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# **Wisdom from Executive Female Leaders: What Can Organizations, Executive Education Programs, and Graduate Students Learn?**

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## **Abstract**

This study focused on the perceptions and experiences of senior executive female leaders and sought answers to the following questions “What can others learn from executive female leaders?, What can organizations do to retain and advance female leaders?, and How can executive education programs and institutions of higher learning better develop female graduate students for leadership positions?” Twelve senior leaders were interviewed who shared the opportunities and challenges they faced as they made their climbs to executive leadership positions. Four themes emerged through a qualitative analysis: (a) confidence (in self) and attitude (of others); (b) negotiation, communication styles, and power; (c) networking and relationship building; and (d) balance. Although the literature focuses heavily on the third and fourth theme, in this study the interviewees did not. The authors theorize that there were fewer executive women who were available as mentors when these women were developing their careers and the senior executive women in this study had already figured out how to balance their lives. It was also interesting to note that the comments regarding balance had as much to do with balancing feminine and masculine characteristics as they did with balancing work and life; an unexpected outcome of this particular study.

## Introduction

Numerous studies have been conducted regarding gender imbalances and stereotypes that women have experienced in the work place. It seems the same old story is told over and over again because the gender gap in education and the workplace is still present. According to The White House Project Report (2009), women receive the majority of all college degrees and are well represented in entry- and mid-level positions in most sections of the economy. But, equality still remains out of reach as women have made strikingly little progress in advancing into the boardrooms and the executive suites. In some sectors of the economy, progress to senior leadership positions has been stalled for many years. Only 15 of the FORTUNE 500 companies, or three percent, were run by women by 2010. However, *two firsts* have occurred regarding women in leadership. The first one occurred at Xerox as Ursula Burns became the first woman CEO to replace another woman, Anne Mulcahy, as a Fortune 500 chief (Fortune, 2010). The *second first* occurred on June 26, 2011 when the executive board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) named Christine Lagarde as its next managing director. She is the first woman to occupy that position (Unelections, 2011). On the Financial Post 500, there were 30 companies with women CEOs/heads, but only 26 women actually led those companies as Monique F. Leroux led four companies and Kathy Bardswick led two. Women make up only 6.4 percent of the 469 companies that are counted in this list (Pyramids, 2011). Today women account for only 18 percent of our top leaders and make only 78.7 cents of every dollar earned by a man—a wage gap that increases with age (The White House Project, 2009, p. 5). It seems that there are many women in the “pipeline” but the transition to upper leadership positions is still elusive. Even a half a century after Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan stated that middle-class women were disillusioned with the isolation of domestic life; women are still facing challenges in the work place (Swackhamer, 2011).

According to a Catalyst study that looked at MBA graduates of the top 25 business schools, there is a pay gap of \$4,600 between male and female graduates. “I was shocked, says Catalyst CEO Ilene Lang of the findings. This really ate away, undermined my confidence that important change had taken place” (Stark, 2010, p. 1). McKay (2010) interviewed Professor Herminia Ibarra from INSEAD, one of the world’s leading and largest graduate business schools. Professor Herminia Ibarra shared:

We do see women entering the workforce at unprecedented levels but the fact is that there are two gaps that really remain. One is the pay gap ... and what is even more astonishing or disturbing is that we see it in cases where there really are equal credentials and equal background. The other is the leadership gap and no matter how you measure it, or where you measure it, you have women at the entrance level in pretty healthy numbers, then ... those numbers dwindle, they start getting smaller in the middle and when you look at the top, there are very few places where you see more than 13 to 15 percent of women at the executive level. (p. 1)

Tahmincioglu (2008) has stated that a well-placed, successful, encouraging mentor can be a champion to a woman getting noticed by higher-ups. In addition, she shared that a mentor can help navigate the ins and outs of what is often still a good-ole'-boys network in the upper echelon of the business world. Similarly Shambaugh (2008) encouraged women to form strategic relationships to serve them as a personal "Board of Directors." By creating a sounding board of other women, the collateral function of helping one another serves to promote and support. Carter and Silva (2010) also stated that women with a mentor increased their odds of being placed as a mid-manager by 56 percent over women without a mentor (p.3). The study additionally noted that "mentoring—especially from senior-level mentors—led to advancement up the corporate ladder for both women and men" (p.5).

In addition to mentoring, networking is often listed as essential for career advancement. Van Emmerik, Euqema, Geschiere, and Schouten (2006) examined the frequency with which men and women used both formal and informal networks and the resulting impact on career satisfaction. They found, perhaps surprisingly, that women used both formal and informal networks more often men. However, it appeared that women are less effective in their use of these networks than men. Many women felt torn as they perceived that the time they spent engaging in professional networking might have been better spent taking care of home responsibilities. In a similar study, Singh, Vinnicombe, and Kumra (2006) examined women's corporate networks and found that organizational citizenship behaviors such as helping, sportsmanship, organizational loyalty, compliance, civic virtue, and self development increased with participation in women's networks. In addition, corporate networks allowed women greater access to human resources activities such as career

fairs and career enhancement opportunities such as conferences and social activities.

Despite the career advantages that stem from informal networking, Linehan and Scullion (2008), in their study of 50 female managers from international companies, found that women were either excluded from or did not participate in informal networks. The authors proffered two reasons for this situation: a) a lack of mentors or role models; and b) time constraints on networking because of family pressures. The authors suggested that improving access to networking opportunities will increase the number of women tapped for international management roles. One way to provide more access to mentors is through the use of e-mentoring. Headlam-Wells, Craig, and Gosland (2006) studied the effect of this type of mentoring on self-confidence and skill development of younger leaders. The study found that links to executive women leaders, even electronic ones, led to improvement in four dimensions: personal development, career development, greater clarity of career goals, and greater confidence. One surprising finding was that the lack of traditional contact allowed some mentees to overcome feelings of intimidation when communicating with their mentors. The electronic format overcame the limitation of geography in finding suitable mentoring relationships and may help deepen the pool of available mentors for women.

