

Agentic and Communal Attributes:

Effectiveness, Innovation, and Transformational Leadership in Educational Administration

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Abstract

Since the advent of public schools and for more than 150 years, educational leaders have endeavored to adjust the norms for educational leadership to meet the needs of contemporary demands. The longstanding norms, including the feminization of the classroom teacher during the 1800's and the promotion of men to positions of educational leadership in the 1900's, do not effectively serve the educational goals of the 21st century. The norms, soundly established by the mid-1900's, were primarily founded traditional gender roles and were guided by a general set of beliefs about agentic (masculine) and communal (feminine) attributes. The traditional norms for educational roles were predominately driven by Westward Expansion, World War I, World War II, and the economic competition of the Industrial Age.

Today, preK-12 school systems exist in the Technology Age. Stakeholders in the preK-12 educational environment requires a new set of educational leadership norms that are based on societal changes, school choice, program driven design, and on transformational leadership. The 21st century norms for educational leadership require dramatic changes for public schools to effectively compete with contemporary challenges. The traditional public school, which relies heavily on traditional norms, must embrace the transformation leadership model which is agile and adaptive to the web of connections present in everyday life. The danger of perpetuating traditional norms in the 21st century is that public school systems are limiting their own ability to envision new solutions, foster creativity, welcome innovation, encourage success, and expand opportunities for transformational leadership.

Research Question

This research brief examines the terms agentic and communal as they relate to ideas of diversity, masculinity, and femininity in leadership roles and how transactional and transformational leadership traits are valued differently through the lens of gender identity. Contemporary research explores agentic and communal traits and how those traits are perceived differently by stakeholders in preK-12 educational organizations (Kis & Konan, 2014). Gender perceptions and effective leadership have been studied through social role theory (Koenig & Eagly, 2014), gender role theory (Karau & Eagly, 1999), and role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Twenty-first century educational leaders must address whether gender in leadership is judged with the same set of standards and expectations for males and females. Further, educational leaders must ask whether gender balance is more essential for educational leadership today in the Technology Age than it was during the Industrial Age. It is essential for educational leaders to ask whether gender imbalances in leadership limit the ability of preK-12 institutions to be innovative, futuristic, and to provide fertile ground for transformational leadership. Educational leaders must also give serious consideration to whether gender balance among educational leaders positively or negatively impacts how teachers and their students envision their own leadership potential. The questions that provide the foundation for this paper are:

- Does a balance of communal and agentic attributes in an educational leader or leadership team shape effectiveness, innovation, and transformational leadership in preK-12 public schools?
- What impact does the gender of the educational administrator (support system) have on experienced teachers and on students (efficacy, change)?

Introduction

Communal and Agentic Attributes

Modern research on the subject of masculine (agentic) and feminine (communal) dimensions emerged with a landmark article by Constantinople (1973) which critiqued early measures of masculinity and femininity. “The terms, masculinity and femininity, have a long history in psychological discourse, but both theoretically and empirically they seem to be among the muddiest concepts in the psychologist’s vocabulary” (p. 390). Following this critique, numerous researchers described a new framework in which masculinity and femininity comprise two separate dimensions, thus avoiding the tradeoffs of a single dimension (Wood & Eagly, 2015). Studies that have followed Constantinople’s landmark research examine the interpersonally oriented, task-oriented, autocratic, and democratic styles of females and males. New data adds to the previous research by offering information about transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles. This research builds upon the foundation of agentic and communal categories to generally describe qualities and characteristics of leadership (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

For more than forty years, gender roles have been categorized as communal and agentic and it is widely accepted that these attributes are not mutually exclusive. Males and females typically possess both agentic and communal attributes and demonstrate a balance of those attributes depending upon personal and environmental circumstances. There are dualities in human nature which are integrated in a complex manner for each individual person (Constantinople, 1973). Logically, it follows that communal and agentic traits exist to varying degrees within each individual leader and those attributes impact the manner a leadership role is enacted.

Gender roles are a set of accepted beliefs about the various attributes of both females and males. Three theories considered in the context of this paper are: social role theory (Koenig & Eagly, 2014), gender role theory (Karau & Eagly, 1999), and role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These theories build on social psychologists' tradition of studying bias, prejudice, and stereotyping. The three theories also build on the industrial-organizational psychologists' tradition of studying perceptions of managerial roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These three theories share commonalities especially when considering agentic and communal attributes.

