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The Role of Gender and How it Relates to Conflict Management Style and School Culture

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This investigation focused on principals, by gender, and the impact that the principals' conflict management style had on cultural aspects in schools. Findings were: principals with a conflict management style that is high in dominating show lower school culture scores in professional development, and, conversely, principals with a conflict management style that is high in initiating indicate higher school culture scores in teacher collaboration. When split by gender, the findings were: male principals whose conflict management style is dominating receive lower school culture scores in teacher collaboration, while female principals whose conflict management style was viewed as integrating receive higher school culture scores in professional development and teacher collaboration.

Men and women in leadership positions are exposed to different expectations in their careers due to the gender role stereotyping applied to male and female behaviors (Burke & Nelson, 2002; Curry, 2000). Lipman-Blumen (1992) postulated that the integration of femininity with the male dominant view of leadership could be difficult to achieve due to the conflict that arises between the female orientation and male-dominated organizational practices. Slaikeu and Hasson (1998) declared, "While [sic] conflict is an integral dynamic in the growth and development of living organisms and groups" (p. 5), different results have been found from research on gender differences in conflict styles (Ruble & Schneer, 1994). However, Eckman (2004) noted "there are both similarities and differences between female and male high school principals in terms of their attributes as well as their experiences of conflict, job satisfaction, and commitment" (p. 381).

Males, using a masculine task-oriented leadership style, have led secondary schools in a similar manner as that seen in for-profit organizations. However, reform research has identified that the leadership style in a school

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setting should embody and articulate a vision of collaboration and sharing (Donaldson & Sanderson, 1996). The building of collegial relationships is essential (Hargreaves, 1994). The principal, as leader, must create the environment that supports a culture for learning. Although studies on conflict management style and culture (Rahim, 1992; Ruble & Schneer, 1994), and the importance of organizational culture (Gruenert, 1998; Schein, 1992) exist, few studies identify how gender and conflict management of the secondary principal affect the school culture (Gates, 2003). This research focused on two questions related to secondary school principals impact on school culture.

1. To what degree is the conflict management style of the principal related to the culture factors of professional development and teacher collaboration?
2. To what degree does gender change the relationship of the conflict management style of the principal on the school culture factor of professional development and the school culture factor of teacher collaboration?

Conceptual Organizers

Gender Characteristics
Various researchers have identified characteristics associated with feminine and masculine roles (Harriman, 1996; Hines, 1992; Marshall, 1993). Women

stereotypically are nurturing, passive, sensitive, compassionate, family-centered, and responsible for the education of children. Men are described as self-reliant, dominant, hard, impersonal, outer-focused, action-oriented, competitive, and assertive.

According to Grant (1988), "Organizations clearly reproduce themselves. People in power (who are mostly men) mentor, encourage, and advance people who are most like themselves" (p. 57). This may explain one reason why women who have been able to rise to management positions have done so by identifying with and emulating the male model in order to progress in the organization. Bell and Chase (1995) stated women's leadership strategies are shaped by the bureaucratic and male-dominated structure that research has generally described as an exercise of power from the top down (Dunlap & Goldman, 1991). In educational leadership, women's experiences are increasingly documented (Brunner, 2000; Eckman, 2004; Grogan, 1996).

Most organizations reflect masculine work orientations and male interests that can cause conflict between the female orientation and male-dominated organizational practices (Alvesson & Due Billing, 1997). However, "with the trends toward participatory style leadership and decentralization of power on the upswing, women's tendency toward a more integrative leadership style may actually be coming into vogue" (Gupton & Slick, 1996, p. 109). This distributed leadership perspective is relatively new and is emerging as an influence in empirical studies of school leadership (Smylie, Conley, & Marks, 2002). Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004) referred to such leadership as distributed practice. They postulated that "leaders' practice is stretched over social and situational contexts and is not a function of just the positional leader" (p. 6).

Conflict Management Style

According to Yukl (1998), "the primary purpose of conflict management is to build and maintain cooperative working relationships with all stakeholders and include efforts to mediate conflicts between other people within the organization" (p. 116). Taylor and Miller (1994) said that gender shapes conflict issues as well as conflict management processes. To connect people to each other and their work through a collaborative culture, principals must apply strategies that symbolically build commitment to the needed approaches, attitudes, and behaviors (Alkire, 1995). The manner in which the principals build commitment is affected by gender and conflict management style and can be a determinant of organizational effectiveness or lead to disintegration (Rahim, 1992).

