'm not afraid to take a strong stand when I have to."

When Marilyn first came to her position she invited prominent members of the community to talk "around the table." And Marilyn was proud of what she had begun.

One thing led to another and within 18 months we had a rotary club started. Now that rotary club was chartered and there are about 30 members and there are about 40 others who are just friends of rotary and they come together to do various projects and start to improve the community. This winter we are going to have several large community forums where we will invite 100 people to each one to come and talk about what do they like about being out here and what do we need to improve.

Like Marilyn, Joan built consensus for the vision, mission, and goals created for her district by being visible and by seeking input from the community. She toured two major factories and met with business people and city officials in her small town. She wanted to "see what they're thinking about the town and how they see themselves." She worked with the county committee "to see how we fit together with the people in the county and the bicounty district area."

These women shaped and created vision and mission statements for their districts. They knew intuitively that they must build consensus in the community for shared ideas about what people wanted for students educationally. Several women reported unique ways of ensuring that the vision was routinely thought about and talked about among the administrators in the districts.

Enabling Others to Act

The key leadership behaviors that enable others to act are “fostering collaboration by promoting cooperative goals” and “building trust and strengthening others by giving power away,” “providing choice,” “developing competence,” “assigning critical tasks,” and “offering visible support” (Kouzes & Posner, 1995). Geri said that her philosophy of leadership was to “provide the environment and resources, [and] the climate for people to be able to utilize their strengths and abilities.” She related a conversation held with a staff member who told her that “what’s really good about working for you is that you allow us to do our jobs and that you have confidence in us that we will make good decisions.”

After Martha’s first year of reorganization in her school district, she spent time rebuilding “security and confidence in the people who are in the district.” She brought in people who she believed shared her beliefs about how to “operationalize the goals of the district.”

And then I had to assure those who were not new employees that we respected them, that we valued them as employees, and that we would not try to change absolutely everything in the district. Together we would forge the path toward improvement and it’s a work in progress. We make some leeway and then we lose some ground. But by and large I think I can say that people as a whole know and understand that we’re working as a team in the best interests of children.

Marilyn spoke of servant leadership, engaging the staff, and enlisting community members as partners in moving the organization forward. She saw herself as “someone who is here to serve, both internally our staff who are on the front line with kids as well as in the larger community for whom we work and represent.” Marilyn talked to her staff about the importance of teamwork. “Our greatest opportunity to make an impact on kids hinges on how greatly we work together as a team on what we’re trying to accomplish.” She looked for alignment of teaching behaviors—do they match with the curriculum? “I’m always in the district looking for how closely are we aligned in our behaviors. And if we’re not, then I invite conversations about what could we do to change, involving everyone.”

There was a consensus that to enable others to act, they needed to build key relationships with the school board, staff members, and community. Consistent with the literature on women leaders, building relationships is highly important (Blackmore, 1999; Brunner, 1999; Chase, 1995; Dunlap &

Schmuck, 1995, Gardner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000). Marilyn's reference to her philosophy of servant leadership emerged in talking about relationships with the school board.

One of the critical things that a new superintendent needs to do whether they are male or female is to develop and nurture that relationship with their board members first and foremost. A mentor taught me that a role of the superintendent is to serve the board and to serve the community.

One of her objectives was to form a common language regarding key components of a quality district and to do that she talked about building relationships. "We know that relationships are critical, and that all of our relationships should be built on respect and responsibility." For Barb, "relationships are it."

If you have a good relationship with the teacher, with the school, with the neighboring school district, with the county, with the politicians, if you have a good relationship with them then you are going to move. If you don't have good relationships, the conflict stays at the adult level and the organization spins. There's no forward movement.

Maxine spoke of her significant contribution as a superintendent,

Building relationships, getting the community to own the system, internal and external. I have a business and industry forum every month. I meet with pastors every month. I meet with parents every month. So I do a lot of large and small group meetings. One of the members of the negotiation team said to me not too long ago that the most significant contribution I've made to the system was teaching them how to work with the board. And I think that's really a relationship piece.

In describing ways in which they enable "others to act," the women superintendents used words such as "provide," "commit to," and "create" when they talked about providing opportunities for their staffs to do their best work. They stressed relationship building as key to encouraging staff to find the motivation to search for new ways of teaching and to provide new programs for students.

Modeling the Way

The two key leadership behaviors of modeling the way were "setting the example through behavior consistent with belief in shared values" and

“through the planning of small wins that promote consistent progress and build commitment” (Kouzes & Posner, 1995).

All of the women superintendents described themselves as role models for their staffs and students. They spoke of letting others know their ideas about how people should be treated. Joan modeled how she treated others in actions but also in her written communication.

This is school bus safety week. The lead off in my memo was that it is school bus safety week and let's thank the bus drivers for all the good things they do; not only getting you safely to your destination but thank them for all of the extras they do.

