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Women Leadership K - 12 Public Education: One Woman's Experienced Perspective

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Women leadership K - 12 Public Education; one woman's experienced perspective

This essay, Women leadership K - 12 Public Education; one woman's experienced perspective, is the outcome of an interview, is a continuum of leadership theory and its application in relation to cultural differences with respect to how society envisions, defines leaders. One component of leadership today that is routinely discussed is a leader's ability to be "transformational." I opine that transformational in this context is a leaders ability to capitalize on differences associated with a multi-cultural society effecting societal change and ensuring social justice (education is a mechanism of social justice) for all. Northouse (2010) in the opening chapter of his book on leadership, *Leadership; Theory and practice; 5th Edition*, speaks of how leadership has been conceptualized. One such concept is "leadership as a transformational process that moves followers to accomplish more than is usually expected of them" (p. 2). However, for leadership to be transformational it must reflect cultural intelligence (CO). What is CO and why is it relative to this essay? Cultural intelligence is defined as "… individual's capability to function effectively across cultures… national, ethnic, and organizational as well as other types of culture" (Van Dyne, Ang, Livermore, 2010, p. 132; Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Early & Ang, 2003).

Incorporating gender as a component of CO development is relative through a societal lens in seeing gender as a specific culture within a society's overall culture, thereby gender being a micro-culture. Therefore, gender in relation to women and leadership experiences merits cultural understanding which segues to my interview.

My interviewee for this essay, Ms M., is a retired 34-year public schools educator and former union leader for Charlotte-Mecklenburg County schools teachers in Charlotte, North Carolina. Currently, Ms M. is the school board's "at-large" member, elected in November 2011.

Leader experience

As with most leaders, gender immaterial, leader experience, although a daily opportunity, is not readily accepted by all people.   For some, the leader experience is gained by circumstance. Individuals collectively sharing the desire for change will produce one who amongst others will voice that desire for change. The willingness to voice that desire, although maybe not initially in an official leader capacity, reflects leadership which was Ms M.'s beginning of leader experience outside the classroom.

Ms M. identified a need of elementary school teachers having union representation at the district level; a collective voice to be heard. That existing void prompted Ms M. to address the then Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district union leader, a female, which the union leader per Ms M. stated, "if you have the gall to (forcefully) approach me about union representation for elementary schools, then you're on board and you're responsible to effect that change."

Ms M. helped to draft a new union charter for the school district that represented diversity in its broadest scope; diversity in grade level representation inclusive of elementary, middle (then junior high), and high schools and diversity in race, gender reflected in the elected school representatives. The union, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Association of Educators (CMAE), was now inclusive versus exclusive.   This same union Ms M. would serve until eventually elected to lead. Ms M. union leadership roles were Association Representative in each of her respective schools of assignment from 1985 to 2003, union Vice- President 2003 to 2006, union President 2006 to 2011.

Ms M. was conceptualizing leadership as defined by Northouse (2010) – leadership at the focus of group process… the leader is at the center of group change and activity and embodies the will of the group (p. 2); transformational leadership (which was employed) is a process that changes and transforms people (p. 171); and leadership is a process, involves influence, occurs in groups, and involves common goals (p. 3).

Leader skills, traits, style

When discussing with Ms M. her demonstrated leadership she immediately reflected on her people skills-set. One thing Ms M. believes in and employs is empowerment as she was empowered early in her career (inferred) with unionizing elementary schools. Ms M.'s idea of her role as a woman in K – 12 Public Education leadership is to empower other women and share her knowledge in support of developing other women leader skills so they can better serve in their educational duties. However, Ms M. is not gender biased as she empowered males as well.

Empowerment is both essential and key in developing leaders, specifically women. It is important to specifically note women for the purpose of this essay as institutional discrimination is still existent globally. In an article titled, Women Empowerment through Transformational Leadership: Case of Satya Jyoti, *Vision: The journal of business perspective* (2009), the following is offered as an example of women and empowerment:

> The process of women's empowerment results in a larger share of control over a variety of resources. Such resources could be material, human, intellectual (knowledge, information and ideas), financial (money and access to money). Empowerment provides an opportunity to women to exercise control over the decision-making process in home, community, society and the nation (Mukherji and Jain, p. 63).

Mukherji and Jain, in their article, address the issue of two women in India being empowered by an idea and becoming transformational leaders in developing a non-profit organization that has impacted rural communities effecting change in farming to include a vocational training center.

Ms M. expressed that leaders are expected to be knowledgeable, proficient, and observant in their occupational realm. Ms M. opines her ability influencing others is attributed to her skill in listening to what is being said verbally and bodily which determines her behavior in how she responds. Ms M. is of the mindset that her behavior is akin to Northouse's (2010) definition of leader behavior as task (directive), relationship (supportive) – Directive behaviors clarify, often with one-way communication; Supportive behaviors help group members feel comfortable (p. 91).

Commonality of skills, style among women as leaders

Women who are effective leaders are no different than men with respect to their being confident, knowledgeable, assertive, persuasive, and directive; sentiments of Ms M. However, what Ms M. feel's she shares with women who are effective leaders is the idea that to possess and implement these traits stated, then it is assumed by the public at large "the woman has to be a bitch!" And Ms M. confesses this is a shared assumption among women about other women as well. Northouse (2010) notes similar sentiments of journalists and one politician leading up to the 2008 presidential election campaign. The bitch reference with respect to then presidential hopeful, Senator Hillary Clinton, was attributed to a Senator McCain interview and a Glenn Beck comment (p. 311; Carroll, 2009; Media Matters for America, 2007).

