

2023

The Experiences of Women Executive Leaders in a Leadership Development Program

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Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Angela Gustus

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

The Experiences of Women Executive Leaders in a Leadership Development Program

by

Angela I. Gustus

MPA, City University of New York: Baruch College, 2010

BS, Morgan State University, 2001

Professional Administrative Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Public Administration

Walden University

May 2023

Abstract

The host organization is a nonprofit that has a mission of supporting the work of 19 other separate organizations, 47% of which are run by women. The problem addressed in this research is the host organization's lack of knowledge related to how to create a leadership development program that will maintain or increase the current gender diversity. The purpose of this research was to gather information about the current leaders to inform the creation of a leadership development program for the host organization based on research conducted at Harvard University. The aim was to understand the experiences of the women leaders within the association and the components of a leadership development program. There were nine women leaders within the host organization; all were invited to participate, and eight agreed. With a general qualitative research design, semistructured interviews were conducted. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes, which resulted in four primary themes: mentorship, communication skills, leadership self-assessment, and business acumen. These themes and recommendations for a leadership development program were reported in an executive summary provided to the host organization. By providing this information, the research has a positive social change on future leaders within the host organization.

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Dedication

This research is dedicated to all the women who have impacted my career and helped me become the leader I am today.

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank my heavenly father for the ability and resources that have enabled me to achieve this goal. To my parents Rudolph & Harvadene Gustus, and my sister, Camille Gustus, I wish more than anything that you all could be here to witness this. Thank you for providing me with the foundation to make this possible. To my family—and biggest cheerleaders—Cathy Mays and James Gustus-Dunson, thank you for your continued support, love, and prayers.

Lastly, I would like to thank Walden University's faculty and staff, especially my committee chair, Dr. Richard DeParis, co-chair Dr. Ross Alexander, university research reviewer Dr. Kristin Dailey and research methodologist, Dr. Marydee Spillett.

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Section 1: Introduction to the Problem

With approximately 75% of nonprofit leaders retiring soon, it is important to address leadership development for new leaders (Branch & Ford, 2022). Further, in 2019, approximately 6.6% of the leaders throughout the United States were women (Zillman, 2019). However, when narrowing down to the top 400 nonprofits in the country, 19% of the CEO and executive director roles are held by women, tripling that of Fortune 500 companies (Jones & Jones, 2017). There is an organization whose mission is to serve other organizations that all support low-income communities. For this research, that organization will be referred to as The Association, which is a nonprofit organization supporting the work of 19 separate organizations holding the federal designation of community action agencies (CAAs). When this research began, nine of the organizations were run by women; however, by the time that the interviews were conducted, 12 of the organizations were run by women, which is 63% of The Association's member organizations and well above the nonprofit average percentage of women leaders throughout the country. The women running these organizations were the focus of this research to understand their respective journeys to leadership and create a path for other women interested in leadership, particularly organizations related to The Association.

Background of the Problem

This research was conducted within The Association, which represents the CAAs of three states. The Association is also part of a national organization that serves the community's needs and has the same mission: "Community action changes people's lives, embodies the spirit of hope, improves communities, and makes America a better

place. We care about the entire community, and we are committed to helping people help themselves and each other” (Wharton, n.d.). The leadership of The Association has been interested in understanding why the number of women leaders in their membership organizations is higher than average and how to create a path for other women aspiring to become leaders of a nonprofit organization (NPO), thereby addressing the lack of women leaders in NPOs.

Statement of the Problem

There must be more women in nonprofit leadership positions (Zillman, 2019). The Association has a high percentage of women leaders within its membership organizations but needs to understand the experiences and the commonalities of these women leaders. In addition, The Association lacks a leadership development curriculum that provides information to assist in developing future women leaders throughout the association. The Association’s leadership team aims to provide tools and information that will enhance leadership as it supports multiple organizations throughout the tri-state area where they are located. This information includes leadership development for emerging leaders throughout The Association. Understanding successful women’s leadership styles is essential to supporting future women leaders’ growth and development (Jones & Jones, 2017). Assessing and analyzing the different experiences of the women leaders within The Association, this study provides insight into leadership ascension throughout their membership organizations. The information can be used to develop a framework and strategic plans to support The Association’s team efforts to establish a leadership development program. The leadership development program will be specifically for

participating organizations' supervisors, managers, and directors. Additionally, throughout the United States, numerous organizations like The Association provide support and services to the CAAs of their respective states/region. The research may lead to further research in the future to assess the leadership development needs of other organizations throughout the national network of CAAs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to understand women executives and their rise to leadership by understanding the experiences among The Association's women leaders. The research questions to address this purpose was: What are the experiences of the women leaders within The Association? In addition, subquestions were developed to provide the information needed to answer the main research question:

