

Entry and Transition to Academic Leadership: Experiences of Women Leaders from Turkey and the U.S.

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Abstract

Academics who aspire to become academic leaders experience a number of changes as they move into administration. New academic leaders find themselves immersed in a transition that demands personal development and creates new learning settings. The purpose of this study is to examine initial challenges experienced by women academic leaders in the first years of their appointment. A qualitative research design was used in conducting this study, and female leaders' voices are heard throughout the piece. 24 women leaders working at universities from two countries constituted the study group. 12 participants from Istanbul, Turkey and 12 participants from Phoenix, Arizona, U.S. constituted the voices of women leaders in the study. Being an academic leader may bring many challenges and the leader faces the greatest extent during the transition stage. This study specifically focuses on women academic leaders and aims to see how women academic leaders can overcome the constraints encountered at the transition stage. The study reveals that initial challenges felt and experienced during the transition stage are similar in two countries. The theme of "transition to academic leadership" involved the following subthemes: "Entry to the academic leadership and adjustment, fit with the institution and maintaining balance, overcoming resistance and interpersonal relations." The theme of overcoming initial challenges is composed of the following sub themes: "communities of practice, mentor and role models and leadership training."

Key Words

Academic Leadership, Higher Education, Administration, Initial Challenges, Transition to Leadership, Leadership Development.

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Academics who aspire to become deans experience a number of changes as they move into administration. New academic leaders find themselves immersed in a transition that demands personal development and creates new learning settings (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002). Korkut (1992) contends that academic leaders' entry into administrative positions entails the power of the position and status. Nevertheless, in time, the authority of academic leaders is accepted as they acquire social and technical skills in addition to attending to their formal responsibilities. This has become all the more important in the last decade, when middle management has come to play an ever more central role in ensuring the overall and long-term welfare of institutions of higher education. Rather than having a single leader, as was often the case in traditional higher education, multiple leaders have emerged in response to the increasingly diversified needs of contemporary higher education institutions. Provosts, deans, associate deans, and department chairs have accordingly become more influential and vocal within this new paradigm. This study defines people holding all of these administrative positions as academic leaders since they have the potential to transform their institutions while having a significant influence on their teams.

College deans engage in academic, administrative, and operational activities. Deans engage in these managerial endeavors to maintain consistency in their faculties and such duties occupy most of their time. However, with the challenges brought by the changing times, deans are increasingly expected to go further, namely, to reflect upon how their endeavors impact upon their faculties' and colleges' future. This underlines the importance of deans as leaders (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002).

With regard to the particular situation of women leaders in higher education, much of the extant literature emanating from Europe and the US focuses on women's often painful accounts of the challenges they have faced (Brown, Ummersen & Sturnick, 2001; Chliwniak, 1997; Nidiffer, 2000; Schwartz, 1997; Turner, 2007; Twombly, 1998; Wolverton, Wolverton & Gmelch, 1999). It was asserted that there are no instant solutions to the problems most deans face most of the time (Tucker & Bryan, 1991). Meanwhile, only a few studies have investigated the issue of academic leadership in Turkish scholarship (Çelik, 2007; Erçetin & Baskan, 2000; Hacıfazlıoğlu, 2010; Korkut, 2002; Özkanlı & White, 2009). In Turkish scholarship, current studies focused on K-12 leadership (Aydın, 2001; Celep, 2004; Çelik, 1999; Erçetin 2000; Gümüseli,

1996, 2001; Şişman, 2004; 2007). There is thus a need for more in-depth data on the ways in which Turkish academic leaders meet the demands of their leadership positions.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine initial challenges experienced by women academic leaders in the first years of their appointment. The study seeks answers to the following questions:

- What are the initial challenges encountered by women academic leaders?
- What are the similarities and differences experienced by women academic leaders in Turkey and the U.S. in terms of initial challenges?
- How do women leaders overcome the initial challenges?

Literature Review

Academic leadership is defined as “the act of building a community of scholars to set direction and achieve common purposes through the empowerment of faculty and staff” (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002, p. 33). Cohen and March (1974) underline the importance of collegiality in their works, describing university presidencies as an organized anarchy where presidents have little influence as leaders.

Several studies focused upon university presidents during the 1980s within the framework of academic leadership (Kerr 1984; Kerr & McGade, 1986). They suggest that a college president guards the general interest of the institution and seeks to facilitate processes that will serve its interest. This places the president in a central position. However, leadership is no longer a one-man phenomenon; rather, it is a collective activity. Within the framework of academic leadership, new leadership positions have emerged in the last decade. Sergiovanni and Corbally (1984) describe effective leadership as the extent to which empowerment is maintained.

