

Participatory Leadership: An Emerging Model of Women's Intercultural Leadership for the 21st century

In our presentation today we will be looking at an emerging model of women's intercultural leadership for the 21st century and how it can be a powerful force for creating agency and building community with women from diverse backgrounds. In this workshop, we will briefly describe the history and essential elements for this work. We want to emphasize that this is an emerging model, a work in progress that we are developing, analyzing and researching.

This model grows out of the work of the Community Connections component of the Center for Women's InterCultural Leadership or CWIL, at Saint Mary's College. In 2001 Saint Mary's began CWIL with a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. to "foster the intercultural knowledge and competence critical to educating the next generation of women leaders." CWIL has three program components, one of which is the Community Connections component that supports the community efforts of diverse women leaders and builds bridges between Saint Mary's College and the community.

First, it is important to understand that this work is rooted in the mission of the Center for Women's InterCultural Leadership (CWIL). CWIL's mission statement reads:

CWIL promotes intercultural engagement across the Saint Mary's campus, connecting with communities at the local, state, national and global levels. We understand intercultural engagement to consist of two essential parts which combine to result in growth: one is interacting across the boundaries that define identities, circumscribe participation, and shape encounters, and the other is reflection on and interpretation of the complexities of those interactions. Such boundaries include, but are not limited to, race, ethnicity, area of origin, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, educational level, sexual orientation, age, varying ability, and language...

Everything we do or support must, in some explicit way, promote this kind of transformative intercultural engagement... we challenge and support individuals and groups to take the next steps toward deeper intercultural experience, more sophisticated grappling with issues of difference such as power and privilege, and greater awareness of their own potential as change agents.

The Community Connections component fulfills this mission through a variety of program models such as the Wellsprings of Wisdom conference, the Catalyst Project, and the Women in Leadership in Community Organizations (WiLCO) project, along with other events and seminars. As the work unfolded, many women self-reported an experience of empowerment as a result of participating in various programs. Many, for the first time, began experiencing the leadership potential in themselves and other women. They often talked about deeply valuing the diversity and relationship building aspects of their experiences with CWIL.

Evidence also appeared in various evaluations. For example, in an evaluation of the 2004 Wellsprings of Wisdom conference 95% of respondents expressed that they were empowered after attending the conference. One woman wrote that it was "empowering and a treasure for the mind, body, and spirit." An external evaluation of the 2004 Catalyst Trip also showed that

participants gained in both self and other knowledge, and many described it as a life-changing experience. “What was learned in that week, many do not get in a lifetime. What the students learned on this trip, for many, will be long lasting and life changing.”

Similarly, a women’s organization in Cincinnati became connected with the work and wanted to understand how it could be replicated in their community. In an effort to understand what was happening and be able to describe and explain the experience for possible replication, the Participatory Leadership model began to emerge. A group of 16 women, students, staff, faculty, and community women representing a wide range of ages, backgrounds, languages, religions, ethnicities, cultures, education, professions and life experiences, began to meet a year ago and distinguishing what we considered to be the key elements.

What makes an effective leader for the 21st century?

The eight elements of the model of Participatory Leadership address both the process of creating agency (leadership development) and the process of building community (leadership in action). These eight elements are:

- 1. The Leader Within**
- 2. Diverse Women as Planners and Participants**
- 3. Dialogue on Power and Privilege**
- 4. Build Community**
- 5. Women’s Sacred Space**
- 6. Use Participatory Techniques to Create Equity and Voice**
- 7. Keep Our Eyes on the Prize**
- 8. Never the Same Way Twice**

This model is emerging; it is meant to provoke reflection, critique, and new ideas. An important aspect of our work is that we model diversity and participatory processes whether it is in the program models, the research approaches, or the presentations.

The Model of Participatory Leadership

1. The Leader Within

We assume that leadership is inherent in each woman and often practiced without acknowledgement. Women’s leadership is practiced in families, in churches, in school PTAs, in beauty shops – in a myriad of places where work gets accomplished, often quietly and without fanfare. Some women exercise courageous leadership that has changed history – Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Septima Clark, Eleanor Roosevelt, Delores Huerta and Rosa Parks but there are millions more whose leadership is the sustaining force of our communities.

In the Community Connections work, each woman who participates is asked to first describe her leadership, an enormous challenge for many women, even for women holding positions of authority. This may be due to the lack of acknowledgement of women’s leadership roles and

styles. At a workshop for women leaders at the Shambala Institute for Authentic Leadership this same problem was identified.

