Women's Leadership Programs in South Africa: A Strategy for Community Intervention

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SUMMARY. A central premise of this paper is that the training of women for leadership roles is a critical component of the development of communities as a whole. This was the central point of departure for a study that aimed to review women's leadership training programs in South Africa. This paper reports on this study in which 38 organizations

from across the country participated. Three main data sources were used: Organizational materials, interviews and questionnaires. The analysis examined the following key features: Motivation for leadership training, approaches to leadership, understandings of gender difference, training techniques and strategies and outcomes. The findings revealed trends that may have implications for best practice frameworks in interventions targeted at leadership, gender and development. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www. HaworthPress.com> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. Women's leadership training programs, gender and development, community intervention, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

Internationally, reports emphasize that despite the dramatic increase of women in the work force, women are still under-represented in positions of power, responsibility and leadership (Stanford & Oates, 1995). This trend is evident in South Africa despite some increases in the number of women leaders in the post-apartheid era. For example, the number of women occupying parliamentary and governmental positions in South Africa increased from 28% in 1994 to 30% in the 1998 elections (Gender Advocacy Program, 2000). But this percentage is still small in comparison to men and the percentage of women leaders at community levels is much smaller. There are many women who are committed and eager to enter these community leadership positions but their under-developed skills undermine their capacity to do so.

Leadership training programs (LTPs) can be extremely effective in improving or developing an individual's leadership abilities (Laird, 1985; Mitchiner, 2000; Stodgill, 1974). The enhancement of leadership may then lead to growth and increased productivity in an organization (Mitchiner, 2000). Training may be defined as an experience that causes individuals to acquire new leadership skills or enhance their previous leadership behavior (Laird, 1985).

In South Africa a range of women's LTPs exist, yet there is no clarity regarding target participants, training content, evaluation strategies, underlying assumptions, and potential effectiveness. This study aimed to review women's LTPs in South Africa. The findings provide a picture of the activities presently being undertaken by some organizations in

South Africa, which aim to increase women's leadership skills, and encourage women to occupy more leadership positions. The analysis identified implications for best practice frameworks and future policies.

THEORETICAL ISSUES

The trait theory of leadership claims that leaders possess certain traits or characteristics that contribute towards being an effective leader. Briefly, these traits include: effective communication, task completion, responsibility, problem solving, originality, decision-making, passion, vision, ethics, humor, embracing diversity, self-awareness, confidence, courage, experience and power (Foster, 2000; James, 1998; Karstan, 1994; Koestenbaum, 1991; Nadler & Tushmen, 1994; Stogdill, 1974; Whitten, 2000; Withers, 2000). Although in earlier writings 'traits' were regarded as inherent, theorists presently maintain that these traits may be learned (Mitchiner, 2000). LTPs are based on the premise that leadership can be taught and learned, and include activities that are designed to 'teach' the participants the above traits. Researchers claim that effective leadership training can enable anyone to become a leader (Foster, 2000; Hughes, Ginnett & Curphey, 1993; Mitchiner, 2000; Steven, 2000; Whitten, 2000).

There is ongoing debate on whether women have different leadership styles and traits than men (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Powell, 1990). The one school of thought advocates that female leaders are not different from male leaders. This school proposes that women who pursue the non-traditional career of a leader reject the feminine stereotypes and have needs and styles similar to those of male leaders. Leaders in an organization are socialized and selected into their organizational role, which overrides their gender role. This results in little difference between male and female leaders (Korabik et al., 1993; Kushnell & Newton, 1986; Powell, 1990).

The other school proposes that women do have different leadership styles than male leaders. Eagly and Johnson (1990) in their meta-analyses on women and leadership found significant evidence for differences in leadership styles. They concluded that women adopted a more democratic or participative style while men adopted a more autocratic or directive style.

This difference perspective proposes that women possess unique leadership traits, and organizations and communities would benefit immensely from selecting and promoting women to higher leadership po-

sitions. Rosener (1990) reports that presently a second wave of women leaders are making their way into the top leadership positions by drawing on the unique skills and attitudes that they have developed through their socialization and from sharing their experiences. These women leaders are demonstrating that women can achieve successful results, but may take a different path.