Organizations such as United Parcel Service (UPS) have taken notice of the positive effects of networking and mentoring. UPS noticed that female employees were leaving their company, and they were leaving at a disproportionately faster rate than any other employee group.

It wasn't a mass exodus, but we realized that across the board in our offices, women were leaving," says Randi Menkin, director of workforce diversity for UPS. "We had to get to the bottom of it. What was happening to us was alarming, and then when you look at workforce trends in general—we realized that we had to compete for talent. We not only had to compete to recruit talent, but we had to do things to retain our talent, especially women. As a company we want more diversity, and if we're losing our women, then we're always playing catch-up. (Welch, 2008, p. 45)

As a result of this trend, Menkin formed a task force and the group spent a year researching, benchmarking, conducting focus groups and interviewing and re-interviewing the departing women. The end result was the creation of the Women's Leadership Development Program, a multifaceted effort designed to attract, retain, and develop female

managers. This program rolled out in May of 2006 to 19 areas across the country. Menkin shared that “basically our women, and it turned out, a large percentage of our men as well, didn’t feel connected to the company” (Welch, 2008, p. 45).

The three original tenets of the Women’s Leadership Development Program were to help women connect within the company, in their professional fields and in the community. The female employees wanted to meet, and share their stories, problems and triumphs, as well as help others. So, UPS started holding meetings, marketing them first to women. But the men also wanted to know if they could attend the meetings so UPS began promoting the program for both men and women. Menkin shared that UPS learned from the meetings that women drivers in particular felt as if they didn’t have mentors or role models to talk to about getting into management. After a year of the Women’s Leadership Development Program, the results were in. Turnover was down 25 percent in the pilot districts and more than 6,000 women were touched by the program. A Women’s Leadership Development portal site was developed to share articles and testimonials for information, and to provide an outlet to inspire others and recognize achievements (Welch, 2008, p. 45).

The program was rolled out nationally and in Canada in July 2007. Menkin believes the program works for several reasons, but paramount was the commitment of executive leadership, which included men.

It also melded nicely with UPS core values of diversity and promoting from within and leadership development. It is in our fabric as a company to be involved in the community and this program actually helps facilitate our employees who want to follow their passion for community service. Employee morale was up and that helped in job performance (Welch, 2008, p. 45-46).

Some organizations, such as UPS, are starting to realize the value that women bring to the work place and are taking steps to help retain and advance them. However, it is troubling that overall there appears to be so few women in executive-level positions who can serve as mentors (The White House Project, 2009; Pyramids, 2011). Younger colleagues need encouragement and guidance for their professional growth, and executive female leaders have much they can share to guide and mentor younger aspiring individuals.

Obviously women are starting to obtain leadership positions, but they still need more guidance and support to advance into executive leadership positions. Women need to learn from other female leaders, to

receive support from organizations, and to receive education from institutions of higher learning. Therefore, this study sought answers to these questions:

1. What can others learn from executive female leaders?
2. What can organizations do to retain and advance female leaders?
3. How can executive education programs and institutions of higher learning better develop female graduate students for leadership positions?

This study used a qualitative approach to learn about leadership from senior women leaders. Conger (1998) noted that qualitative research has been underutilized for studying leadership. He stated that qualitative research must play an important role into the investigation of leadership topics because of the complexity of leadership itself. In addition, qualitative research allows researchers the opportunity to study things in their natural setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). In this way participants can speak freely within the context of their personal values and experiences, and researchers can use their responses to develop, rather than impose, research themes.

## **Methods**

A cover letter and interview protocol questions that were approved by the authors' university Institutional Review Board was sent to 24 executive female leaders who had been publicly recognized for their leadership in a large, metropolitan community. For the purposes of this study, an executive female leader was defined as one who had risen to a top management or leadership position within her organization. In addition, the women asked to participate were chosen because they represented diverse functional and organizational backgrounds. The letters requested a one-hour, confidential, tape-recorded interview about their experiences and contributions as leaders. From this list of 24 female leaders, 12 accepted the interview invitation. The organizations of the female leaders ranged in size from less than 20 employees to over 500 employees. One interviewee came from education; three from media, communication, and technology; two from banking and finance; one from transportation; two from government, and three from nonprofit agencies. Job titles included CEO, executive director, senior vice president, executive vice president, associate dean, director, vice president, district

attorney and broadcast editor. Years of work and leadership experience ranged from 11 to 45 years.

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore in depth the perceptions and thoughts of each senior female leader. A semi-structured format was used because of its highly individualized nature and its ability to elicit unanticipated information and insights by adapting to the interviewee's personality and priorities (Kellerman & Rhode, 1994). The interviewer, an MBA graduate student completing a Directed Study under the supervision of the primary researcher, guided the direction of the interview by using primarily five open-ended questions that encouraged each female executive leader to discuss her experiences as a leader. The five questions asked were:

1. What are the most critical problems you specifically face as a female leader?
2. What are the major reasons female leaders fail in positions like yours?
3. If applicable, can you share a story about a particular situation in which you perceived you failed as a leader?
4. If applicable, can you share what leadership lessons you learned from that experience?
5. What are some words of advice you would give a new leader or aspiring female leader?