Communal characteristics, which are ascribed more strongly to females, describe a concern with the welfare of other people. In social roles, females are valued for being affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturing, and gentle. In contrast, agentic characteristics are ascribed more strongly to males and describe as assertive, controlling, and confident tendency. Specifically, in social roles, males are valued for their ability to behave in a manner that is aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful, independent, self-sufficient, self-confident, and prone to act as a leader (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Karau & Eagly, 1999). Likewise, these same agentic and communal attributes may create relative limitations for males and females depending upon the circumstances. The agentic and communal attributes naturally carry over and create challenges for balance of power and influence in the workplace.

The main objective of social role theory is founded in beliefs about the differing capabilities of females and males to lead an organization. Social role theory indicates that success in leadership is highly dependent on which communal and agentic attributes an individual has or is perceived to have by others. In addition, the social role theory provides a framework that includes contrasts in the leadership styles of females and males. The complexity

of gender differences may obscure the causes that produce differences or similarities in the leadership styles (Koenig & Eagly, 2014).

There are two main paradigms of educational leadership to be considered in the context of this research. The two paradigms are transactional (traditional) leadership and transformational (reform) leadership. Traditional norms require that transactional leadership be upheld by agentic and communal attribute stereotypes. Transformational leadership, which is the style of reform, “may be more congenial to women because its communal behaviors assist female leaders with the specialized difficulties of lesser authority and legitimacy that they encounter in the workplace more often than do males” (Burdick & Danzig, 2006, p. 25). The problem for innovation in education lies in the idea that while agentic attributes are associated with competence in leaders, communal attributes which may be more readily associated with reactive behaviors in leaders (Rudman & Glick 1999; Rudman & Glick, 2001; Rudman & Kilianski, 2000). On the other hand, the contemporary leader is adept at leading in a web of connections and relationships which fits with modern day organizations and within the transformational leadership paradigm (Burdick & Danzig, 2006).

According to Ridgeway (2001) where more women have obtained leadership roles, researchers find that when women do assert authority, they are caught by one of the outgrowths of stereotyping called comparative devaluation. In other words, when women step outside of the prescribed communality way of conducting themselves, and exercise agentic behaviors, they are devalued by their colleagues. Comparative devaluation creates difficulty to achieve positions of leadership and authority. The devaluation cycle, brought about by stereotyping or interference from gender preconceptions, slows females down compared to similar males in leadership. The cumulative effect is to substantially reduce the number of females who successfully attain

positions of high authority. According to the research, females are measured and often devalued regardless of their education and experience.

Holistically, traditional views about agentic and communal attributes in males and females may have an adverse impact on the innovation of an organization because the beliefs might hinder a leader's ability to focus, create, and implement new ideas. Although a female is likely to be considered competent when she enacts an agentic leadership style, she also risks a backlash and at a minimum, the female leader risks being judged as insufficiently nice (Rudman & Glick, 1999; Rudman & Glick, 2001).

Summary of Findings

Effectiveness of Leadership

The effectiveness of a leader depends on the attributes, skills, and abilities possessed by that individual. The effectiveness of a leader may be undermined from the onset if the general held belief is that females will be less affective in positions of authority. Eagly and Karau (2002) explain that characteristic markers such as: affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, and gentle are used as descriptors for a communal individual and are ascribed to female leaders. In contrast, agentic leaders are described as: assertive, controlling, confident, aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful, independent, self-sufficient, self-confident, and prone to act as a leader.

Transactional leadership, which is hierarchical and traditional, has fostered two forms of bias toward female leaders. The biases toward female leaders are demonstrated by both implicit and explicit career barriers. Eagly and Karau (2002) assert the two biases are based primarily on agentic and communal attributes in leaders and females bear the burden of the inherent disadvantages of the transactional leadership model. Female leaders experience the following:

less favorable evaluation of women's (than men's) potential for leadership because leadership ability is more stereotypical of men than women and; less favorable evaluation of the actual leadership behavior of women than men because such behavior is perceived as less desirable in women than men.

Today, females and males need to see a gender balance represented in leadership roles to move toward a transformational model in educational leadership. Research shows that role models contribute to a change in the female gender role toward greater agency (confidence in ability to lead) in the long run and have encouraged more women to enter stereotypically masculine occupations such as leadership roles (Schyns & Sczesny, 2010). The hypothesis is that envisioning oneself in a leadership role will lead to improved self-efficacy and successful performance in the traditional leadership roles. A balance of female and male role models will contribute to an increase in agentic traits for all (Bosak & Sczesny, 2008). When all stakeholders in preK-12 school communities are represented at every level of leadership, the organizational structure builds shared trust, growth mindset, improved self-efficacy, and deepens belief in the effectiveness of all educational leaders.

