Connecting to Communities: Transformational Leadership From Africentric and Feminist Perspectives

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Twenty female administrators in human service agencies serving diverse ethnic communities were interviewed to provide an understanding of their struggles and leadership styles. Applying both Africentric and feminist theoretical frameworks to inform the political frame advanced in theories of transformational leadership, connecting with community and community building were strategies for providing leadership.

The differences in administrative experiences and styles between men and women generally, and women espousing a feminist philosophy in particular, have gained attention in recent years (Chernesky and Bombyck, 1988). Yet in a time of changing demographics, when many women of color are administrators of human services, there has been a paucity of research on the concerns and contributions of female administrators of color working in community based human service agencies (Daley, 1995). This paper presents the findings from research on the experiences and leadership styles of women administrators, in community-based human service agencies serving communities of color. It is intended to provide information on their experiences connecting with communities as a strategy for leadership. Much of what they said and did reinforces concepts put forth in transformational models of leadership and reflects aspects of feminist and Africentric organizational theory (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Bolman & Deal, 1991; Burns, 1978; Gardner, 1989; Gilkes, 1983; Bradford, Soifer & Guttierez, 1994, Dumas, 1993; Hyde, 1989).

The Context

Recognizing the constraints of traditional bureaucratic organizational models and their implications for leadership and organizational functioning, organizational theories emerging over the past twenty years have stressed structures and leadership styles that allow for flexibility and individuation, support the importance of process, emphasize input into decision making, and stress the primacy of social relationships and interactions. There is an emphasis on team that is consistent with community in both Africentric and feminist theories (Bass and Avolio, 1994; Bargal and Schmid, 1989; Bennis, 1983; Burns, 1978; Iannello, 1992; Schiele, 1994; Senge, 1990).

Transformational Leadership. Among the theories that have significantly changed thinking about organizational behavior are those that build on the concepts of transformational leadership. The transformational leader assesses the needs, values and aspirations of his/her followers, is clear about his/her own values, needs, and vision, and acts in a manner that promotes the needs of both (Burns, 1978). There is a recognition of the relationship between the well-being of the individual, the work group, and the larger organization. Recognizing the social context of behavior, this type of leadership supports intellectual stimulation by attending to individual styles and needs for development, while creating a culture in which employees enhance their own satisfaction while working to promote the good of the organization. Consequently, workers are likely to invest more energy and time in the organization than they initially intended.

Support for creative problem-solving takes place in an atmosphere in which mistakes are accepted in the context of team involvement, commitment and support. Leadership reinforces activities that contribute to the vitality of the work community by actively participating followers (workers). The leadership creates an organizational culture based on openness, trust, and respect, and inspires team spirit (Bass and Avolio, 1994, Bass, 1985).

Transformational leadership is empowering and participatory as it promotes input into decision-making, delegation of tasks and responsibility, and fosters local leadership. The context of the leadership and followership is seen as indispensable to

understanding organizational problems and building on individual and group strengths. The acknowledgment of "followership" as a significant and reciprocal role in relation to "leadership" provides a unique organizational insight. Leaders cannot be studied in isolation from followers, constituents, or group members. The leader is a product of group history, culture, and interactions, and is shaped by such. The organization is envisioned as a system of interacting members with shared goals, values, and beliefs working together in a common effort toward mutually agreed on outcomes. The organization as functional community resounds.

Providing insights for organizational analysis, Bolman and Deal (1991) suggest that the complexity of organizations, and the accompanying demands on leaders, be viewed in terms of four frames: 1) the *structural* frame which addresses the formal organizational structure as outlined on organizational charts and which focuses on formal roles, rules, statuses, and responsibilities; 2) the frame of *human resources* which takes into account the beliefs, values, needs, and feelings of the workforce; 3) the *symbolic* frame which drops assumptions of rationality and recognizes that organizations reflect cultures that are driven by rituals, ceremonies, myths, stories, and beliefs; and 4) the *political* frame which, according to Bolman and Deal, tends to be overlooked and under-researched, focuses on the competition among groups for resources and power. It is seen in both intra- and inter-organizational conflicts, tensions, rivalries, and power struggles.

