

Trend Setting Minority Female Leader in Organizational Development

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Submitted to Fulfill the Final Report Requirements in OLT 553 Organizational Leadership

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Introduction

Mrs. Martha Robinson has been an innovative, trend-setting, minority female leader in her industry. She has made an impeccable impact in my life, and I have been fortunate enough to still maintain rapport and mentorship from her for 20 years. Initially, I worked for Mrs. Robinson (three levels down) early in my career. She and I attended the same church for many years before I knew her as the leader that she is. She used to be my Sunday school teacher when I was younger. When I graduated from undergraduate school at Harding University, she helped me to find a job as a caseworker working in social services for the Arkansas Department of Human Services. I was at that job for almost 3 years before I relocated to Texas and began my career in Learning and Development with another company. However, she made such an impression on me with how she thrived as a senior leader, wife, and mother for the state that she and I are still in touch today. I am very fond of her. She has served as a role model, mentor, and counselor to me throughout the years as needed and I have been amazed at her in the profession of social work. She has proven to be not only an authentic leader but also a servant leader.

Mrs. Robinson is now retired. However, prior to retiring two years ago, she served as the Branch Chief over the Arkansas Department of Health, Vital Records and Statistics. She was directly responsible for over 200 leaders and was responsible for overseeing the complete organization of all health records consistent with state and federal laws, agency policy, and regulatory requirements of the healthcare system. Before that role, Mrs. Robinson served as the County Administrator for the Arkansas Department of Human Services for 16 years (where I worked indirectly for her). There, she reported directly to the governor of the State of Arkansas, Asa Hutchinson, and was responsible for 150+ leaders and employees.

Additionally, Mrs. Robinson has a Master's in Public Administration and she worked for the state of Arkansas for a total of 29 years before retiring. Furthermore, she is a leader in her community and has and still is very active with serving on several boards including the Chamber of Commerce, ASU Master's Advisory Council, and a few others.

As an influential, black woman who was among the top leaders in her field, I am truly inspired by Mrs. Robinson and her years of dedication to serving others. She has over 25 years of leadership experience which I find a great source of real-world experience to learn from, and she was very well respected and revered in her role. Watching her leadership style and how she faced adversity directly with grace, empathy, and stamina is something that I think makes her an amazing leader. She has a Team Management style, but also changes her approach to leadership based on every situation. This is ultimately why I chose her as who I would like to interview.

The organization that I will be discussing in this paper is the Arkansas Department of Health. This is a state government place of business. According to the Arkansas Department of Health's [website](#), public health is everything the Arkansas Department of Health (ADH) does to protect and improve the health and well-being of all Arkansans – more than 100 services provided statewide by public health professionals to assure that their water is safe, their children have immunizations, their restaurants are safe, and birth certificates are available. This organization serves the entire state of Arkansas and is responsible for issuing certified copies of birth and death certificates, and marriage and divorce decrees. The organization's mission as provided on their [website](#) is to simply protect and improve the health and well-being of all Arkansans. The vision of the Arkansas Department of Health is to provide optimal health for all Arkansans to achieve the maximum personal, economic, and social impact.

Interview Questions

The following interview questions were formed to learn about organizational leadership through Mrs. Robinson, Branch Chief (Retired) at the Arkansas Department of Health.

1. **What type of leader would you consider yourself to be?** Democratic leadership style
2. **What personal qualities or traits do you think are most important for effective leadership, and why?** A good leader must have integrity, self-awareness, respect, empathy, initiative, dependability, loyalty, unselfishness, and decisive in decision-making. I believe these traits will assist in your leadership to become a role model and empower others to meet the goals required,
3. **How do you best identify and develop leadership potential in others?** Observe their character and work ethics, then empower individuals by providing opportunities for leadership skills to emerge by mentoring and providing constructive feedback.
4. **What skills and/or traits do you possess that you have had to use in your role as Branch Chief or other leadership roles?** Being a visionary, strategic mindset and having critical thinking skills, open-minded, responsible, and dependable. **Do you think these are required to be a good leader?** Yes
5. **Do you consider yourself to be a servant leader? Absolutely. If so, what inspired you to become a servant leader, and how do you exemplify that?** I believe it is important to provide employees the assistance and support they need to meet their personal and work goals. By involving them in the process they have a vested interest in whether we are successful or not. I have practiced this throughout my professional career and it has worked.