The semi-structured interviews took place over a period of eight weeks at the convenience of the interviewees. Three interviews were conducted at the interviewee's place of work, eight were conducted by conference call, and one started face-to-face, but was concluded by e-mail. All interviews were audio taped and fully transcribed with the gathered materials being considered confidential. As suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990), throughout the interview the interviewer attempted to ensure no potential misunderstandings were occurring. The interviewer also verified with the interviewee that she was recording the answers accurately and that she had interpreted the answer correctly before proceeding to the next question. Triangulation techniques were also used in that each interview participant was sent an electronic copy of her transcript and asked to comment on any inaccuracies. In addition, the primary researchers did the final analysis and coding of participant responses.

Using constant comparative analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the transcribed interviews were coded. Open



coding (Boyatzis, 1998) provided a framework in which key word analysis allowed for an extraction of sequences of words about the subject of interest along with their contexts. In this way codes, categories and over-arching themes were initially identified. The researchers then used axial coding to develop a hierarchy of codes, categories, and themes. The final level of selective coding revealed the following key concepts in order of importance: a) attitude and confidence; b) negotiation, communication styles and power; c) networking and relationship building; and d) balance.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *Attitude and Confidence*

The first concept, attitude (of others) and confidence (in self) were often linked and mentioned in responses to four of the five questions. One interviewee noted that the most critical problem she faces as a female leader is:

People not believing I'm the leader. I'm the DA for my County, but people will ask 'Oh are you the assistant? Who do you work for?' Fighting stereotypes that women would not lead law enforcement. The press thought it was a disservice for me to be out on maternity leave and thought it was a waste of taxpayer's money. I actually called the office almost every day while out. The other challenge is walking the fine line between being tough and fighting the stereotype that women who are tough, are bitches, and if you are too friendly, you would be taken advantage of.

Similarly, Adams (2011) determined that women managers did not score as high as men when it came to their employee's confidence in women managers to do their job. In fact, one executive female interviewee noted that "If a woman wants to run an operation, and she fails at it, people would say 'See, she should fail since she is a women.'" Typically, women have been held to a higher standard of competence than men and must demonstrate superior performance (Eagly, A.H. & Carli, 2003). However, recent research conducted by Ibarra and Obodaru (2009) found that women leaders actually scored higher ratings from their peers than their male counterparts along 10 dimensions of leadership; emotional intelligence, empowering, energizing, envisioning, global mindset, organizational designing and aligning, outside orientation, rewarding and

feedback, team building and tenacity. Perhaps the confidence people have in women being leaders is starting to improve.

Besides facing negative attitudes from others, women are often their own worst enemy. One executive female interviewee stated that one reason women fail in leadership positions is because “Women tend to be self-effacing (i.e., I could never do that.) Men are more confident, even if they aren’t completely sure. Women want to get something 100% right before they go on to the next thing.” Turknett (2005) looked at 10 traits that are essential for female leaders and found confidence is one of those traits. In her research study that compared 360 feedback results for men and women executives, she found that women only scored lower than men on 1 out of 10 traits - self-esteem. Similarly, Ibarra and Obodaru (2009) noted that many women are not considered “visionaries” because they tend to hesitate and not “go out on a limb.” Ribitzky (2011) declared that:

One reason women stumble is because others perceive them to be too “maternal” and essentially, not strong enough to be a leader. “Men and women manage very differently,” says Nell Merlino. “Women want to get it right. It’s not that men are out there to get it wrong, but you can bet that when Bill Gates makes a decision, he isn’t fretting about what people will think of that decision. (p.1)

In concurrence with Pestrak (n.d.), who stated that senior female leaders who reached the upper echelons of corporate American cite having a positive attitude as one of the most important keys to success, the executive female interviewees in this study also listed attitude and confidence as keys to success. This finding supports previous research that has cited having a positive attitude as a key factor for women’s leadership success (Caliper, 2005; Howard & Wellins, 2009; Pestrak, n.d.). To build that confidence many of the executive women interviewees felt that pushing themselves, surrounding themselves with the right people, not giving up, learning from mistakes and looking for opportunities for growth were integral in helping them believe in themselves. They encouraged younger, aspiring female leaders to do the same with comments such as:

There are a lot of people who get insecure and think they always have to be right. You are better off being wrong. Hire people smarter than you in certain areas. Be proud of them, promote them. It only advances you. A lot of young leaders are insecure and are intimidated by people who are smarter than them. Stay open to new ideas.

I learned that some things that people say are merely cosmetic, and that you can't believe everything they say. The best way to handle situations where you are being treated unfairly is to look for opportunities. Sometimes, you have to know when it is time to move on and look for other opportunities outside the company. You can't think that you will always be rewarded by the same company. Sometimes you can stay too long and actually hamper your career rather than changing jobs. Learn to value new opportunities in other areas.

Also, you should never say never. You might start out saying, "I'm only interested in this or that" but you still can combine interests with other things you never thought about doing. Continue to look for opportunities every five years, or even shorter than that. That's how you grow, even if it is within the same company. Don't think you will forever be in the same position. You will advance in salary and opportunities.

Madsen (2008) noted "Looking at failure as an opportunity to learn and grow rather than denying mistakes or blaming others is a quality that makes an exceptional leader" (p.205). Similar to the executive female interviewees in this study, the women leaders Madsen studied felt they had to learn from mistakes and failures and that they could not just sweep them under a rug or blame someone else for their difficulties.

### ***Negotiation, Communication Styles and Power***

The second concept, which emerged in an overlapping fashion, was negotiation, communication styles and power. Example responses and a short discussion follow each of these sub-themes.

#### ***Negotiation***

Women are generally horrible negotiators. Men respond to negotiating similar to athletics; but for women, it is similar to going to the dentist.