In this context, deanship appears to be a leadership position that is becoming as important as presidency. Deans act as the bridge between those in upper and lower administrative positions in higher education. In the literature, the acquisition of deanship is seen as part of a meta-

morphosis from being an academic to being a leader (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002). The path to deanship begins when academics decide that in addition and perhaps above and beyond scholarship, they wish to pursue careers as administrators (Bursalioglu, 2002). Yet, many do not take on administrative posts with the intention of making it the main thrust of their career. In fact, the road to deanship usually entails a period as a department chair, a position which is not always embraced by many academicians. There are a number of extrinsic and intrinsic reasons put forward by those who pursue career paths as university administrators. Some say that they feel forced to take on such roles because no one else is willing; others say that they see it as an opportunity to help either the department or themselves professionally (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002). There are various reasons that motivate academicians to follow the path to leadership. Deanship is seen as a turning point, where those who proved successful are rewarded as a result of years of academic, professional, and personal sacrifice.

Academic leaders carry great responsibilities. Leaders might experience a period of uncertainty especially in the first few years. They might also experience difficulties in adjusting their professional and private lives. Hart (1993) bases his theory of academic leadership path on the notion of organizational and socialization periods. He divides deans' career paths as advancing along stages of "anticipation, encounter, and adaptation." The anticipation stage begins when an academic is selected as a leader and decides to accept a leadership position. In the encounter stage, newly appointed leaders begin to deal with routines, surprises, and relationships. During the adaptation phase, the leader completes the transition and begins to manage the institution with his or her own means. Similarly, Gmelch (2000) calls these stages "separation, transition, and incorporation" – phases which share more or less the same qualities as Hart's (1993) categorization. Gmelch and Miskin (1993) stated that deanship is more challenging than being a department chair since it requires socialization with the whole university. Gmelch and Seedorf (1989) examined the transition from academic life to administration. New administrators go through five stages, which are "taking hold, immersion, reshaping, consolidation and refinement" as well as the learning and action issues they face at each stage (Gabarro, 1987). Rosner (1990) examined transactional and transformative leadership from women's perspectives. Nidiffer (2001); Amey and Twombly (1992);

Finkel, Olswang, and She (1994) analyzed academic leadership from gender perspective and revealed gender based constraints experienced by women leaders. Walton (1997) analyzed the challenges experienced as a woman with the metaphor of “swimming against the tide.” Chliwniak (1997); Cotterill, Hughes and Letherby (2006); Nidiffer (2000); Schwartz (1997); Seedorf (1990); Twombly (1998); Wolverson et al. (1999) asserted that the situation of women academicians has changed and women began to take academic leadership posts.

Being an academic leader may bring many challenges and the leader faces those to the greatest extent during the transition stage. This study specifically focuses on women academic leaders and aims to see how women academic leaders overcome the constraints encountered at the entry stage. The study reveals that initial challenges felt and experienced during the transition stage are not unique to women. However, women’s experiences regarding the sub-theme of balance appeared to be gender specific. Women revealed that they faced constraints as mothers, as women, and as leaders while maintaining the balance between their responsibilities as academicians and as leaders.

Method

A qualitative research design was used in conducting this study and female leaders’ voices are heard throughout the piece. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) emphasize that adequately understanding the complex lived experience of humans is one of the defining goals of qualitative research. Recognizing this, I interviewed 24 participants for this exploratory study. This is in keeping with Sudman’s (1976) assertion that a small scale study is appropriate for initial inquiry into a complex topic. This in-depth study of 24 women leaders allowed me to develop a deeper and more contextualized understanding of their thoughts and experiences than I could have achieved with a more standardized study of a larger group of respondents.

Participants

Women leaders working at universities from two countries constituted the sample for this study. Participants were chosen from two large cities in two countries. The city of Phoenix, Arizona is a large metropolitan

area in the United States and is home to people of different cultures and ethnicities. The city of Istanbul in Turkey also has a very large and diverse population. Twelve participants from Istanbul and twelve participants from Phoenix constituted the voices of women leaders in the study. All were volunteers. Each participant was a scholar and leader in fields such as organizational behavior, organizational development, and women studies. Specific information regarding the individuals and their institutional profiles is not provided to ensure the participants' privacy.

