



Extraordinary stories from everyday women leaders

Overcoming Barriers and Celebrating Successes

Have you heard or spoken these words:

- “She’s too old to start her leadership career.”
- “She’s too aggressive when it comes to personnel matters.”
- “She’s too soft/feminine when it comes to decisions.”
- “She wears her heart on her sleeve.”

These quotes are a few of the responses to the question we asked of women in educational leadership: What are some of the barriers that got in the way of your progress on your leadership journey?

We also asked the question: What has supported you on your journey?

Their responses also included, but were not limited to:

- “I had to learn the ‘good old boys’ system and who my allies were.”
- “My mentor was a man who mentored other men about the benefit of having women in the organization.”
- “I worked really hard to overcome stereotypical views of women as leaders.”
- “I changed organizations and found

leaders who supported equitable and inclusive hiring practices.”

This article is written by three women who are experienced educational leaders; it’s about multi-generational, multi-cultural, multi-racial women’s experiences; and it’s written on behalf of women who can support, model, mentor, coach, and guide other women to become their authentic selves as women leaders. This article is also written for men who can change the oppressive, inequitable, and sometimes invisible systems of oppression and privilege.

Our purpose in writing this article is to share these extraordinary stories of sincere, well-prepared, everyday women educational leaders. As women educational leaders, we intend to bring to surface the barriers that many women seeking educational leadership positions face, offer a counter-narrative and strategies to overcome these barriers. Overcoming these barriers is one of the tools of Cultural Proficiency, a Framework for Equi-

By Trudy Arriaga, Stacie Stanley and Delores Lindsey

table Educational Practices. The Tools form the foundation for assessing equity journeys and implementing an action plan for shifting school district leaders from inequitable practices to equitable practices. In this article we emphasize the tools of Overcoming Barriers, Guiding Principles, and Essential Elements.

The individual and institutional barriers that women face can be categorized as:

- Being unaware of the school or district's need to adapt to having women leaders at all levels.
- Denying the existence of sexism and gender inequities as systemic oppression.
- Denying the existence of systemic privilege and entitlement that favors male leaders.
- Resisting change that aids in attracting, recruiting, and mentoring women in leadership positions.

Gathering narrative data

We hosted a small Women in Educational Leadership Retreat to help us identify the barriers that hindered, as well as the supports that assisted women leaders on their career journeys. We had hoped to gather 10

to 15 women on a Saturday morning for coffee and brunch to respond to our two questions. Much to our surprise and appreciation, almost 30 women joined us. Many of the women told us the invitation and the questions intrigued them because no one had ever asked about barriers or supports to their career goals. We found these women to be ordinary, everyday women educational leaders doing their jobs. We had planned an agenda that included an opening strategy called, "Go 'round". We would simply "go around" the room and each guest would respond to the following prompts:

Who are you? What do you do and where?

What inspired/intrigued you to be here today?

We had allowed 25 minutes for this strategy, including time for the three of us to respond to the prompts. We could not stop the responses. An hour and a half later, each woman had spoken and had told amazing stories about why she was inspired to attend. They told stories of struggles, inspiration, heartbreak, and motivation. The women needed and wanted to tell their stories. And, they wanted to hear each other's stories.

Today's context and barriers

Many of the retreat interviewees' stories revealed incidents that occurred 20 to 30 years ago; yet, other women told similar experiences occurring within the past 10 years, five years, and even one year ago. As many male leaders contend the glass ceiling had been shattered and the playing field has been leveled, women continue to find the contrary. In addition to the glass ceiling, the retreat participants identified key pipeline barrier themes including marginalization, lack of mentoring and sponsorship, stereotyping, and discrimination. Cultures of women were well represented in the forum. Women of color and women of the LGBTQ community clearly identified existing barriers that the white, heterosexual woman did not encounter nor see. Historical constructions of gender and race became evident as women expressed their journeys navigating multiple cultural boundaries in addition to gender barriers.

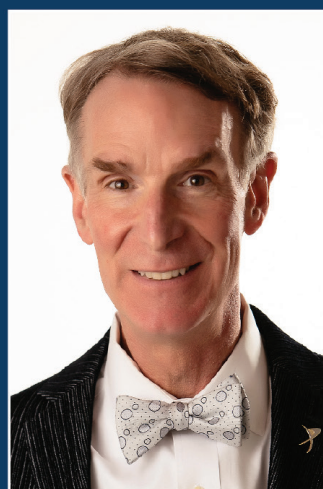
Numerous examples cited by the participants directly aligned to the barriers identified in the Culturally Proficient Framework:

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- Understanding of Systems of Oppression and Entitlement.

- Unawareness of the Need to Adapt.
- Resistance to Change.

The WELR participants recognized and acknowledged the barriers that we propose to address and overcome.

