

Challenges in Academic Top Leadership as Perceived by Women Leaders

Daizylyn Caan-Palillo

Polytechnic University of the Philippines

Abstract

The leadership of Higher Education in the Philippines both in State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) and Local Universities and Colleges (LUCs) have been led by men leaders. However, in this changing world, a lot of empowered women have been taking the position of top leadership in this sector and remarkably adapt the good practices that would benefit the institution they are serving. In this climate of change where new leadership style is applied, challenges are inevitable which requires skills to make a wise decision that would benefit all stakeholders. In this study, five women presidents were interviewed to explore how they perceived challenges in their leadership journey. Findings revealed that women presidents experience the same challenges as to men in various ways yet these challenges made their faith even stronger and their character finer. On the other hand, challenges affect the implementation of change. It was a huge challenge but their desire to put their respective institution on spotlight drives them to become more determined with motherly approach in the process. This has become their edge in enforcing teamwork among their employees which open doors for smooth implementation of change.

Keywords: challenges, higher institution, top leadership, women leaders

Introduction

Women nowadays are becoming more dynamic and empowered leading them to hold top positions not only in the industry but also in higher education institutions. While the ratio between women and men leaders is still far from equality, women leaders are doing great and performing as powerful as men leaders. The increasing number of women leaders proves how competent they are in this field of endeavor. Aware of the challenges in their leadership journey, stepping back is not an option compare to their desire to do service in their respective institution. Environment of the higher has significantly changed now a days. Innovation has been evident from the previous leadership which requires altered requirements in able to adapt to the demands of time. Political and ideological invasion has increased and universities have been pressured to demonstrate greater accountability on issues of access, cost containment, and learning outcomes (Rich, 2006)

Education is one of the largest sectors that can serve as agent of change. According to Khan (2012), Higher education is performing various tasks for nation development. It prepares and trains the work force for the 21st century. Education sector has emerged to broaden the areas of knowledge to address the inevitable changes occurring in every field of life as well as in the field of higher education for effective working methods in the global age. These changes have created many challenges to academic leaders, now academic leaders are responsible to trace these changes and add them for excellence in higher education. In some situations, academic leaders feel pressure as change management is necessary for advancement, while on the other hand local and cultural norms create some hurdles for them. Change is a normal scenario in today's world. Changes are occurring in almost all fields of life whether we like it or not. Therefore, management has to manage the change for benefits and to survive in the changing world. Market situation, technology, government laws and regulations and economics are some external forces which bring change while corporate strategy, workforce, technology and equipment and employee's attitude and leadership structure are some internal forces of change (Passenheim, 2010).

As accountability among stakeholders continue to be raised in higher education, so do the challenges on leadership which is significantly considered as a factor that impacts the implementation of new process on educational conditions and consequently on the quality of student learning (Cardno, 2014). One of the common challenges a leader experience is the change of structural organization. Leaders in any organization including Higher Education Institutions is not excused from this across all three levels namely structuring their own work, structuring their organization and structuring the change process. (Gallosa & Bolman, 2021). This challenge has been dealt many times under new leadership. Institutions across the higher education landscape have much in common that test how leaders respond to this inevitable challenges. Not only the structural change that confronts leaders but also in doing fundraising and retaining a talented workforce, engaging into academic excellence, balancing complex priorities and budgets and fostering student success

Change for its good benefit is everywhere. However, challenges have been affecting the implementation of these changes which the women leaders find it to be equally important in their leadership style. It gave them another perspective in bringing their respective institution into greater heights of achievements especially that they have this motherly approach in their way of leading the institution they are serving. As stated by Parrish (2013) in one of his study, emotional intelligence was recognised by all of the case-study participants they have interviewed to be highly relevant and an important requirement for highly respected academic leadership. The challenges encountered in higher education in the past but recent decades have led to the emergence of various leadership styles within the sector and is evident in many higher education institutions across all regions, whether research-led, teaching-led, large or small, specialized or multi-faculty (Black, 2015).

Leadership is not only about top-down influence and does not happen through the effort of one individual person with high position, rather, it is through a dynamic and collaborative support of everyone in the institution. It is an engaging process which evolve in connecting people suitable for a certain situation to be handled. Relationship between and among employees plays a significant role in this process. Moreover, if change is beneficial to the workforce, then change will make a difference (Komives, Wagner, & Associates, 2017). Furthermore, social change and socially responsible leadership are even more significant in the 21st century because of the complexity and competing demands among different clusters in the society which is evident as characteristics of the 21st century. In fact, record of history stated that generations across the millenia also perceived their times to be complicated, difficult and sometimes deceitful.