Not asking for what you want and settling for what is offered. I had a colleague who needed to negotiate her rate. When I told her what

my boss was offering, she said “Well, I guess this is ok.” I said “If it was me, and I wasn’t the middle man here, I would probably not accept the offer and counter with something higher to meet in the middle.” She said “I don’t want to lose the opportunity” and I said, “You won’t.” I pushed to get more for her and the boss said he would meet in the middle. She would have been fine accepting the lower offer. Men negotiate better. Whether it is a car salesman, etc. women don’t negotiate but say “That’s fair, I’ll take that.” And we lose out because of that. It doesn’t even have to be money, it could be an opportunity. We wait on the next level to be offered to us as opposed to bringing it up.

According to Babcock and Lashever (2003) women don’t ask. The responses from the executive female interviewees in this study suggested that women still do not ask and that little change has occurred regarding negotiation skills. The executive women in this study noted that women don’t ask for raises, promotions, better jobs, recognition or help and younger women need help in developing their negotiation skills. Babcock and Lashever also found that women do not negotiate their beginning salary, but men do, resulting in a four times higher starting rate than women. By not negotiating a first salary, a female stands to lose more than \$500,000 by age 60. As a result, women end up starting their careers doing equal work, but earning less money, amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars over a lifetime career.

Gangone (2009) in a conference address to the American Council on Education in Hawaii stated:

When we ask and higher ups say ‘no’ the first time, we don’t go back . . . if you believe in what you are asking for, it’s your personal responsibility to keep on asking. We often don’t ask for clarification. Do they mean no for now? Or does it mean “no” for the next six months? Or does it mean “no” for forever? (pg. 3)

This comment demonstrates a major difference between many men and women. Generally, women don’t ask again, but men keep asking. Evans (2000) stated that “no” simply means that whatever a woman asked for at the time didn’t happen. The “no” should not mean that women question whether they are bright or talented enough. In her book, Evans shared that her son, who was a president of a California outsourcing company, loved the word “no” because for him it was the first step to thinking strategically about how to convince his boss or client to get to a

“yes” (p. 142). The executive female interviewees in this study confessed that earlier in their careers they did not think of “no” as a first step or an opportunity. Instead, in their anxiety about hearing the word “no” they often avoided asking for something in the first place.

Women within organizations may have the authority to negotiate, but they are often unsure of how to bargain confidently. Unfortunately, women have few female role models of effective negotiators and find it difficult to develop a comfortable and effective negotiating style because the rules of negotiating were developed by men. Kolb and Williams (2009) interviewed women and found that for women “*who*” is at the table can be just as important to the eventual outcome as “*what*” is on the table. They coined the term “shadow negotiation.” For women, when they are bargaining over issues, they are also conducting a parallel negotiation in which they work out the terms of their relationship and their demands. The professional women they interviewed showed that managing shadow negotiation did not require being brash or aggressive. It did, however, involve mounting an *effective advocacy*. A bargainer’s advocacy essentially defines her claim to a place at the table. It tells the other side not only that she is going to be an active player, but that she will not, and does not, need to settle for less than she deserves. This is definitely a key lesson for younger, aspiring women to learn.

### ***Communication Styles***

One personnel problem I had involved a senior manager whom I promoted quickly. This manager had great experience, but when the rubber hit the road, she wasn’t performing. She looked the part, which was nice. I found it hard to say “Your work doesn’t meet my expectations.” I used some of that soft talking feedback, and I was thinking perhaps that she would see what I was getting at. We got to a point when I thought “She is not a fit for the team.” When I finally had to have that kind of performance review, I had not prepared her for it. I had been so afraid of hurting her feelings; I couldn’t bring myself to tell her. Once I did tell her and worked on what she had to do, she improved and it has been great.

Frankel (2004) has found that women use qualifiers to calm their fears about being too direct or opinionated, which some of the executive women leader interviewees in this study admitted to doing. Frankel shared when women do that it softens or weakens their message. Instead

she recommended that women give their opinions in clear, certain terms. Riggio (2010), however, shared that in the workplace the same behaviors displayed by men are interpreted entirely differently when they are displayed by women. For example, a woman might be described as having a short-temper, or being overly assertive and petulant. On the other hand, a male colleague would be described as arrogant, grouchy, or eccentric.

Meyerson, Ely, and Wernick (2007) found women face unique challenges as many mainstream organizations conflate stereotypical masculine traits with competence and leadership. They stated that:

This conflation places women who seek leadership roles in a double bind: those who enact idealized masculine images of leadership, by definition, violate idealized feminine images of women and vice versa. The result is that women who are tough, confident, and decisive are demonized as bitchy, strident, and insensitive. By the same token, women who are sensitive, relational, and warm are discounted as weak, passive and too nice. Either way, women are seen as unfit for leadership roles. (p.454)

In addition to being aware of how they communicate verbally, women also need to be aware of the non-verbal communication signals they display. Goman (2010) found that women undermine their authority with non-verbal communications and may not even be aware they are doing so. For example, women are perceived as submissive when they use too many head tilts while engaged in conversation. She further stated that women need to take up more space in meetings, sit at the table not in the back or along the sides of the room, use a firmer handshake, and smile less frequently in conversations. One of the female leader interviewees confirmed Goman's assertions as she too spoke about men, but not women, using their physicality to successfully assert themselves.

