

The Significance of Relationships in Leadership: Does Gender Make a Difference?

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Abstract

A comparative study was conducted to determine if any differences exist in leadership strength with respect to gender and academic position (teacher leader and administrator). Seventy-two participants completed a 27 question online leadership survey that was created to measure the four domains of leadership strength (relationship building, strategic thinking, executing ideas, and influencing others) suggested by Rath and Conchie (2008). The survey as a whole had good internal consistency as measured by Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha=.88$), but none of the four subscales reached the desired threshold of $\alpha=.7$. Each participant also rated themselves on each of the four dimensions to determine if self-rating scores would correlate with the corresponding subscale scores, but no significant correlations were found ($\alpha=.05$) when a Bonferroni correction was made for the four comparisons. Therefore, only the self-rating data was used, and a two-way MANOVA was used to determine if any significant main or interaction effects could be found. A significant main effect for gender was found for both strategic thinking, $F(1, 68) = 4.85, p = .031, \eta^2 = .067$, and for relationship building, $F(1, 68) = 9.42, p = .003, \eta^2 = .122$, with men ($M = 3.06, SD = 1.14$) scoring significantly higher than women ($M = 2.31, SD = 1.18$) on the strategic thinking dimension and women ($M = 2.71, SD = 1.3$) scoring significantly higher than men ($M = 1.65, SD = 1.11$) on the relationship building dimension.

Keywords: relationships, strategic thinking, gender, leadership strengths, influence

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Rath and Conchie (2008) share their thoughts on strengths based leadership stating leaders would be much more productive if they would spend time on building their strengths rather than spending numerous hours developing their weaknesses. Rath and Conchie (2008) go on to explain effective leaders are not well rounded at all, but are highly aware of their strengths and use their strengths to their advantage. Fullen (2004) clarifies the most effective leaders surround themselves with others having different strengths and talents other than their own to complete a team with all four leadership strengths: relationship building, influencing others, executing ideas, and strategic thinking (Rath & Conchie, 2008).

Statement of the Problem

While facing career pressures, leaders may lose sight of their leadership strengths. Leaders need the reinforcement of their talents to influence their actions. When leaders stray off course they are many times trying lead alone and specific leadership strengths are left unattended leaving behind well intentions and a lack of action within the school culture.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the differences among the position of academic educators (teacher leaders and administrators) and if gender plays a significant role regarding the four domains of leadership strength: relationship building, executing ideas, influencing others, strategic thinking. The results from this study may be useful in understanding how male and female leaders shape the school culture through their strengths and furthermore, results may be beneficial in preparing future leaders.

Research Questions

The following questions provide the framework for this study:

1. Do differences exist between academic position (teacher leaders and administrators) regarding the four domains of leadership strength?
2. Do differences exist between genders regarding the four domains of leadership strength?

Literature Review

Leadership and gender. Merchant (2012) explains the most common leadership distinctions between men and women stem from differing communication styles due to the purpose of the conversation. Women use communication to build relationships and social connections, although men use communication to achieve tangible outcomes. Women are more expressive and polite in situations of conflict, whereas men are more likely to offer solutions to problems avoiding unnecessary discussions of interpersonal problems. Women value the process of communication for the relationships it creates and men are more prone to be more assertive in their speak, and unemotional or detached in conversations (Merchant, 2012).

Stern (2008) offers results from high-achieving women and found the women tended to implement a relational based, collaborative, team-building, and shared leadership style. A female participant from Eckman's (2004) study reported, "I spend a lot more time listening than I do pontificating...I use a lot more feeling words...I have a real relationship with my staff" (p.203). Cheung and Halpern (2010) found women had a greater tendency to share information with faculty. Anderson, Lievens, van Dam, and Born (2006) agree by sharing significant mean differences favoring female participants on the measurements of oral communication and interaction with others suggesting an interpersonally oriented leadership style. Tannen (1990) suggest these communication differences between men and women begin at a young age. Boys tend to build relationships by doing things together, participating in an action toward a common

goal. Girls tend to simply talk and create close relationships. Male leaders prefer to have negotiations and women leaders prefer connections. However, some researchers argue men and women do not differ in communication or leadership styles at all, but rather the differences are merely conditional on various situations (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Foels, Driskell, Mullen, & Salas, 2000). On the other hand, some researchers stand firm that differences do exist. However, the differences do not imply either gender make better leaders, but understanding these distinctions will help leaders better communicate with those of the opposite sex (Cheung & Halpern, 2010; Merchant, 2012).