- What tools did the women leaders use to advance in their careers?
- What are the components of a leadership program (ideas, skills, tools, and knowledge) for The Association?
- What career path/position led to the interviewee's current position?

Based on the findings from semistructured interviews, I created an executive summary for The Association to support their goal of maintaining and growing a diverse leadership team throughout the CAAs in their region. This research has provided information to The Association related to the experiences, education, and potential challenges women leaders may face. The findings of this research have also established recommendations on how the organization can support and develop women's nonprofit leaders to foster diversity.

Nature of the Study

This research was conducted using a qualitative methodology to understand the group of women executive directors/CEOs within The Association's network, identifying the experiences, education, and other factors that have led to the women's current roles. The information collected through the interviews was used to provide recommendations to The Association's leadership team for developing a leadership development program. This qualitative research method tells the story of the individuals studied to address a phenomenon that will then solve a problem (Creswell, 2018).

The information collected for this research involved two primary sources: interviews with women executives belonging to The Association (Appendix A) and Work history data for all participants related to their resume or curriculum vitae. The questions developed for the interview were closely aligned with the stated purpose, goals, and research questions (Roberts, 2020). The interview questions were evaluated and validated by an expert panel of two social scientists and a practitioner/head of a human services non-profit organization.

I scheduled virtual meetings with each interviewee due to the constraints of schedules, location, and limitations related to the COVID pandemic. Semistructured interviews were conducted—asking the same primary questions of each participant—along with potential follow-up questions based on the answers given by the interviewee. Once the research was conducted by gathering information about the interviewees' experiences, the data were analyzed for trends (Roberts 2020). The initial questions were simple, and as the interview progressed, they became more open-ended and provided

opportunities for the interviewee to tell their story (Roberts, 2020).

Before the scheduled interview, I also asked for a copy of the resume or curriculum vitae to review their individual work histories. Not all interviewees provided this information before the interview; however, their professional history was discussed during the consultation. Gathering details about the interviewee's work history saved time during the interview to focus on other questions (see Roberts, 2020). I also had an opportunity to review the resume and prepare questions for clarification to be asked during the interview. Once all the data were collected, a thematic analysis was conducted to develop an understanding of the experiences and provide information that will guide the development of the leadership program.

Summary

Section 1 highlighted The Association, the member agencies, and the overall research. Though The Association has a higher percentage of women as leaders than the national average, currently, the organization lacks a leadership development program to maintain and/or increase the number of women leaders throughout the association. The purpose of this research was to gather information from the women leaders throughout The Association with the goal of understanding their journey to leadership and providing a path for future leaders. The finding will inform The Association's development of their leadership development program. Section 2 will delve into the theories and literature on diversity in nonprofit leadership.

Section 2: Conceptual Approach and Background

The Association has 19 member organizations located in four different states, and 12 are led by women executives. Additionally, the executive director of The Association is a woman. When assessing the nonprofit sector's overall gender makeup, 79% of the organizations' leaders are men (Renock, 2017), whereas women make up approximately 70% of all nonprofit staff (Gill & Orgas, 2018). This research explored the experiences of the leaders of organizations belonging to The Association who are women, covering organizational information related to the interviewee's organization; the career path of the interviewee as they ascended to their current position; challenges, if any, throughout the interviewee's ascension to their current role; and interviewee recommendations on leadership development based upon their own experiences. This section explores the concepts, models, and theories from previous research; the relevance of this research; existing scholarship; the current state of practice, and recommendations for growth.

