

"Getting Comfortable in Leadership Positions: Women of Today" Presentation at the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators 2000 Focus on Women in Administration Conference, September 29, 2000

The title of this session, "getting comfortable in leadership positions," reminds me of a day of great emancipation for me. I was in Madison about 12 years ago with a group attending a meeting. In my dress heels I found walking around the Madison campus almost impossible. My feet were killing me. With a realization as powerful as falling off a horse, I thought, "I don't have to wear these shoes!" I bought 5 pairs of flats that very day and have not graced a pair of heels since then. I learned I did not have to dress the way I was "supposed" to. I learned the importance of being comfortable in what I do. And later I learned that women can be uncomfortable in administrative shoes because they are wearing the wrong ones.

I have had the typical atypical career pattern characteristic of women in higher education administration. With degrees in English and education, I began my career in a staff position writing speeches for the President of the University of Alabama. After nine years and nine different "special" assignments--from graduate office admissions to establishing a foundation office to starting a faculty development program-- I moved to Washington DC to join a national project where my colleagues and I worked with 50 small colleges across the country to help assure their survival. I served as special assistant to the Secretary of HEW, I was the first executive director of a national organization of collegiate faculty developers (which is 35 years old now). I had a rainbow of early advantages--American Council on

Education Fellow in 1972 (one of 30 nationally) and the summer Institute for Educational Management at Harvard Business School in 1971. After Washington, I served as Dean and Vice President at several private colleges. And 15 years ago, I came to the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, as Dean of the College of Professional Studies. In all, I have had 32 years of administrative experience, 22 years before my Mother died and 10 since.



When my Mother died in 1990 at age 71, she had been in the workplace until she was 70 because she needed to increase her social security. But she was in a job she detested. I used to hate to call home, knowing that I would be subjected to the long stream of complaints about her job. It was a definite source of stress for her, unrewarding, and a strain on her life. In fact, I wonder if the job influenced her early death. My Dad gave me her office coffee cup after the funeral. It reads "Just another shitty day in Paradise."

Tragedies can bring new insights to those who reflect on them. What lesson or story could I learn from my Mom's life

and death? I found myself concentrating on her unhappiness at work. How sad to spend that much unfulfilling time at work each week and over a lifetime. Eventually, I vowed that I would not follow in my Mother's footsteps, living and dying at work that only drained me.

I examined my situation and realized that while I felt positive about some of my job, the negative parts came from straining to "act like an administrator,"



whatever that was.

The shoes were tight. My management style had evolved over time mostly by watching my bosses, my male bosses, of course. OV It took a lot of soul-searching, reading and writing (2 articles), to find my own true voice: my own principles, my own style), my own rationale for being in administration, my own shoes. Finding my own self felt good and made work a breeze. I felt self-directed, clear and yet, light.

My discoveries might not be yours, since I think each of us has a unique voice.



The point is, lead from your own inner strength not from the prescriptions in business management books nor from the limited number of styles you now see around you. Persist in your own pursuit of leadership opportunities and as you add your own unique style to the organizations you serve, young women and girls will begin to see the many wonderful ways we have of leading.

Let me share with you a few of the changes I observed once I found my true administrative voice, the shoes that fit.



I noticed that I no longer spent much time pushing, pushing both myself to behave in unnatural ways and pushing others to places they did not want to go. Getting people to do things. Instead, I noticed flow, a more natural way of being that stemmed from authenticity and listening. Using support instead of push, changed the locus of control and freed others to do their good work. I began to feel less like a traditional "boss" and more like a jungle guide hired to use a machete to chop a path through the bureaucratic jungle. To enable people to get where they wanted to go. The story goes that Ghandi was sitting one day talking with friends. He suddenly stood up and said, "I have to go now. There go my people and I am their leader."



With my new voice, I became as interested in the quality of work life as I had been in the work itself. The department heads and I began to talk about how the college could better support faculty, staff, and students, how environmental factors boosted us or dragged us down. We made a pact to find ways to support each other, the faculty and the students, to make the college a better place to live and work. We improved chairs, classrooms, smells in bathrooms, flowers around the building, food in the cafeteria, and expectations for departmental civility. Coming to work in our building became more pleasant. And wonderfully, magically, our work gained creativity, excitement and optimism.

My new voice taught me that administrative decisions can be handled in myriad ways, not just with the numbers game.



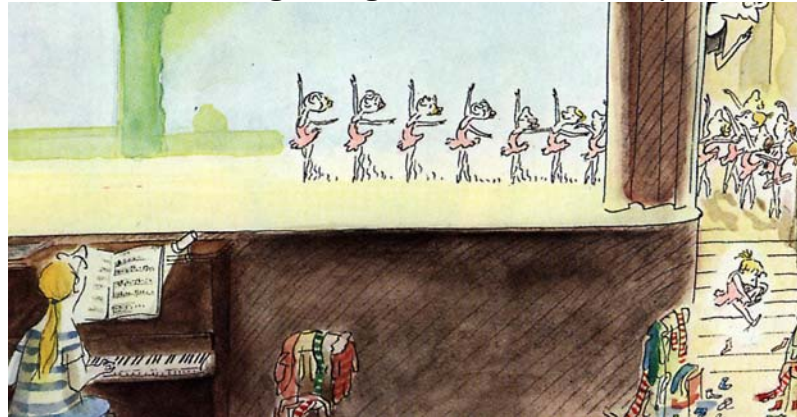
While I applaud the use of numbers and attempts to be fair, I realized that exclusive use of these tools narrows one's view. So I began to experiment with and ultimately, embrace the concept of relying on context for decisions. I realized that it takes considerable courage to operate this holistically,

because sometimes you have to be able to justify your judgments without relying on comparing apples to apples. As teachers you know that each child is different, yet as administrators we are often trapped into using categories that don't work. Now I fight for stories and exceptions over numbers and the norm. When my Dad started dating a few years ago, we kids were very worried about his interest in a younger woman, younger than all of us. He was after all in his mid-70's. We talked about heart attack, over exertion and so forth. And finally one day, he said, "Well, if she dies, she dies!"
Context over rules.



Finally, my new voice helped me see that for such a long time, my job had been about performance, mainly my own performance. Am I a good Dean? Am I handling this conflict well? Do I represent the College well? Am I getting my share of resources? What do people think of me? With the spotlight directed at me on the hot seat, I could become impatient, unreasonable, depressed, fearful, or too separated from the very people who make up the College. Instead, I came to follow the concepts of "servant-leadership" and began to think about my job as contribution to others; contribution to the department heads, to the faculty, to the University. How can I help? How can I help remove barriers from others? How can I help with their work? How can their

accomplishments beam in bright lights while I stay in the



background?

I want to confess that at this point in my life, I love being an administrator; I love the work I do. I don't use this coffee cup anymore. And I am encouraged to think that the time is coming soon when many more administrators in districts and universities will be women, women who love what they do because they bring a variety of new styles. Hopeful signs are in the work of WASDA in sponsoring this conference over the years and the work of a new state organization, Wisconsin Women in Higher Education Leadership (WWHEL).

In March of 2000, the University of Minnesota and the Ford Foundation sponsored a national teleconference on shaping a national agenda for women in higher education. The theme song started with the phrase, "With our lives we can make a difference...." Join me in making a difference, by being who you are in your own voice. Join me in making a difference by seeking and sticking to an administrative position where influence abounds. Join me in making a difference by learning, reflecting, and sharing with others.