Interviews and Procedure

Voices are powerful and useful tools in both educational practice and research, yet women leaders' voices are rarely heard. Seidman (1998) has stated that when we encourage participants to tell their stories, we hear about their experiences in illuminating and memorable ways.

For this study, I sent a letter to women vice presidents, deans, associate deans and directors who were actively involved in leadership positions inviting their voluntary participation, informing them of participation requirements and safeguards, and asking that they certify their informed consent (Arizona State University-ASU- IRB Protokol Number: 0811003423, IRB Approval Date: 11 November, 2008). I contacted prospective interviewees in person or by email, requesting their participation. Participants were reassured that their identities would remain confidential unless they wished to be identified by name or role. No real names were listed on any documents or data related to this research.

As I interviewed women leaders, I used reflective listening, remaining open and non-judgmental in the process. After each interview, I completed a "Contact Summary Form" as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) to summarize the main points of the interview and to use during the final analysis.

Bias and Validity

I bring to this study my own background as a department chair. I also bring my background as a woman and a mother of an active little boy. My present position as an assistant professor who works in administrative posts has allowed me to personally experience the constraints reported in the lives of women in academic leadership positions. Maxwell

(1996) addresses the potential for bias and the threat to validity when he refers to our tendency to filter information through our own prior experiences. I acknowledge that these experiences can become a source of bias, and was very cognizant of not allowing, as much as possible, my own assumptions to influence the interview process.

The procedures used to collect and analyze the data were put in place to address the issues of bias and validity. In qualitative studies, there is always a possibility that the researcher could misunderstand what he or she has heard. In order to minimize this, I allowed participants to review their own interview transcripts, as was suggested in Yıldırım and Şimşek (2008). Interviews were conducted at leaders' own offices, where they appeared to feel more comfortable and confident. During the analysis phase, I solicited input from my colleagues, inviting them to challenge both my thinking and my interpretation of the data (see Maxwell, 1996). During transcription, I was very careful to transcribe the audio recordings word-for-word and paid close attention to the subjects' unsolicited comments and observations. In addition, my questions were open-ended. This was done so that the leaders could better tell their stories, free of the influence of my own story.

Analysis

I divided the analysis procedure into the five parts as suggested by Marshall and Rossman (1999): a) organizing data; b) identifying themes, patterns, and categories; c) testing the emergent hypothesis against the data; d) searching for alternative explanations of the data; and e) writing the report. I then selected excerpts from the transcripts and placed them into broad categories in search of thematic connections within and among the transcripts (Seidman, 1998).

Next, I carried out cross-case and cross-over analyses based on the various responses from the interviews, using the work of Miles and Huberman (1994) and Merriam (1988) as references. I then presented the data in a series of tables which incorporated direct quotations from participants to illustrate their viewpoints as stated by Miles and Huberman (1994).

This article features interview data regarding the initial challenges encountered by women leaders during their transition to academic leadership. My next step was to develop narrative summaries, which Maxwell (1996) describes as thumbnail sketches that capture a few pertinent high-

lights from an insider's perspective. Throughout the analysis process, I used women leaders' own voices and words to describe their experiences.

Results

I observed in the interviews that some women leaders have stories of resistance from the faculty and their stories show how they are motivated and encouraged to follow the path of academic leadership even though they encounter roadblocks. It seems as if they achieved professional success by jumping over those barriers. None of the interviewees' stories ended in failure; rather, they found alternative solutions for achieving their goals. None perceived being a leader as their primary end or goal. An additional interesting finding was that all participants expressed pleasure and excitement from being a faculty member. Academic leadership appears to be offered to such people as a part of a natural process.

Emerging Themes and Subthemes

The following themes and subthemes emerged from the analysis of the transcripts, though the prime focus of this paper is on the theme of initial challenges faced by women leaders.

Table 1.

Women's Transition to Academic Leadership Themes and Sub Themes

Theme 1: Transition to Academic Leadership and Initial Challenges

Entry to Leadership and Adjustment

Fit with the Institution and Maintaining Balance

Overcoming Resistance

Interpersonal Relations

Theme 2: Overcoming Initial Challenges

Communities of Practice

Mentorship and Role Models

Leadership Training Programs

Theme 1. Transition to Academic Leadership and Initial Challenges

Transition to Academic Leadership and Initial Challenges involved the

following subthemes: “Entry leadership and adjustment, fit with the institution and maintaining balance, overcoming resistance and interpersonal relations.”