Four Domains of Leadership Strength

Relationship building. Rath and Conchie (2008) explain relationship builders are leaders holding a group of people together with a collective energy to transform individuals into a team. They minimize distractions and relate to people. Strong mentors and steer others to improved achievements. Hensley and Burmeister (2008) explain building relationships share a common theme of relationship connectors: communication, trust, support, competence, continuous renewal, and safety. Hensley and Burmeister (2008) go on to clarify “Effective leaders recognize quickly and clearly that people are the most important asset in any organization” (p. 126). Finzel (2000) agrees and shares how leaders must make people a priority with “people work before paper work” (p.40) and Whitaker (2003) suggest the most effective leaders concentrate on people, not on programs. Reig and Marcoline (2008) concur relationships should be on the priority list of all leaders. Finnigan and Daly (2014) offer what they refer to as *relationship reform* by taking a relational approach to education improvement with collaborative and trusting cultures. Bleich (2014) suggests relationships should not stand alone, but along with

action and leaders should take full responsibility for establishing and nurturing the relationship even when challenging.

Influencing others. Rath and Conchie (2008) define effective influential leaders as those that can sell their ideas to others. They take charge and speak up to make sure the group is heard. They help the team reach a much larger audience and help team members feel comfortable and connected to the objectives at hand. Merchant (2012) describes influence “as a leader’s ability to motivate their followers to change their behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes” (p.23). Influential tactics found males use personal appeal, assertiveness, and inspiration. Females also use inspirational appeal, along with consultation and ingratiation. Clifford, Behrstock-Sherratt, and Fetters (2012) explain how a leader’s influence can affect multiple layers within education. “At the center of the ripple effect is a principals’ practice, which includes principal knowledge, dispositions, and actions” (p.7) to provide direct and indirect influence to community, ... “school conditions, teacher quality and placement, and instructional quality” (p.8).

Executing ideas. Rath and Conchie (2008) identifies the strength of executing ideas by accomplishing tasks, providing coaching and feedback, and monitoring projects to make sure goals are met. They work tirelessly to complete a task and take ideas and turn them into realities. Some executive leaders may push other strengths to the way side when bogged down in challenging tasks. They may tend to focus more on task-oriented goals without a network of relationships to support them. However, Theodore Roosevelt commented “The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it” (as cited in Finzel, 2000).

Strategic thinking. Rath and Conchie (2008) describe strategic thinkers as problem solvers and constantly pulling team members into the future. They navigate the team through the

most effective route. Beatty (2010) distinguishes strategic thinkers as those that can identify patterns, connections and key concerns. They move forward with decisive action based on a plan. They have a balance of direction and autonomy, reward appropriate risk taking, and build commitment within the team. Beatty (2010) goes on to specify strategic thinking is a structural and individual process. Merchant (2012) adds strategic thinkers are task oriented, autocratic, and direct. Mellon and Kroth (2013) state strategic thinking is “a particular way of thinking”(p.70). It is not the same as strategic planning, “one is analysis, and the other is synthesis” (Mintzberg, 1994, p.107).

Transformational and transactional leadership theory. Over several decades an enormous amount of research has been conducted based on Burns (1978) introduction to transformational and transactional leadership theory. Transformational leadership is characterized by a charismatic leader with a visionary, inspirational, and trusting rapport with followers (Merchant, 2012). Transformational leaders gain confidence to create future goals, by encouraging and helping develop their followers full potential (Val & Kemp, 2012). Kastenmuller, Greitemeyer, Zehl, Tattersall, George, Frey, and Fischer (2014) convey women take on a more transformational approach to leadership. Transformational leaders inspire others to go beyond the expectation. They pay attention to the differences among team members, inspire others through modeling, provide mentoring, coaching and continuous feedback, and challenge others with new ideas (Bass, 1985). Based on self-reporting teachers, Zeinabadi (2013) indicates females are more transformational based and males are more transactional based in leadership.

Merchant (2012) explains transactional leaders offer incentives in exchange for obedience and punishments for failures. They have a take charge authoritarian attitude (Val and

Kemp, 2012). Almansour (2012) elucidates the transactional leader uses a leader-follower exchange when performance and goals are in agreement. Kastenmuller, et al., (2014) state transactional leaders focus on finding mistakes and intervene when necessary. According to Merchant (2012) men are more goal oriented and strategic problem solvers. They want to *fix* problems and achieve results.

