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OPINIONCOMMENTARY

David McGrath: Teaching taught me that female leaders help others excel



Supporters attend a rally of Vice President Kamala Harris, the Democratic presidential nominee, in Las Vegas on Aug. 10, 2024. (Bridget Bennett/The New York Times)



By **DAVID MCGRATH**

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I officially entered the full-time labor force in 1972 when I drove my 1964 Olds from my childhood home in Evergreen Park to 71st Street and Loomis Boulevard on the city's South Side for my first day as a substitute teacher at Altgeld Elementary School.

Just 21 years old, I still felt like a kid, and Altgeld Principal Thomas Pinson did nothing to disabuse me of that notion.

“Do not stray from the syllabus in the substitute folder” was the first order he gave with regard to the sixth grade class I would be covering that day. I turned around to see who he was talking to since he was looking over my shoulder. And not saying my name.

When, at the end of the day, I learned from the office staff that he wanted me to return the next day and every day thereafter as a day-to-day sub, I inferred he was pleased with my

work. Yet, for the remainder of the school year, he never said as much, and he was still looking past me when I said goodbye for the summer.

I probably would not have stayed at Altgeld those five months were it not for my other supervisor, Assistant Principal Delores Pickett. She didn't hand out a lot of compliments, either. But every day, she greeted me by name and chatted informally about her family and my upcoming August wedding, cultivating an open relationship in which I might ask the numerous questions I had as a greenhorn teacher, particularly with regard to classroom management and discipline.

Some of the Altgeld teachers in those days still kept wooden paddles in their desk drawers or hanging prominently in the front of the room, with a notation to use them in the folder for the sub. I could hardly conceive of myself doing so and relied on Pickett for counsel, such as: "Never let them see you rattled."

This was in stark contrast to Pinson, an otherwise successful, longtime principal to whom I was grateful for the daily gig but who remained aloof to encourage subordination while discouraging questions.

The Pinson-Pickett dichotomy was not an aberration. At the high schools and colleges where I was employed throughout my career, I felt I was able to grow, thrive and even excel under the leadership of communicative, nurturing women, as opposed to imperious men, protective of their power, their egos and their territory.

My personal experience has been generally affirmed by gender and leadership expert Alice Eagly, professor of psychology at Northwestern University.

According to Eagly, “women are more likely than men to possess the leadership qualities that are associated with success.”

Female leaders are “transformational,” Eagly said, insofar as they care more about their constituency, listen better, build better relationships or alliances, are more effective motivators and behave more ethically.

Whereas, male leaders tend to be transactional, with a modus operandi of reward and punishment. Reprimands, promotions and firings are the primary implements in their toolbox.

Unfortunately, in spite of being better suited, women have had a harder time attaining top positions in a society in which male leaders dominate in the workplace, the corporate world and halls of political power. Aspiring women have had to overcome cultural, gender and systemic obstacles in private and public institutions in the U.S. where mostly men remain in charge.

Yet the historical gender imbalance in leadership in this country may be changing. American voters seem to prefer Kamala Harris over Donald Trump for president, according to an average of national polls showing her leading in the race.

If Harris does, in fact, prevail on Nov. 5, she would become the first female president in the United States, whose top-down influence would likely result in the installation of more and more women as leaders in business, industry and government.

That would be a positive development that is long overdue.

David McGrath is an emeritus English professor at the College of DuPage and author of the newly released book "[Far Enough Away](#)," a collection of Chicagoland stories. Email him at mcgrathd@dupage.edu.

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