The following exploratory study addresses leadership strategies and struggles as discussed by women of color as administrators, with attention to the impact of gender and race. Building on transformational leadership theory, it is an attempt to focus on the political frame of analysis discussed by Bolman and Deal (1991) by connecting the values around team building, with the community building tenets of Africentric and feminist organizational approaches, as they provide a context for the strategic behaviors of the respondents. In this context, the workplace can be considered the functional community.

Feminist Influences.   Organizational literature on feminist agencies reflects concerns about the agency social structure connecting

with external communities, the nature of interpersonal relation-
ships, and the values around helping. Redefining power, focus-
ing on supportive relationships, and mutual decision-making in
an effort to build community within the agency are recurrent
themes (Arches and Schneider, 1994). Feminists have developed
an organizational leadership model of shared power called the
shared administrative model or modified consensus model (Ian-
nello, 1992; Kravitz and Jones, 1988; Perlmutter, 1994; Weil, 1988)
which aims at operationalizing community within thesocial ser-
vice workplace. This model reflects values of mutual support, in-
terdependence, shared power, and nurturing social relationships
(Hyde, 1989; Kravitz and Jones, 1988).

     The shared administrators are the providers of the services as
well as the decision-makers, the executives, and the fund-raisers.
They rotate tasks and regularly "switch hats." An employee's tal-
ent, experience and/or interest in a particular area will determine
the position she holds at any given time. All members contribute
to all parts of the organization with power and decision-making
coming from the entire group. Daily routine decisions are made
in work groups while organizational policy or critical decision-
making is brought to the larger group in regularly scheduled
meetings with rotating chairs and a mutually defined agenda
(Iannello, 1992). The boundaries separating direct service workers
and administrators (officially designated leaders and followers)
do not exist because shared administrators are both.

     In feminist agencies, the traditional notion of team is ex-
panded to include community and consumer groups actively
working together on the board, committees, and as volunteers.
There is a recognition of the relationship between the personal and
political. Consequently, the borders of the workplace go beyond
the agency and into the external community.

Africentric Influences.   Grounded in African philosophy and cul-
tural values about individual and organizational behavior, this
perspective is manifest particularly in policies, technology, and a
leadership style that view the individual's problems as related
to the agency and the community (Daley, 1994; Meyers, 1985;
Schiele, 1990; Schiele, 1994; Warfield-Coppock, 1995). Based on
the recognition of the interconnectedness of social systems, and
that one does not function independently of others, the agency's

survival is linked to the individual's well-being. This takes the concepts of mutuality and reciprocity between leaders and followers, in transformational leadership, to the next level. Respecting the social context of behavior, the group is the unit of focus, not the individual. Organizational and community survival, not individual worker output, is the focus of administrative concern (Daley, 1994; Schiele, 1990). Internal community building and connections with external communities are seen as paramount. A major tenet of Africentric theory is understanding the connection between individual and collective identities which influences the definition of problems and the nature of solutions (Schiele, 1994).

Traditional western boundaries are viewed as artificial. The view of human nature assumes that people are basically good and need a supportive community to overcome obstacles (Warfield-Coppock, 1995). Leadership style is caring and supportive with a tendency to understand shortcomings in an organizational context, putting problems in the perspective of the larger social environment (Warfield-Coppock, 1995). "Staff relationships are based on the concept of family, inclusiveness and the idea of interdependence and that every person has a role to play in maintaining the harmony of the group" (Warfield-Coppock, 1995:40).

There is a recognition of a range of learning and practice styles which support the legitimacy of the experiential aspect of learning. This is seen in agency hiring, supervising and in the evaluation process which focus on more qualitative outcomes. Such an orientation leads to a de-emphasis on productivity alone as an outcome evaluator. Along with deemphasizing the purely rational approach to understanding behavior and behavioral outcomes is the belief that behavior is non-rational (compatible with the symbolic domain introduced by Bolman and Deal in their contributions to transformational leadership).

Behavior may reflect a multitude of positive and negative experiences in human interactions and at times may be impulsive. This would also lead to a de-emphasis on the quantitative productivity focused aspects of bureaucratically oriented organizations (Daley, 1995; Schiele, 1990). In the organization, the highest value is placed on interpersonal relationships, or what feminists call connectedness (Schiele, 1990; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Schriver, & Surrey, 1991). Supportive relationships, based on group (small

community) interactions define every day work routines and impact significantly on job satisfaction (Daley, 1994; McNeeley, 1992, Schiele, 1994) as discussed in transformational leadership.