If she saw something occurring in the school buildings, Joan told me that she would handle the situation after the incident.

I would never put a teacher or administrator down in front of a parent or student, but later I would talk to them and ask them what they were thinking about and what's the outcome of acting that way and so forth.

Maxine demonstrated her ideas about how people should be treated. “I think I probably model it more than I demand it.” She would relate to someone on occasion, “Your expectation is that I treat you with dignity and respect; mine is that you treat others with dignity and respect.” She indicated that she was not afraid to demonstrate her ideas about proper treatment of students and staff through contract nonrenewal. “Coaches [who don't treat students with respect] find themselves no longer able to coach here. Administrators find themselves no longer able to administrate (sic) here. So I think that sends a pretty clear message.”

Vivian stated that her philosophy of leadership was to be a role model for others. “I've always said that you get from other people what you expect. So if you expect a lot and give a lot, you get a lot.” She treated her staff with respect and received respect in return. Since she has been in her district for 30 years as a teacher, principal, and superintendent for 20 of those years, she said that people understand what she is about. “I've been around for a long time so I've built a reputation so there's no question in their minds. I'm the very strong disciplinarian here and kids know what I expect.” She said that her staff would most likely say that she is very compassionate. “I love my staff and I love my job and I love my kids.”

Geri talked about herself as a role model for female administrators as well as for female students. “My female administrators pay a whole lot of attention to how I do things.” When talking about female high school

students' interests in understanding her role, Geri said that when she was a high school principal there were female students who would come into her office, would ask her personal questions and then would ask the question: "Could I do this?" And Geri said she felt strongly about letting young people know that it was possible as females to lead large schools and large school districts, and she felt she was a good example.

Laura reported "I think that good leaders can do the grunt work as well as the top work. I don't think you draw lines. If it needs to be done, you aren't necessarily better than anyone else." Laura had an interesting perspective about role modeling. She said,

I don't think of myself as better than anyone else. I have a different role, a different job to do but eventually it all has to get done and sometimes you just have to model even the baser pieces of the job.

Laura continued

I model that [fair treatment] all the time. How I talk to the custodian, how I talk to the parents, how I talk to the kids, how I take phone calls. It is all visible and it is all observed and it's commented on and it's noticed.

Barb also spoke of treating people with dignity. She valued her staff for what they bring to the organization, and it was important to her that she demonstrate it. "It's simple things like if someone wants to have a meeting with you, you arrange your schedule so that you can get that meeting in. Instead of two weeks, try to get it scheduled in two days." Barb expected people to be open with her if they disagreed with decisions she made. "And if you screw up and you are bound to do so, then you can be more open because it fits into the idea of treating others with dignity and respect." The idea of "modeling the way" and particularly of being a role model were repeated themes throughout the interviews.

Encouraging the Heart

The two key behaviors associated with encouraging the heart are "recognizing individual contributions to the success of every project" and "celebrating team accomplishments regularly" (Kouzes & Posner, 1995).

Laura was the only interview participant who perceived that she used "encouraging the heart" as her preferred leadership practice on the LPI-Self. More than any of the other superintendents interviewed, she frequently talked about celebrating with her staff. She said that she and her staff members routinely got together to mark special family events but that they also

celebrated their work together as professionals. “As mundane as a box of donuts seems, it goes a long way.”

Several of the superintendents spoke about their practice of encouraging the heart. They stated that celebrating staff accomplishments was something that did not come easily to them. Martha said that her nurturing skills were overshadowed by her attention to detail and her orientation to task completion. She has hired people who could fulfill that nurturing role better than she has been able to do.

In answer to a question about how she might celebrate everyone’s efforts, one superintendent said:

I might sometimes just send somebody an email or a note. I have to admit that that’s probably my greatest weakness. This doesn’t sound real and I don’t mean it to sound anything but a reflection of whom I am. I’ve not needed a lot of rewards. My reward is in doing. That’s how I’ve always been. So I expect people to be happy once they’ve accomplished their goal. I have to continue to re-learn that that’s not how some people function, that they need rewards along the way. So I work at it but one of my assistant superintendents is much better at it than I am and she is willing to share it. And so I have to practice it.

Ruth stated that she “is not a person to give accolades. In fact, I’d rather not receive them myself. I don’t need those rewards, that constant reassuring that you’re OK.” Because of this, Ruth said that rewarding others is hard for her to do. But she did recognize people who need that and that keeps me at least more alert to a special pat on the back that they might need.”