The role of an academic leader is complex, large and often imbued with misconception. One of the fundamental challenges that academic leaders encounter is a lack of clarity about the nature of this context-specific form of leadership that embraces both management and leadership functions and is generally poorly described in official documents and statements of performance expectations (Marshall et al., 2011; Scott et al., 2008; Yelder and Codling, 2004). In the study of Drew (2010), it was found out that the most remarkable challenges is focus on the need for strategic leadership, adaptability, creativity and even the change implementation. It also includes the method of responding to competing tensions while maintaining academic quality and managing fiscal and people resources.

These challenges encountered in the higher education prompted the researcher to explore how the women leaders addressed these as they lead the institution they are serving. This was determined through the statement of the problem stated below.

This study explores the leadership Perspective of Women presidents in higher education which sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the struggles/challenges of a woman as president of higher education institution?
 - 1.1. What are the common challenges and concerns you have encountered as woman president?
 - 1.2. In the face of challenges and concerns, how do you end your day?

Methodology

Research Design

The researcher employed the descriptive design as it answers the questions beginning in “how” and “what”. Qualitative research approach through a case study method was employed in this study to drive responses about perceived leadership with reference to a case among the five women presidents among State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) and Local Universities and Colleges (LUCs) whose institutions is eligible for free education. The case study method is designed to gain insights from the in-depth details of the case in SUCs and LUCs. It is anchored on real life accounts and provides rich, detailed accounts of the case. The researcher chose case study for it is an empirical study of a contemporary phenomenon in real-life contexts.

The study utilized the case study method under qualitative approach as the tradition of inquiry since the main objective was to study how woman perceived challenges in higher educational institutions.

Data Collection

There are two sources of data: primary and secondary sources. For this study, both primary and secondary data were collected by the researcher to achieve the goal of the study. The primary data were derived from the answers given by the participants who were the woman presidents among SUCs and LUCs in Luzon. The respondents must be a woman president of higher education institution specifically of State Universities and Colleges, and Local Universities and Colleges in Luzon. The secondary data were list of SUCs and LUCs in Luzon who are eligible for free education.

There were five (5) woman presidents interviewed to get the needed data. President A is the first woman president and third university president in one of the SUCs in National Capital Region (NCR). President B is the first woman president in one of the LUCs in CALABARZON (Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal and Quezon) Region. President C is now on her second term as woman president in one of the SUCs in Central Luzon. President D is also from the same region and is about to take her second term as the first woman president of SUC as well. . President E is the first woman president in one of the SUCs in Bicol region. The qualitative samples included processes of purposeful selection according to specific parameters as stipulated in the study. The researcher used non-probability sampling techniques particularly purposive to achieve desired data.

The researcher also guaranteed the participants that while processing the gathering of data, respect for privacy will be implemented to the participants To maintain the confidentiality of the participants in this study, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Numbers were assigned to each participant for their surveys.

To achieve the goal of this study, the researcher provided semi-structured interview. The interview guide was a researcher-made instrument and was validated by the experts.

The interview guide question was composed of eleven (11) items which were divided into cluster. First cluster of the interview schedule, the researcher asked the participants on how women become the president of a higher education institution run by government. Next cluster were questions that solicit answers on the struggles or challenges they encountered as woman presidents .

Another set of questions was focused on how does presidency impacts woman leaders in their perspective in leadership. The last question focused on how could they envision the future to create more empowered women in education. Everytime an interview was done, transcribing of the actual interview was done in verbatim approach.

Results and Discussion

Challenges are always present in any situation whether an individual belongs to top social heirarchy or bottom social heirarchy. Woman presidents whom the researcher had interviewed, for them, challenges are more complex and diversified on top leadership. Challenges are not new to college and university presidents because the 21st century leaders are more pressure than ever to balance multiple demands (Simon, 2009). President in Today's University face the challenges constantly to lead the institutions with unique cultures, long histories, structures that are difficult to follow that binds together all the stakeholders. (Ruscio, 2017).

Challenges encountered by women presidents are the same as those of male presidents

Career women have the same problems as men; pressures of responsibilities, problems with subordinates, and accountability to top management (Herrera, 2006). It is interesting to know that the presidents whom the researcher had interviewed recognize the similarity of man and woman leader. President C said that, *“that I experience same challenges as what man leaders experience. This is about human relationship, because no matter what you do, there are people who dislike you but then I am here not to please myself but to serve others.”* Redmond (2016) interviewed seven females from Australia who have successfully achieved the top leadership positions. He found out that while their experiences differ in many ways, there are definitely common challenges and adversities that they have faced which they perceived to be factors in becoming successful leaders. These were further achieved through development of resiliency, developing track record and seeking support.