While the executive female interviewees mentioned many communication aspects young, aspiring female leaders could work on, they also discussed a strength that is often unique to women - strong interpersonal communication skills (LaMarr, 2010). When women listened they didn't just hear words; they listened to both the content and the way in which the message was delivered. A study by Caliper (2005) found that women use an inclusive style of leadership based upon open lines of communication. In addition, this study suggested that women are more persuasive than their male counterparts. They are less likely to withhold information for personal or selfish reasons, feeling that it is

better to over communicate than not communicate and fail. These women leaders excelled in an environment which fostered collaborative discussions, ultimately resulting in stronger communication. Similarly, many of the executive female leaders in this study spoke about including others in their discussions and decision making.

### *Power*

You have to be aware of the politics. You have to have your eyes and ears open and pay attention. You have to process what is going on so you don't make mistakes.

Earn your chips and play them carefully. Don't be afraid to make a move. In my political career, I learned that you are governed by the permission of the people you work with. If people are well prepared and trust you, you can move. As a leader, you have the freedom to make decisions, but you also should have the ability to back up those decisions.

According to Lips (2009), a woman leader stimulates a different reaction than a male leader because of learned expectations that are shaped and supported by the surrounding social structure. Sometimes that structure invalidates and undercuts a woman's attempts to be effective, influential, and powerful. Furthermore, the socialization process for most women does not prepare them to handle male-oriented organizational power structures that exist in many work environments. Traditionally, women have not been taught how to compete and master the unwritten rules of the organization. Doing these tasks comes harder for most women than their male counterparts. Hagberg (2003) shared two levels of organizational power that one must master to be successful in one's career. The first is *Power by Association*. This power is granted when individuals learn the skills and abilities of their chosen profession. Individuals learn on the job as they try to understand and make individual contributions to the organization. They look for a powerful role model to emulate. The second stage, *Power by Achievement*, occurs as individuals move up into the ranks of management. As a manager, a female leader is expected to demonstrate independence in thought, action and decision making. While at the same time she must take risks, understand the unwritten rules of the organization, negotiate, strategize, compete, and build effective coalitions. All of this takes place while she is building a team and maintaining a healthy balance between self-interest and the good

of the organization. Hagberg generalized that the stage, *Power by Association*, could be called a more feminine expression of power, whereas the stage, *Power by Achievement*, has a more masculine demonstration. For men, moving from the first stage to the second one is typically an easy transition as men are socialized to expect to move into leadership roles. And, if they are talented, other senior male leaders will mentor them to success. For women, Hagberg asserted that this transition is the hardest; some of the agentic, individualistic skills that are demanded by the *Power of Achievement* stage are foreign to the upbringing of women and how they have been shaped by culture. For women to excel as leaders, they must reflect on their experiences, take opportunities to role play challenging situations and seek help from a mentor who has learned how to navigate through the more traditional masculine-identified traits needed for power and influence.

The executive women interviewed stated that aspiring younger, female leaders need to learn the tactics of effective communication, negotiation, and power so that they can ask for what they need while watching their nonverbal communication cues that may undermine their power. Delivering messages to employees at the right time and using the correct words is instrumental. Truthful communication, such as the example of the interviewed executive female leader who had to tell her employee directly that she was not meeting expectations, can help others to learn from someone's mistakes instead of making the same mistakes themselves.

### ***Networking and Relationship Building***

In this study, the interviewees did not cite networking or mentoring as being as important as the previous two concepts. It was a surprising finding, in that networking and mentoring were prevalent in the literature review. The authors surmise this may be due to the scarcity of mentors available to these executive women as they were developing their careers. Nevertheless, reflective responses on this concept did appear in four of the five questions. Examples include:

My biggest difficulty is fitting in and getting entrance into the strong men's network. Good advocacy from a man is viewed as strong, but can be viewed as harsh or even patronizing when coming from a woman.



Finally, I see women fail when they do not build relationships and network early in their life. It is critical that women leverage other male and female professionals and make a big effort to establish an external network.

Networking is critical. It's not who you know, it's who THEY know. It's also not about what people can do for you; it is about what you can do for them. Also external connections helped me get my current position. I built my own external networks in the community and helped make connections between my contacts.

According to a 2011 Harvard Business Review Research Report, “the vast majority of highly qualified women don’t have political allies to propel, inspire and protect them through the perilous straits of upper management” (Birigwa & Sumberg, 2011, pg. 1). The authors of this report noted that individuals with sponsors have a 30 percent greater chance of being rewarded through stretch assignments, promotions, and salary increases. A sponsor can be anyone who is willing to stick out his or her own neck to create an opportunity to help a young, aspiring, female leader. Unfortunately, some of the executive female interviewees noted that women were not as willing to help each other as men are to help each other, or even men are to help women. As one female respondent noted “I find women do not have camaraderie with other women, but are somewhat competitive with them. You still have some of that Mean Girls high school stuff that you deal with.” In support of this statement, Okello (2008) claimed that women managers were more likely to promote a man than a woman because they were afraid of the competition. She stated that women take competition personally, whereas men understand that it’s just part of doing business. The competition between women is often vicious and holds women back in the workplace. As such, young, aspiring female leaders need to be wise and cautious about whom they seek out as mentors.

### ***Balance***

Balance was the fourth theme that emerged; however, it was not brought up nearly as much as the previous themes. The authors surmise that balance may not have been as strong of an issue for the executive women leaders interviewed because they had already mastered juggling many balls. It was also interesting to note that the comments regarding balance had as much to do with balancing feminine and masculine

characteristics as they did with balancing work and life, which was an unexpected outcome of this particular study. One executive female interviewee made this comment about balance.

One of the things that is a challenge for me as I have gotten older is balancing. When I was newer to leadership, I was very hard-nosed about things and took a tougher approach to things. As I have grown in my role, I have come to respect the softer side of myself. How do I be a strong leader while having compassion and respect for a person's life? How do I balance the hard and soft parts?