The awareness that individual, organizational and community problems are connected is a similar perspective shared with feminists. The desire to flatten hierarchy, downplay superordinate-subordinate relations, promote participatory management, and encourage an equitable distribution of power in a community context are emphasized in both feminism and Africentrism and fit well with transformational leadership. By focusing on Africentric and feminist perspectives, racism and sexism are highlighted, providing insights into the political frame of conflicts and struggles the agency's leadership may experience.

Methodology

This research was conducted to supplement data from an earlier pilot study on women administrators working in both feminist and traditional human service settings (Arches and Schneider, 1994). This second phase of the research found its origin in the striking absence of information related to race.

Sample. The sample reflects the exploratory nature of the research design. Agencies were selected that would provide information about the struggles and leadership styles of female administrators in community based agencies serving multicultural and multiracial communities in one urban area. Each agency was selected based on its comparable size, length of time in existence, length of employment of the administrator, urban location and the ethnically diverse populations it served.

The agencies included: 1) three alcohol and drug abuse programs, 2) three battered women's organizations, 3) three multi-service centers, 4) three agencies addressing immigrant and refugee issues, 4) four health oriented organizations, and 5) four mental health centers. All agencies were considered medium sized, employing from 11–40 full-time staff.

The president of the local chapter of the National Association of Social Workers generated a list of agencies serving communities of color, from which agencies meeting the above criteria were contacted and asked to be in the study.

Sixteen of the 20 respondents held masters degrees in social work or a related field, one held a doctorate, one had a BSW and two held associates degrees. Each agency had at least two masters level workers, with degrees in social work, counseling or human services, and other workers with some or no college background. All of the agencies had staff who represented diverse Latino, African, Asian and Euro-American racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Data Collection and Analysis. Open-ended, semi-structured interviews, conducted by the same two researchers together allowed for the respondents to express their own words, memories and thoughts. The women, who were interviewed in their own agencies, answered questions about the organization's mission and history; their vision for the agency; the obstacles they face; approaches toward minimizing obstacles and maximizing gains; strategies for hiring, supervising and problem-solving with staff; and the role gender, race and ethnicity plays in their work.

Each interview lasted approximately ninety minutes. All the interviews were tape recorded and later listened to for common themes, based on concepts and phrases expressed by the interviewees. The tapes were reviewed at least twice by each of the two interviewers who listened to the tapes separately, listed themes after listening to the tapes, and came together to discuss the findings, and then repeated the process until agreement was reached.

Findings

Connecting with community emerged as a style of leadership and a source of strength as administrators described their examples of external community building. The following section reports, as much as possible in their own words, the ways in which connecting with communities was a strategy of leadership for these respondents.

> (Pointing to a picture). This is my son, he was 18. This young man seated next to him is a paraplegic . . . he had been shot up, as he lay on his bed, by some drug lords who came to his family's house one Sunday morning and shot up eight people. And shot him in the head and left him for dead. Shot his mother dead. And I say that I

came here to work because I am a woman of color and it is important to me what happens to young men of color. . . . And I really believed that coming here I could influence care and services in a way that our cities could be made better. If our cities are made better then I get to help my boys (administrator in a health care facility).

In response to their struggles and based on their values, all the women spoke of their attempts to connect with the larger geographic and functional communities of which they were members. The Africentric value of blending individual and community in one's identity was apparent. Seeing themselves as community members was in fact a significant aspect of who they were. It provided not only a sense of identity but a source of strength and positive self regard as well. In defining the nature of problems, and in their attempts to resolve them, reaching out to the community was the approach most frequently cited.

An agency which served pregnant women through community education, public health, and social services was determined to hire community women with medical skills, as opposed to men with medical experience, or professional women not connected to this particular immigrant and refugee community. First attempts at hiring yielded literally no applicants with these qualifications. Actually, only men who had experiences as medics in the military applied. The director was informed, by the men, that the women she hoped to hire simply did not exist in this population. She was informed that women, who did not serve in the military, did not have the opportunity to learn or practice medical techniques. Determined in her belief that women with these qualifications were indeed out there, she changed her strategy. She moved the interviewing process from the office to an apartment in the community. Information about the positions spread informally by word of mouth in the factories, beauty salons and shops where women worked. Flyers advertising the positions were left with local community groups and merchants. Two open houses were held at the apartment resulting in a wonderful range of qualified female applicants. They were community women who had been midwives and healers before immigrating to the U.S. The women who were hired were known and respected in the community. They had "community links, people who the community looked to when they needed help."