It soon became apparent that, even though many of the women were in high-visibility positions of leadership, they did not see themselves as leaders in the traditional sense. In fact, in several cases, they had a hard time understanding why people thought of them as leaders at all... We noticed that as women, some aspects of leadership sometimes make us feel uncomfortable, such as power, visibility, vulnerability, and exposure.

When we develop programs we look for multiple ways for people to share their strengths. How does an introvert participate? An artist? Who can sing, pray, create a database, translate, teach Tai Chi, encourage others? As we feature our individual strengths, we shift the leadership role. Each person is practicing leadership and experiencing the positive affect of making a contribution.

2. Diverse Women as Planners and Participants

Participatory leadership is built on the belief that women from diverse backgrounds must be involved as planners and participants from the beginning. If the plans are made exclusively by women representing one social group, we miss important ideas, insights and experiences that would create a stronger and more effective design. If we design our plans, and then invite women from other social groups to participate, the involvement is usually low. Seeing diversity as strength is essential in the 21st century.

There should be people participating who can bring many perspectives. But there should be particular attention to race since racism has been one of the deepest, longest, most destructive forces in this country. It continues to deeply divide our country. We need to move beyond token representation; there should be enough representation that people feel free to bring their cultural practices to the process – different styles of talk, dress, humor, and problem solving. This enriches the group and the process while it strengthens the outcome.

We must also be mindful not to keep inviting the same group of overworked leaders to represent the “African American” or the “Latino” community. Leaders are in many places in each community, though often only a handful are recognized.

As we engage in this important work, we are building critical social capital that is the building blocks of democracy. There are two kinds of social capital – bridging and bonding, and this element speaks to the **bridging** social capital that brings people together across their divisions. Putnam and Feldstein write:

Building social ties among people who already share a reservoir of cultural referents, family history, or personal experience is a qualitatively different from building ties among those who do not – different in how it gets done, how often it gets done, and what happens as a result... Both kinds of connections are valuable to us as individuals, but bridging is especially important for reconciling democracy and diversity.

3. Dialogue on Power and Privilege

Real communication is achieved only when everyone feels equal in their power and status. Society discriminates, giving some groups of people what Peggy McIntosh calls “unearned overadvantage” while others experience “unearned underadvantage.” As members of groups, we

experience either privilege or the denial of privilege, often shifting roles in different contexts. This dynamic is always present in groups whether or not it is addressed.

It is usually easy to recognize when you are denied privilege, but having privilege is often unexamined. For example, if you are white and middle class, generally the clerks in stores are friendly and helpful. It is easy to ignore or never be exposed to the experience of clerks who are suspicious and unfriendly, generally with customers who are not white.

We must have the courage to dialogue about power and privilege, in all its complexity if we are to achieve the meaningful communication. It takes participants from both perspectives (unearned overadvantage and unearned underadvantage) to understand the larger picture. It is important to acknowledge that white privilege is the dominant force in our society and therefore and dynamics of racism is a critical area to address. Barriers to participation are created in groups when these perceptions operate covertly and go unaddressed.

You can not assume that experiences are the same. Racism is different than sexism. When taking on these difficult topics, it is important to acknowledge and validate everyone's experience and avoid assumptions. Not everyone who is African American or everyone who is a woman has the same experience or perspective.

Finally, you can take personal responsibility for what you say and do, but you can not take the larger experience personally. The pain, issues, and hopes are deeper, longer and bigger than any of our personal histories or actions. We must trust that our commonalities will emerge once we experience respectful and open communication.

4. Build Community

There is more that binds us than separates us, but we must be intentional about not only finding our commonalities, but recreating ourselves in a new community. Creating community builds the relationships from which we learn, make commitments, and sustain change over time. It is the many ways we thicken and multiple the strands of relationship between each other. James Comer, noted researcher in the field of education, wrote that "No significant learning occurs without significant relationship."

Creating shared experience is an essential building block for creating community and requires both formal and informal spaces for relating with each other. We work hard, but we also celebrate. We play together –share poetry, singing, dancing, eating and talking. We feel we are connected. We have found two powerful approaches to creating shared experience: creating ritual and sharing stories.

Ritual is also an important part of creating shared experience. It is a key part of what makes you feel Methodist, Catholic or Muslim, for example. Think about one of your identities and the shared practices inherent in that identity. For example, if you are a Methodist then you know what hymns Methodists sing, how the ritual goes, what the core beliefs are. You can go to almost any Methodist church service in the country and feel comfortable, but you might feel disoriented at a Catholic Mass or a Muslim mosque down the street. To be something new together, we must create ritual together, and a ritual that is inclusive at the same time it stretches us.

