Leadership Traits of Successful Women University Presidents

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to describe the leadership traits of successful women university presidents. Through interviews conducted with 4 women who lead research intensive universities, this narrative study identified several themes related to leadership success. The findings inform leadership learning for all women working in education.
Keywords: Trait Leadership, Women University Presidents

University presidents are the leaders of their institutions. The university presidency is viewed as the pinnacle of leadership success and the career end point on the higher education leadership ladder. Although the role of the president is complex, it is especially complicated for women.

The majority of women serve in the role of president at community colleges (American Council on Education, 2012). However, the hiring of female leaders at doctoral granting institutions is on the rise. In 2006, women held 14% of the presidential positions at doctoral-granting institutions. In 2011, women held 22% of these positions (American Council on Education, 2012). Although not on the parity of men, women in higher education are increasing in leadership responsibilities (Bornstein, 2008; Eagly and Carli, 2007a; Glazer-Raymo, 2008)

According to Eagly and Carli (2007a), traits are an equalizing power in leadership competence. In an investigation of traits as related to effective leadership, results showed men and women possess an equal balance of successful leadership traits. According to Keohane (2010), women university presidents exhibit positive leadership traits but are often hindered by the organizational complexities of the institution. Thus, women who become university presidents must possess leadership traits and navigational acumen.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify and describe the leadership traits of women presidents who lead large research institutions. Three questions guided the framework of the study.

1. What are the leadership traits of women presidents in public research institutions?

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2.   How do women presidents describe leadership success?
3. What is the path to the presidency?

The significance of the study will inform women educators who aspire to attain leadership positions within their organizations of the traits needed for leadership success. The implications of the study will also inform educational organizations on ways to best support women leadership by building program frameworks that endorse leadership knowledge and skills.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

According to Bass (2008), traits are competencies that can be caught as "snapshots" (p. 103) and correlated to situational effects. Certain traits are more evidenced in leaders (Bass, 2008; Derue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011; McCrae & Costa, 1987). Specific traits correspond to effective leadership (Bass, 2008; Bono & Judge, 2004; Carlyle, 1869; Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001; Derue et al., 2011; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). Trait leadership theory has grown from a list of inheritable qualities (Bass, 2008; Carlyle, 1869) to a theory of leadership (Northouse, 2010).

A historical difficulty in examining leadership traits has been lack of a valid and reliable measurement (Barker, 2001; Bass, 2008; Northhouse, 2010). Studies have attempted to quantify traits for leadership analysis (Bass, 2008; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Lord, De Vader, & Alliger, 1986; Mann, 1959). However, with the emergence of the five-factor model of personality (McCrae & Costa, 1987) or the Big 5 a reliable framework of personality traits emerged to support leadership research (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). The segments that comprise the Big Five are Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. Judge et al. (2002) conducted a meta-analysis of 78 leadership and personality studies published between 1967 and 1998. Results indicated a strong correlation between the Big Five personality traits and predictors of leadership.

Research on traits has particular relevance for women leaders (Eagly & Carli, 2007a). Intelligence, a trait associated with leadership, is found equally in both men and women. According to Costa, Terracciano, and McCrae (2001), of the Big Five personality traits, men and women displayed Extraversion equally. However, men showed an increase in the Extraversion sub-trait of assertiveness and excitement seeking while women exceeded men in the sub-traits of warmth, positive emotions, gregariousness, and activity. In the end, neither men nor women had the advantage in the area of Extraversion or trait development as a theory of leadership. Thus, trait leadership is an equalizing factor for both men and women.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study of leadership traits is a qualitative narrative study of the traits of successful women university presidents. A search of the *2010 Carnegie Classification of Institutes of Higher Education* using the Classification Descriptor: Research Universities

(Very High Research) yielded 108 institutions of higher education. A manual search of each university listed was completed to determine the gender of the school's president. This resulted in 9 potential participants. Each participant was sent an invitation letter via US mail and email requesting a one-hour in-person interview. Four participants agreed to be interviewed. Data was collected during a one-hour in person semi-structured interview at the participant's institution. Data was also collected through a one-hour in-person interview with individual(s) the president considered part of her leadership team.

The interviews were hand coded for themes that reflected the purpose of the study. Narrative coding (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) was applied to discover actions, events and story lines that identified the self-described leadership traits of each participant. Using a two cycle coding method (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña 2014; Saldaña, 2013), the first cycle codes were guided by the research questions. This resulted in three broad categories: leadership traits (LT), leadership success (LS) and path to the presidency (PTP). Structural coding (Saldaña, 2013) was used to organize the data into segments that were connected through notes, memos and diagrams.