Earlier researchers (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Kilmann & Thomas, 1977; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Putnam & Wilson, 1982) identified and labeled

conflict handling styles. Their instruments range from two to five styles in varying degrees of concern for one's self and concern for others. We used *The Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory II* and focused on the five conflict handling styles developed by Rahim (1992, 2001). These styles differed on two basic dimensions, concern for self and concern for others. The first dimension explains the degree (high or low) to which a person attempts to satisfy his or her own concern. The second dimension explains the degree (high or low) to which a person wants to satisfy the concern of others. These variables are important aspects in an organization and impact culture of that organization (Schein, 1992).

Organizational Culture

Schein (1992) defined culture as a "pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration" (p. 12). Building upon Schein's definition, Yukl (1998) asserted, "a major function of culture is to help us understand the environment and determine how to respond to it, thereby reducing anxiety, uncertainty, and confusion" (p. 330). Manifestations of a school's culture are observed through the interconnectedness of symbols, ceremonies, heroes, myths, values, and norms. These manifestations are representations of what school personnel value (Gruenert, 1998). The culture needed is that of collaboration where everyone is considered a resource and works collectively so that the school will be effective (Claes, 1999).

Research does support that some gender differences exist in how individuals lead and how leaders are perceived. However, little research exists that examines the relationship between culture, conflict management style, and if and how those variables are affected by gender.

Methods

Participants

Determination of the population and sample size was based on geographic location, time constraints, financial considerations and gender distribution. A stratified random sampling by gender and school size of 30 secondary school principals and 150 teachers was used. Fifteen male and 15 female principals along with five faculty members were selected from the 30 principals' buildings.

Data Collection

Data for the study were obtained by surveying secondary principals and faculty members. Two survey instruments were administered. The first half

of the survey instrument included *The Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II)* (Rahim, 1992, 2001) that determined the conflict management style used by the building administrator. Two forms of the ROCI-II, oneself and the other by observer were used.

The second half of the tool was the *School Culture Survey* (SCS) developed by Gruenert (1998). The SCS evaluated the school culture in terms of six factors found in the culture: collaborative leadership, teacher collaboration, and professional development, unity of purpose, collegial support, and learning partnership. Of particular interest were the factors of professional development and teacher collaboration.

Data Analysis

The data from participant surveys were analyzed using the Pearson Coefficient to determine the relationships among gender, and five styles of conflict management, and the factors of school culture. For this study, the five styles of conflict management were: integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising within two dimensions of handling interpersonal conflict, concern for self and concern for others. The variables of school culture as measured by the SCS included: teacher collaboration and professional development. Statistical significance was determined at an alpha of 0.05.

Findings

To what degree is the conflict management style of the principal related to the culture factors of professional development and teacher collaboration?

Principal perspective. No statistically significant correlation with the management style of the principals and the culture factor of professional development was found. No statistically significant correlation of management style of the principals and the culture factor of teacher collaboration was found.

Teacher perspective. Statistically significant correlations between principals' conflict management style of integrating and the culture factor of professional development ($r = +.308$; $p = .000$), and principals' conflict management style of avoiding and culture factor of professional development ($r = +.192$; $p = .019$) were determined. No other correlations were significant. Interpretation means that principals with a greater use of integrating and avoiding conflict management styles promoted greater professional development in the school culture. The literature supports that principals with

an integrating style of conflict management promote a climate that encourages professional development (Hargreaves, 1994).

A statistically significant correlation between principals' conflict management style of integrating and the culture factor of teacher collaboration (r = +.331; p = .000) was determined. No other correlations were significant. Interpretation of the results means that principals' who were perceived to be more inclined to use the integrating conflict management style were more likely to promote greater teacher collaboration among staff. Again, the literature supported that principals high in utilizing the conflict style of integrating would also support a culture conducive to collaboration (Donaldson & Sanderson, 1996; Gupton & Slick, 1996).

To what degree does gender change the relationship of the conflict management style of the principal on the school culture factor of professional development and the school culture factor of teacher collaboration?

Principal perspective. No statistically significant correlation with the culture factor, professional development, or the culture factor teacher collaboration, was found for male principals' self perceptions of conflict management style.

A statistical correlation between female principals' self perception of the conflict management style of compromising and the culture factor of professional development was revealed through analysis (r = +.634; p = .010). Female principals perceived that as compromising increased, so did the professional development within the staff.

