

Chapter 34

Successful Women Leaders: The Convergence of Personal and Professional Promotion

Freda R. Russell

Cardinal Stritch University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines research from the lens of women who are in mid-level and senior-level positions in their organizations. Using Mezirow's framework for transformational learning, these inspiring women leaders shared perceptions of organizational practices, work-family interface, institutional culture, issues of equity and diversity, institutional challenges, and personal mastery; they also defined their actions that contributed to their successes as well as the successes of the organizations they identified with. Additionally, within this chapter, the author compares and contrasts the barriers that limit women's ability to aspire to top leadership positions and examine the roles of their primary and secondary supports (i.e., sponsors, family, mentors, work teams, and peer networks).

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to examine research from the perspective of women who are in mid-level and senior-level positions in their organizations and to describe the lived experiences of these inspiring women leaders as they shared their stories of navigating organizational practices, work-family interface, institutional culture, issues of equity and diversity, institutional challenges, and personal mastery. I utilized Mezirow's (2012) framework for transformational learning to categorize their journeys and the actions that contributed to their successes as well as the successes of the organizations they identified with. Additionally, within this chapter, I will compare and contrast the barriers that limit women's ability to aspire to top leadership positions and examine the roles of their primary and secondary supports (i.e., sponsors, family, mentors, work teams, and peer networks). Finally, I will make recommendations for the implementation of best practice models of leadership development and sponsorship for professional women who desire to actualize their leadership aspirations.

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Successful Women Leaders

Historically, the underrepresentation of women in top leadership positions in the workplace is a persistent global reality based on a sociocultural constructed belief that men make better leaders than women. Even though the number of women in top leadership positions in American organizations has increased, women are often hired or promoted in a time of organizational “crisis” or are named to positions as an afterthought. Social identities of women and men in the paid U.S. labor force remain highly gendered and segregated, with men continuing to maintain the majority of senior executive positions (Bongiorno, Bain, & David, 2014).

WOMEN AND THE AMERICAN LABOR FORCE

Women’s participation in the American labor force expanded significantly after World War II, reaching a peak of 60% in 1999 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 along with the 1964 Civil Rights Act contributed to the movement of women and people of color into American colleges and universities (Geiger, 2011). The demographics of postsecondary student populations became increasingly diverse in the 1970s and 1980s in terms of race, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds. From the years 2000 to 2010, higher education’s institutional enrollments of females between the ages of 35 years and older increased by 35% (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015).

According to the Pew Research Center (2015), the pipeline for female leaders making inroads into top positions in organizations appears to be widening. Women have made great gains in management and other mid-level professional occupations, up 30% from the late 1960s to 2013. In the legal profession, women account for 24% of U.S. federal court judges, 27% of state court judges, and 20% of partners in law firms. In politics, since 1917, a record number of women have served as U.S. senators and in Congress, yet they remain significantly underrepresented in the House and Senate. Five percent of the population of Fortune 500 companies have female senior executives, which is a modest gain considering that 20 years ago there were no women CEOs in such positions. Among college and university leaders, women represent 30% of presidents, up 4% from 2011 to 2016, with the largest percentage of women presidents leading associate colleges and special focus institutions; however, women represent only 22% of presidents within doctorate-granting institutions of higher education (Gagliardi, Espinosa, Turk, & Taylor, 2017).

While women are making inroads, top-level positional achievement gaps remain significant. Additionally, women hold only 25% of the senior-level positions, which include ministers of health globally and directors at global health centers at U.S. medical schools (Javadi et al., 2016). Gender inequities also exist in healthcare systems, including academic medicine, where 70% of the medical residents are women. Compared with the representation of women in the U.S. labor force, the progress of women having formal educational training, and the number of women in mid-level management positions, an overall gap persists in the number of women in positions of power and authority at the top of the hierarchy within organizations.

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