

Peer Support for Women in Middle Management

A small, informal network of colleagues can provide the professional and personal support so often missing from their organizational lives.

Simple or brilliant? My two colleagues and I have not yet determined the right descriptor for the method we use to provide one another with personal and professional support. It happened quite naturally, growing more out of rapport than a plan. Though each of us later discovered common needs and shared circumstances, none of us had previously articulated the lonely conditions of women in positions of middle management.

Defining the Need

Educators in middle management positions need opportunities to meet with others in similar positions. Isolated from colleagues, we lack companionship and perspective. Especially in small organizations, we have few opportunities to find support from professionals at similar levels of management, but far enough away from our own organizational dynamics.

Women educators in middle management positions are especially hard-pressed to find women colleagues. Women compose half the labor force but only 1 percent of top management. The ratio of male to female corporate chief executives, for example, is 600 to 1 (Josefowitz 1980, p. 195). In educa-

tion, the statistics are equally stark. Sixty-seven percent of all teachers in this country are women, but women make up only 5 percent of superintendents or assistant superintendents, 13 percent of principals and assistant principals, and 34 percent of all other official administrative staff (Burstyn 1980, p. 73). A small, informal peer support group made up of professional educators at similar levels of management from different organizational contexts overcomes many of the barriers to collegiality in educational organizations and offers an array of benefits.

Our group came together initially as representatives of our respective educational organizations to talk about a collaborative effort. We knew each other by reputation or rumor, but we had never had occasion to interact. After we had covered the business of the day, we began to talk more broadly, first about our organizations and then about ourselves. Noticing the darkness gathering outside my window, I leaned forward in my chair to signal the meeting's end. In direct counterpoint, one of the women leaned back and said: "You know, this has really been a good meeting. I can't remember when I've had a chance to talk about what I do and how it relates

to the rest of my life. What about a follow-up?" Three weeks later we found ourselves sitting around a table in a dimly lit restaurant, with no formal agenda, talking about how hard it was to break away from our jobs at 3:30 in the afternoon, simultaneously seeking permission for having left.

Refining the Process

Women in middle management spend a great deal of time supporting others, but rarely do we think about taking care of ourselves. Teachers care for children, principals support teachers, and if they are lucky, principals and central office administrators help to create contexts for their own and each other's continued learning and growth.

As it turned out, all three of us work directly with school people, but each in a different way, in separate organizations, and from different vantage points: an assistant superintendent, an associate director of an educational research laboratory, and a university professor. Working in separate settings, we can talk about work-related issues without revealing specific details or identities. Because we are unfamiliar with particular issues or individual staff, we are also free of some of the biases that characterize organiza-

tional life. In that sense, we have been able to serve as consultants to each other.

One of our strategies has been to share issues and dilemmas in the form of scenarios or cases. We use this approach to seek alternative solutions or to share a proposed plan of action and solicit feedback. Meeting from one-and-a-half to two hours every two to three months, we have time for one person to get in-depth responses and for the others to bring up related issues. While we begin each case with the details of a specific concern, we frequently move on to discuss the situation from a broader perspective. For example, discussion of a complex relationship between a middle manager and a secretary shifted gradually into an exploration of working relationships among women managers and women support staff.

Our wide-ranging discussions and the questions that surface serve multiple purposes. At the beginning, they are cathartic for the initiator, who frequently has been confronting the issue alone. Often they are also confirming. One of us may have had a similar experience, or the solution we are planning makes good sense. Sometimes we discover a new way of looking at a problem, benefiting from another's failures or successes.

One afternoon the topic turned to budgets, particularly to impending federal cuts. What did we expect to happen if 30 percent of the organization's funding disappeared? Where would the organization turn for support? Would our colleague be forced to look elsewhere for work? One of us shared her view of this dilemma. In school systems, she said, the typical response to fiscal cuts or external mandates is to take something away or add something on:

I've found the distinction between *preserve* and *conserve* to be useful in these situations. When there is a threat that something will change, people naturally hold tight to what they have, or simply take on the new requirements without reordering their priorities or redistributing their resources. Sometimes you can incorporate rather than aggregate; you can trim instead of cut.

The next day I made a similar point to a class of graduate students. The benefits of the group had begun to spill over into my daily work.

As we got to know one another, we moved from the specifics of our day-to-day working relationships to our more general work orientations. In the context of asking where our careers are heading, we detailed the paths to our present positions and described our current work lives. During this career exploration, we gave each other feedback on individual styles and entered into a number of lively discussions on such topics as the economic plight of the unmarried and salary differentials between men and women.

One outcome of our group has been our willingness to serve as resources to help one another form new professional relationships. For example, I shared with my colleagues a manuscript that had recently been turned down for publication. I was helped by their specific comments and suggestions. Most important, one of the group members was a colleague of the journal's editor; she paved the way for a revised version of the manuscript to receive further consideration. The piece was published, and I learned firsthand the importance of professional contacts. Men take the "old boy network" for granted and make good use of it. As a woman, I am still discovering and forming ties to colleagues so that I can both offer and receive support.

Savoring the Benefits

We've been meeting regularly now for almost two years. The influence of our mutual support has reached beyond the walls of the dimly lit restaurant. We have helped each other fill job openings, for example, and we continue to develop collaborative projects. Maintaining our small size preserves the quality of our limited time together and provides a workable nucleus for this type of peer support.

One of our most exciting ventures has been to introduce each other to

dynamic women educators in a wide range of middle management positions. On one occasion, we each invited three of our most interesting women educator friends to a potluck supper. The evening produced an intriguing discussion on leadership. This forum for meeting and learning about educators with related goals and interests served as another way of expanding our network.

Work has not been the only area in which we have gained support. Though we had not been accustomed to blurring personal and professional activities, we discovered their inextricable connectedness and the importance of taking time to share both work and nonwork issues. As tired as we are when we pull into the parking lot of our meeting place, we are always refreshed and recharged when we depart. Taking care of our own needs releases a hidden store of energy for both home and work.

"Simple or brilliant?" I asked a colleague as I described our middle management support group.

"Probably neither and both," she replied.

As I thought about her paradoxical comment, I realized she was right. A small peer support group for women in middle management positions is a simple idea, but an important one. As a mechanism for broadening perspectives, generating alternative solutions to managerial problems, and enhancing professional and personal esteem, this structure can make an enormous difference. □

References

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