How Women Administrators in Public Higher Education Institutions Choose their "Battles"

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The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to assess perceptions of women administrators in public higher education institutions on how they choose their "battles." What "battles" the women chose related to their demographic information, organizational culture, leadership style and conflict management skills.

INTRODUCTION

Women leaders who hope to attain or retain a higher education administration position need effective conflict management skills to negotiate through the organizational culture and demands of the position. Studies of over 200 women in leadership positions in business and higher education indicate that conflict is one function of organizational performance (Singleton, et al., 1994). Some researchers propose that certain types of conflict are healthy and lead to creative solutions, while other types of conflict involving personal animosity provoke distrust, cynicism, and apathy (Amason & Thompson, 1995).

Much has been written concerning effective conflict resolution techniques used to diffuse the possibility of an altercation (Drake, 1996; Fennell, 1994; Grab, 1996; Johnson, 1994; Keane, 1996). In addition, much has been shared concerning conflict management (Kormanski, 1982). However, little research has been conducted to identify the decision-making process women administrators in higher education employ when determining in which conflicts to engage. A conflict can escalate to such a level as
to be considered as a "battle." Some articles or newsletters, documenting women administrators' opinions contain references of "having to pick and choose battles" (Albino, 1992; Westerhof, 1995). How do women administrators choose which "battles" to "fight?"

BACKGROUND

Decision-making and Conflict

Decision-making is a critical role of the educational administrator. It is largely a cognitive task concerned with achieving a "best" decision or solution for a given situation. Decision-making has been defined as the reduction of informational uncertainty (Fann & Smeltzer, 1989) or as efforts to analyze a task, assess evaluation criteria, and identify the positive and negative qualities of alternative choices (Hirokawa & Rost, 1992).

During the decision-making process, conflict can occur when differing perspectives, or orientations to the problem, make a single solution unlikely or impossible. Conflict is an inevitable and normal event of organizational life. Research indicates that certain conflicts typically arise over differing values, scarce resources, rewards, status, and power (Schockley-Zalabak, 1981).

Although conflict is recognized as essential for organizational growth, conflict can produce both positive and negative outcomes. Strategies are needed to handle the resulting tension from conflict situations. Research indicates that women frequently encounter stereotypes concerning their conflict management skills when seeking educational administrative positions. Women are sometimes perceived as less capable in terms of attitudes and skills needed in managerial work. In addition, women are sometimes viewed as unwilling to exercise power, conflict avoid-ers, indecisive, valuing
harmony over productivity, and lacking in assertiveness (Childress, 1986; Fortinberry, 1986; Jacobson, 1985; Kagan, 1980). However, research on conflict management models typically has involved male subjects and been conducted by male researchers (Formisano, 1987).

Many conflict management strategies have been suggested to women administrators, such as withdrawing or suppressing the conflict, integrating conflicting ideas to form a new solution, working out a compromise, or using power to resolve the conflict (Kormanski, 1982). Occasionally, conflict management strategies are not enough and escalation occurs to a new level informally referred to as a "battle" situation.

**Battles**

Although the term "battle" rarely is used in a formal sense within the educational arena, the colloquial phrase "pick your battles" is referenced when discussing strategies for successful management as an administrator and leader. Ondrovich (1997) discussed twelve cardinal rules for dealing with educational conflict. She advocated that confronting the problem directly may not always be the best plan. "Picking your battles carefully and choosing the ones you can win is essential to survival" (Ondrovich, 1997, p. 12). Westerhof (1995, p. 6) quoted the Vice Chancellor from the University of Colorado at Denver: "What bothers her most as an administrator is having to pick and choose her battles."

The phrase "choose your battles carefully" seems to involve strategy. According to Judith Albino (1992), past president of University of Colorado, the word "strategy" seems to be a "dirty word." Albino advocated that strategizing is a skill needed in the educational field because most women are competing (another "dirty word") primarily against men who seem more versed in strategy, competition and a few other job related skills. A study of women college administrators identified four abilities of successful
women in the field, one of which was the ability to use strategy (Albino, 1992).