Concepts, Models, and Theories

Until the 1970s, there was not much research on women in leadership (Lyness & Grotto, 2018). The concept of leadership, dating back to the early 1900s, has gone through many transitions, from believing that traits impact a person's ability to be a leader to a more current understanding of leadership and the importance of authenticity (Lyness & Grotto, 2018). Research has continued to focus on leaders' behavior through theories such as authentic, spiritual, servant, and adaptive leadership.

The leadership pipeline has been depleting overall, and developing the next generation of leaders is becoming increasingly important in the nonprofit sector (Lyness

& Grotto, 2018). The baby boomer generation will vacate approximately 70% of the workforce through retirement over the next decade (Branche & Ford, 2022). This has made professional development and leadership development programs a priority; however, the individual must also want to succeed (Lyness & Grotto, 2018). Creating plans for leadership development brings to attention the importance of maintaining the same level of gender diversity at The Association.

In addition to learning skills in leadership development programs, there are other elements of an effective career advancement strategy, such as networking, mentorships, and relationship building. Men and women traditionally have different definitions of and experiences with networking and mentorship (Zdroik & Babiak, 2017). There also appear to be barriers for women in some nonprofit industries due to the culture established in organizations (Zdroik & Babiak, 2017). Research shows that the nonprofit industry provides more women leaders opportunities (Mastracci & Herring, 2010), but gender norms and assumptions about women versus men leaders continue to create a glass ceiling for many women (Piatak et al., 2022).

Relevance to Public Organizations

Governance and funding in CAAs Throughout the 21st century, nonprofits have gone through transitions related to oversight and governance. Organizations receiving government funding must perform and have policies and practices similar to the structure of for-profit and governmental organizations. For example, in 2011, President Barack Obama's State of the Union Address suggested cuts to the Community Services Block Grant, a primary funding source for CAAs. The result was a backlash from the 1,100

CAAs (primarily nonprofits) throughout the country. As a result, the funding remained; however, more stringent financial and programmatic outcomes-based oversight was developed for agencies receiving Community Services Block Grant funding (Chaffin, 2011). CAAs must establish a tripartite board of directors, meaning that the board must have representation from government officials, community/business leaders, and individuals representing the low-income community (Bishop, 2007). Board governance for most boards addresses adherence to “legal and ethical responsibilities, financial oversight, fundraising, strategic planning, succession planning, communication, and outreach while remaining focused on the organization’s mission” (Crawford, 2019, p. 9).

Gender diversity in nonprofit as additional oversight occurs, the nonprofit sector is becoming acknowledged as an opportunity to assess the effectiveness and innovative approaches to leadership. The nonprofit sector was initially not seen as an actual business because it often had missions that did not have to do with business outcomes; however, it is a professional space for women’s leadership opportunities (Mastracci & Herring, 2010). Board diversity, especially related to gender, appears to have better overall board performance and the appointment of women leaders (Dula et al, 2020). Additionally, the high number of women leading CAAs may be due to the board makeup, as they are the governing body responsible for hiring the organization’s leader. Though women executives are still in the minority of nonprofit leaders, there is a significantly higher number of women executives in nonprofits than in for-profit and government organizations (6.6% and 19%, respectively; Jones & Jones, 2017).

Relevance of study Highlighting the experiences of the women leading membership organizations of The Association will provide information for other women with goals to ascend to leadership positions. Seeing women in positions of leadership or authority becomes symbolic and inspirational (Piatak, et al, 2022). Though a small representation of the nonprofit sector, The Association provides a glimpse into nonprofit leaders' work—both women and men—and their individual stories. The information gathered in this research will also give the organization recommendations, allowing them to continue to have a gender-diverse leadership throughout all the organizations affiliated with The Association and look at different factors that can be used in succession planning.

Existing Scholarship and Broader Context

A comprehensive literature review was conducted using multiple keywords, which led to a better understanding of leadership development for women leaders in the nonprofit field. Further, this literature review provided information about topics that framed the interview questions. The keyword search provided a significant list of peer-reviewed papers based on studies conducted in the United States and abroad: *networking, career advancement, women leaders, leadership development, nonprofit management, gender diversity in leadership, nonprofit leadership, community action agencies, and leadership style*.