Foster (2000) and James (1998) note that women's leadership positions have been hindered by discrimination and stereotyping. Overcoming these difficult circumstances has resulted in women developing a more co-operative and flexible model of leadership. Women leaders are breaking new ground and are eager to find ways to engage other disenfranchised communities, such as youth and ethnic minorities. Helgesen (1990) recognized that certain feminine characteristics give women leaders an advantage. These include heightened communication and interpersonal skills, conflict resolution skills, and a greater capacity for prioritizing than their male counterparts. Helgesen (1990) suggests that these traits may stem from managing a household and raising children, while at the same time juggling a career. Rosener (1990) found that women leaders were characterized by a style of interactive, 'transformational' leadership. They actively sought affirmative interactions with their subordinates and the creation of a work environment where everyone was involved. This reflects the woman leader's belief that the creation of a win-win situation is advantageous to the organization's production. Organizations in recent years have been criticized for their hierarchical and bureaucratic structure. Many organizations have started to adopt a flatter organizational structure, where interpersonal and participatory skills are required. Thus, women's dynamic leadership traits are ideal (Fierman, 1990; James, 1998; Helgesen, 1990; Moskal, 1997; Stanford & Oates, 1995).

Researchers question the effectiveness of women-only versus mixed gender LTPs. Women-only LTPs are advantageous as they provide a safe space for women leaders to address and tackle the issues they face, and develop more skills in certain areas. Women-only LTPs generally include modules on personal development and career planning, assertiveness skills and organizational change strategies. Women aiming for leadership positions generally lack self-confidence, and thus women-only LTPs provide the affirmation boost that most women leaders require. This increases their motivation and self-assurance (Bhavnani, 1997; Burke, 2000; Steven, 2000).

On the other end of the continuum, individuals believe that women-only LTPs exacerbate the gendered leadership problem and contribute to the stereotypical idea that women are unsuccessful and ineffective

leaders. This perspective proposes that the implementation of mixed gender LTPs is of greater value. Mixed gender programs aim to deter bias against women and help dispel sex role stereotypes that exist in the organizations and communities. Women and men participants are encouraged to listen to one another and build authentic and significant relationships with one another. This results in participants feeling empowered, realizing the value of learning from one another, building relationships, and encourages the organization to work together interdependently and successfully (Betters-Reed & Moore, 1992).

METHOD

Data Collection

Three data sources were used, namely, organizational materials, interviews and questionnaires. These different sources were utilized so as to illuminate multiple perspectives and contribute to a richer data set (Tindall, 1994). The data collection was conducted using a phased approach beginning with interviews that informed the design of the questionnaire, which was subsequently distributed. Organizational materials were obtained during the interviews and were also submitted with the questionnaires.

A combination of convenience and purposive sampling was used. Twelve interviewees were selected because they represented a diversity of training and women's organizations, and conducted women's LTPs in different sectors. The interviewees were also selected on the basis of accessibility to the researcher. The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes, and were audio-taped with the permission of the interviewees. The interviewees were guaranteed anonymity. Structured topics included the aim, content, and the underlying assumptions of their program. Space was provided for free-flowing comments from the interviewees about training, views on women's leadership and future goals.

After reviewing the literature on women's leadership and training programs, a questionnaire was constructed. The interviews not only provided in-depth qualitative data, but also served the purpose of piloting the questionnaire. The questionnaire was revised accordingly. There is no clarity on the actual number of organizations that offer women's LTPs in South Africa, nor is there a comprehensive database. Therefore, questionnaires were distributed to as many organizations as

possible that indicated some leadership training. Four hundred questionnaires were distributed nationally via facsimile and e-mail to all organizations named in various resource lists. The questionnaires aimed to provide an overview of the different women's LTPs presently active in South Africa. The questionnaire consisted of both fixed and open-ended questions. Questions were grouped into five categories, aimed at assessing the program's target audience, rationale and aims, training content and learning strategies, evaluation and assessment strategies, and underlying assumptions.

Twenty-six questionnaires were returned, yielding a response rate of 5.9%. In each case the respondent was the person directly responsible for the training program. Together with the interviewees' twelve organizations, this yielded a total sample of 38 organizations. All organizations also submitted information materials such as brochures and pamphlets.

Data Analysis

The twelve interviews were transcribed, and a thematic analysis was conducted using a coding framework that emanated from the data content. Initially the transcripts were read closely to identify units of meaning that were coded. These codes were then merged into categories and finally into themes of meaning. Frequency counts were derived from the questionnaire data. Organizational materials were read and themes were identified.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The themes extracted from the data are presented below beginning with a description of the final sample. Each theme is discussed in relation to the literature, noting points of confirmation and difference.

Sample Profile

To obtain a profile of this sample, data from the 12 interviews and the 26 questionnaire responses were combined (n = 38). The percentage of organizations aimed directly at women was 44% (17). Of the organizations not directly aimed at women, i.e., 55% (21), 47% (10) reported a 70-90% female attendance of their LTPs, and 19% (4) indicated about 80% female attendance. Only 33% (7) indicated less than 50% female attendance.