Transformational Leadership and the Double-Bind

According to Diekman (2007) educational leadership demands that individuals involved in the practice possess both agentic and communal attributes. Public schools represent the community in which they exist. Public schools also bind the community through jobs, activities, and set the tone for various civic interactions. Agentic attributes, which may manifest themselves in dominant behaviors, may bring about penalties in communal occupations such as education. While school leaders are expected to demonstrate agentic qualities to manage a school system, educational leaders must be conscientious enough to balance their skill set to

meet the unique needs of their community. Research refers to this as the double-bind of dominance (Diekman, 2007).

Agentic attributes help both males and females attain higher professional status but, for females, agentic attributes might jeopardize social relationships. Role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) suggests that behavior will be evaluated more positively when it is congruent with traditional valued social roles. Thus, females who demonstrate agentic attributes in their role as leader tend to score lower on evaluations based on communality or interpersonal skills (Diekman, 2007). “The prescription to ‘be feminine’ while simultaneously fulfilling agentic requisites may be a difficult and demanding balancing act akin to driving over rough terrain while keeping one hand on the wheel and the other reassuringly on passengers' backs” (Rudman, & Glick, 1999, p. 1009).

According to Eagly (2007) women are consistently concerned with whether they are simultaneously balancing and fulfilling agentic and communal requirements, while men are operating without those same concerns. This type of cognitive distraction may place female leaders at a distinct disadvantage because it may impede one’s ability to focus on fully expressing creativity, innovation, and advancement. The female leader may be prone to second-guessing decisions whereas the male leader may not have that same response. While more females are being rewarded for having excellent leadership skills, in the United States, more people still prefer male than female bosses and it is still more difficult for women than men to become leaders and to succeed in male-dominated leadership roles. There has been progress toward equality, yet the progress is overshadowed by the lack of greater equality in organizational leadership.

Lanaj & Hollenbeck (2015), in support of gender role theory, determined that “all else equal, there was a direct bias against women when it came to leadership emergence that resulted in men over-emerging as leaders” (p. 1488). In preK-12 education, it is common knowledge that females comprise a greater percentage of middle-management positions than males. The middle management of preK-12 education includes positions such as classroom teachers, educational support positions, office and secretarial, guidance counseling, and administrative support positions. The feminization of middle-management jobs may reinforce discrimination against the most competent and ambitious women. For the serious female applicants (those who exhibit agentic traits but may therefore be viewed as violating prescriptions for feminine niceness) feminized job descriptions may only legitimate or condone using unfair and stereotypical perceptions that agentic women are difficult and insensitive. Thus, matching males on agency is necessary for females to counteract perceptions that they are insufficiently qualified for high-status jobs but it may lead to the double-bind (Diekmann, 2007; Rudman & Glick 1999).

Women in leadership roles share a common dilemma. If they enact agentic behaviors to be perceived as qualified for leadership roles, they are rewarded with competence ratings equal to those for agentic men. However, by enacting agentic behaviors they also suffer a backlash effect in the form of social repercussions. In other words, women who exemplify the qualities desired in a leader may experience prejudice and, at a minimum, they may not be well-liked (Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006).

Agency, Communitary, and Transformational Leadership

The modern transformational leader:

... Encompasses a list of qualities that typically have been attributed to the female styles of leadership. These attributes position the contemporary leader to lead in a web of connections and relationships, fitting with modern day organizations. Through traits such as caring, collaboration, and communication, personal

associations foster creative systems with the ability to respond to fluid environments (Burdick & Danzig, 2006, p. 25).

Communal attributes are essential to transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is superior to transactional leadership because it requires collaboration, connections, and furthers positive work relationships (Burdick & Danzig 2006). It is critical to ensure that gender balance is embedded in a leadership structure. The imbalance of gender perspectives limits the ability for a team, group, or organization to perform to their highest potential (Carli & Eagly, 2001).

In the United States, females are viewed as legitimate careerists, with the agency necessary for carrying out important work, however, when gender is the first thing that is seen, biases related to agentic and communal attributes may influence all possibilities that follow. If females violate the expectancies for communal behaviors and forge into agentic territory where males occupy powerful roles, females' authority may not be well received. Bias toward female authority may be the result of linking men to power and influence. It may be an unavoidable reality that the moment gender is identified, it becomes a barrier in the quest for leadership. (Rudman & Kilianski, 2000).

The paradigm shift toward transformational leadership requires that effective communicators be in positions of leadership. The 21st century educational leaders are those who affect change and foster reform through listening, caring, collaborating, training, modeling, and connecting with staff (Burdick & Danzig, 2006).