Systems of Oppression and Entitlement: The women leaders described themselves as not being positioned well to qualify for executive leadership positions as opposed to the entitled, traditional roles of their male counterparts. Many women reported following a “traditional female route” to include elementary teacher, elementary principal, or curriculum and instruction related pathways as opposed to athletic coach, high school principal, district office administrator in human relations, business or technology, then on to assistant superintendent and superintendent. Women, in contrast, served as department or grade level chairs, Teachers on Special Assignment, district curriculum or professional development coordinators, directors of curriculum, assistant superintendent at several districts, and finally, superintendent. The lack of opportunities limited the ways women were seen as the “fit” for executive leadership positions. Thus, the women leaders reported statements by supervisors as,

- “It’s not your time yet.”
- “You need more experience. You are not proficient with budgets and the political aspects of the job yet.”
- “This district isn’t ready for a female assistant superintendent for personnel or business yet.”
- “You are not strong enough. You would be required to stay late and lock up.”

As co-authors and female leaders, may we be so bold as to suggest that women be given the keys both figuratively and literally.

Unawareness of a Need to Adapt: This barrier was filled with stories of lingering stereotypes, biases, and misinformation, as well as examples of misconceptions that women need to spend more time with family and that men have more time to work hard and get the job done are without lack of evidence. Women leaders shared experiences of having the tissue box moved toward them during difficult conversations or being

stereotyped by the way they dressed, their accent, and even their tears. One participant shared her comment to her supervisor following a high-stakes, potentially volatile community meeting which she chaired. She had shared her passion for students through her tears. Her male supervisor cautioned her that she shouldn’t show her emotions in public that way. She responded to him, “Do not mistake my tears for a sign of weakness. My ability to emote, feel, and be vulnerable and share my passion for our students is indeed my greatest strength.”

Another retreat participant shared that her supervisor accused her of being “flirty” because of her accent. The informal, light-hearted, two-way conversation was clearly on his terms. Women participants of the LGBTQ community reported having to protect their identity to avoid professional and personal harm. Women leaders of color spoke of being frequently asked to give extra time and prove their qualifications. They also described the depth of their feelings of isolation accompanied by a sense of pride when they realized they were the “only woman of color” in the room. Women of color spoke of being targeted to serve and lead groups who looked like them, with an incorrect assumption that they were not qualified to lead organizations for all. One participant added, “As I looked around, I noticed we (WOC) were assigned to be in charge of equity plans, diversity recruitment for people of color, newcomers committees, newly formed Diversity and Equity departments, and all things diversity.”

Resistance to Change: The glass ceiling effect was clearly identified as a barrier of resistance to change. Districts are frequently identified as reluctant to hire women as superintendents, business leaders, technology specialists and human resource leaders. The American Association of School Administrators (AASA, 2019) show that 23% of superintendents identify as female. While women are the strong majority of the teacher workforce, they are significantly underrepresented in executive leadership roles. Quotes from the participants retreat included:

“We already have one female high school principal. Don’t you think we are going too far if we appointed another female?”

“You are the top candidate, but it’s his turn.”

“The men on the committee would not look at me when I spoke, or when they spoke. They only looked at each other. I was the first female Superintendent. Finally, I said, ‘I’d like for you to look at me when you have something to say.’ After that, things changed for the better.”

Numerous retreat women, white and women of color, also reported the lack of female mentoring. Mentors were listed as Joe, Bob, Randy, Jose, Rich, Jerry. The commonality was the majority of mentoring came from men. We even noticed that sometimes women reported other women as barriers by being territorial and competitive with a “pull up the ladder now, I’m up here” attitude. Women participants also stated that male mentors periodically contributed to the barriers by advice such as, “Don’t apply for that. It’s a male dominated position. We need your expertise in the position you are currently holding.” And, “You’re not ready yet. You need more experience and more education. You’ll need your doctorate before you think of applying as assistant superintendent.”

A female assistant principal told one of our co-authors last year, that her male principal told her, “If you want to become a principal in this district, you’ll need to start acting more like a man.”

Imagine her disappointment when her self-appointed mentor spoke those words to her?

Supporting women educational leaders, overcoming the barriers toward equitable educational practices requires a sense of moral purpose. The Guiding Principles of Cultural Proficiency foster the development of a set of core values focused on equity and inclusion. These values serve as a moral framework for conducting one’s self and their school and district in an ethical manner. The Guiding Principles serve as guides for who we say we are as leaders. These core values are also the representation of the district for serving historically marginalized groups. (Lindsey, Nuri-Robins, Terrell & Lindsey, 2019). Clearly, the challenges the female participants at WELR overcame and the successes they experienced relied on their talents and expertise, as well as support and encouragement from mentors throughout their careers.