Moreover, President B said, *“there is no distinction between male and female”* The same president reiterated that, *“Once you’re there, regardless of your academic achievement, that’s not matter anymore. It’s what you bring to the table in terms of life skills, how do I relate with you. How do I work, how do I respond to this, that is something you never learn in school”*. It was further stated by president A, *“ I experienced what the male president also experienced”* which was validated by the statement of President C when she said that *“I don’t say it’s a barrier...It’s the day to day operation where man also experienced.* Regardless of their experiences in the service, it is interesting to note that the woman presidents who were interviewed acknowledge that their status as president of their respective institution does not mean that they are better than male, but instead, they are equally effective and competent because regardless of their gender, they all undergo same process and experiences.

The study of Hopkins, & Bilimoria (2008) found out that the results between competency level of male and female leaders indicated that there were no significant differences in their demonstration of emotional and social intelligence competencies. On the other hand, Sanders, et. al (2011), viewed women as stronger than men in the high emotional quotient skills such as consulting, supporting, mentoring, and rewarding. However, these are the leadership factors that tend to be less recognized and rewarded.

Challenges vary

Presidents, whether man or woman, challenges will never be the same across all universities and colleges. It varies at some point of time during their presidency. In their career path, they had experienced different challenges getting on top. President A who is also the first university president

revealed that, *“dealing with male employees and peers who have the tendency to belittle a woman president is one of my challenges”*. President C also mentioned, *“how to handle human relations is one of the most challenging part of being a leader”*. Similar challenge was mentioned by President D, *“handling the human relationship, because no matter what you do, there are people who dislike you”*. The same challenge that President E faced, *“managing people is very challenging”*. Their statements show that regardless of how long they have been as president or regardless of the experience they had attained as administrators, handling people is one of the most challenging part as of women presidents. It is an evidence of the old proverbs that no matter what you do, you cannot please everyone. However, these women presidents could not avoid these employees even they dislike her as she has to deal with them as part of her constituents. As Mohrman, & Worley (2009) pointed out, leaders, during a deep and prolonged downturn, should introduce organizational practices that build capability in the organization, not only to withstand the uncertainties of rough times better, but also to emerge stronger for the future. They should present a set of organization design changes that can create closer connections to the marketplace and better use knowledge in the organization to introduce new ways to deliver value while consuming fewer resources

Another challenging experiences of women presidents are breaking something that has already been a tradition. President D said, *“first of all, of course the culture even if I grew up here but...of some system and we do not want it to change suddenly of course”*. On the other hand, President E pointed out that, *“the common challenges in my presidency includes the inability of certain units/offices to carry out their works efficiently. Productivity in the workplace is also a problem. Some employees just simply report to duty without completing a work, a report, a project”*. she also pointed out that, *“The capability which goes beyond the degrees earned and the training acquired”*. is a challenged she has to face on a daily basis. while for president A, *Students have to earn at an early age without having the chance to pursue higher studies*. These are challenges the woman presidents have to face respectively in their institution. It may change at some point of time but one sure thing is that, challenges are inevitable in any organization. If taken positively and responsibly, the same challenges will teach leaders to become stronger and more prepared for greater responsibility. Herrera (2006), said that working women have some unique problems because they hold a position that has long been considered as a “man’s job”. Moreover, while most executives believe that women’s competence, confidence and commitment are as effective as male leaders, they were still given less priority in the top position.

The study of Jackson & Harris (2007) found out that exclusion from informal networks, lack of preparation, and lack of career goals were among the primary challenges a leader may experience. But strategies to overcome these barriers included exceeding job expectations, being visible, and developing leadership skills. Mentoring was also suggested as a way to overcome challenges. Men and women are different in many ways but both deliver the job well and make strong leaders.

Challenges affect the implementation of change

As an old adage says, *“Change is the only permanent thing in this world.”*. This means that change is everywhere. However, in an organization, implementing change is necessary. The presidents mentioned that the implementation of change is one of their challenges. President D said that, *“we expect at all times that change is coming, but we cannot do it suddenly, otherwise, there will be resistance in the implementation of change and you cannot avoid resistance. The introduction of change is really the one that was and is that will be challenging and concern among leaders. But if you are consistent, then that would be an advantage because consistency is also important character of the president”*. Change is one of the many struggles a leader may experience. However, if that change is the best for the institution, then a leader has to be assertive in implementing the change

whether this is an organizational structure, a practice that has to be eliminated, or even a tradition that hinders innovations or best practices to be employed. Furthermore, the successful organizational change can lead to innovation for organization, which is the key for long term success and sustainability. This model expresses relationship between successful organizational change and leadership on the basis of her characteristics, which are ‘Vision’ and ‘Innovative Approach’ (Wasim & Imran, 2010).