Conflicts are commonplace in organizations, including educational institutions. Conflicts can escalate to a "battle" situation when individuals are under emotional stress, or when there is a climate of distrust, competition, or miscommunication. What types of strategies do women administrators use when choosing their battles? What is the decision-making process engaged in prior to the decision to enter into an escalated conflict or battle? How do women administrators in public educational institutions "choose their battles?"

**METHODODOLOGY**

This study uses the phenomenological method of qualitative inquiry (Moustakas, 1994). This particular study attempted to capture the meaning of the experienced reality, with the focus of the process on how something happened rather than on outcomes or results.

Twelve women in administrative positions in community colleges or universities were invited to participate in the study. Two declined the invitation. Sampling was performed using a theory-based or operational construct selection technique (Patton, 1990).

Personal interviews, from 60 to 90 minutes in length, were conducted at the participating administrator’s institution. After the interviews were transcribed, analysis was performed using analytical methods associated with grounded theory (Patton, 1990). The issues of validity and reliability were addressed in a number of ways. To enhance the validity of the study four verification procedures were incorporated: compilation of a reflexive journal (Creswell, 1998), member checking (Lincoln & Guba,
1985), peer examination (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and clarification of the researcher's bias (Creswell, 1998). The issue of reliability was addressed with the use of an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

FINDINGS

Demographics

Of the ten women interviewed for this study, six were employed by universities and four were employed by community colleges. Half of the women held non-academic positions. The titles held by these women ranged from dean of a college to president of the institution. Four of the women had served in administrative positions for 16-20 years and half of the women held a Ph.D. as their most advanced degree. Of the participants, seven were married and six had children at home while serving as an administrator. Half of the women were between the ages of 46-50. Three administrators indicated their ethnicity was not Caucasian.

Leadership Philosophies and Administrative Roles

To derive some understanding of the phenomenon of "how women administrators in public institutions choose their battles," it is important to describe the philosophy these women advocated concerning their personal leadership or management style. The participants' described their leadership styles as "participative management," "advocate of positive morale," "collaborative," "consultative," and "collective." In addition, these women administrators believed "praising employees is important," "patience with committees" is necessary, and decision-making should be an "inclusive process."

The women perceived their administrative roles differently depending on their position at their institution. Top level administrators perceived themselves as CEOs with the mission of preserving the vision of the organization. One woman, in a mid-management position, perceived herself as a "servant" who "quietly and nobly" served her unit. Other
women administrators perceived their roles as facilitators, advocates, collaborators, the institution’s representative, or a "voice" to present another's perspective.

**Use of the term "Battle"**

The word "battle" elicited a strong negative response from every administrator interviewed. Their negative perceptions seemed grounded in the belief that "battles" are antagonistic, confrontational, adversarial, and dictatorial, with a "winner" and a "loser" or "pro" and "con" positions. Some women were offended by the word "battle" and indicated they felt extreme discomfort or were "put off" by the use of the term.

It is important to note that three of the women indicated they almost refused an interview because of the research question. One woman said she had refused to participate in the study until she found herself in a conversation with a colleague and actually used the word "battle" herself. However, many of the women admitted that "battles" were a part of their administrative lives. This is where a pattern begins to emerge. Every one of the women in middle management positions indicated that the word "battle" is an accurate term to describe the amount of conflict inherent in certain situations or events. As one administrator said:

I think 'battle' is not a bad word. I think it is actually pretty accurate. There are battles. There are winners and losers sometimes. There don't have to be winners and losers in a total battle. just in parts of the battle.

Another middle management administrator confirmed that the word "battle" is accurate. When asked why, she responded, "because it is full of maneuvers and strategies and I associate it with war language. I think it is a good analogy." A third administrator said, "in rare cases the word 'battle' is accurate."
Women administrators in upper management positions also indicated discomfort with the word "battle," but were willing to use the term and discuss the decision-making process that is inherent in a "battle" situation. One woman said:

I don't like the word battle, but there are some battles. My preference is to think in terms of negotiating and so the primary part of my work is to select the ways in which I will negotiate for what needs to happen. There are occasional battles, but for me and the style that I work and what has been most successful for me has been negotiate, negotiate, negotiate. And if there are battles, they had best be very, very, very significant.