Although race is not the premise of this essay, I do want to have acknowledged that Ms M. is African American. This is important to note given the historical challenges that minorities have faced in obtaining leadership roles in the greater community (society). In a research article about ethnicity, gender, and leadership, authors Jean-Marie, Williams, and Sherman, Black women's leadership experiences: Examining the intersectionality of race and gender, *Advances in Developing Human* Resources (2009), commonality of leadership skills and style is noted – In many ways, the participants' transcendence of racial and gender stereotypes became the impetus for developing a leadership style that is inclusive, builds consensus, and collaborative (p. 573). This is akin to Ms M. in her leading the reconstruction of the teachers union, empowering other women, and Northouse's (2010) definitions of leadership's two general behaviors (as already stated in this essay) – task and relationship; culminating into goal accomplishment through subordinate comfortability (p. 69; p. 91).

Leadership development prompts opportunities and challenges

"The increasing numbers of women in leadership positions and women in academia, brought about by dramatic changes in American society, have fueled the scholarly interest in the study of female leaders" (Northouse, 2010, p. 301).

With respect to leader development, gender immaterial, leaders seem to go through a formation that starts with the early development of very solid core values. In a taped interview for Walden University course, Education 8116, Professor Stanford-Blair (Laureate Education, Inc., 2012) comments – And those core values come from family, from the wider culture, perhaps from mentors. However, of equal consideration is what women are modeled by other women leaders who defer their leadership to gender stereotypes or choose to assert themselves regardless of stereotypes, expectations. Northouse (2010) comments that women leaders respond to stereotypes in one of two ways: they demonstrate vulnerability assimilating to gender stereotype or react against by executing stereotype-countering behaviors (p. 313).

In presenting Ms M. with the question, are there multiple opportunities for women in public education, K-12? Ms M. emphatically answered not outside the school house. Leader opportunities exist within the school house (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools) with school administrator, faculty advisory committee, school leadership team, as department chair of respective academic discipline, mentor chair and other specifically designed in-school and or other school-associated programs. An example of typical disparity with women and opportunity as asked of Ms M. was experienced during the 2011 – 2012 school year, with the search for a

district superintendent of schools here in Charlotte. There were school district related and public voices who were of the opinion that there was already a qualified individual with 30 years invested in the school district having served in a myriad of positions – teacher, administrator, department head, and department associate and regional superintendent, respectively, who would do well as superintendent; who just happened to be a woman. However, it was not to be and the school board settled on an outsider at a considerable cost to the city taxpayers.

However, in fairness to the district superintendent today (January 2014), of the seven community superintendents, five are women. These five women are a component of the superintendent's district management team, which comprises 20 individuals who are either area superintendents or district staff executives. To give clarity to women leadership as a composition of this management team, of the 20 positions, 13 are women (including the five community superintendents); and of the 13, four are African American.

Ms M. is of the opinion that when a qualified woman educator seeks to go outside the proverbial K-12 school environment, such women at times are met with overwhelming challenges. This was Ms M.'s experience when campaigning for both the union leader position and her current position as school board member, "at-large." Ms M. also shared with me that she actually had more male support than female support; something to consider and an equally researchable phenomenon.

Continuing this argument and akin to Ms M.'s opinion of women leaders in education aspiring achievement in leadership positions outside a K-12 setting, is also noted by Jean-Marie, Williams, and Sherman (2009), "…Black women in higher education has broadened to include the highest ranking position of a university—the presidency. However, ascending to the presidency is fraught with challenges that seek to limit the power and authority of female presidents" (p. 565). Although the authors' reference was specific to African American women, it can be inferred that this is applicable to all women in general who are aptly qualified in their respective professions to be organizational leaders.

However, in assessing her own career development, Ms M. is proud to say that she was provided ample opportunities to develop professionally providing her opportunities to effect change and or advocate for change at the local, state, and national level. Ms M. not only served in union leadership roles as previously noted but in-school leadership positions with respect to school leadership teams, teacher advisory committees, and superintendant and teacher advisory committees. Ms M. also credited her opportunities inclusive of meeting, speaking with noted personages of academia and government over the years such as Honorable Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton (2009 – 2013) on four occasions.

Final thoughts

Women, like other minorities, and doubly so if of "color," face what America has perpetuated over the years, institutional discrimination. Institutions and agencies from local to national, corporate to government, K - 12 to university are majority headed by "white" men. So women, like other minorities, have had to push themselves beyond normative leader expectations to excellence in leadership that sets a new standard. However, in fairness to women collectively who seek to challenge themselves and societal norms, Northouse (2010) offers these words:

> In, sum, empirical research supports small differences in leadership style and effectiveness between men and women … women exceed men in the use of democratic or participatory styles, and they are more likely to use transformational leadership behaviors and contingent reward, styles that are associated with contemporary notions of effective leadership (p. 304).

In closing, what is stated herein is applicable globally prompting continued research of the phenomenon of women in leadership.

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