In second cycle coding, data was organized from structural codes to pattern codes (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña 2014; Saldaña, 2013) to recognize emerging themes. According to Creswell (2013), a researcher should use evidence to support a code or theme by triangulating the theme with another form of data. The primary data were the interviews with each woman president. The themes from the interviews were triangulated with themes found in the interviews of members in the president's leadership team, binders of extensive field notes, biographical information collected on each participant, and 242 secondary source articles collected from the news media. Triangulating data and seeking points of convergence supports the reliability of the codes.

RESULTS

Three themes emerged from the data. First, all participants exhibited traits aligned with the Big 5 personality inventory (McCrae & Costa, 1987) and considered integral to leadership success. The traits of Extroversion, Openness, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness were equally represented among participants. Extroversion is described as the tendency to connect with people and work well in groups. Openness is a willingness to hear all the voices in the conversation. Both of these traits connected in the skill of team building. One participant described her process.

> It really should be about teamwork. Because I don't know how else you do these kinds of jobs if you haven't got a talented team around you, and you can't trust them and delegate to them the responsibilities you need. I couldn't do what I need to do if I didn't have people that I could trust to do the day-to-day business.

A second participant echoed the importance of being a connected leader.

> You have to remind yourself every day that when I decided to go into the profession as a faculty member, it was about what I could do to help people move along in their lives and transform themselves. As a president, I do the

same thing, only in a broader scale. So you have to be passionate about the purpose. And then I think you need to surround yourself with some really good people. It's about continued engagement. I've often wondered about aloof presidents, or people who didn't have a style that was like *get me into the conversation* and let's make sure that we don't lose an opportunity. So I've got really good people that I surround myself with.

Second, a participant's leadership traits informed her leadership success. Conscientiousness, Agreeableness and Extroversion were evident in one participant's description of her goal to improve the alcohol culture on campus. She assigned the project to another administrator in her office. The program was successful and the administrator was honored publicly while the president was largely ignored. She reflected

We were working together and I told him 'you gotta work on this for me because it is important to me.' I've got 25,000 employees, 30,000 students and 55,000 possibilities every day for something to go very wrong. I am pleased that there are people on my staff that are getting this kind of recognition. For them, it's more important than for me.

Another participant described the growth in her leadership that occurred after a contentious faculty contract negotiation.

You grow from those. You grow from those situations, so that you can handle tough moments. And we've had some difficult times since. We've had other moments where there have been emergencies on the campus. And I think that you gain from very difficult high profile situations,to learn how to, to balance that communication, internal and external. They're all learning moments.

Third, the path to the presidency mirrored a labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007b). The barriers each participant encountered supported the development of their leadership traits and improved their leadership practice. One participant described taking leadership positions that were unpaid. She said

I didn't really look for administrative positions but I kind of accreted them, and they were never paid. They were always in addition to everything else I was doing…one of the associate deans said to me, 'in the dean's office, if we want something done right, we go to you.' That's the kind of reputation I got.

Another participant describes her path to the presidency as a path of intuition and risk.

I worked in an auxiliary unit and got involved in the budgeting process and the appropriations and went to the regents meetings, and started to observe university leadership. I had all those campus experiences, but I also had linkages to the system with other provosts and other chancellors, and so during about a 10 year timespan, I got to take the mystery out of the leadership position as chancellor and president. And I saw these people as human beings. I never really aspired [to be a president]. I just wanted to keep doing what I was doing, and doing it well and making a difference. So when the first call came [from the university], it was actually great fun to interview. I would have never thought that.

The findings indicate a connection between the leadership traits identified by the Big 5 personality inventory and effective leadership practice. Leadership traits are also a platform for leadership success. For each participant, the development of leadership traits was influenced by her response to barriers in moving through the leadership labyrinth.

IMPORTANCE TO THE FIELD

Many challenges face universities in 2014. Presidents must handle shrinking state allocations, the growing population of nontraditional students, cost disparities between academic programs, and the impact of technology (Fethke & Policano, 2012). In addition, in 2011, 58% of university presidents were age 61 or older (American Council on Education, 2012). This suggests that many presidents are looking towards retirement.

This study contributes to the research on trait leadership theory and the successful traits of women leaders. This study also adds to the foundation of research on ways women move into and survive pinnacle leadership positions. Though the sample size was small, the participants in the study evidenced the connection between leadership traits and leadership success. The small percentage of women leading at the top level tells the story of the need for organizational change. Further research is needed on ways institutions can augment practice and create avenues for women to access leadership advancement

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