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# Here Come The Women!

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*To their skills in leadership, management, and communication, women are adding knowledge about career paths and advancement so that they no longer have to move out to move up in education.*



SUE THRASHER MCGRATH

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**I**n 1909, Ella Flagg Young, superintendent of Chicago public schools, made her now-famous prediction:

In the near future, we shall have more women than men in charge of the vast educational system. It is a woman's natural field, and she is no longer satisfied to do the larger part of the work and yet be denied the leadership.

What bravado! Nevertheless, only 5 percent of superintendents today are women, even though teaching remains a predominantly female profession.<sup>1</sup>

Major change, however, is brewing. Smart, energetic women want to make a difference, and they are moving up, not out of education, to do it. I don't have a crystal ball any more than Ella did, but if the doctorate is the admission ticket to competition for leadership positions, and more than half of all doctoral students in administration are now women, then a larger number of women will be vying for top admin-

istrative positions in the next decade than ever before.

## Historic Inequities

Sex discrimination is clearly one of the reasons women fail to gain administrative positions. Women who aspire to leadership roles have usually been required to hold higher levels of certification than male candidates for the same position. The primary reason given for not considering women candidates for leadership positions has often been their "lack of qualifications," defined as a track record of successively more responsible administrative positions. Women have not been aware of this, nor have they known which career paths lead upward as opposed to those which dead-end.

The majority of women administrators currently hold central office staff positions as specialists, supervisors, or as elementary school principals. The typical woman in administration remains

in one of these positions without further promotion until retirement. Women who do achieve top-level positions have career paths that resemble those of males: teacher, high school principal, eventually an appointment as assistant superintendent, and finally, superintendent (Shakeshaft 1989, p. 73). With each step, the woman must convince the existing leadership that she is capable of the "stretch."

Unfortunately, a recent dissertation at Texas A & M University suggests that school board members see female leaders as less effective than their male counterparts (Folmar 1989). Some of those surveyed said they thought "women would be happier as teachers." Convincing the existing leadership, it seems, is still an uphill battle. However, 91 percent of the respondents were male, and their judgments may have reflected discomfort with the collegial leadership style typical of female administrators more

than with actual results.

### Women at the Top

According to a survey by Gotwalt and Towns (1986), women who do become leaders in education tend to exhibit similar characteristics. They are usually from rural areas and small towns that have allowed them to build power bases and overcome stereotypes, and they are often first born or only children. Women administrators are more often married than not, and the majority have children. Women at all levels of administration are older than men in similar positions, are

more likely to be members of minority groups, and usually have more classroom experience.

These women at the top demonstrate that they know the unwritten rules about accepted behaviors and experiences that are rewarded in the system. Through organization and networking, women are beginning to ask the right questions and learn what they need to know about career advancement paths and leadership. They have identified successful leaders, studied where they have been,

and observed what they have done to get ahead. Then they set out with determination to ensure that they are given the opportunities to have the same types of experiences.

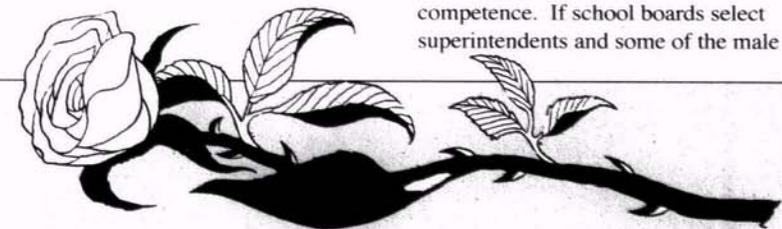
Surprisingly, they also try to gain access to membership in networks of influential men, because, in fact, a significant number of men have opened doors for women just as other men have closed them. Relationships are critical to advancement, and being recognized as a "member of the club" is as important as hard work and competence. If school boards select superintendents and some of the male

## In the Pink?

MARSHA WISLOCKI GOIN

**W**hen I was completing my university's undergraduate education curriculum, I witnessed something that would remain etched in my consciousness like a scar.

Judy, my supervising teacher, who was completing her administrator's certificate, was "taking over the fort" while the principal, soon to retire, interviewed prospective candidates for his position. Judy and I were at the photocopy machine when a poised woman in a pale gray suit arrived for an interview. Half an hour later, the woman emerged from the principal's office, smiling and confident that she had done well. Judy asked the principal his opinion of the candidate. She was very qualified, he replied, but she was wearing pink earrings. His wife wore pink earrings, and he didn't take any woman seriously if she wore them.



As we left the office, Judy confided that "pink earrings" was just another excuse for not hiring a woman for a man's job, that men didn't want women "up there" with them. That was 15 years ago . . . back when women were beginning to make inroads into the all-male enclave of educational administration.

I'd like to believe that times have changed — that men and women now work side by side in administrative positions; that men and women now mentor colleagues through programs of study or job searches; that men and women now network with one another without feeling that their same-sex bonding needs are being eroded; that men and women in positions of power now can recognize and value intuitive/nurturing capabilities and/or analytical/assertive qualities whenever and in whomever they see them, regardless of the sex of that person.

But I fear that the pink earrings

syndrome is still with us. Although women in educational administration are no longer an anomaly, their paths are often obscured by the same old obstacles: they are denied access to leadership positions by a well-established male network. They are not mentored. They are screened out of activities that encourage growth and teach competitive teamwork. They are underestimated, relegated to less important work, patronized. They are not taken seriously.

Leadership has many definitions, but it is most easily defined by what it is not. True leadership is not an individual decision to exclude many, but a commitment to include all in the effort to fulfill human potential. □

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## The Female Advantage: Women's Ways of Leadership

Sally Helgesen  
New York:  
Doubleday, 1990

*The Female Advantage* is about women who are leaders, but both males and females can learn from it. What is significant about the book is its emphasis on what organizations (including educational ones) can learn from the ways woman lead.