In addition, this agency connects to the community through a retreat day, to work on agency direction, which includes staff, the board, and other significant community people. Their mission is not just to promote the health of the women they serve, but of the entire community.

The origins of one of the battered women's organizations which serves a diverse multicultural, multilingual population was firmly rooted in the community. A social worker providing services in a daycare center began a rap group for mothers who had appeared isolated and individually had complained of abuse.

> As trust built, the women began talking about the physical abuse their families, friends and they were experiencing. She worked with the group to figure out how to address the issues in the community. They looked around and found there were no resources in the community—and, decided, as women often do, this wasn't okay. They were going to do something on their own. They exchanged phone numbers (what later became a hot line), took each other in (the beginnings of a safe house network) and maintained the rap group (later to become a support group). They went to court with each other, and that's how our advocacy program began.

The director of a mental health agency spent the first half hour of our interview enthusiastically discussing a conference she had just attended for third world women on the topic of WOMEN AND AIDS. This was clearly an important community connection she was eager to talk about. Her community of support were women of color, and the coalition she built with this group was personally energizing. It was a source of inspiration for this African American woman to be able to cross socially defined boundaries and to connect with her Latina, African and Caribbean sisters and to be able to share their experiences despite language differences.

This director frequently spoke of her dedicated staff and the fact that she frequently had to discourage them from working overtime. They were always at work! When asked to what she attributed the energy level and commitment of her staff, she responded, "If there's one thing that keeps us going, it's our commitment to the agency and the community."

It was striking to observe the importance placed on connecting to their communities. They worked hard to develop and

maintain trust, decrease social distance and to be responsive to
the needs of the community. Their understanding of the connec-
tion between their agencies, their clients and the communities
reflected ideological sources of praxis grounded in feminism and
Africentrism. While it was a source of support and strength, at
times it was stressful and created additional tensions.

The commitment to community, and the frustration she felt
when this seemed to be undermined, was expressed by the direc-
tor of an outpatient community-based drug treatment program
for women. She expressed strong concerns that the advisory
board, which did not represent the community, did not under-
stand community issues in their recommendations regarding a
new program. Their insensitivity, she felt, was reflected in the
hours the center was to be open (which did not take into con-
sideration school and work schedules), the age range of child
care (which neglected the needs of children slightly older than
preschoolers but who were sure to be showing up), and espe-
cially the tools of evaluating the program (which were exclusively
quantitatively outcome oriented).

> These women don't live in the community and they're telling me,
> who lives in the community, what's needed. That's like a slap in
> the face. That's a lot of power they have. . . . It kills me when they
> say, "You don't know what you're talking about," and I'm from
> the community and they're not. And they're making assumptions
> about kids.

The range and extent of connecting to community varied
with the context of the organization. In the more bureaucratically
structured agencies, community building took the form of recog-
nizing the needs of the community in setting goals (what hours
the program should be open), planning (bringing in relatives to
run programs), and dealing with obstacles (by actively staying
connected with community groups as a source of support), en-
suring the use of space to create and provide opportunities for
social interaction, especially those related to eating together, and
encouraging social interactions and shared experiences through
activities that supported celebratory rituals and events. The agen-
cies taking on more collective models had structures that not only
allowed them to creatively utilize space to ensure opportunities

to eat, celebrate and interact but also enabled the leadership to respond to external geographic and functional community needs by structurally including the community, reaching out to the community through hiring and strategic planning, community driven programs, and designing a financial plan building on workers' experiences budgeting within the context of their families.

Conclusion

Theories of transformational leadership provide an additional framework for understanding the struggles and strategies that validate the leadership styles expressed by the respondents. Feminist and Africentrist perspectives provide the locus of understanding for the political frame connecting the organizational analysis to race and gender. These perspectives supplement the transformational theories, adding insights into administrative strategies based on community building and connecting to communities. With the current attack on low income women and immigrant communities, these strategies deserve understanding and support. The respondents in this study clearly voiced an acknowledgment and respect for their communities, sorely missing from much of the policy and practice debates that are presently part of public discourse.

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