Top level administrators indicated they did not think in "battle" terms at all. Rather, they thought of conflict situations as opportunities for "facilitation" and "problem-solving" that involved certain strategies. One top level administrator said:

I wouldn't always call them battles in that we're not always lining up with someone in a "pro" position and someone in a "con" position. I think a lot of them are "pro, pro" or "con, con." I wouldn't call them battles because there is no fight. There is nothing to be won. You just need to take a stand on particular issues.

The emerging pattern indicated that administrators in mid-level positions were willing to label the conflict situations as "battles," while top level administrators considered the conflict situations as opportunities for "facilitation." Based on that emerging pattern, the researcher asked the remaining few women who were interviewed if they had viewed battles differently in earlier administrative positions. They confirmed that when they held faculty positions, they remembered being more confrontational, than facilitative.

**Battle Definitions and Perceptions**
When defining a battle, the women administrators used such phrases as: being assertive, being aggressive, a chess game, choosing to "be out there," a compromise, a conflict, the defense of an issue, an issue with a significant effect, a difference of opinion, maneuvers or strategies, not a "win-win situation," constructive problem solving, putting an issue on the line, setting priorities, taking a risk, a tough stand, or advancing a cause.

One woman administrator said the "battle" is:

often times not a win, win situation, but it's a compromise achieved. Or putting it on the line. It is being up front, being assertive with your thoughts and our actions. I think a lot of people interpret it as being confrontive, but I'm not so sure that it always needs to be confrontive. I think it's being direct. I think for women to do battle, it's being direct and being straight and acknowledging the issues, but it doesn't always have to be seen as confrontive.

The women administrators had many comments and perceptions concerning "battles" that emerged when discussing the decision-making process of choosing to "battle." The perceptions ranged from the beliefs that battles are situational, political, and contextual in nature, to personal and territorial. Battles can be energy-consuming, risky, and emotionally demanding; therefore, they need to be worthwhile. Battle lines shift, they can move fast, and they can be a 24-hour, everyday engagement of resources. Size-wise, battles can be system-wide and complex, or simplistic. Battles also can range from small skirmishes to a series of battles commonly referred to as a "war."

The Decision-Making Process

The decision-making process to choose to "battle" was different for every woman administrator interviewed. It is important to note that for those women who did not like to
use the word "battle," another phrase, selected by the administrator at the onset of the interview, was used. Therefore, although the word "battle" predominates in this study and in the interviews in an attempt to understand this phenomena, other words or phrases such as "conflict" or "a tough stand" can be used in replacement.

The question of how women administrators choose their "battles" revealed a decision-making process that leads up to a "battle" situation. Five themes emerged from this decision-making process. They were: a) choosing to battle; b) identifying battle issues; c) evaluating the potential battle situation; d) negotiating and communicating techniques; e) avoiding battles pro and con. In the following section, each theme is identified, defined, and discussed. Women administrator's voices will be shared to support the findings.

Choosing to Battle

An issue arises that demands the attention of the administrator. Conflict and differing opinions result. Most likely, the battle is brought to the administrator. In rare instances, the administrator instigates the battle. One top-level administrator made the following statement regarding issues and her choice in battle situations:

It depends on the issue and it depends on whether it's important that I speak out on that issue. You're not in a battle until you choose to be in that battle. There are times when people will start arguing and my thought is 'Man, I'm staying out of this one.' I mean there is nothing to be gained by jumping in on either side. And so I just won't say anything. People might ask your opinion and you say 'Well, I really don't think there is an institutional position on this issue.' You're not going to take sides in a particular issue.
When asked whether they always feel that they choose their battles, a number of women indicated they lacked a choice.

Sometimes battles are imposed upon me. It's not always my choice. There is a battle going on right now in [our state] over a degree that we offer I didn't choose that battle. I don't want that battle. But it's mine and every other [upper-level administrator] in the state. So I have no choice.

Another woman administrator disagreed. She said choosing a battle is always a conscious decision:

It has to be a strategic battle. There's always battles going on every day, but I turn my back and walk away from them. And you know, I can only choose so many. I'd like to say I choose one a year. It sometimes has to come up to about three a year. But they're exhausting, and incredibly demanding. It is the way, I think, administrators are making change.

