ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the intersection of gender and personality, specifically addressing some of the issues that introverted women leaders may face. The author’s personal experiences as an elementary school principal will be interwoven into the current research that highlights the underappreciated strengths of introverted women leaders. Personality traits and leadership styles of introverts are presented along with descriptions of the experiences of female leaders. The chapter ends by providing readers with ideas to support women and introverts in school to prepare them for future leadership roles.

INTRODUCTION

In the world of leadership, I have two main characteristics working against me: I am a woman and I am an introvert. Throughout my career, I have learned to value these attributes and use them to enhance my leadership skills. Introverted woman leaders have traditionally been undervalued in leadership positions and usually overlooked in favor of an extroverted male leader (Brandt & Edinger, 2015; Laiho & Brandt, 2013; McKinsey & Company, 2017). However, research is beginning to highlight the unique qualities and strengths of introverts that can make them effective leaders.

As a child, I always thought I was shy. In fact, people would label me as shy upon first meeting me. I guess hiding behind my mother and tightly gripping her hand whenever we were in public was a tell-tale sign that I was not a budding extrovert. Later in life, I learned that what I thought was shyness was actually a display of my introversion. Whatever the label was, shy or introvert, I always felt that my quiet and reserved nature was a negative dimension of my personality. This stemmed from the feedback I received from teachers in elementary and secondary school, as well as my observations of the positive responses extroverts would receive both in school and in social situations.

In elementary school, I quickly realized that teachers praised students for being the first to raise their hand to answer questions. I always enjoyed participating in school, but I required time to think about my
responses and preferred to share my thoughts in small groups or on-one rather than boldly expressing my thinking in front of the entire class. In social situations, I admired others who were gregarious and able to capture the attention of a crowd. I thought that my struggle with feeling comfortable in large social gatherings and preference for solitude or one on one conversations was a negative attribute. In fact, I constantly tried to overcome my tendency toward introversion by participating in activities that I thought were considered more socially desirable.

In one of my greatest pursuits of trying to become more extroverted, I became a cheerleader in high school. I thought this experience would help me become like my extroverted peers. While being a cheerleader did not make me extroverted, it did provide me with the opportunity to apply the positive attributes associated with introversion to a leadership position. To my surprise, my teammates elected me to be the cheerleading captain; a leadership role that I thought was best suited for an extrovert. I initially thought this was a bad decision by my teammates because I did not believe that I would be a good leader. As my role as cheerleading captain progressed, I realized that my leadership style was well-received by my teammates. They appreciated that I listened to their ideas and tried to incorporate group decision making rather than trying to dominate the group. This high school cheerleading experience allowed me to begin to realize that not all leaders need to be extroverted. This understanding opened the door to my future pursuits as a school leader.

**Underrepresentation of Women in Leadership Roles**

Women have traditionally been underrepresented in leadership positions. A 2017 *Women in the Workplace* study conducted by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company examined the experiences of women in corporate America. The extensive study collected survey data from more than 70,000 employees representing 222 companies employing more than 12 million people. The results of the study indicated that women continue to be underrepresented at every level in corporate America. This finding is surprising because for more than 30 years, women have earned more college degrees than men. Specifically, women represent 54 percent of recent college graduates. Therefore, it would be expected that women would be at least equally represented in all positions in corporate America.

Gender is close to being equally distributed at entry level positions, where 47 percent of employees are women. However, the gender disparity begins “at the first step up to manager where entry-level women are 18 percent less likely to be promoted than their male peers” (McKinsey & Company, 2017, p. 10). This gap widens as job rank increases, as only 20 percent of employees at the highest leadership role in a company are female. In addition, women are 18 percent less likely than men to be promoted from entry level to manager. This demonstrates that while women and men are close to being equally represented in entry level positions, men are more likely than women to receive promotions to leadership positions (McKinsey & Company, 2017).

The gender gap in leadership positions exists not only in corporate America, but also in educational institutions. At first glance, it appears that the representation of females in educational leadership positions is comparable to males because 52 percent of public school principals are female (Bitterman, Goldring & Gray, 2013). However, when the data are disaggregated by school level, it becomes more obvious that there is a gender gap at the secondary level where the percentage of female principals decreases as the grade level increases. For example, the representation of females in principalships is 64 percent in elementary schools, 42 percent in middle schools, and 30 percent in high schools. Not only are female principals underrepresented in high school leadership positions, they are also more likely to work in high
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