Three women talked about encouraging people, finding ways to value staff, and celebrating accomplishments with their respective staff members. Marilyn said: “[I believe that] people’s spiritual energy devoted to [a cause] happens by either hunkering down together and surviving something awful or it hinges on ways that people have fun and celebrate their accomplishments together. I’m always looking for those opportunities.” At the end of each of their monthly administrative meetings, she had a gratitude jar that she passes around the table. “After we’ve conducted all of our business, the last thing we do is pass the jar around and people will put in a quarter or more and thank somebody specifically around the table for something they did that was helpful.” She then matched the money in the jar and “we spend it celebrating.”

Barb said that she sent handwritten notes to individuals. She preferred this type of quiet, private acknowledgement rather than the larger celebration.

I've always thought that if you take a minute and you just write down something that you want that person to know and that you value what that person has done for the organization, for a colleague, for a child, it goes so far.

Barb said that because she was fiscally conscious, she was not apt to sponsor large-scale celebrations. She used an instrument designed to find people's strengths and needs with her administrative staff. A part of this strength perceiver revealed that some of her staff members "love the hoopla." Those people receive a plaque and she recognized them on the cable channel at the board meeting. "You need to know what people like and what they appreciate." She added, "I really don't like that kind of thing, and I tend to minimize it." She was adamant in her ideas about liberating the leadership in everyone. "People don't come to work and stand outside the door and say, 'Well today I'm going to give 90% today.' They don't. They come in and give 100%, 110% sometimes." It was her job "to notice and to acknowledge" everyone's efforts and "to encourage them to keep making those very genuine, unique, and sincere contributions for the good of the kids and the organization."

New Findings

Two additional findings were outside the theoretical framework of the five leadership practices. Women superintendents reported that their hiring practices were an important component of their leadership success. Furthermore, they said that effective leaders must possess specific qualities.

Hiring practices. Superintendents reported that hiring good people was a key component of leadership. Geri surrounded herself with what she called, "heterogeneous people." She related that when she hired people, she looked to build a team of people who had different strengths to be better equipped and knowledgeable in working with a diverse population of staff, students, and parents.

I really try to build a team of people who have different strengths in terms of dealing with people. This is a people business and you have to have those people who are good at different aspects of that working on your team. And if it is this heterogeneous group than you will be able to have really good give and take discussions of issues you need to talk about and they [staff members] will do it at a very professional level. It won't become personal to any one person.

She explained that one aspect of her job was to provide the resources to create the environment to make things happen.

You need to have really good people and let them make those possibilities happen . . . and I guess most important to me is that you have people who are loyal to you. That is very important in a system.

One superintendent preferred leading a large school district rather than a small district because of her ability to have a larger central office staff. She hired several central office staff members who were bright, capable administrators with a specialty for her cabinet.

The reason I like a larger district is because I am a person who likes to be surrounded by very bright people. I absolutely think that is a key to success. I want the best and brightest in what they do in my organization.

Ruth looked for team players. A superintendent in her district for 12 years, she had the “luxury” of hiring most of her teaching staff during her tenure. Martha hired people with beliefs similar to hers about providing an environment conducive to engaging all children as learners and all that goes with what she called her “bottom line.” Because of her orientation to focus and to task completion, she observed that she was not as nurturing as she would like to be. Therefore, she hired staff members who exhibited that nurturing side. She gave her unique perspective on women as leaders.

I think women are very capable of managing the business of a district as those of us who have been in this position have demonstrated. But I think we bring a quality that is unique to the socialization of females. We have been taught to nurture and be concerned about the people who work with us and so are more likely to do that. That [nurturing quality], however, happens to be one of my weaknesses. While I think I possess some of those qualities I’m also very logical, sequential and task oriented and so therefore I’m focused on the target and sometimes at the expense of looking at the nurturing role I need to play. But what I’ve attempted to do in my leadership role both as a principal and as a superintendent is to try to put someone as close to me as possible that will have more of those qualities.

Joan placed utmost importance on hiring staff.

I think that the most important task an administrator has is hiring; most definitely. It just makes a big difference. For the most part those people are going to be with you for a long time and so you have to do a good job with that.

The four women in mid-size and large school districts said that hiring principals was crucial to the success of their districts. Barb convinced the board that she needed to retain the ability to hire principals even though past practice in her district had been that committees made up of teachers, parents, and other staff members hired principals. Because of the size of their districts, Martha and Geri relied on assistant superintendents to hire principals, and both women declared the practice a disadvantage in leading large districts.

Qualities of a leader. Most of the women had ideas about the special qualities leaders should possess. Joan stated that leaders must have qualities of integrity, character, and strong values. For her, integrity was a big issue. "There's a fine line with getting the word out and having integrity and political correctness at the same time, politically expedient, not correctness."

Geri stated, "I think the barrier to being successful is to remind yourself that this is a very risk taking job and if you don't like risks you don't want this one." Martha reported that leaders must have compassion when leading organizations. Martha related a speech she gave to a group of principals.