As there is an increase in the number of women in leadership roles throughout nonprofits, for-profit, and government, there needs to be more research on women leaders in nonprofits. Women in leadership have been researched for the last 50+ years; however,

research focused explicitly on women leaders in nonprofits is even more minimal (Jones & Jones, 2017). Nonprofit organizations whose mission is related to women's rights have clear policies and practices that ensure women have equal leadership opportunities (English & Peters, 2011). Further, organizations founded by women provide opportunities for people in the pipeline to learn from the organization's leaders (English & Peters, 2011). However, the challenge is that many of the women that start these organizations do not relinquish leadership to allow for promotional opportunities for the individuals that have been trained or mentored (English & Peters, 2011).

Though this research focuses on the women in their organization's top leadership role, there are other leadership roles within nonprofit organizations, namely development. The purpose of the development professional is to raise funds for the nonprofit. Despite the growing equality, there is still a gap in income for women versus men (Lyness & Grotto, 2018). Despite the growth in women's presence in the workspace, there continues to be a significant gap in leadership throughout the United States (Lyness & Grotto, 2018).

Current State of Practice

Jones & Jones (2017) conducted research culminating in the article "Leadership Style and Career Success of Women Leaders in Nonprofit Organizations" that focused on assessing three leadership styles (Transactional, Transformational, and Passive) and the correlation each type had on the leader's success. Understanding the history of leadership research discussed earlier, looking at the timeline, women were factored into leadership

research in 70 years into the timeline. Therefore, it can be stated that leadership styles may or may not be relatable to women (Jones & Jones, 2017).

As an association of nineteen Community Action Agencies, this research on the women leaders within The Association has gathered relevant information to understand each leader's journey better. Also, factors that may have helped them obtain their positions and find commonalities in leadership that may be used to train and develop a pipeline and program that will maintain the current gender diversity of The Association's member organizations.

Many nonprofits need a formal leadership development plan and are challenged by the difficulty of broaching the subject with some leaders (Dorse & Durham, 2018). Dorse & Durham quoted a research participant saying, "by the time I retire, all of the potential successors would have moved on," as a response for not focusing time on succession planning (Dorse & Durham, 2018, p68). Without a formal leadership development or succession plan, up-and-coming leaders—especially women—should take matters into their own hands by learning the unspoken rules and networking skills and finding a mentor (Elias, 2018). Women who do not accept these steps increase the likelihood of reaching a glass ceiling (Elias, 2018).

Recommendations for Growth

Understanding the experiences of The Association's member organizations' current women leaders will provide recommendations for understanding what skills, experiences, factors, and opportunities have played a part in their ascension to leadership.

Three statistics highlighting the importance of leadership development identified by Dorse Durham (2018) are:

- 17% of the nonprofits in the United States have a formal succession plan.
- In 2020, approximately 40% of the workforce was retiring.
- of 2,500 youth surveyed, only 4% considered working in a nonprofit a career choice.

There are four primary components of leadership development strategies: the buy-in and commitment of the CEO/executive director and the board of directors, an assessment of the organization's future needs, implementing the 70/20/10 leadership development model, and ongoing engagement (Clardy, 2018). Implementing initiatives such as creating a leadership development program or plan must come from the CEO. Without the organization's support of a leadership development program, the time and resources will not be allocated towards developing the leaders within the organization. Understanding the future of the business is essential when thinking about a successor. What has worked prior may not work well in the future; therefore, it is necessary to tie the succession plan to the strategic plan to ensure they align. The 70/20/10 leadership development philosophy states that 70% of growth is on-the-job experience, 20% mentoring or coaching, and 10% formal training (Clardy, 2018). Lastly, leadership development planning is not a one-time process tucked away on a shelf. It is essential to create space within the organization's regular operations to continually work on developing leaders and prepare the organization for potential change in leadership (Durham, 2018).

Creating leadership development plans should be a part of all nonprofits' strategic plans. Nonprofits needing a plan are leaving themselves at risk of adverse financial implications and losing institutional knowledge during the transition (Dorse Durham, 2018). While 62% of The Association's member organizations are led by women, without proper succession planning, the continued gender diversity may be left to chance rather than thoughtful succession planning processes.