Helgesen used Henry Mintzberg's study of male managers as the organizing force behind her study. She found that male and female leaders are similar in many ways — both prefer "live action encounters," for example — but very different in others — females see mail as a way of connecting, a way to enhance collaboration, while males see it as an interference.

In the first of the book's three major sections, "The Feminine Principles," Helgesen relates her findings to those of Mintzberg's study and to Carol Gilligan's "web of connection." Today's school leaders will find the concept both fascinating and helpful, since school leadership is currently moving from a strict hierarchical arrangement to a more supportive, inclusive structure. The web structure emphasizes empowerment, "affirms relationships, seeks ways to strengthen human bonds,

simplifies communications, and gives means an equal value with ends" (p. 52).

Helgesen's second section contains diary studies of four successful female leaders from across the country: two entrepreneurs who head their own businesses, one leader of a major nonprofit organization, and one who works in a large corporation. In these detailed portraits, readers see both the professional and personal sides of the female leaders, learning valuable tips for leading through inclusion and empowerment.

Section three, "Leadership in the New Economy," stresses that leaders must conform to the demands of today's workplace, including schools. Helgesen emphasizes the need to listen, concentrating on how leaders can balance efficiency and inclusion, or as she puts it "the need to nurture the human spirit" (p. 234).

As school leaders move to site-based management, empowering teachers and others to be involved in educational decisions, they will have to let go of traditional hierarchical structures. The model of inclusion described here may well be the effective leadership model for schools of the future.

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members know "Tom" from friendly association with him at the men's prayer breakfast, on the golf course, or from Rotary, they may quite naturally think, "I just don't know Mary" and select the male for the top leadership position. This is one reason men have often been given opportunities for promotion sooner, under the

assumption that they will meet the challenge. Many women now create situations through their hobbies or volunteerism to associate with the "club," too. In addition, women now compose one-third of school boards (Lockett and Underwood 1987). The definition of the "club" may be changing.

Finally, successful women leaders demonstrate high levels of skill in communication, problem solving, organizational savvy, team building, instruction, and curriculum (Gardenswartz and Rowe 1987). Self-confidence is a characteristic of women leaders, and, in spite of all the evidence documenting sex discrimination, they don't get hung up on gender. These women don't "whine" but command equality through their actions. It seems the best way to stop being a victim is to stop acting like one.

### The Female Advantage

Education is mirroring business in its slow but steady awakening to the fact that the demographics of the American work place are changing just as the school population is. For the first time in history, white males are a minority. The United States Department of Labor projects that within a decade, 75 percent of those entering the work force will be minorities or women. All of our institutions will begin to adapt to this fact of life.

In the past, well-intentioned members of the dominant coalition have tried to ignore differences in workers in the name of equality. To succeed, many women have fought long and hard to become like their male role models in leadership positions; they have become aggressive and competitive, wearing dark suits, consciously lowering their natural speaking voices, and often outdoing men in their use of profanity. The concept that "we are equal" came to mean "we are the same." "The problem with measuring everyone against the white male standard," says Gerald Adolph, a management consultant, "is that you set up a sizable portion of your work force for failure"

(Copeland 1988). Even more significant, we may be failing to draw on strengths that are particularly well developed in the minority group.

No one in education will deny the existence of sometimes cutthroat school board politics. To survive in such an atmosphere, some management consultants advise a technique called "blending," a martial arts term. It refers to doing everything you can to understand the other person's point of view and match your moves to theirs. A number of experts say that women are especially good at this because in their formative years they routinely relied on persuasion rather than intimidation (Gelman and Powell 1985).

Along these same lines, the Executive Development Centers, in association with the American Association of School Administrators and the University of Texas in Austin, conducted a nationwide study that rated the skills required of an educational executive (Glass and Sclafani 1988). The majority of superintendents agreed that climate building and success in managing personnel are among the most essential skills to the job. Both men and women demonstrate these skills equally well. The male superintendents expressed confidence in their ability to manage operations, facilities, and finance but admitted feeling the greatest need for improvement in the areas of communication, implementation of new instructional systems, curriculum development, and teacher evaluation. Striking about these areas of weakness is that they are precisely the areas of strength exhibited by women leaders. Administrative woman tend to possess more expert information than men because they've had more classroom experience. In an age that is refocusing attention on the

teaching process, women in leadership will be a valuable asset.

Research is supporting the growing belief that rather than lacking leadership skills, women have the "right stuff" for the superintendency. We now know that both men and women are capable of providing leadership and good management and that their characteristic styles can complement each other. True, traditionally all-male groups who begin to include females often exhibit some initial tension and are not as "comfortable" as the old single-sex group. However, diverse groups are also less likely to maintain the status quo. The results of making the effort to discuss, negotiate, and develop consensus with others are more likely to be successful, equitable, and lasting.

### Opportunity '90s

There is no doubt about it: the 1990s is the breakthrough decade when women will achieve positions of leadership throughout corporate America (Naisbitt and Aburdene 1990). Women now make up 40 percent of the managers, half of all accountants, one-third of computer scientists, and one-third of the managers in advertising, marketing, and public relations (*Working Woman*, September 1990). Similarly, more women will be appointed as school superintendents in the decade ahead, opening up tremendous career advancement opportunities to women in education and providing vital, new leadership needed to reform education in America.

Ella Flagg Young's prediction of a female monopoly of educational leadership may never materialize, nor necessarily should it. However, the women leaders are coming. They are fresh, determined, and ready to work with men to improve our schools.

Now that's a prediction worth fulfilling. □

<sup>1</sup>According to the Office of Minority and Women's Issues of the American Association of School Administrators.

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