A statistical correlation between female principals self perception of the conflict management style of compromising and the culture factor of teacher collaboration was revealed through analysis (r = +.643; p = .010). Female principals perceived that as compromising increased, so did the teacher collaboration among the staff.

In the literature (Alvesson & Due Billing, 1997; Curry, 2000; Lipman-Blumen, 1992), female principals were more often associated with people-oriented behaviors (e.g., compromising). Those behaviors generally support a culture of positive professional development. Specifically, these findings revealed that female principals' perceptions were that as their use of a compromising style of conflict management increased, so did professional development in school culture.

Teacher perspective. The analysis of the teachers perceptions of the role gender plays in the principals' conflict handling style with the school

culture factor of teacher collaboration showed statistical significance for both male and female principals. Of the 80 teachers who had a male principal, a statistical significance was revealed for the conflict handling styles of integrating ($r = +.252$; $p = .024$) and compromising ($r = +.238$; $p = .034$). This significance indicated that as male principals' utilization of the conflict handling styles of compromising and integrating increased, their school culture factor of teacher collaboration also increased.

A statistical significance was also perceived by the 70 teachers who had female principals who utilized the conflict handling styles of integrating ($r = +.406$; $p = .000$) and obliging ($r = +.306$; $p = .010$). These correlations indicate that as female principals utilization of integrating and obliging styles of handling conflict increased, so did the school culture factor of teacher collaboration. Statistical significance was determined at the 0.05 level of confidence.

Although teachers perceived that both male and female principals integrated conflict management style and professional development in school culture, female principals had a stronger significance level than males. The data revealed that teachers who perceive female principals displaying high levels of integrating and obliging have strength in teacher collaboration in school culture. In addition, integrating and obliging styles of conflict management were supported in the literature review as utilized by females more often than males (Gupton & Slick, 1996; Taylor & Miller, 1994). Additionally, the data revealed that male principals who display high levels of integrating and compromising conflict management styles were perceived by their teachers as having strength in teacher collaboration in school culture. It appears from the data that male and female principals, through the use of different conflict management styles, approach both professional development and collaboration differently in a school setting. Since the organization's culture can be affected by the way the principal handles conflicts (Gruenert, 1998; Rahim, 1992), and since gender can shape those conflict management processes (Taylor & Miller, 1998), it is important that leadership is viewed through both those lenses.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study suggested that the secondary principal's conflict management style and school culture were related and that gender played a role in how leaders' conflict style was perceived. There were numerous correlations between the principal's conflict management style and the two identified school culture variables in this study. In addition, gender had an impact on those relationships. Therefore, it is suggested that institutions with leadership preparatory programs should incorporate a conflict management

program into their curriculum so that aspiring leaders could have a deeper understanding and increased awareness of which conflict management style is their preferred style. Such leadership preparatory programs could utilize the *Rahim Organizational Conflict Management Survey* (Rahim, 1992, 2001) as a screening tool, and once the dominant style is identified, strategies could be implemented that would enhance the utilization of all appropriate styles. Regardless of gender, leaders should utilize styles that will promote and enhance professional development and collaboration. Also, since female principals were perceived able to utilize a myriad of conflict styles more effectively than the male principals who tended to utilize predominantly only integrating or compromising style, the training approach to teaching conflict styles should take into consideration the gender of the participant and build on their conflict style strengths.

Additionally, school district personnel should utilize a conflict management assessment as a screening tool for new applicants or for determination in the placement of individuals. Because a school culture warrants a need for nurturing and collaboration in a school setting, which is in contrast with the traditional masculine management approach of competitive and authoritarian (Claes, 1999), a conflict management assessment could also be used as a staff development tool to enhance training and retention of personnel.

When principals, regardless of gender, begin to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their conflict management styles and understand how it affects school culture, perhaps they will improve individually. As a result, schools should also improve and grow to become true collaborative learning organizations. This collaborative school culture should support the teaching process by providing time for professional dialogue, providing appropriate support through resources, and collaborative planning time for teachers. The open discussion that will prevail in this collaborative learning environment will allow open and frank discussions about learning and teaching and will result in articulated alignment among the school personnel regarding values and beliefs. In this current arena of school reform, the building of collegial relationships is imperative, which warrants the continued examination of what makes for an effective and successful school culture and does the gender of the principal have a significant role in that investigation.

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