Both executive and younger aspiring female leaders may find themselves essentially stuck in a place where they must balance their feminine qualities with masculine qualities to gain respect as a successful female leader. As stated by one executive female leader interviewed, women often feel that they must have the perfect balance to gain the respect of their peers and subordinates.

In addition to seeking balance between male and female qualities, many women still struggle with finding balance between home and family life. Facebook's chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg has highlighted three reasons why many women, particularly those in law, may not be getting into top leadership positions in the workplace (Aguiluz, 2011). She explained that most women often a) underestimate their own abilities, b) accept more than their share of responsibilities when it comes to caring for their children and taking care of the house, and c) give up on taking on more challenging work because of premature work-life balance uncertainties. Having to take care of family and household responsibilities has often discouraged women from seeking leadership positions. This struggle was noted by the interviewed executive female leaders with comments such as "The most critical problem a female leader faces is the balancing of family, career, and community service" and:

Women have a lot on their plate to balance. The stress and workload of high positions force many women to choose carefully without creating overload. For women, there are other ways to get satisfaction. Women may decide to take themselves out of the running [for top positions] by working part time, working for a small organization, or not working at all [to create balance].

Indeed, Schings (2009) found that one of the main reasons women did not seek leadership positions was the growing demands of the workplace conflicting with the demands of their family. This supports the

comment made by one executive leader interviewed that women may decide to take themselves out of the running for top positions. According to a survey conducted in *Working Mother* (Owens, 2010), many women felt that having an employer with flexible policies helped them to become successful at both work and home. Women are more successful in their job if their company affords them the opportunity to have a flexible work-life schedule. At least one of the executive leaders interviewed did note that this was a real issue for her direct reports by saying that “I’m sensitive to work/life balance and making sure my employees have a well-rounded life.”

The COO of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg, recently discussed her experience of dealing with ambitious young women who are concerned about the ramifications of becoming pregnant. Sandberg has seen opportunities pass women by while they tried to achieve pregnancy, which often took years. She has taken a proactive approach to communicating with her young talent that they should not pass up an opportunity to advance based solely on the fact that they want to have children (Bartz, Jackson, & Sandberg, 2009).

Until organizational structures adapt to meet the needs of both men and women, women will struggle with the complex issues of work and family obligations. If traditional roles prevail at work and home, women will always find it difficult to penetrate the highest levels of leadership.

### **Implications**

Women may find themselves in more of a sieve than a pipeline to leadership. It is obvious that women can bring much needed skills to the global economic world of work, but careers are often derailed by the challenges described above by the executive women leaders in this study. So the questions become:

- 1) How can organizations develop prospective and current female leaders?
- 2) What can executive education and institutions of higher learning do to help female graduate students move into leadership positions?
- 4) What can women do themselves to support their move into the executive ranks?

## What Organizations Can Do?

Organizations need skilled and talented people and to realize that the work force is not just for men. Organizations also need to be creative in thinking through ways that will allow both men and women to be successful in the work place. Women account for a majority of university graduates in Europe, the US and OECD [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development] countries. By 2020 it is anticipated that women will account for more than 70 percent of college graduates in seven countries: Italy, Sweden, Hungary, Iceland, New Zealand, the UK, and the Netherlands (Vincent-Lancrin, 2008). The low representation of women in executive leadership is a missed opportunity.

“In today’s sagging global economy, organizations that mentor and support women moving up the organizational ladder could well be one of the best survival strategies that an organization could undertake,” say authors Ann Howard and Richard S. Wellins. “It’s time organizations stopped blocking the development and progress of the kind of talent that could fortify the executive suite.” (Howard and Wellins, 2009, p. 29).

Another reason for developing women is to get the right leadership team. In an unprecedented open letter at the height of the financial and economic crisis, 17 chairmen and chief executives of well-known companies, including Anglo American, BP, Cadbury and Tesco, called for more women to be appointed to senior positions. They said that extraordinary times required innovative solutions and that is was more necessary than ever to deploy the best talent. “Business leaders have spoken out on the need for action on climate change and poverty,” they wrote to The Daily Telegraph. “It is time to do the same on gender.” (The Daily Telegraph, 2008).

Women represent more than half the marketplace. After decades in the workforce, women now provide a majority of the purchasing power. Research, in the United States, shows that women are making 80 percent of consumer purchasing decision, covering everything from cars, computers, and insurance. (Wittenberg-Cox and Maitland, 2009, p. 15) Therefore organizations need women at the top to make sure the right products and services are provided for the marketplace.

Some organizations are leading the way in implementing work place strategies that focus more on productivity, flexibility, and development. A “Results-Only Work Environment (ROWE),” can be

found at Best Buys. ROWE was started by two women Ressler and Thompson. In a results only work environment, employees can do whatever they want, whenever they want, as long as the work gets done. Employees are paid based upon results, not time in the office, which has helped many employees balance the struggles of work and home responsibilities (Ressler & Thompson, 2011). Implementing this approach increased productivity by 35 percent. (Welch, 2008, 42).

In addition six years ago Best Buy launched a Women's Leadership Forum, known as "WOLF". Originally the forum was created to empower female workers, but the program has become crucial in connecting the electronics retailer with an untapped customer base: women. Then in March 2010, Best Buy introduced the Talent Readiness Program to help WOLF participants in middle management to advance in the senior-level leadership pipeline. In the Talent Readiness Program women work on their public speaking, meeting effectiveness, career growth, and confidence (Pyrillis, 2011, 3).