An essential component of leadership development is the overall assessment of the organization. Many leaders believe that leadership development planning is an extensive process that will take more hours than they have to devote, but it can still need to be completed. Burmahl identifies four elements of the assessment/planning process (Burmahl, 2017).

- Reviewing positions, future openings, and potential growth of the agency.
- Assessing the current staff
- Providing training and mentoring to develop the skills of staff who are likely candidates for growth
- Creating recruitment strategies to address any gaps in talent the organization has.

The staff assessment should review the organization's talent to assess whether the efforts will recruit new staff, develop the team within your organization, or combine the two (Clardy, 2018). Emerging leaders internally are ideal, as they provide opportunities within the organization, leading to talented staff retention (Clardy, 2018).

According to the 70/20/10 rule, the training component is the smallest; however, it can be one of the most expensive (Clardy, 2018). This is where belonging to an organization like The Association is beneficial. Organizations can collaborate with other organizations to share the training cost using fewer financial resources, which many nonprofits still need to have.

A part of the leadership development assessment process identifies talent early in their tenure within the company and at all levels. This also allows the individual to develop their skills before stepping into a leadership position, posing more significant problems for the organization if they are not ready for advancement (Renock, 2017).

Gender diversity in leadership is essential and enhances the work environment by providing different perspectives and experiences to impact top-level decision-making. Diversity and Inclusion are not about ostracizing or marginalizing any group (Renock, 2017). The opposite is, in fact, the purpose. Celebrating diversity is not about hitting a specific quota; it acknowledges the lack of biases employed in the hiring or promotion process (Mastracci & Herring, 2010). Mastracci and Herring (2010) found that creating inclusive work practices and transparent human resource management processes organically creates a more diverse workplace without quotas or selections based on gender, race, or other diversity categories.

An increase in women sitting on the boards of companies is a factor in women leaders' rise, as the board is responsible for selecting leaders (Zillman, 2019). Developing leadership skills is of great importance to the advancement of women leaders; however, how to do this is not clearly understood due to the lack of literature explicitly related to

women leaders, styles, behaviors, and strategies to address the biases they may face (Jones & Jones, 2017).

Organizational Background and Context

The Association is the Community Action Association presiding over three states. The Association has 19 Community Action Agencies (CAA) as members (Wharton, n.d.). These organizations are independent, all with the federal designation as a Community Action Agency, making them eligible for funding set aside in the federal budget under the Community Services Block Grant (LaRochelle, 2019).

CAAs must also adhere to the mission, board makeup, fiscal management, reporting, and community impact regulations (LaRochelle, 2019). Each CAA has access to a state association such as The Association. Smaller states will often combine and have one organization, as in the case of the Association. The more significant states have their association, such as Virginia or Pennsylvania (Maryland Community Action Partnership, n.d.). The concept of Community Action started with President Lyndon B Johnson's signing of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. The state associations came after to assist the CAAs nationwide in partnering with one voice (LaRochelle, 2019). The Association is a nonprofit that started in 1986 (Wharton, n.d.).

Unlike most nonprofits, The Association's Board of Directors comprises one representative of each of the CAAs represented by the association, making the board members serve in dual roles. One is a member of the association vested in the interest of their respective agencies or the state at large. Also, board members serve as traditional board members with a fiduciary responsibility to the organization itself (Wharton, n.d.).

The Association is a part of the larger national organization, the National Community Action Partnership (NCAP), which plays a similar role to the state agency, but on a national level. The mission of NCAP is to “strengthen members’ capacity to provide quality services and opportunities that empower individuals and families to achieve economic security.” All CAAs are charged with meeting the needs of their respective low-income communities (Wharton, n.d.). CAAs provide myriad services addressing hunger, housing, utility assistance, weatherization, and early childhood education using the Head Start model (LaRochelle, 2019).

Role of the DPA Researcher

As the previous woman Executive Director of a Community Action Agency, I became familiar with The Association. Eventually, I ascended to The Association’s Vice President of the Board of Directors position. With over 25 years of experience in the nonprofit human services field, I found it interesting that the board comprises many women. When I stepped down from my role as Executive Director of my local CAA, I also relinquished my position on The Association’s board of directors, as only heads of CAAs can be a board member and participate in this research, I have acted in the role of a board member of The Association. I have conducted all the interviews with the participants of this research study.