6. **How do you ensure that your team members feel valued and supported in their roles?** Acknowledge them by recognizing and celebrating milestones accomplished.
7. **Can you share an example of a time when you successfully adapted your leadership style to match the needs of your team? Rephrased, how do you adapt your leadership style to different situations or team members?** First, you must recognize there is a need, create a plan, communicate with the team, and set realistic goals by addressing the problem and coming up with a viable solution. Implement the plan and follow through. Making a connection with your team also helps get this done.
8. **How do you balance the need for control with the need for empowerment in your leadership approach?** A good leader will know how to balance leadership of when to control and when to empower and coach. It is important to be responsible by coaching employees and recognizing their skill set and maturity in the job to get the desired result. This can be done by having an employee draft their performance expectations based on discussions you have had with them. This is empowering them to meet the goals they have set for themselves. I used to tell my staff that I only micro-manage those who need it because I prefer not to.
9. **Can you describe a time when you used supportive leadership behaviors to remove obstacles and facilitate goal achievement for someone on your team?** Yes, by creating a team of individuals that I felt had the skill set and provided guidance for teamwork to meet required goal by showing concern and treating them with dignity and respect to build trust and make them feel valued which helped them to perform the task at hand.
10. **How do you inspire and motivate your team to go above and beyond what is expected of them?** As the leader, it is important that we walk the walk and not just talk

the talk. By providing positive reinforcement and open communication with respect, making them feel they belong, showing why their work matters by providing clear directions, helping them to accomplish their goals which empowers them to excel in the workplace from their achievement creates happiness and enthusiasm and excitement in the employee.

11. **How do you ensure that your team members understand and accept the terms of their employment and the rewards and punishments associated with their performance?** My responsibility was to believe in the employee and let them know they were important in helping our business move forward and achieve our goals by providing clear directions that help the team understand how their jobs relate to our goals. I was responsible for providing personal commitment and support for my team.
12. **How do you build relationships with your team members?** By listening to them, making time for them to follow through on our commitment, setting clear boundaries, and showing gratitude and respect empowers employees. **Does this impact your leadership approach?** I don't think so, good relationships with the employee keeps down conflict and keep disagreements to a minimum.
13. **Do you consider yourself to be an authentic leader? Yes, absolutely. If so, how do you stay true to your values and beliefs as an authentic leader, even when faced with difficult decisions?** I am transparent in the workplace by being honest in my approach and tactful in relating the information considering the employees feeling when providing constructive feedback. Honesty and directness with empathy has proven to be the best policy for me.

14. What role would you say that personal experiences and emotions play in your

leadership style? It plays a big role because I believe everyone has an opinion and I recognize all individuals have a right to their thought process and we must be open-minded to embrace all to reach a common goal.

15. How would you navigate complex and ambiguous situations in your organization,

and how does this change your leadership approach? By using my skill set to make the best possible decision without having all the information. Provide some alternatives for the situation. My leadership approach will remain the same as I base my decision on my skill set with the understanding that my employer expects me to find a viable solution to accomplish the goal.

16. Can you describe a time when you effectively leveraged your team's diverse

perspectives and talents to achieve a common goal? Yes. First, I acknowledged the diversity, set goals to be obtained, listened to understand each team member's perspective, had a discussion on the topic at hand, the team voted and we made decisions based on the information received.

Analysis of Interview Questions

This interview was conducted via a virtual face-to-face call on Sunday, April 30, 2023. I scheduled a Zoom call for Mrs. Robinson and I to chat that afternoon after she got out of church. It was an informal style of interview for about an hour and a half in which she and I caught up on life as well as me asking her about her leadership style and instances. I explained to her that I would be asking 10-15 questions and would take time typing her responses up as we went through the questions. I also explained my goal was to write a paper that aims to analyze her leadership experiences as a transformational, authentic, and servant leader who has been a trendsetter in her industry. She was not presented with the questions in advance, but I did read each answer back to her to make sure I captured the essence of all her responses. correctly.

Leadership Style: Mrs. Robinson identified herself as a democratic leader, which means that she encourages the participation and involvement of her team members in decision-making processes. She believes that effective leadership requires integrity, self-awareness, respect, empathy, initiative, dependability, loyalty, unselfishness, and decisiveness in decision-making. In her opinion, these traits enable a leader to become a role model and empower others to meet their required goals.

Identifying and Developing Leadership Potential: Mrs. Robinson observes the character and work ethics of team members to identify and develop their leadership potential. She empowers individuals by providing opportunities for leadership skills to emerge through mentoring and constructive feedback.

Skills and Traits for Leadership: Mrs. Robinson considers herself to be a visionary, strategic, open-minded, responsible, and dependable leader. She believes these skills and traits are required to be a good leader. As a Branch Chief, she had to use these skills to ensure that her

team members felt valued and supported in their roles. She acknowledged them by recognizing and celebrating the milestones they accomplished.

Servant Leadership: Mrs. Robinson considers herself a servant leader who provides employees with the assistance and support they need to meet their personal and work goals. By involving them in the process, they have a vested interest in whether the team is successful or not.

Transformational Leadership Style: Mrs. Robinson adapts her leadership style to different situations or team members by recognizing the need, creating a plan, communicating with the team, and setting realistic goals. She assists her team with implementing the plan and then encourages them to follow through.

Balancing Control and Empowerment: Mrs. Robinson believes that a good leader knows how to balance leadership by coaching employees and recognizing their skill set and maturity in the job to get the desired result. This can be done by empowering employees to draft their performance expectations based on discussions she has had with her team.