Another pioneer is Alston & Bird which was the first firm in Atlanta, Georgia to have a dedicated day care center and to provide maternity benefits. In addition, the firm created the Alternative Career Path, a more adaptable partnership plan that does not lock an associate into a specific time period in which to become a partner, but instead gives individuals more flexibility so that they can balance the work/life challenges younger, aspiring female leaders face (Welch, 2008, p. 43).

Then there is Merrill Lynch who established a Women's Advisory Council of 12 women in the local business, philanthropic and political communicates whose goal was to increase the number of women working at Merrill Lynch and in the financial services industries as a whole. The firm also helps its women manage work/life balance issues by looking for ways to be flexible. Mary Ellen Garrett, vice president-investments says: We let people know that you can work wherever you have to and when, but we also have internal backup systems available so that if something happens—say, you have a sick kid—that the workload goes on without a beat (Welch, 2008, p. 44).

Deborah Kolb, a negotiations expert, is an advisor to the Chicago-based Leading Women Executives program, which was started in 2009 by the Corporate Leadership Center and Hewitt Associates, an HR consulting firm that is part of Aon Hewitt. To participate in this program, women have to be nominated by their company's CEO. According to Kolb, the reason for the requirement is to ensure that employers are not just

providing a window dressing but are fully committed to helping women advance. Participants also must have at least 10 years of management experience and be just two or three levels below CEO (Pyrilllis, 2011, p.3).

It seems some gender diversity is taking place in organizations but there is still a long way to go. In addition, this is not just a phenomenon here in the United States. A recent study by Europe's Institute of Leadership and Management (2009) entitled "Ambition and Gender at Work" found almost three-quarters of women believed a "glass ceiling" exists, barring them from senior roles. A total of 3000 male and female managers took part in this study, which found that a lack of confidence in women's abilities and lower career expectations are holding them back to the point that women assume management positions three years later than their male counterparts. Half of female managers admitted feelings of self doubt, compared with 31 percent of men. Similarly only 50 percent of women expected to become managers at the start of their careers, while two-thirds of men did.

"Employers who are serious about increasing gender diversity at the top need to recognize and respond to these differences, and find ways to nurture women's ambition" (Bolshaw, 2011, pg. 1). Companies should consider more flexible career models, as well as coaching and mentoring for women who are looking to take on executive-level positions.

## **What Can Executive Education Do To Help Develop Female Students?**

With a record number of women earning college degrees, female leadership development programs are critical to make a crack in the glass ceiling (Pyrilllis, 2011, p. 3). Executive education and institutions of higher learning need to create more female leadership programs such as some of the exemplary programs described below. At Barnard College, professor Kathryn Kolbert designed the Athena Leadership Lab for women. Workshops and seminars include 'Managing Change in the World,' to 'Resiliency Training: Building Your Ability to Bounce Back.' At Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management, the Women's Senior Leadership Program helps women find a different path to the top. Courses focus on issues such as how to motivate people, how to develop better negotiating skills when it comes to pay and resources, and how to promote oneself with confidence (Pyrilllis, 2011, p.3). In 2009 at Kennesaw State University, a graduate course entitled Women's Leadership Lab was officially made a permanent graduate course offering within the

Department of Management and Entrepreneurship. In this class, the students focus on personal and professional development while working on a semester long project that requires them to partner with a non-profit organization that either help women or is led by women. The students interview executive level female leaders and network with various women leaders from the metro-Atlanta community who come in to share their lessons learned.

More universities could also follow the path of the Women's Leadership Forum at Harvard Business School that brings together a group of accomplished businesswomen from around the world to mentor young, aspiring females. This intensive program helps young women advance their management and leadership skills in an intense week long program. A mix of small groups, classroom discussions, and informal interactions allow students to explore best practices and new research, share insights, compare experiences, and try out new ideas with an exceptional group of seasoned businesswomen. The curriculum combines topics that promote proactive business leadership, including marketing innovation, organizational effectiveness, service excellence, and negotiation with a focus on enhancing leadership skills. Students have the opportunity to meet each day with a Board of Advisers—a small group facilitated by a professional coach—who helps each student address critical challenges and develop a personal action plan. (Harvard Business School, n.d.)

Another example of an outstanding program is the Smith-Tuck Global Leadership Program for Women at Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth. This intensive four-day program focuses on helping women become expert in the three transformations that are considered key to global success: industry, organizational, and individual transformation. The curriculum for this program includes creating a framework for changing the rules of the global game, enhancing knowledge of global financial markets and risk management, evaluating tools for building and managing globally successful products, creating the global organization of tomorrow, developing intercultural competencies and a readiness to lead cross-cultural and virtual teams, developing a global mindset and expanding capacity to build a global network that will support life-long learning. A special aspect of this program is that it provides opportunities for participants to share strategies for negotiating the work/life choices inevitably faced by high-achieving women. (Smith College, n.d.)

At one point, one of the authors of this study served as Chair of the Department of Leadership and Professional Development, which was an

interdisciplinary faculty team that taught only in the Executive MBA program. The female students came to ask what programs could be developed to help them. The Women's Leadership Lab course that is open to all graduate students is one outcome of that request. One student who just completed the Kennesaw State University's Women's Leadership Lab course stated:

As the semester nears the end, I worry that I may need more time to learn more about leadership. I wonder if I have learned the lessons, I need to learn to be a better leader. I have finally found a great resource with a limited time to draw from it. My experience as a leader is limited to a few years and I have a lot to learn and develop in leadership. I worry I will not draw enough knowledge in the limited time I have this semester and I want to have this resource available to me at all times. I wish I had the opportunity to take this class every week as this would provide more discussion time with the class and interaction with my teammates. In the three months since the semester began, I see the difference in my approach to different issues as a leader. I find myself being more patient and more considerate of the employees in my department. When a problem occurs with an employee, I find myself thinking in a wider scope about the different challenges that maybe causing this problem with the employee and trying to find solutions to that problem.