A common theme emerged from these women administrators in identifying potential issues that could bring conflict into their environment. Some of the women felt they did choose their battles, consciously and deliberately. Other women felt that certain battles were brought to them and it was part of their job to negotiate through them. They felt they had no choice in whether to engage in certain battles. Regardless of their instigation, as one administrator put it, it is important to choose. She said:

Participant: It's important for women to choose.

Interviewer: Not just to go at every battle all the time?
Participant: Right. Nobody has that level of energy. To be effective, you have to choose. If you are seen as somebody who is onto everything in a very, very energetic way, then you may not be effective on anything.

If there is a choice in choosing certain battles, the women administrators firmly pointed out that they needed to be selected carefully and wisely. In addition, they felt it was more important to battle issues that threatened common goals of the organization. One woman discussed the rationale supporting the belief that choosing battles that are selfish or petty is self-defeating.

There are certain battles I don't choose, by the way. Because it's looked at as petty. And I want to deal with more important big issues issues that people would perceive as useful and not just lethargic. [Those petty issues] detract from the real serious problems. So, yes, you choose your battles that will be the most helpful. You start off with what you think are abuses and are really fundamentally hurting the institution, if any exist. Then you start looking at ways to make a vital, operating, stirring place.

The phrase "the right thing to do" was used repeatedly. Many of the women administrators indicated that regardless of the costs, personal or professional, they had the moral, professional, and ethical responsibility to "go to bat" for others because "it was the right thing to do" given the situation.

Although the costs of a battle are previously weighed, the women administrators felt they must take on a battle to support their personally held principles and values. Regardless of the choices presented to them, the administrators all advocated that analyzing all sides of the issue was a key decision-making part of the process.

**Identifying Battle Issues**
Issues these woman administrators felt were worthy of a battle typically involved personally held values or beliefs. Certain broad-based battle issues involved ethics, justice, equality, diversity, racism, sexism, and sexual orientation. As one administrator said:

I'd probably go to battle unquestionably anytime that I feel someone is being treated unfairly or unjustly, whether it's discrimination, race, gender, or sexual orientation. I have very strong values about people being oppressed and how that plays out.

Other issues that generated a battle situation included fairness, honesty, mistreatment of others, equitable treatment and pay, and diversity of opinion. One woman felt very strongly about gender discrimination concerning equity pay. Earlier in her career she had been given a raise $200 lower than any other faculty member who had been hired at the same time. When reviewing her performance with her boss, she discovered it was not her performance that was inferior, rather the reverse. It was because her husband had a job that contributed to her household income. The woman administrator said:

The bridges were totally destroyed that meeting [when I discovered the truth]. And I left that university because I will not work for someone who makes that kind of decision. It's important to me that I'm dealt with in an equitable manner. And I will not stand for anything that's not equitable.

Still other issues involved respect for others, being excluded from decisions or critical information, being blind-sided, or questioning their integrity. The administrators indicated that battle issues were not black and white, that they rarely disappeared if lacking attention, and that they considered them a part of their job.
**Evaluating the Potential Battle Situation**

Evaluating a potential battle situation involved many skills. One of them was the gathering of critical information. How and when this was done seemed to shape the battle situation. One of the key pieces of information was to determine if a battle was really inevitable.

The women administrators felt other questions needed to be asked when gathering critical information. The following is a list of those questions according to the women.

Who are the stakeholders?

What are the pros and cons of the situation?

What is the worst case scenario?

What is the possible outcome?

Is the battle "winnable"?

What are your own priorities for the battle?

Who is in the battle?

What is your realm of influence?

What are the costs and possible gain of going into battle?

What are the risks?

How many other battles is the administrator currently engaged in?
What is the possible impact on the administrator and others?

Following are two women administrators' voices evaluating a potential battle situation.

Well, I think you should have all your facts. I think one thing I've learned early on and I watch is that you should always look into both sides of the story. There are usually two sides to stories. And you should have all your facts before you proceed.