Target Groups and Context

Organizations in this sample reported adjusting their programs to meet the needs of the different communities in South Africa. For example, courses would be changed to accommodate language differences. The percentage of organizations that indicated that they conducted the programs in English was 95% (36), in Afrikaans 47% (18) and in an African language 53% (20).[1] Most of the organizations reported that their programs are conducted in multiple, parallel languages where the facilitators are multilingual or work through an interpreter, or the workshop participants translate for each other.

The literature on LTPs, which tends to focus on management and training conducted in large corporations, was often inapplicable to the South African context, where programs are adapted for a range of target audiences. The results indicate that most of the organizations target more than one audience, i.e., rural 74% (28), urban 61% (23) and peri-urban 63% (24) communities, and 82% (31) of the organizations report targeting all races. The programs are required to adapt their content for the diverse sectors. The percentage of participating organizations that reported targeting skilled workers was 68% (26) and those targeting unskilled workers was 50% (19). A majority of the respondents emphasized the value of the programs being conducted in a community setting, with 47% (18) reporting that they conduct their program in the community, and 37% (14) of the organizations stating that they conduct the program at their offices. The reported advantages of conducting the program in the community included a greater feeling of familiarity for participants, increased sensitivity to the cultural context, and greater chance of success and sustainability.

Payment for Training

Mixed responses were reported on the issue of participants paying for the course themselves. Forty-two percent (16) of the organizations reported that participants are sponsored and do not pay for the course themselves. One interviewee strongly advocated that, "We've seen that the people who pay for themselves or are paid for by their family or who have a vested interest in the program, tend to take it more seriously," and another commented, "When they pay, value is given to the course." These comments illustrate one of the reasons why 37% (14) of the organizations reported that the participants pay for the course themselves. One organization sponsors their rural participants entirely, but promotes 'sweat equity' where the participants collect money for food, and

where they need to do their work in order to obtain the course certificate. When asked if the program was sponsored, 47% (18) of the respondents reported yes, 8% (3) reported no, 42% (16) reported partially. Reflecting the South African financial situation, many of the respondents reported difficulty in obtaining outside funding and sponsorship.

Motivation for Leadership Training

Many of the LTPs in this sample target individuals already identified as leaders in their community. As a result, the programs aim to enhance the participant's leadership potential and provide the skills for them to reach their full capacity with the objective of achieving community upliftment and sustainability. The responses to an open-ended question to state the aim of their LTP included key words, such as 'team leadership' and 'community organizing.' These aims resonate with the literature, which emphasizes that in addition to viewing a leader as an individual, it is essential to recognize that the community participates in the leadership process and that the leader should aim to positively influence the community towards an accomplished goal.

Empowerment

The word 'empowerment' surfaced numerous times in the interviews when explaining the aims of programs. The definitions of empowerment varied, yet a common thread was that individuals must first empower themselves before they can empower the community. The following definition of empowerment is an example:

> Empowerment, it's when they never had opportunities but we created opportunities for them to do certain things. It's one, using their capacities. It's two, the education. They are empowered to work on a plan for the project, empowered to work on project goals and objectives, so you empower them to do those certain things.

The interviewees' definitions of empowerment strongly resonate with Wallerstein's (1992, as cited in Wolfe, Wekerle & Scott, 1997) definition. He proposes that empowerment involves people gaining control and mastery over their own lives. Empowerment implies change and social action, where people, organizations and communities are encouraged to work towards a common goal and the improved quality of community life.

Defining Leadership

The personality characteristics and behavior traits associated with leadership were (n = 26): 'participatory' (77%, 20), 'person-orientated' (73%, 19), 'interpersonal' (85%, 22), and 'vision' (81%, 21). This 'participatory' definition of leadership underlies the programs' activities. An illustrative example is:

> A leader needs to be receptive to people, a leader needs to be the one that listens to people, and the leader is the one that is being directed by the vision of the people. A leader to me is the one that is working with communities, but also creating a space for participation in the community, identifying a problem and then outlining for the community, and then the community participating and supporting that person.

Gender and Leadership

The literature overview highlighted the perspective that advocated the existence and characteristics of a feminine style of leadership (Fierman, 1990; Rosener, 1990; Stanford & Oates, 1995). This perspective emanated in the data. Most of the respondents reported that men and women differ in leadership styles. In comparison to men, women leaders were described as having better interpersonal skills, being more sensitive, caring, democratic, flexible and more encouraging of participation.