Supportive Leadership Behaviors: Mrs. Robinson used supportive leadership behaviors to remove obstacles and facilitate goal achievement for someone on her team by creating a team of individuals she felt had the skill set and providing guidance for teamwork to meet the required goal by showing concern and treating them with dignity and respect to build trust and make them feel valued which helped them to perform the task at hand. She explained that she found ways to

Inspiring and Motivating Team Members: Mrs. Robinson inspires and motivates her team to go above and beyond what is expected of them by providing positive reinforcement, open communication, and respect, making them feel they belong, showing why their work matters by providing clear directions, helping them to accomplish their goals which empowers

them to excel in the workplace from their achievement, and creates happiness and enthusiasm and excitement in the employee.

Behavioral Approach & Relationship Building: Mrs. Robinson believes that it is her responsibility to ensure that her team members understand and accept the terms of their employment and the rewards and punishments associated with their performance. She provides clear directions that help the team understand how their jobs relate to the goals as well as how failure to perform can impact not just the individual, but the team as a whole.

Mrs. Robinson builds relationships with her team members by listening to them, making time for them to follow through on their commitment, setting clear boundaries, and showing gratitude and respect, which empowers the employee. This does not impact her leadership approach as good relationships with the employee keep down conflict and disagreement to a minimum.

Authentic Leadership & Diversity: Mrs. Robinson considers herself an authentic leader who is transparent in the workplace by being honest in her approach. She values transparency, honesty, directness, and tactfulness in her approach. She strives to stay true to her values and beliefs even when faced with difficult decisions, providing constructive feedback while considering the employee's feelings. She believes it is important to authentically show up which involves being self-aware and knowing who you are first. Mrs. Robinson shared that she faced much adversity as a minority leader in a predominantly male-driven industry, but she learned to not wear her heart on her sleeve and to always use the voice she had been blessed to have.

Analysis of Mrs. Robinson

After conducting this informal interview with Mrs. Robinson, I hold her in an even higher regard. The way I observed her mind work was very thoughtful and strategic in how she

described her leadership style and answered my questions. She explained that sometimes it's not always easy to show up authentically or have all the right answers, but to keep showing up and letting the staff know that you are there to support and help them reach their fullest potential will go a long way. This goes back to task and relationship behaviors (Northouse, 2019) which explains that the essence of leadership behavior is task behaviors and relationship behaviors.

Additionally, Mrs. Robinson exemplifies traits of a servant leader, which is evident from her focus on providing assistance and support to employees to help them meet their personal and work goals. Servant leaders prioritize the needs of their team members and are committed to helping them grow and develop. Servant Leadership (Greenleaf, n.d.) is defined as a non-traditional leadership philosophy, embedded in a set of behaviors and practices that place the primary emphasis on the well-being of those being served. This is the essence of who I observed Mrs. Robinson to be. Servant leadership is further demonstrated by her belief in empowering employees to set their own performance expectations and providing them with the resources and guidance needed to meet their goals.

Overall, Mrs. Robinson believes in prioritizing the creation of a positive work environment where employees feel supported and empowered, which can lead to increased engagement and productivity. From my observation, Mrs. Robinson is very well respected by everyone who comes into contact with her, myself included. She is a very direct, yet empathetic and an impactful leader. She makes all of us feel as though we matter and that we make a difference while holding us accountable for the work that we do. Mrs. Robinson exhibits authentic leadership by having high standards of integrity, taking responsibility for her actions, and making decisions based on principle rather than short-term success (Gavin, 2023). She is someone that I truly admire, and I aspire to be like as I grow in my leadership skillset.

Suggestions

Based on her responses, I believe Mrs. Robinson possesses a great understanding of what it takes to be an effective leader. She is compassionate, empathetic, transparent, direct, and honest in her approach. She values results in her team. However, as with all of us, there is always room for improvement. If I were to give her feedback, I would suggest she works on her ability to adapt her leadership style to different situations and team members or at least explain more. While she acknowledged the need to do so, she did not provide me with much detail on “how” to actually go about adapting her style. I think it would have been helpful if she provided specific examples of situations where she had to successfully adapt her leadership style and explain her approach. Full transparency, I will admit that I could have kept pushing, but I tried to ask the same question by rephrasing a couple of times but was unsuccessful in getting the type of answer I was expecting. At any rate, by working on this, I think Mrs. Robinson could be an even more effective and impactful leader.

Self-Reflection and Conclusion

In conclusion, as a minority leader who has been in various leadership positions, I have learned that self-awareness is crucial to effective leadership. Being aware of my strengths and weaknesses, biases and blind spots has helped me to lead with humility and a servant-minded approach. It has also enabled me to be authentic in my leadership style while remaining innovative.

As a leader, it is important to recognize that we are not perfect and that we need to continuously work on our personal growth and development. By doing so, we become better

equipped to lead others and to create positive change around us. I believe that a humble and servant-minded approach to leadership can inspire trust and respect from those we lead, while authenticity and innovation can help us to drive meaningful progress. Personally, as a black female leader, it is essential to stay true to myself, while also being open to learning and adapting to new ideas and perspectives. Ultimately, I believe that self-awareness is the foundation for effective leadership, and it is something that we should all strive to cultivate in ourselves and in those we lead.

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