I think I spend a lot of time determining whether or not it's worth my energy. I mean, there are things, you know about the circles. [She drew three concentric circles on a sheet of paper. See Figure 1.] What you have learned is in the outside circle, and the next area is your area of influence and in the center is your area of control. I think for me, I measure is this an area I have control over? Or is this an area I can have influence over? Or is this an area that the best I'm going to do is learn from it? I need to decide when I can influence. Often times, I look at my realm of influence and I say, "What can I bring to the table? What is my area of expertise? How well do I know that individual? How well do I know their reaction?"

**Figure 1. Realm of Influence**

**Weighing factors**

Once the information is gathered, the potential battle is weighed against other activities or skirmishes going on in personal and professional lives. Weighing factors that emerged from the coding of the data included:

What are the battle costs or the "fallout"?

What can be gained?

What are the projected or desired outcomes?
What is the context of the battle (political agendas)?

What will be the personal impact (personal energy involved)?

What other people will be impacted?

Are there personal and professional costs?

What are the issues initiating the battle?

Is the timing right?

**Negotiating and Communicating Techniques**

The main goal of the decision-making process concerning a potential battle was to diffuse the situation enough to circumvent one. This phase involved the administrator's use of communication and negotiation skills, in an attempt to achieve a win-win situation which seemed to be the goal of the women administrators. As one woman said:

I think that most situations are "win" situations. And I think that is optional. I think people can choose to view things as a "lose" situation. And I guess that's their choice. But I think most things can be a "win" situation. It's not a battle, but there's negotiation. How can we do that? What kinds of ways can we do that? I think you can prevent most battles unless you're caught off guard and something comes up.

Communication skills involved careful listening and determining how other people may hear the message best. One woman administrator related a powerful story of working in an all-male office and how she discovered a way they would hear her best, whether negotiating or communicating. The method involved the use of a man on the committee!
She said:

I have been a single female administrator among ten or fifteen male administrators—the only female perspective and minority perspective. In discussions and in dialogue, I would be present at the table, but invisible in terms of what I had to say. They would, you know, nod their heads, but not hear what I was saying. The strategy that I began to develop was to lean over and whisper to the male next to me, and then that person would say my idea and it worked.

Interviewer: So, voice it is who is the mouthpiece. You found a different mouthpiece where your ideas could be shared.

Participant: Yeah, and it is okay that I didn't have credit for it. I just wanted the problems to be solved and I needed solutions.

Lastly, communication techniques mentioned by these women administrators involved being clear about goals, keeping the superior apprised of the situation, being sure to communicate clearly and honestly, choosing words carefully—especially in written communications, and being very clear about their stance.

In summary, these women administrators implemented strategies for circumventing a battle through techniques of conflict resolution. Discussions indicated they did not strive to put someone in a figurative "corner," but rather tried to listen and perceive another's viewpoint. Critical thinking was perceived as important. One woman felt strongly that it was important to avoid the appearance of "digging in" or entrenchment before the battle had ever begun. Instead, there needs to be acceptance that there are two sides to every story and different lenses through which to view the same situation or world. Listening and gathering a clear picture of the situation is a valuable technique of conflict management.
Avoiding Battles  Pro and Con

Women value personal relationships. Battles are perceived as a way to sever relationships because of the harm inflicted on another individual. Therefore, avoiding a battle, if possible, is an understandable step in the midst of a conflict situation. Although the majority of the women administrators strongly advocated the use of negotiation and compromise to avoid a battle, one woman discussed the belief that at some point avoiding battles is harmful.

I think when it becomes negative is when we avoid it--when we avoid the opportunity to do battle. And I think for many of us that is what we do. We avoid the battle rather than doing it. If we always avoid doing battle because we don't like to do it, --because it's difficult, it's confrontive then I think everything goes underground, and then I think it's a much bigger issue than we ever assumed it was going to be.

At some point in a conflict situation, after many attempts have been made to resolve the issue or to achieve a compromise, a stand must be taken. However, taking a stand should be used sparingly--especially a tough stand. If a tough stand is taken sparingly, the chances of winning increase.

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

The review of literature indicated that a consuming task for higher education administrators is the management of conflict that results from organizational growth and change. Conflicts can escalate to such a level as to be described as a "battle." This qualitative research study assessed perceptions of women administrators in public higher education institutions on how they elected to "choose their battles." Although the ten women used slightly different decision-making processes in choosing their "battles,"
the analysis of the data revealed an overall decision-making model that could reflect all ten participants. (See Figure 1.) The disadvantage of the overall model is that it becomes "watered down," losing the complexity and dynamics of the individual decision-making process.