During rapid change and extreme threats, steering the ship is not sufficient. Leaders must introduce approaches that tap employees' energies throughout the organization (Mohrman, & Worley, 2009). In the same manner, Ford, J.D., Ford, W.F., and D’Amelio, (2008) have pointed out, that thoughtful resistance can play a much more important role in sustaining organizational change than unquestioning acceptance.

It is good to know that the study of Higgs and Rowland (2005), recognized change as a complex responsive process and embedded this recognition within the overall change process tended to be successful across most contexts. Finding from this study was supported by another study of Higgs and Rowland (2011) where findings show that the impact of leader’s behavior on the successful implementation of change is when the applied approaches to change is within the framework as a complex phenomenon (e.g. master and emergent) since it is more successful than approaches that adopt a more linear and sequential viewpoint. This study has provided further evidence to support the view that approaching change with an understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon plays a significant role in ensuring successful implementation.

In the study conducted by Andrews, Cameron & Harris (2008) about the experiences of manager’s organizational change and how they change theory in practice and its impact on their practice, it was revealed that the complexities of managing change in practice shows distinctive organizational environment and cultures. The skills and knowledge which was found to be useful by the managers were those that capacitate them to make sense of the organizational change they had experienced afterwards. This was also supported by the study of Wasim, & Imran, (2010) that the leader as a person in charge or as a change agent can manage an organization or the process of organizational change more effectively and successfully if he/she is capable and competent. Rapid technological advancements, high expectations of stakeholders, and ever changing situations have compelled organizations to incessantly reassess and reevaluate how they work, understand, adopt, and implement changes in response to changing trends. Organizational change is a demand of the day, and is needed for organizations to survive. Organizations are serious to prepare themselves not only for the current but also for the future trends to get the level of sustainable success. Yet, along with all of its implications and importance the process of organizational change is also very complex and challenging. As leadership has a central role in evolution and cultivating an organization, the process of organizational change demands a very effective and highly competent leaders who are capable to perceive the most desirable shape of an organization and address the issue of organizational change in the most appropriate way.

Challenges are a test of faith and character

With the various challenges the woman presidents experienced, it is humbling to know that they recognize God as their first resort to solve problems or challenges that may arise during their presidency. In fact, President D uttered, “*challenges are equally beneficial. challenges that we usually overcome with the help of the Lord*”. In addition, President A proudly said that, “*I always start my day with prayers, daily gospel reading and rosary*”. Almost the same revelation was mentioned by president B, president C where they said that, “*I start and end the day with a prayer, and I pray to God respectively*. With humble heart, President D seriously pointed out, “*before I sleep I I*

pray the rosary. There were times that I feel tired which often time cause me to missed praying. However, it often lead to a feeling that something is lacking within me.. When I realized it, I really spend time praying knowing that it is only God that could help me get through my busy day as the president. Thanking the Lord for the whole day blessings makes me feel at peace even if work is loaded". Furthermore, President E said that, "I always seek the intervention of the Holy Spirit in my tasks of operating SUC. He bestows in me the wisdom I truly needed". Knowing that the women presidents put God as the center of their presidency, this implies that their faith remains to be strong even as they reach the pinnacle of their success. It also shows that they acknowledge the presence of God to succeed from the very purpose why they accepted the position men usually dominate.

Taken as a whole, those women who perceived themselves as religious or spiritual did not deny threatening signs but instead, confronted their suspicions directly. Yangarber-Hicks's (2004) found out that waiting for God to solve problems and asking God for miracle were generally accompanied by lower sense of self-efficacy. However, working together with the help of God toward recovery from a challenging situation was associated with greater empowerment. Apparently, prayerful people are no less, and perhaps even more capable to face their problems and feel capable of dealing with them. It is also important to note that people who are more religious prior to stressful events appear to show greater resiliency.

Challenges are also a test of character. President C humbly admit that, *"If I need to say sorry for the person whom I hurt, then I will also end the day texting that person to say how sorry I am"*. This character admits that a woman could not stand alone even a leader herself. She acknowledges that a good working environment is more productive and efficient thus, asking forgiveness to someone whom she had done wrong is a willful move to address the problem. Tyler (2006) pointed out that leaders must be perceived as fair by their constituents for leaders to maintain unity. If leaders decide to contribute less to the group's common good which would definitely put the organization to danger, one must apologize and ask for forgiveness.