Storytelling can be another powerful experience of building knowledge of and trust with each other. And in the process of being together, we create new stories -- new constructions of “we” that incrementally and cumulatively connect us to each other. “Crafting cross-cutting identities is a powerful way to enable connection across perceived diversity (Putnam and Feldstein, 284).”

By creating shared experiences and addressing issues of power and privilege, we begin to create a level playing field from which we can build relationships based on real communication and genuine caring. We must be the change we want to see: a complex and interrelated community that is strengthened by the differences of each individual.

5. Women’s Sacred Space

For most women, it is a rare opportunity to be able to come together to work, create, share, and play solely in the company of other women, and particularly sustained over time. Through Saint Mary’s and CWIL, we have been able to experience the power and possibility of women working together. We believe that having this unique space is one of the important elements that contributes to the success of the projects.

It may be due in part to removing ourselves from some of the everyday presence of sexism, but it is more than the reduction of a negative. There is something out of the ordinary that we are creating together as women. It is as though we can begin conversations with a language and vocabulary that is distinct, richer, more descriptive than the language we use in the rest of our daily lives. It gives us voice and expression to our inner selves in a way that is difficult to describe, yet is clearly and powerfully present.

We are aware of the sacred space for women that Saint Mary’s College has created over more than 160 years of nurturing women’s talents and leadership. There is wisdom in creating a place where women can believe in themselves and build lasting relationships with other women.

6. Use Participatory Techniques to Create Equity and Voice

We must be intentionally participatory using approaches that create voice and involvement for all participants. The participatory aspect of this work is both a theoretical and practical cornerstone of this emerging model. We draw heavily from the process Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) used in many parts of the world. We study and incorporate the work of participatory social change theorists and practitioners like Paulo Freire, Myles Horton, and bell hooks. We are guided in this process by Dr. Jennie Campos, an international trainer in PLA and participatory research, who has given multiple workshops and serves as a consultant.

The basic understanding is that the success of the whole rests with the contribution of each person, and that we must deliberately create multiple ways for each person’s experience and voice to enter the process. PLA rotates the leadership. We call this “passing the stick.”

PLA also begins with the practice of problem posing, rather than problem solving though that ultimately is the goal. Problem posing requires listening – what are the generative themes – how do people keep describing the problem? The answers come from all of us working together. PLA also gets us past just talking. We are moving, drawing, describing, evaluating. While PLA

puts an end to passivity there is both authority and autonomy, depending on the activity. And in PLA, low tech is often better than high tech. Chart paper, markers and post-it notes are a staple.

PLA often uses very visual and research shows that our brain can take in much more visual information than auditory. The weather map gives us complex information in seconds that would take minutes to describe. It also empowers people who might not be as literate, feel articulate, or who is using a second language.

One example of a PLA process is the leadership historical profile where we ask women to visually create the 4 – 5 experiences that shaped their leadership. Inherent in the question is that you are a leader. The task is to explore and share what helped to make you one. Examples of these are around the room.

When one woman from Palestine shared her historical profile, it immediately stood out from the rest because it begins with a tank. It immediately tells us that she has survived something few of us have any relationship with. Though there were language, religious and cultural barriers, we immediately listened differently, the language barriers lessened, we saw new strengths in her, we felt compassion.

There is more and more research on and validation of people-oriented, participatory approaches to leadership. It is worth mentioning the early contributions of women to the concept of participatory leadership. Mary Parker Follett the founder of the humanistic approach to management wrote a book on leadership in 1924 called *Creative Experience*. She extolled the virtues of collaboration, coordination, sharing power and sharing information. She lectured about empowering the workforce as opposed to having power over them and advocated a process-oriented, systems approach to management where all aspects of work are interconnected.

7. Keep Our Eyes on the Prize

In many of our joint programs, like the Wellsprings conference or the Catalyst Trip, each person brought her best to the process, acting empowered and empowering others. The edges where we sometimes rub, the complaints, maybe even the self-doubt are minimized. As Brenda Hodges said about the Catalyst Trip: “The more miles we traveled, the more baggage we left behind.”

More importantly, we agree that we are doing this for something bigger than ourselves. We are solving a problem, taking on injustice. We are working for our children, communities and planet. We are making the world a better place. When all this is at stake –and hopefully we are having fun at the same time -- the smaller issues tend to drop away.

8. Never the Same Way Twice

While the goal is to share and replicate the model, we also have learned that it is never the same way twice. Change is continual, not static. New people enter. Circumstances change. We change the process. The process changes us. If the leadership process is participatory, it is never the same way twice.