These findings support Stanford and Oates' (1995) heuristic model of female leadership, which points out that women leaders are characterized as participative. One of the interviewees explained:

> The difference between female and male leadership to me, is the ability to walk in the shoes of the follower, to understand the needs of the follower, and to really only stay one or two steps ahead, and not run away from the follower, not get behind them . . . women leaders that we work with are most definitely, spiritually more intelligent.

Training Techniques and Strategies

Block Modules

Lambert (1994) emphasizes that LTPs should be conducted in block modules, as repeated interaction creates a greater opportunity to influ-

ence behavior and establish informal networks. In this study, 77% (20) of the organizations reported that their programs are conducted in the form of modules. All the interviewees emphasized that as a result of the short attention span and pressured schedules of adult participants, a modular program is effective. In the period between modules participants are assigned activities to implement in their community. This results in participants returning for the next module, having already put the acquired skills into practice. They are able to report on the effectiveness of their performance and ask advice for improvement. In summary, the benefit of a modular program is that it enables ongoing monitoring, testing and evaluation.

Participatory Learning

The questionnaire asked the respondents to select the factors that would best describe the features of the learning design used in their LTP. The most frequently identified factors were participative style (92%, 24), experiential activities (88%, 23), and questioning style (88%, 23). This finding was supported by the interviewees, who described their programs as implementing participatory action learning methods with an emphasis on group interaction and experiential learning. An example of the implementation and advantages of a participatory learning style is the following description by one of the interviewees of her activities with rural women:

> What I try to do, is make it as participatory as possible, with as little amount of lecturing as possible, because lecturing goes in one ear and out the other, especially for people who have not had much formal education, then participatory education is better. I try to keep it very practical and very realistic, and not really on the theory.

Numerous aspects were incorporated into the sub-theme of participatory learning style. The style of the instructors was described as facilitative (85%, 22) rather than authoritarian (4%, 1). Another aspect of a participatory learning style related to the use of multiple learning methods and training aids. The interviewees mentioned the use of case studies, manuals, videos, role-plays and billboards. These methods aim to encourage the participants to be actively involved in the learning process. This was supported in the questionnaire, where many advocated a 'doing style' (77%, 20) rather than a 'telling style' (23%, 6).

These findings echo Wallerstein's (1992, as cited in Wolfe et al., 1997) empowerment education model, which is based on the principle that participation is the active agent in empowerment. He maintains that programs must incorporate activities that actively involve the participants as "co-investigators," and participants are encouraged to explore issues and develop strategies that may positively transform the community.

Networking

Networking is a strategy that helps women achieve greater leadership positions (Karstan, 1994; Rosen, Miguel & Pierce, 1994). Twenty-one (81%) interviewees reported that networking is an important skill that they impart and implement in their LTPs. This is achieved through using facilitators from other organizations, creating a database of participants and sending out newsletters to alert the participants as to what aid is available and what activities are being conducted. As expressed by one of the interviewees:

> We find that women are talking about going up the ladder, but we're not talking about going up the ladder we're talking about a cobweb, whereby people can go anyway and anyhow and that would be that you have a network, and if you fall you have a place to fall on; a safety net.

Creative Evaluation Approaches

Evaluation is pertinent to any LTP design. Self-evaluation ensures that the learners have gained from the program, and program evaluation indicates to the facilitators if the program was effective in achieving its desired objective (Hughes et al., 1993; Lambert, 1994; Laird, 1985).

The use of discussion to evaluate the program was reported more frequently (73%, 19) than the use of written questionnaires (50%, 13). Some of the interviewees claimed that a written evaluation of the program was not beneficial, as the participants fear writing negative comments. One interviewee noted that she calls the evaluation sheet a "smiley sheet." Numerous measures have been undertaken by the interviewees to avoid this problem. Instead of handing out the evaluation forms only once, some require the participants to fill out an evaluation form every day, which includes self-reflective questions, such as, "What did you learn?" This ongoing evaluation is advantageous as the program is improved daily, rather than receiving the evaluation at the end of the LTP.

Follow-Up and On-Site Visits

The interviewees stated that although they use evaluation forms, the "real evaluation" of the programs' effectiveness is to examine if the participants are implementing their newly learned skills in the community. The only way this can be achieved is by having contact with the participants after the program and/or conducting a follow-up program. The questionnaire respondents all mentioned that they had contact with the participants after the program. The type of contact reported included monthly meetings, newsletters, e-mail correspondence and regular supervision.

All the interviewees indicated that follow-up in the form of on-site visits is essential, and advantageous. Interviewees reported that on-site visits provide an indication that the participants are actively implementing their newly learned skills, allow the program developers to gauge the impact of the program in the community context, show support and commitment to the participants, provide an effective program evaluation method and indicate areas of improvement. Yet, only a few of the interviewees said that they conducted on-site visits because of a lack of sufficient finances and sponsorship.