Methodology

Setting and Participants

This research project took place within one southeastern state. At the end of the 2014-2015 school year, participants were recruited from 1 school district with 11 elementary schools, 4 middle schools, and 2 high schools, 1 state-level higher education organization, and 1 state-level professional development organization. The Institutional Review Board granted permission to proceed with the study. The researcher sought participants through the convenience of a local K-12 school district, emails found on public school websites, and the state department directory to represent K-12 and higher education. The researcher contacted the local school district IT department to request assistance in sending out the survey by email to the district faculty. The IT department emailed the survey to all district central office faculty and all district principals. The IT department requested the principals to forward the survey by email to the individual school faculty members. The researcher emailed the survey to all members of the state-level leadership organization and all members of the state-level professional development organization. To be eligible to participate, respondents were over 19 years of age and considered current or previous educators.

The Leadership Survey was emailed in May 2015 to potential participants. The survey took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete depending on the participant. Using Google Forms, the researcher sent 674 electronic surveys inviting and requesting participation.

Approximately, 10%, or 72 surveys submitted. Of the 72 participants, 55 females and 17 males responded. Furthermore, 53 reported their academic position as teacher leaders and 19 reported their academic position as administrators. In addition, 44 female teacher leaders, 9 male teacher leaders, 11 female administrators, and 8 male administrators self-reported.

Instrumentation

Based on the four domains of leadership strength from Rath and Conchie (2008), the researcher created the Leadership Survey to gain a better understanding of how educators relate to the four leadership strengths. The survey contained 20 items (5 questions for each domain) related to four domains of leadership strength: relationship-building, strategic thinking, executing ideas, and influencing others. Participants were also asked to indicate their gender, academic role (teacher leader or administrator), academic location (elementary, middle-high school, or higher education), and to self-rate on each of the four leadership domains.

Using a Likert-type scale, all items measured 1 to 4. The scale was ranked (4) *Almost Always*; (3) *Often* (2) *Sometimes*; (1) *Rarely*. A relationship-building item example from the survey was “I am an effective mentor and guide.” A strategic thinking item example from the survey consisted of “I help the team drill down into the details of cause and effect.” An executing item example from the survey was “I work tirelessly toward a goal.” An influencing item example from the survey included “I can woo people to get involved in the issues at hand”. The ranking portion of the survey included the four areas of leadership strength and participants ranked the areas using (4) as most important and continued to rank down to (1) as least important.

Although the survey as a whole had good internal consistency as measured by Cronbach’s alpha ($\alpha=.88$), none of the four subscales (five questions each) reached the desired

threshold of $\alpha=.7$. Additionally, factor analysis was used to assess the unidimensionality of each of the subscales, but factor analysis revealed at least two factors for each subscale with no single factor accounting for more than 50% of the subscale variance. Each participant was also asked to self-rate themselves on each of the four dimensions of leadership to determine if self-rating scores would correlate with the corresponding subscale scores, but no significant correlations were found ($\alpha=.05$) when a Bonferroni correction was made for the four comparisons. Given this information, the researchers decided it would be inappropriate to use the data from the four subscales. As such, only the self-rating data for each of the four leadership dimensions was used.

Results

The statistical data analysis software Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 22) was used to analyze the data collected from the 72 participants. A two-way MANOVA was used to determine if any significant main or interaction effects could be found for gender and academic position.

As shown in Table 1, 72 educators, 55 females and 17 males responded. Furthermore, 53 reported themselves as teacher leaders and 19 reported as administrators.

The first question of this study was to determine if there were any differences existing between academic educator position (teacher leaders and administrators) regarding the four domains of leadership strength: relationship building, executing ideas, influencing others, and strategic thinking. A two-way MANOVA was used to determine if any significant main or interaction effects could be found for gender and academic position. No significant main effect was found for academic position (Table 1).

The second research question was to determine if differences exist between males and females regarding the four domains of leadership strength: relationship building, executing ideas, influencing others, and strategic thinking. A significant main effect for gender was found for both strategic thinking, $F(1, 68) = 4.85, p = .031, \eta^2 = .067$, and for relationship building, $F(1, 68) = 9.42, p = .003, \eta^2 = .122$, with men ($M = 3.06, SD = 1.14$) scoring significantly higher than women ($M = 2.31, SD = 1.18$) on the strategic thinking dimension and women ($M = 2.71, SD = 1.3$) scoring significantly higher than men ($M = 1.65, SD = 1.11$) on the relationship building dimension (Table 1).

