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Dolores E. Cross
Chicago State University

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Women as Leaders in Higher Education: Blending Personal Experience with a Sociological Viewpoint

by Dolores E. Cross

A theme often repeated in the writings of C. Wright Mills is that of the “sociological imagination.”¹ What prompts our sociological imagination, he says, is a blending of our knowledge about the social sciences with our personal history. In my experience, it is important for leaders to have a sociological imagination. What follows are observations of my experience during my tenure as president of the New York State Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC), and in my current position as president of Chicago State University.

In 1981, I was appointed president of HESC by Governor Hugh Carey. The agency had been created as an educational agency by the state legislature in 1974. My vision was that the agency could be more than just an administrative agency doling out student aid funds, but could educate students and serve institutions in a much broader way.

There is no one model of successful leadership that fits all circumstances.

The purpose of HESC was to provide access to higher education for all eligible students. Looking at the work of the agency from both my own personal experience and from a sociological viewpoint enabled me to understand the external constraints that would impact the process of change. My sociological imagination prompted me to know, and to act upon, an awareness that in order to serve all eligible students, the agency would have to go beyond a mere processing function.

I had a vision for the agency that would place it in a national leadership position not only for financial aid administration, but also for information and research. Many of the students HESC served had lives similar to what mine had been—I understood the obstacles they faced, and their needs. I had grown up in Newark, New Jersey, in a low-income family, had married and had children at a young age, and had struggled for many years to achieve my educational goals while working and raising a family. I was an honor student, but finances presented a barrier. My experience made me more sensitive to the triggers in the environment that are early warning signs of greater hardships for



minority and low-income students. In spite of demographic projections for a greater proportion of minorities among college-age youth, minority representation in higher education was, in fact, decreasing. At the same time that college costs were escalating, the federal government was wavering in its support of student aid.

Providing leadership required that I not only draw upon my personal experience, but also adhere to the tenets of good social science and public service. This meant developing information, expanding the vision, and increasing the stakeholders. In the process, I shattered stereotypes about myself, confronted myths about women in management, and made progress in unconventional ways.

Since taking a position at Chicago State University four years ago, my role has again been that of a change agent. Faced with the difficult task of evolving the organizational culture, I relied upon my own experience while realizing that CSU had reached a new point in its organizational history. I took great effort to communicate directly with all employees and instituted a participative planning and budgeting process that emphasized communication and interaction. Employee development was encouraged and supported. My visibility on- and off-campus was increased as a result. Greater delegation and coordination were given to middle-level managers as I sought to develop a more consultative model and increase communication.

What have I learned from these kinds of experiences?

I learned that there is no one model of successful leadership that fits all circumstances. Leaders are similar in their ability to bring together different people for the sake of a common goal, but they differ in talents, temperaments, and traits that enable them to work at different levels in business and government.

One does not become a leader by merely reading a set of

abstract rules. Leadership is achieved by those who understand the constraints of the environment as well as their own capabilities. Leaders are self-aware, conscious of their weaknesses as well as their strengths, concerned with personal development for both themselves and others. Leadership needs to be initiating, guiding, involving, and influential. Leaders combine their own initiatives with the involvement of others in determining the needs of an organization and finding potential solutions to problems. Commitment to change stems from personal values and priorities—vision—and a leader's effectiveness depends on her ability to make *her* vision a *collective* vision. I often speak of the "we" tradition at Chicago State University. It is a coming together and working together toward a collective set of goals.

For women, taking risks and confronting stereotypes is a key to providing leadership.

Much of what I do involves taking risks and confronting stereotypes. Those risks include a commitment to women's inherent connectedness with other women, not only with those other women who are in the same social and economic group, but also with women living in poverty, in terms of caring about them and raising the right questions about their situations. That means raising questions that may not be popular. Confronting stereotypes means dealing with the preconceived notion that a woman, and, in my case, an African-American woman, will not take charge.

For women, taking risks and confronting stereotypes is a key to providing leadership. In taking risks and challenging stereotypes women must be cognizant of what they have learned from other women, whether from similar or different backgrounds. I have learned a lot about taking risks and confronting stereotypes from women at Chicago State University. If we are to become the leaders we want and need to be, then we must look at our connectedness with one another. We must ask ourselves, How much do we really listen to and understand about the lives of other women, not just our colleagues and neighbors, but also our sisters in the Third and Fourth Worlds?

If change is to happen, it must be inclusive and it must be for the right reasons. It must address the needs of women like CSU's students, women who may seem faceless in an organization. Those of us who have achieved positions of leadership should seek out such individuals and talk to them. We must let them know that we understand, and that we recognize that they, too, have something to contribute.

Leadership is not a now-and-then quality to be exercised only when emergencies arise. It is not a reflex response to organizational demands, but the infusion over time of a sense of value in people who feel that what they are doing is meaningful. The ideal leader cannot be merely successful herself. She must also bring out the best in other people, the constructive ideals of social character and the values that express its positive traits.

At the same time, we must not view power and politics as dirty words. Women *can* get to the top and gain power the same way men do, by working harder, knowing more, taking risks, and being better at their jobs than their competitors, both male and female. But, having gained power for ourselves, we must use it to help others. Leadership includes the value of caring about others, and it encourages personal development in others which, in turn, creates value for the organization. The most significant attribute of a leader is such a caring, respectful, and responsible attitude, along with flexibility about people and a willingness to share power.

Notes

¹C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford, 1959).

Dolores E. Cross is president of Chicago State University.