This student's comment shows she valued the course and would like for it to continue beyond the semester. One endeavor the professor undertook was to create a class social network site. The site provides ongoing support for all the students who have enrolled in this class. It connects all the students-- current and past, speakers, and the organizations that have participated in the class for the past three years. The social media site allows these students to stay connected to each other and other female leaders to receive the mentoring they need to succeed. In the three years that the class has been offered, former students are now asking to come back and share with the current graduate students. The same is true for some of the female speakers who have requested to be put on the agenda each year. Having a social media site allows everyone to stay connected throughout the year.



## What Can Women Do to Help Themselves Advance?

One interviewee remarked that women do not advocate for themselves enough and miss opportunities; while another said that the same results come from a fear of risk-taking. A third interviewee warned that women must be politically astute to advance at work, and a fourth cautioned against failing to nurture networks. A fifth interviewee advocated goal setting, while a sixth interviewee counseled that women must learn to negotiate their successes.

To move into the upper ranks, women will need to develop networks, seek a mentor, and have a high level sponsor who will serve as an advocate. Mentors and sponsors can help aspiring young female leaders to seek transparency in intentions, increase self-awareness, and improve communication skills. Although mentoring may be just one facet of career development, research has suggested mentoring leads to early career advancement, as well as greater job satisfaction, increased performance and upper mobility, higher income, and improved leadership capability (Bahniuk & Hill, 1998). Furthermore, females need to learn the value of networking at a young age as the executive women leaders in this study appeared to have fewer networks and took less advantage of the connections they had to propel their careers forward, which may have caused them to take longer to get to the executive level.

### Limitations of Study

In undertaking this research study, research bias could have occurred (a) during the interviews in that the researcher may have moved the conversation in a particular direction due to personal interest or (b) during the coding phase as the researcher determined various levels of coding which ultimately led to the four key concepts. Preconceptions or biases may have existed that lead to inaccurate generalized statements.

A second limitation might be that one researcher conducted the interviews while a different researcher did the data analysis. It is possible that meaning and intent of what the interviewees said was misinterpreted.

A third possible limitation could be that although the researchers did send the interviewees transcripts of their interviews, they did not provide the overall conclusions of the study to the interviewees. It is possible that the interviewees might have disagreed with the researchers' conclusions. If the researchers had conducted a follow up conversation

with the interviewees, the coding schema might have been revised which could have led to different final concepts.

Finally, because the sample is small, it is difficult to say that the results are transferrable to the general population. Therefore, conclusions should be limited to those who are in similar settings (e.g., type of industry, years of experience, etc.).

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Any one of the five questions posed in this study could be a stand-alone study. By focusing on just one question researchers could increase their sample size and learn whether or not the same concepts emerge. A related opportunity for further research would be to repeat the study with mid-level or entry-level female leaders to see if the same issues/concepts surface for them as they did for senior executive leaders.

Additionally, researchers could expand the study by selecting executive women from other types of organizations and industries as well as within other regions of the United States. The study could be replicated by asking these other executive women the same five questions.

Some further research questions such as these could be answered:

- (a) Do women today perceive that they have more opportunities than their predecessors and thus feel less threatened by other successful women? or
- (b) Is there a generational difference with younger women being more willing to help each other than perhaps their mothers were?

Future qualitative researchers could take this research study a step further and use the four main concepts to build a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) about executive women in leadership. Grounded theory uses inductive logic to build a general theory out of the specific particular data at hand. A new grounded theory could then be compared to existing theories about executive women in leadership.

Another qualitative approach to data analysis that might be undertaken would be to do a discourse analysis (Austin, 1962), which aims to “unpack” the text or data to reveal what people are really trying to say while at the same time identifying what background assumptions are needed for this to be achieved. This type of research would look at the hidden messages rather than just the data at “face-value.” In this type of analysis, the researchers should and must have preconceptions regarding what they are studying.

Still another qualitative approach would be for researchers to use the four main concepts and build questions based upon those concepts.

They could then interview other executive women about these concepts to learn whether or not the concepts continue to hold true and thus strengthen the dependability and transferability of the results. Quantitative researchers could take the same four concepts and build a survey of likert-type scaled questions to test the validity and reliability of the concepts.

## Conclusion

The executive women interviewed confirmed previous research and shared that for women to advance as leaders, they will need to push themselves, support each other, build the right team, not give up, provide truthful communication, and look for opportunities to improve negotiating skills while maintaining strong interpersonal communication skills. Although the interviewees perceived women had strong interpersonal skills, they did believe women sometimes undermined their power through their nonverbal communication. It was an interesting, new finding that these women did not themselves mention networking as helping to advance their careers or that work/life balance had held them back. Instead they spoke about the challenge and need to balance the feminine and masculine characteristics of their personalities.

They also spoke about the need for women to strengthen and lift each other up since all women face the same challenges regardless of industry, race, or occupation. Many successful women in the past considered other women to be competition. The executive women in this study said women must stop doing that and take every opportunity to advance and support other women. The interviewed executive women further emphasized the importance of relying on one another so women could break into leadership positions in sufficient numbers. Then a women's presence at the top would be no longer remarkable.

Finally, younger women do need to listen and learn from executive women who have risen to the top leadership positions within their organizations. While the current gender inequality and lack of parity between men and women may seem disconnected from that of the past, it is not. It took the women who currently hold executive leadership positions to pave the way for where women stand today. Appreciating and respecting executive women leaders will fortify a foundation for mutual growth and progression. Much value and wisdom can come from the words of those women who travelled the path before us.

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