Women-Only or Mixed Gender Training

As mentioned previously, there is debate about which LTPs are more beneficial: women-only or mixed gender LTP programs. Most of the interviewees mentioned that there is a market for women-only LTPs. The interviewees acknowledged that women lack self-confidence and doubt their leadership abilities. Women-only LTPs were seen to alleviate these problems, as they provide a safe space for women, build the women's confidence by providing assurance and affirmation, and acknowledge that women have the ability to become powerful leaders in their community (Bhavnani, 1997; Steven, 2000).

The interviewees implementing women-only LTPs highlighted that these programs create a space for participants to discuss important issues that specifically affect women. These issues include, amongst others: child care, gender discrimination, balancing work and family, managing stress, sexual harassment, AIDS counseling, the 'pull-her-down' syndrome and the 'queen-bee' syndrome. Some interviewees mentioned that women-only LTPs allow the facilitator and participants to discuss techniques of how to lead in a traditionally male dominated leadership

space, and encourage women leaders to create their own space. The following is illustrative:

> Women will find it safer, more comfortable, and will be freer to express ideas. Same way looking at girls' schools, free to develop in maths and science. Girls develop freely when competition of men is removed . . . experiencing who they are, not fearing challenge, not being indoctrinated.

In spite of the support for women-only LTPs, this was not seen as a method that should be continued into the future by 73% (19). Two main reasons emerged as to why mixed gender LTP should be implemented. The first reason suggests that mixed gender LTPs promote the acceptance of differences and diversity, and encourage men and women to learn about and support each other. Respondents reported that women-only LTPs, through the exclusion of men, create greater alienation. Mixed gender LTPs were viewed as representing real life dynamics. One of the questionnaire respondents highlighted the value of mixed gender LTPs by reporting that, "I think the challenge is to be able to lead no matter whether we are different in gender or race." This echoes Betters-Reeds and Moore (1992), who promote diversity training as beneficial in removing stereotypes and empowering individuals.

The second reason reported by respondents is that mixed gender LTPs provide a space to educate and shift the attitudes of men. These comments demonstrated that the advantages of conducting mixed gender LTPs are that they "force men to examine their sexist attitudes," "challenge patriarchal assumption of power and dominance," and that they encourage men to "learn how to work positively with women." Respondents reported that mixed gender LTPs are extremely beneficial in encouraging men to eradicate their stereotypical belief that a leader is male, and instead to learn to accept women as competent and valuable leaders.

Standardization and Accreditation

Many of the interviewees recommended external accreditation for the programs. This issue was stressed as pertinent to South Africa, where a large percentage of individuals were unable to obtain an education due to the past political system of apartheid. The following response was typical:

> There are so many programs, so much bogus stuff going on in this country and people issuing bogus certificates, and people paying through the nose for them, and at the end of the day they are actually competent in nothing. . . . There is so much of this.

Many of the interviewees proposed that one way to alleviate this type of problem is to establish an external organization to accredit worthy programs. They believed that this would result in a standardization of programs, and participants would receive credits that render them eligible to attend a higher institution of learning. The comments mentioned in the open-question section of the questionnaires indicated the advantages of implementing an external standardization board. These included ensuring that training organizations meet the standards set for the quality and content of programs, creating a monitoring system that ensures greater accountability and transparency, and ensuring that the proposed quality of the service is being delivered.

CONCLUSION

Through an analysis of LTPs, this study investigated activities that ostensibly seek to increase the number of women community leaders in South Africa by training women in skills needed to occupy leadership positions. The findings revealed clear trends that may inform work towards the identification of a best practice framework for women's leadership training. In sum, experiential, participatory methods were deemed most suitable. Furthermore, to accommodate the multiple demands on women, training should be organized in block modules. The need for follow-up monitoring and evaluation was considered critical, but not always feasible due to resource limitations. Accreditation of courses was seen as desirable, specifically for the purpose of quality assurance.

NOTE

1. Most of the questions in the questionnaire asked the respondents to select the options that applied. This resulted in more than one option being selected (maximum = 26). In order to obtain the sample profile, the 12 interviews and 36 questionnaire responses were combined, and frequency counts were converted into percentages by dividing the total number of questionnaires and interviews completed by (n = 38). In the rest of the article, percentages are obtained for the questionnaire respondents only, by dividing the frequency counts (n = 26). This illustrates the percentage of subjects/organizations that agreed with a particular option presented. Percentages are rounded off.

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