Entry to Leadership and Adjustment: One of the most significant challenges that leaders faced in their entry period was the mental adaptation to their new positions. The move from a regular faculty to a leadership position appeared to involve many changes. Most respondents stated that it took them six to eight months to even be able to embrace the pace at which they had to work and the quantity of work itself. Most more or less echoed the following sentiment “when you get to the dean level you really lose control of your own time.”

For all of the respondents in the study, time management appeared to be the biggest challenge encountered at the initial transition to leadership. Another oft-cited challenge was the issues related to budget, regulations and procedures. Both leaders from Turkey and the U.S. mentioned these as their primary duties during the first six months. However, in both countries, many participants also indicated that “overcoming resistance, fit with the institution and maintaining balance and interpersonal relations” appeared to be the main challenge that they had to deal with for more than six months.

Fit with the Institution and Maintaining Balance: “Fit with the institution and maintaining balance” appeared to be the most influential driving force emerging from the stories of these women leaders. Most leaders indicated the importance of fit with the institution in their success. They pointed out the wide range of ways in which they try to maintain balance in different areas of their activity. Most of the participants also mentioned, directly or indirectly, their responsibilities as women. The responsibility of playing many roles both in the work place and within their families was perceived to be a real constraint for many respondents. However, they seemed to be quite successful in managing these roles. Participants all emphasized the importance of maintaining balance between “being an academic and a leader”.

Overcoming Resistance: Almost all the leaders mentioned experiences of resistance in the first few months. However, the intensity and the degree of resistance differed in each leader’s story. Most of the U.S. deans’ stories revealed the dilemmas and conflicts that could be experienced in academic leadership positions. Almost all felt some de-

gree of resistance from their colleagues, though the type and the nature of resistance differed. Some mentioned silent resistance, some cynical comments and cruel jokes, and some stated that their morale was low. Furthermore, due to the nature of their position, all said they had to act as a mediator between their own faculty and the presidential leadership team which was often a source of tension. Three leaders from the U.S. said it took several years to entirely overcome those constraints while the rest said it took from six to twelve months. Nevertheless, in time it appeared that all the women interviewed successfully overcame such challenges, as attested to by their advancement as leaders. In this respect, five women leaders from Turkey echoed their counterparts in the U.S. These stories suggest that, despite cultural differences, our common human nature means that we experience the challenges associated with taking on a leadership position in similar ways. Therefore, it appears that resistance is unavoidable at the encounter stage but degree and intensity differ depending on the institution, faculty and the staff.

Interpersonal Relations: Argyris and Cyert (1980) identified four skill areas which must be mastered by university administrators. These are peer skills (the ability to establish and maintain networks), leadership skills (authority, power, and dependence), conflict-resolution skills (mediation, handling disturbances, and working under pressure), and information processing skills (collection, evaluation, organization, and dissemination of information). In this study, leaders reflected on the ways they handled such challenges in a changing environment. All leaders who have held their positions for around 20 years stated that “interpersonal relations” was one of the most important aspects of the job. It was clear in their stories that collaboration and connection were important stylistic elements in establishing a collaborative culture. All leaders both from Turkey and the U.S. indicated “changing the culture of the staff” as one of the biggest challenges they encountered. It followed from the conversations that the first two years were spent trying to establish such a framework. Nearly all emphasized that a lot of time was spent on getting know people’s strength and weaknesses and hiring right hand people who could advise them well. Most of the deans also emphasized the importance of “hard work and commitment integrated with humor”.

Theme 2. Overcoming Initial Challenges

The theme of overcoming initial challenges is composed of the follow-

ing sub themes: “Communities of Practice, Mentor and Role Models and Leadership Training”.

Communities of Practice: Some of the women leaders from the United States indicated that being an active member of a network group helped them considerably. At the same time, some talked about the ways in which “communities of practice” established a ground, where they could share their practices. Turkish women leaders asserted that they would be happy to be a part of such a group.

Mentorship and Role Models: Women leaders in both countries underlined the importance of having a mentor or mentors when overcoming initial constraints and challenges. They also recommended aspiring leaders to observe the leaders around them.

Leadership Training Programs: Some of the American women leaders indicated that they were sent to leadership training programs and seminars arranged by the organizations and associations. They revealed their positive thoughts about the courses which focused on “action practice.” Although majority of the Turkish women leaders did not attend such courses, they believed these courses could be useful for them.

Discussion

It appears that leadership became a part of these women’s lives, rather than a separate burden which they carry. This might be the “secret recipe” for their success. Each, moreover, mentioned that “leadership requires hard work and commitment.” It appears that embarking on the road to leadership with high expectations of the position can only make one’s own life as well as those of others more miserable and complicated. All leaders who have held their positions for almost 20 years stated that ‘interpersonal relations’ was one of the most important pillars in their job.