As historically marginalized groups, female educational leaders have unique cultural needs. Overcoming barriers to equity requires women leaders to push through the limitations that have been set upon and in front of them. Perseverance to overcome sometimes emerges through external recognition and nudges, such as those expressed from many of the women leaders at WELR. Some participants spoke about nurturers who saw beyond what they thought of themselves; others saw their capabilities and through encouragement and support helped set in motion the trajectory of their leadership careers. Leader after leader referred to the taps on the shoulder from their principals, Human Resources directors and professors. Nurturers seem to know that those invitations to serve on teacher leader committees, strategic planning teams, and organizational boards are the seeds that foster women leadership. In the words of one retreat participant,

“...but, women in particular for us, we all need that, that someone to help take us by the hand and say you can do this and this is how you do it without losing your job. And I always talk about that ...You can be courageous and keep your job.”

Leaders also spoke of their support and motivation coming from the members of the school communities in which they served. Through the development of deeper relationships with students and families, they were compelled to do more, form community partnerships, and extend their educational degrees, for the specific purpose of building their capacity to better serve members of marginalized groups. One administrator shared,

“...my life was changing and my lens was changing by immersing myself in the communities that I was working in, and getting to know those families in the way that I did, and becoming really vulnerable myself.”

Another leader was compelled to further her education when a young female African American student looked at her and asked, “You’re brown and you can be smart too?” The opening of doors for these women leaders also led to the opening of doors for marginalized students and their families (Arriaga & Lindsey, 2016).

Several women leaders shared that once they were set on the pathway of educational leader, support from members in professional organizations helped them sustain their careers. Some women spoke of the difference networks made in developing confidence and often served as the linchpin in securing a position as superintendent, as one leader shared:

“...(it’s) creating a space for yourself to learn and to have not only a statewide network but a national network, that has been huge in supporting me... I told my board, ‘you’re not getting one person, you’re gaining a nationwide network’, and so my superintendency is a collective knowledge base that you’re getting.”

We also found in our conversations with many women leaders, professional support took the form of affinity groups that helped address specific identity and cultural needs. Time with each other allowed them to share their stories and find support. They enjoy attending conferences for women and specifically women of color.

In our quest to be culturally proficient, we understand that women as a group are not

monocultural. As an example of the Guiding Principle, diversity exists within group identity, the diversity amongst women leaders is vast, significant, and referred to as intersectionality of identity. Women identify by their gender, sexual orientation, language, faith, ableness, and ethnicity. Intersectionality is the overlapping structures of subordination in which marginalized people are situated. It manifests itself in the consequences of interactive oppressions, the elimination of people’s experiences at the intersections of multiple oppressions, and the cultural construction of identities that result in negative stereotypes that are used to further discredit marginalized experiences (Agosto & Roland, 2018). One educational leader who is female, black, and gay, shared that she is all of these identities, experiences, and perspectives. While the retreat participants appreciated the camaraderie that existed in the all-female leadership cohort, one woman wanted everyone to understand an important element of gatherings is, The intentionality around forming the network

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and forming profound relationships also help you professionally... strength comes not from my family only but my professional family. That's how I've met so many people.

When the guiding principles of cultural proficiency are used as the foundation for supporting the development of women in leadership, the individual, organization and community benefit and thrive.

From gender inequity to gender equity

Unlike the research of the late 20th century that emphasized the numerical representation of women in leadership roles, our narrative data focuses on the everyday female leader and the relationships of social/cultural interactions of gender and power in women's career journeys. A cultural, sociological view treats leadership and leaders as a conceptual lens through which to view the nature, purpose, and capacities of educational systems and organizations to reform and indeed re-think about their practices in more socially just ways. These narratives add to today's conversations about how women

leaders want to be identified and how that identity should not serve as a barrier for career advancement (Blackmore, 2013). Culturally Proficient leaders can provide substantive and normative alternatives to how we theorize and practice leadership.

Elements for action

Now what? These narratives serve as points of reference for human resource managers and employees, site and district-wide leaders, and educational consultant and recruiting firms. These stories and others like these may lead to the development and future focus for:

- Collecting quantitative and qualitative data within districts regarding gender and ethnic disparities (assessing cultural knowledge);
- Publishing male/female coauthored guides for changing the system of recruiting and hiring and mentoring women educational leaders (valuing diversity);
- Dispelling myths and negative assumptions about women and women of color needing to be exceptional and extraordinary educational leaders (managing the dynamics

of diversity);

- Collecting and publishing data that reflects growth over time with ethnic and gender equity in district-wide leadership positions (adapting to diversity); and,

- Developing policies, practices, and procedures in support of mentoring female and male leaders equitably (institutionalizing cultural knowledge).

We shared these extraordinary stories of sincere, well-prepared everyday women educational leaders to provide frameworks for gender equity. Women leaders will no longer be seen as the extraordinary candidate to meet unrealistic expectations placed on them by systems of oppression and entitlement. Women leaders with their male and female mentors will tell their stories of leadership actions focused on socially just schools and communities.

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