In studying the decision-making model, the women administrators used a series of evaluative questions to determine whether the battle was worth fighting. Some of these questions assessed the real issue, type of resources, time available in their work schedule, whether it was an important value or principle, severity of the risks, and potential gain and losses. What "battles" they chose related to their: a) demographic information; b) organizational culture; c) leadership style; and d) conflict management skills.

Organizational Culture and Leadership Style

Interestingly, the women's perception and definition of a "battle" seemed to differ depending on the level of influence they held at their institutions. The women in mid to upper level administration perceived the word "battle" accurately described the particular situation or event. Their comments indicated a type of confrontation that was "face-to-face"--where the opponents could be seen, talked to, and heard. The issues were not necessarily more personal in nature, but more immediate to their surroundings, as if they were closer to the battle lines. The women seemed to have a personally held, vested interest in the outcome of the battle.

This did not seem to be the case with the top-level administrators. Their position during the "battle" seemed to be more removed, facilitative, and global. The process was one of negotiation, collaboration, and cooperation to achieve the "common good," than of a one-on-one "battle" situation. An analogy could be drawn that their role was to study the global picture of the "battle" from the "war room," working with their teams of experts to
identify potential conflict situations.

This study was not an in-depth look at women's leadership skills in higher education. However, it was evident that how these women administrators selected their "battles" directly correlated to their individual leadership philosophies. In fact, each of the women discussed their decision-making process of choosing a "battle" within the context of their personal leadership style.

The women administrators in this phenomenological study described their leadership styles as being "participative management," "collaborative," "consultive," and "collective." Their philosophy of accomplishing common goals was one of a more "web-like" structure (Helgesen, 1990), than a dictatorial hierarchy. Many perceived their role as a leader, whether in the organization or in a "battle," as acting as an advocate for others. Use of networks, negotiating, and empowering others also emerged as communication techniques or strategies used in this decision-making process.

Numerous women in this study discussed their decision-making process as situational. One woman indicated it would be very difficult to predict her reaction to a conflict, that every event necessitates different evaluation and techniques.

Finally, similar to a recent study of theoretical leadership (Irby, 1995), the participants tended to use strong leadership characteristics: a) seeking input; b) encouraging others to be involved in decision-making; c) sharing power and credit; d) empowering others to improve skills; and e) maintaining open communication. Only when the women were pushed or forced into a figurative "corner," would they act in a more direct style, perhaps because that was the style "heard best" by that group of individuals.
Conflict Management Skills

The women indicated conflict that could evolve into a "battle" situation could be minimized or managed. Effective leadership mandates both knowledge of and skill in conflict management techniques. A great deal of research has been conducted on strategies for managing conflict otherwise known as conflict management. Wheeless and Reichel (1990) found that a supervisor's use of solution-orientation strategies (a combination of collaboration and compromise) related positively to subordinates' satisfaction with supervision. The use of non-confrontation strategies (a combination of avoiding and accommodating) and control strategies (i.e. forcing) related negatively to task attraction of the supervisor. Therefore, the women administrators' use of compromise and collective collaboration would yield positive results to conflict situations.

Counter Story and Final Remarks

There is the possibility of a counter story in every research study (Gardner, 1995; Jablonski, 1996). In these interviews, the women administrators may have presented their sense of what they wanted to be or what they were trying to be, rather than how they really were. They may unintentionally have omitted "negative" perceptions they had received about themselves, or they may have wanted to portray a more positive image for this study. A counter story only can be assessed after interviewing others who work or participate in the phenomenon with the participant.

In conclusion, the women administrators were powerful perhaps more so because they rarely used the word. They were highly educated, experienced administrators who had survived and thrived in a male-dominated, hierarchical environment. They chose their "battles" cautiously and carefully, realizing their resources were limited and the costs high. They exemplified a new style of leadership for the next century-- not one that is devoid of leadership characteristics typically associated with males, but one that works
well with the individual, regardless of their gender status.

REFERENCES


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