In both countries, we heard the women leaders tell us their success stories. At the same time, there may be tales of disappointment. This duality was evident in some leaders’ accounts. Yet, they seemed to say that in the end they had managed to turn the challenges they faced into success stories. In this context, we saw snapshots of women who were responsible for dealing with many issues. A dean from Turkey, Melis, believed that since women have to cope with many constraints in society which lie along a spectrum ranging from family issues to professional issues; as

a result, they develop certain strategies to meet these challenges. Being a sociologist, she believed this held true for women's lives not only in Turkey but also in other parts of the world. Gender-related constraints were mostly mentioned when women leaders talked about the experiences under the sub theme of "fitting with the institution and maintaining balance." As for the initial challenges, they did not specifically relate the constraints to being a woman. Further studies analyzing male voices can bring the perspective and experiences of male academic leaders in higher education administration. The impact of such challenges was also mentioned by most of the participants in the American sample. In some cases, women attempted to create "communities of practice" to share their experiences and overcome feelings of pressure under the burden of their positions. Almost all the leaders in the study invited aspiring leaders to increase their awareness of the people around them. They believed one could learn a lot by watching good leaders and bad leaders.

The findings in this study appear to be in parallel with the results of the study on the career phases of school principals (Bakioğlu, 1993; Day & Bakioğlu, 1996; Huberman 1989). Having a mentor in the entry phase of academic leadership could help the novice leader to overcome the initial challenges. This finding has similarities with Bakioğlu, Hacifazlıoğlu and Özcan's (2010) study on school principals.

Almost all the leaders in both countries emphasized that good motives spur people to organizational leadership and being a team player. Yet, leaders might experience certain dilemmas in creating a profile of their own. Although they might have good intentions, they might experience crises in the quest for self during the long path of leadership. The participants recommended that aspiring leaders need to be "themselves" during the development process. Leadership requires hard work and commitment. Thus, embarking on the road to leadership with expectations of immediate results and recognition will make one's own life and those of others more miserable and complicated.

It was observed from the voices emanating from the two cultures that leadership is perceived as a "service" rather than a symbol of power. In their view, academic leadership is not an ego-driven role; rather, it entails a regenerative power that collects, connects, and regenerates the faculty as a whole. Perhaps for this reason, almost all of the leaders warned aspiring leaders not to rush into administrative activities at an early age.

Many of the women's words regarding initial challenges that they encountered during their careers stress the theme of "building identity as a leader." This suggests that women spend the first six to twelve months of a leadership position trying to adjust to the system and building their identity as a leader. The time span changes depending on the dean's previous leadership experience, training, field of study and character. For all the participants it was clear that the first months appeared to be the most challenging in terms of finding a balance between the position and the self. During this time span "institutional fit" appeared to be of crucial importance.

One way women leaders can counter stress is through participating in various training programs, and a number of programs have been designed specifically for women leaders in different parts of the world. The growing number of women in higher education administration is a sign of how their stories have changed in the last decade. Some attend workshops and conferences specifically tailored for women leaders. American leaders mentioned "practice oriented workshops and conversation sessions" as being of considerable value. Some described these sessions as moments of "rehabilitation and self-reflection", which offered a way to maintain balance between their private and professional lives. However, some were also skeptical about the benefits of these professional development activities. And while women leaders in the Turkish sample did not mention such sessions – perhaps because they are only rarely held – almost all mentioned one or two close mentors from academia who had helped them to develop their leadership skills. Some women leaders also mentioned male mentors as serving the role of a "critical friend" who holds up a mirror for self-reflection. Thus, while this article does not hone in upon the thoughts and experiences of women leaders on the importance of leadership training in their career success, "professional development" did emerge as a basic theme of this study, along with the notion of "initial challenges". Following excerpt reveals the importance of support among women:

...by bringing ourselves through the door and supporting others in doing so as well, we can define ourselves in and claim unambiguous empowerment, creating discourses that address our realities, affirm our intellectual contributions, and seriously examine our worlds (Turner, 2002, p. 93).

This study revealed experiences of women academic leaders in the transition stage. Experiences and stories of women showed that leadership

is a long and difficult journey, which requires commitment, hard work and competence. Further studies could serve as valuable resources both for the practitioners and the theorists of academic leadership. Leadership training and development should also be examined in order to prepare effective training seminars and courses for aspiring academic leaders.

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