Implications of Findings

Bear in mind that “the business manager prototype no longer fits the requirements for effective school leadership” (Burdick & Danzig, 2006, p. 40). There are mounting challenges for 21st century schools and for all stakeholders within school communities. The key to meeting

those challenges is to build communal skills and, as a result, shift organizations toward a transformational leadership paradigm. This challenge involves collaboration, democratic decision-making, and meaningful relationships between leaders and their subordinates (Helgesen, 1995). Because leadership has traditionally been a masculine construct described in agentic terms, females face substantial barriers to attaining leadership. Female leaders may be subjected to biased reactions because the leader stereotype is generally incongruent with the communal behaviors (Karau & Eagly, 1999). However, to enact meaningful change in leadership that also creates a shift toward transformational leadership, school systems must seek leaders with communal qualities. Communal attributes are essential to the process of building a new paradigm for learning in the 21st century. Transformational leadership is based on communal qualities and is the shift toward leadership that is focused on achievement through innovation and research based instructional methods (Burdick & Danzig, 2006).

Educational leaders today are those who affect change and foster reform through listening, caring, collaborating, training, modeling, and connecting with staff (Burdick & Danzig, 2006, p. 40). Shakeshaft (1986) reported that “women ... are likely to view the job of principal or superintendent as that of a master teacher or educational leader while men view it from a managerial, industrial perspective” (p. 118). Gender roles in general and in leadership are consensual beliefs about the attributes of females and males. Stereotypic beliefs are the expectations that men have high levels of agentic attributes, exemplified by being independent, masterful, assertive, and competent, and that women have high levels of communal attributes, including being friendly, unselfish, concerned with others, and emotionally expressive. Transformational leaders of the 21st century must possess both communal and agentic attributes. The 21st century student needs both male and female role models in leadership positions so they

may envision where they themselves fit on the spectrum of leadership. A gender balance among educational leaders will reveal the hidden potential in varied leadership styles and will maximize innovation in educational organizations. School reform in the 21st century will only be possible if school systems embrace active learning communities and departs from the hierarchical managerial structures of the past.

Applications to MOEC

MOEC has a unique opportunity as a consortium of K-12 school districts, community colleges, and UNO educational leaders to eliminate barriers and develop a level playing field for the career advancement of educational leaders who possess agentic and communal traits. This may begin with efforts to balance the pool of candidates across the Omaha metropolitan area.

Balancing the pool of candidates entails creating a common list based on an agreed upon criteria. The selection criteria may include descriptors of agentic and communal attributes; doctoral students; teacher leaders with advanced degrees; teacher leadership cohort participants; teacher leaders in local and state education associations; teachers who have demonstrated community collaboration; and teachers who have participated and presented at professional conferences.

MOEC has challenging projects already underway. Perhaps a preK-16 collaboration fueled by a paradigm shift toward transformational leadership would afford more resources from which to draw support. There are many talented individuals working in education today who are well-equipped and highly capable of embracing reform in the Omaha metropolitan area.

Author's Information

Amy Himes has worked in the field of education for more than 25 years in Nebraska, first with Lincoln Public Schools and presently with Papillion La Vista Community Schools. Himes is the Department Leader of World Languages and the High Ability Learner Facilitator at Papillion La Vista Senior High School. Himes teaches Honors Spanish and Visual Arts and is a National Board Certified Teacher. Himes has served as Vice President and as President of Papillion La Vista Education Association at Papillion La Vista Community Schools. Himes successfully introduced and passed New Business Item #81(<http://bit.ly/2nu2AOs>) at the National Education Association Representative Assembly in Denver, 2014.

Amy Himes has worked in various roles during both tenures with LPS and PLCS including but not limited to: Department Leader; Curriculum Design and Implementation; Spanish textbook selection (LPS and PLCS), Contributor to Nebraska State Standards for Foreign Language Education; LPS High School Focus Program Design and Implementation; PLCS Summer School Principal; PLCS contract negotiations; and, in 2016-17, Himes spearheaded the school-community based facilities design of the PLHS Monarch Garden. After school, Himes sponsors the PLCS Green Team and coaches the PLHS Academic Quiz Bowl Team. Throughout her career, Amy Himes' work has focused on enriching the school community with innovative programming for large and small student groups. She has also concentrated her efforts toward improving the lives of her fellow teachers through collaboration and by example. Her current research focuses on educational leadership traits with an emphasis on agentic and communal interpersonal skills. Himes is a student in the doctoral program at the University of Nebraska-Omaha.

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