I believe that most effective leaders probably have as part of their make-up the innate characteristic of leading and can probably go back and identify every instance in which they have been thrust into leadership and that they emerged as a leader. I do think that there are some things that can be taught for people who want to be leaders, but I'm not sure that if the characteristics are not there, can you truly become an effective leader.

Laura expressed that quality leaders be logical thinkers who can balance the "incredible control, power, and responsibility" that comes with the job. Maxine stated that a leader needed to be centered so as not to "get off the track." She should be someone who is extremely focused. Barb also talked about focus as important. She wanted to see the leader focus on specific goals and then remain relentless in pursuit of those goals; she saw herself as a prime example. Vivian spoke of leaders maintaining high standards so that they might command respect from others.

Marilyn's response to a final question about her preferences for additions to the interview serves as a closing to this section.

. . . quality is never an accident. Our schools deserve quality leaders. I think that in today's age, public schools particularly have to look at what they're doing with very close scrutiny and they have to learn how to be more quickly responsive to making changes internally that they need to make. In order to get the adults to make those changes, to take those risks, to look incompetent while they're learning something different, it takes strong soft-touch leadership to do that. And I see a high need for that out there.

Discussion

There were differences in how women perceived their leadership based on the size of their districts. Both quantitative and qualitative data confirmed this finding. Women in small districts spoke more frequently and passionately about the appeal of a more intimate involvement with staff and students than did women in larger school districts who missed those personal connections.

Women in large districts perceived themselves to be using “challenging the process” and “inspiring a shared vision.” The interviewees used those practices in different ways. In larger districts, they talked of involving stakeholders, shared decision-making, and taking risks regarding personnel. In small districts, they talked of involving community in bond issues for facility funding, programming issues, and taking risks regarding program.

All talked about the importance of the leader maintaining high standards as they served as role models for staff, students, school board, and community members. Some of the respondents modeled beliefs in championing the value of diversity, and others modeled behaviors they want followers to emulate, i.e., dignity and respect. All talked about building relationships, whether those relations were at the level of students and teachers, or at the level of a cabinet staff. Building relationships was a repeated theme in many of the answers to the interview questions.

One voice stood out among the nine interviewed. Vivian belonged to a different era. She was 62 years old with no plans to retire. Vivian was the pathfinder with more than 20 years of experience as a superintendent and more than 30 years of experience as a teacher and then principal in the same district. She talked about how she maintained what she calls the “old principles.” She made clear to the staff and to her school board that as “long as I am here, that’s the way it’s going to be and if you don’t like it you better do something about it.” Vivian said that although her staff and students knew her as a strict disciplinarian, they also knew that she would be there for them when in trouble. She noted that her age was a possible barrier to her success and worried that she may have carried her ideas “a little too far.” She talked about wanting to show her staff her strong beliefs and principles in working with students as a “strict disciplinarian,”—an “old fashioned way,” according to Vivian. Vivian wanted people to know that she stood staunchly behind those principles, yet she worried that she was too “hard” in her approach. Her initial comment before we began the interview was, “Are you sure you want to interview me?” I took this to mean that I might not find her contemporary

in her ideas and views, given the fact that she has been in the district for so long. Vivian showed her unique style of leadership in several ways. One way was her belief in remaining cautious when taking risks to “challenge the process.” When other superintendents talked of the risks they took to change the status quo in their districts; Vivian talked about determining what the risks might be to try to prevent any fallout from taking the risk. Again, Vivian related her belief system as she said, “I’m a strong believer in preventive medicine for everything.”

When asked how they might challenge staff to try new approaches, most related that they believed building consensus, creating a common language, providing time to team and discuss the issues, and assuring people that they were safe before taking risks were important aspects of their practices. Vivian stated that she prepared and exposed staff to new techniques, but sometimes “you just have to say this is the way it’s going to be.”

All of the women were asked what advice they would give to women seeking a superintendency. The answers varied from “Just do it, it’s not that hard,” to Vivian’s advice. “You have to want to do it.” She reported that a superintendent should not divorce herself from the classroom because once done her decisions become unaffected by kids and after all, “That’s what we’re about—we’re about the kids.” Vivian was the woman who said that when her day was going poorly, all she had to do was go into the kindergarten room and sit with the children and then she would remember how truly rewarding the job was.

Concluding Remarks

I planned to give these women the voice to describe their leadership in their districts as superintendents. The insights drawn from this study of the perceptions of women superintendents regarding how they lead their school districts include:

1. Women viewed relational leadership as a key component of their leadership style.
2. Women have ways to talk about how they have succeeded in their roles as superintendents.
3. This talk can be useful to women aspiring to the superintendency and those in the pipeline who are uncertain. As one woman said when asked what advice she would give to women aspiring to the superintendency, “Just do it, it’s not that hard!”

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