Conclusion

Regardless of the women president's years of experience in handling administrative position or office, the presidents found out that challenges are inevitable whether the president is a man or a woman. They happen to anyone. As the first president of the institution, they admit that just like men leaders, handling human relationship is one of the most challenging part of their leadership journey. Challenges that the presidents experience also vary depending on the status of their institution but for them, these difficulties are part of the position they have accepted. One president faced a challenged on the efficiency of her employees while others find it challenging to deal with the system or culture of the institution.

Challenges are present everywhere to anyone at anytime. The higher the position, the greater the challenge is. The greater is the population, the harder to manage human relationship. This concludes that leading an institution is not just for prestige or title but it entails a lot of sacrifices and tough decisions in order to run it toward its vision and mission. It also implies that dealing with such challenges does not require toughness decision making alone but the manner of saying it in order to influence the people in a more positive way is also a must

Further analysis reveals that consultation may be done among all stakeholders to know their pulse and sentiments at the very onset of leadership era to establish good working relationship and achieve the desired teamwork for a more effective and efficient way of fostering service for the institution. In addition, a regular meeting with core groups which may be called "a time with the pres-

ident” may be done to ensure that everybody is doing their assigned task towards the attainment of the vision and mission of the institution.

Integrating these practices would result into more dynamic and productive way of leading the higher Education institution, thus, empowering more women to be engaged in such hierarchy position.

References

- Black, S.A. (2015). Qualities of Effective Leadership in Higher Education. *Open Journal of Leadership*. 10.4236/ojl.2015.42006
- Cardno, C. (2014). The functions, attributes and challenges of academic leadership in New Zealand polytechnics. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 28(4), 352–364. doi:10.1108/ijem-11-2012-0131
- Ford, J.D., Ford, W.F., and D’Amelio, A.(2008). Resistance to Change: The Rest of the Story. *Academy of Management Review*, 33(2)
- Gallos, J.V., and Bolman, L.G. (2021) *Reframing Academic Leadership*. Jossey-Bass A wiley Imprint 111 River St. Hoboken, NJ 07030
- Herrera, Rosana, 2006 *Filipino Women in Management: Competence, Confidence and Commitment to Development in the Workplace*.
- Higgs, M. J., & Rowland, D. (2005). All changes great and small: Exploring approaches to change and its leadership. *Journal of Change Management*, 5, 121-151.
- Hopkins, M., & Bilimoria, D., (2008). Social and Emotional Competencies predicting success for male and female executives. *Journal of Management Development*.
- Jackson, S. & Harris S. (2007) African American Female College and University Presidents: Experiences and Perceptions of Barriers to the Presidency. *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*, 5(2)-April 2007 ISSN: 1541-6224
- Khan, S (2012) Role of Academic Leadership in Change Management for Quality in Higher Education in Pakistan. *Journal of Education and Practice* ISSN 2222-288X (Online) Vol 3, No. 16, 2012
- Komives, S.R., Wagner, W & Associates (2017). *Leadership for a Better World. Understanding the Social Change Model of Leadership Development*. Jossey-Bass A wiley Imprint 111 River St. Hoboken, NJ 07030
- Marshall, S.G. (2012), Educational middle change leaders in New Zealand – the meat in the sandwich, *International Journal of Educational Leadership*, 26 (6), 502-528.
- Mohrman, A., & Worley, C., (2009). Dealing with Rough Times: A capabilities development Approach to Surviving and Thriving. Human Resource management. Wiley Online Library.
- Parrish, D. R. (2013). The relevance of emotional intelligence for leadership in a higher education context. *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(5), 821–837. doi:10.1080/03075079.2013.842225
- Passenheim, O (2010). *Change Management*. Ventus Publishing APS.
- Rich, D. (2006). Academic leadership and the restructuring of higher education. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 134, 37–48. doi:10.1002/he.215
- Ruscio, K. P. (2017). Organized Anarchies: The Role of the President in Today's University, Change, *The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 49(2), 26-29, DOI: [10.1080/00091383.2017.1286213](https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2017.1286213)
- Simon, L.K. (2009).The University President: Balancing Competing Demands *ERIC Presidency*, 12(1)

- Scott, G., Coates, H. and Anderson, M. (2008). *Learning Leaders in Times of Change: Academic Leadership Capabilities for Australian Higher Education*, University of Western Sydney and Australian Council for Educational Research, Sydney.
- Yangarber-Hicks, N. (2004). Religious coping styles and recovery from serious mental illnesses. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 32(4), 305-317
- Yielder, J. and Codling, A. (2004). Management and leadership in the contemporary university, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 26(3), 315-328