Leadership Interview: Dr. Butler

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Interview introduction

Meet Dr. Melba Butler, a servant leader, in the education and clinical community. Dr. Butler describes herself as a seasoned executive, leader, coach, and educator. Her intersectional experiences collaboratively involve, non-profit, government, small business, civic organizations, resident leaders and academia. She strives to enhance the quality of services for society’s vulnerable population through community-based programs, policy development and educating future generations through her college courses: Social Welfare and Society, and Field Instruction and Social Work Processes III, taught at Iona College.

**Building blocks of a servant leader**

During the interview, Dr. Butler recalled her experiences in child welfare management, policy, program development, and coalition building at Harlem Dowling-West Side Center for Children and Family Services. She spoke with a twinkle in her eyes and a great pride in her voice as she describes her seventeen years at the oldest child welfare institution serving African American children. She commented, “these years truly formed my theoretical and practical concepts of leadership”. In great detail she described how no one leadership style, “autocratic, democratic, laissez-faire, charismatic, etc.”, was found sufficient working in this environment, but a combination of the various leadership styles was adopted to enhance the effectiveness of her administrative outcomes. She went on to say, during this era and professional climate, one leadership style would not have been proficient due to the continuous surfacing of struggles over-power, issues of isolation, lack of support, sexism, racism and an overall disregard to her personhood. Although she was unable to title or pinpoint one specific leadership approach, she concluded her answer to this question saying, “teamwork was also essential to the growth of our institution; for me this required rapid development to efficiently meet people at their level”. This was accomplished but most-certainly not without challenges. She mentioned feeling like a figurehead as the director; being the only Black individual at an agency otherwise composed of white men. Additionally, Dr. Butler shared anecdotal stories and examples of how she and another minority colleague deride the existing circumstances in which they did their work.

Despite her countless trials, Dr. Butler was credited for shaping the organization’s response to growing and changing community needs, as she spearheaded the diversification of its family and child-focused services and brought Harlem Dowling to the forefront of child welfare organizations. Her work did not stop there, during this time, Dr. Butler also served in several leadership capacities on numerous boards of directors including, Sisulu Academy, Hale House, the council on family and child caring agencies and Black agency executives. Dr. Butler listed merely some of her collaborations and stated this is the secret to her success. Community building and leading requires a community. She said, “it was through the collaborative work with non-profit organizations, small businesses and local government that we saw the level of success we did under my tenure”.

**Academia**

Shifting our attention to academia, Dr. Butler considered, albeit of her then success, she knew “it was not enough”. She went on to establish her own business, Butler Consulting, where she functioned as the principal agent providing technical assistance to other community and organization leaders. From this experience and other contributing factors Dr. Butler believe by securing a doctoral degree would help solidify her work and add validation to her voice. In 2011, Dr. Butler received her Ph.D. from the Graduate Center of City University of New York. She recalled this was a “fine moment for herself, her children and her community”. This degree was meant to fuel energy back into her work and-so her research interests were in areas of executive level non-profit management, coalition building, civic engagement, program development, and leadership development. Some of her teaching experiences includes her position as an adjunct assistant professor at the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College for 14 years and now a full professor at the Iona College School of Social Work.

When asked about her promotion and her interest of tenure she responded in a way that gave new meaning to empirical research. In the United States, across programs of studies, colleges and universities continue to struggle with the underrepresentation of African American academic faculty. According to a myriad of research, fewer than 3% of the 160,000 faculty who currently work at doctoral extensive and intensive institutions identify themselves as African American and only 1% of African American women academicians are full-time faculty members (National Opinion Research Center, 2018). Dr. Butler held that after reviewing the options for her tenure track, she opted to not pursue. Her rationale for her decision was largely based on her earning potential versus the amount of academic expectations. This disclosure was surprising because of all of the perceive security tenure offers. Dr. Butler elaborated she wanted to teach and educate her students to forward the counseling profession but found it advantageous to go in a different direction. She remarked, “freedom does not come for free,” as she told circumstantial stories contributing to her decisions.

In closing, when asked if there is anything else, she would like to in-part upon me as we wrap-up our time together, Dr. Butler said, assimilation to a college or university’s culture will take some getting used to but once you have settled into your position, feeling that you have earned your “citizenship” make the best use of it. “It is important to remember that research has to serve a larger purpose than the researcher’s need to publish, and the institutions demand for notoriety”, she said. Adding “the road to academia will look different for you and for each of us, so we have to keep in mind, the purpose of our journey, for me that was social justice and advocacy for the voiceless”.

**Reflection**

I found in Dr. Butler a kind and humble heart, which spoke to me intimately. This was a spiritual experience for me. I felt she spoke to my existence as a mother and a professional. I met someone that reflected my values in addition to my future goals. The conversation verbatim was powerful and although she did not mirror me precisely, it was refreshing to reserve space in my head and heart for her as an anchor (where I hope to be in the future). She was able to provide an insider perspective of what it was like, for her, working with colleagues, expectations for publications and navigating the intersections of race and gender.

My approach to this interview was to challenge or validate research. One of the highlights came when I asked her: Research indicated that African American counselor educators perceived publishing, colleagues’ racism, and lack of mentoring as major barriers to the attainment of promotion and tenure; is this true for you as well? Her response shocked me, as this was not her story. Like beforementioned, she chose to stay away from tenure. Nowhere in my scope of research did I find professional black African American women deciding to work outside the tenure track voluntarily. Most-all literature speaks to injustice and inequality as the bedrock of the statistical numbers. This was new information for me, and I have gained another perspective in my thinking as a result.

Another gem gleaned from Dr. Butler stories came when she talked about “interpreted behavior”. She shared her intention and how her action was interpreted, with justifications from both hers’ and the other individual’s vantage point. I believe these kinds of disclosures are invaluable. Although I may not function in this exact way or encounter the exact response as Dr. Butler the awareness here is key.

I walked away feeling less glassy eyed and naïve because I have received a professional debriefing. This was an informal instructive class that included fierce mothering and mentoring with an unspeakable finesse. Although she challenged my ideals, she did not kill my enthusiasm. Subsequently, Dr. Butler help to narrow the latitude and readjust my expectations. I never thought that I was exempt from facing and overcoming personal and professional obstacles, however, this conversation offered many insights as she outlined different approaches to being successful on the academic journey, for this I am forever grateful.

Reference

National Opinion Research Center. (2018). Doctorate recipients from United States universities summary report: 2009. Retrieved from http://vww.norc.org/ NR/rdonlyres/2E87F80C-82F6-4E26-9F78-CA4C6EOB79C6/0/sed2005.pdf