Conclusions

All female respondents regardless of academic role ranked relationship building as the most important strength. They also continued to rank down with executing ideas, influencing others, and ranking strategic thinking at least important. In contrast, all male respondents regardless of academic role ranked strategic thinking as the most important strength and relationship building as the least important. These results fall in line with previous research concerning the gender differences in leadership. However, it is important to realize an effective leader must have a network of relationships in place to follow through with executing ideas and using strategic thinking to find solutions. These other areas are not as powerful without a network of relationships to draw from to create synergy and high morale by considering the needs of all stakeholders. The interactions between leaders and followers are more important than the leader's independent actions (Spillane, 2005). Administrators must build a strong relationship with their teacher leaders. No one leader can accomplish everything alone, but all members of the team can hold a spoke on the wheel to keep the school rolling along smoothly.

As future leaders are preparing for a challenging administrative role, consideration should be given regarding the judgment of leaders based on behaviors or lack thereof, and possible unknown intentions. Juhos, Quelhas, and Byrne (2014) consider a person's intentions an array of personal objectives and consider one's actions pre-determined by their intentions. In various forms, actions and intentions intertwine within the four domains of leadership strength. Strategic thinking requires a certain amount task-oriented behavior. During the process of building relationships, one may have the intention to complete a task, attend a meeting, visit a teacher's classroom, but never get around to it. Hence, faculty may analyze the leader's lack of action, regardless of well-planned intentions; therefore, losing credibility within the relationship.

This study was limited to one school district within the state. It would be beneficial to include more school districts across the state for better representation. Given the many steps by the school district's IT director to send out the electronic surveys, many faculty members may not have received the survey. In addition, some potential participants may have not been familiar with completing online surveys, therefore, unable to access the survey. It may be helpful for future researchers to provide hard copy surveys to potential respondents. In addition, future research should include a qualitative component to find out what specific reasons respondents justified making their ranking responses.

Table 1

MANOVA Critical Values

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Noncent. Parameter	Observed Power ^a
Corrected Model	Strategic Influence	7.870 ^b	3	2.623	1.856	.145	.076	5.568	.461
	Execute Relationship	1.165 ^c	3	.388	.543	.654	.023	1.630	.156
		1.414 ^d	3	.471	.442	.724	.019	1.325	.134
		16.316 ^e	3	5.439	3.376	.023	.130	10.127	.740
Intercept	Strategic Influence	329.176	1	329.176	232.885	.000	.774	232.886	1.000
	Execute Relationship	281.677	1	281.677	394.015	.000	.853	394.015	1.000
		333.997	1	333.997	312.896	.000	.821	312.896	1.000
		223.034	1	223.034	138.430	.000	.671	138.430	1.000
Gender	Strategic Influence	6.851	1	6.851	4.847	.031	.067	4.847	.583
	Execute Relationship	.413	1	.413	.578	.450	.008	.578	.116
		.019	1	.019	.017	.895	.000	.017	.052
		15.182	1	15.182	9.423	.003	.122	9.423	.857
Role	Strategic Influence	.285	1	.285	.202	.655	.003	.202	.073
	Execute Relationship	.574	1	.574	.804	.373	.012	.804	.143
		1.195	1	1.195	1.119	.294	.016	1.119	.181
		.199	1	.199	.124	.726	.002	.124	.064
Gender* Role	Strategic Influence	.473	1	.473	.334	.565	.005	.334	.088
	Execute Relationship	.365	1	.365	.511	.477	.007	.511	.109
		.617	1	.617	.578	.450	.008	.578	.116
		1.668	1	1.688	1.036	.312	.015	1.036	.171
Error	Strategic Influence	96.116	68	1.413					
	Execute Relationship	48.612	68	.715					
		72.586	68	1.067					
		109.559	68	1.611					
Total	Strategic Influence	549.000	72						
	Execute Relationship	480.000	72						
		586.000	72						
		561.000	72						
Corrected Total	Strategic Influence	103.986	71						
	Execute Relationship	49.778	71						
		74.000	71						
		125.875	71						

a. Computed using alpha = .05

b. R squared = .076 (Adjusted R squared = .035)

c. R squared = .023 (Adjusted R squared = -.020)

d. R squared = .019 (Adjusted R squared = -.024)

e. R squared = .130 (Adjusted R squared = .091)

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