The motivation behind conducting this research stems from the desire to understand the experiences of the women leaders throughout The Association. In addition, as a previous member of the board of The Association, I knew that the leadership of The Association was interested in creating a leadership development

program based on the experiences and career paths of the current leaders of the member organizations.

In my work as the previous leader of an Association member organization and board member, I have developed collegial relationships with many of the other leaders due to having previously worked with many of the potential participants. Throughout the interview process, it does not appear that my collegial relationship created any biases. Using a semi-structured interview process, the interviews all had a similar structure of whether I had worked with the leader being interviewed or not. Due to this research, the Association will provide a framework for how to support diverse leadership within member organizations. In addition, The Association will be provided with recommendations for training.

Summary

The focus of Section 2 has been to understand the literature on leadership development, planning, gender diversity in nonprofits, and current leaders' experiences in establishing a leadership development program. After reviewing the literature, it can be deduced that there is a need for diversity in nonprofit leadership, despite the increasing number of women in the workplace. The Association provides an opportunity to research twelve organizations within The Association's membership led by women. Section 3 will detail the process developed for this research.

Section 3: Data Collection Process and Analysis

The Association's member organizations are in a unique position to understand women's experiences in leadership roles. The Association has a high percentage of women leaders, but no research has been conducted to understand the backgrounds of these women leaders. In addition, The Association does not have a leadership development curriculum that provides training that would assist in developing future women leaders in their member organizations. The purpose of this research was to understand women executives' experiences in The Association, which can develop a path for future women nonprofit leaders. Using a qualitative methodology, the women leaders were interviewed, and the information collected was used to create guidelines, suggestions, and recommendations based on the findings. This information will support the goal of maintaining and growing a diverse leadership team throughout the CAAs in the three states. The findings have been used to establish recommendations for The Association's leadership development program. This section will provide information related to the interview protocol and the analysis that was conducted once the interviews were completed.

Practice-Focused Questions

Though The Association has many women leaders, the organization needs a clearer understanding of the experiences of those women leaders. To achieve this understanding, this study addressed the following questions: "What are the experiences of the women leaders within The Association?," "Based on the experiences of women leaders in The Association, what are the components of a leadership development

program for The Association?,” and “What tools did the women leaders use to advance their careers?” To develop an understanding of the experiences of the women leaders within The Association, this research used semistructured interviews. This method is more effective than a written questionnaire because it provides an interactive forum for emerging unexpected topics (Busetto et al., 2020). The participants had an opportunity to tell their stories and reflect on experiences that have impacted their ascension to their current roles. The goal is to use the findings to develop a leadership development program for the leaders throughout The Association’s membership organization who currently hold positions such as director, manager, or supervisor. Membership organization is defined as organizations that are members of The Association, supporting the work of CAAs in three states in the United States. CAA is a designation given by the federal government to organizations whose mission is to support the needs of the low-income community. For the purposes of this research, a leadership development program is defined as opportunity for professionals to develop the skills needed to ascend to leadership positions successfully (Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2019).

Sources of Evidence

Walden University’s Institutional Review Board approved this research (approval no. 11-15-22-0762793), and the interviews were scheduled and conducted in November and December of 2022. In addition to the interview process, I also requested a copy of the interviewee’s resume/CV to obtain information about their work history and education. Some interviewees did not provide their resumes, so I asked questions about their education and professional experience during the interview. The results will support

maintaining and growing a diverse leadership throughout the CAAs in the three states covered by The Association.

Evidence Generated for the Administrative Study

Participants

The participants of this study are the heads of The Association's member organizations, also women. There are currently 12 individuals who fit this criterion. The women leaders are the only ones being interviewed because the focus of this research is to tell the stories of the current women leaders to develop a leadership development program that will promote continued diversity within The Association. Individuals who are the executive leaders of their respective organizations and women were the individuals requested to participate in the research study. The goal was to understand their experiences, education, and any other possible factors that have allowed them to achieve their current position.

Protections. The Association's member organizations' leaders had the option to participate in the research study. The executive director emailed all eligible participants to introduce everyone to me and prepare them to receive an email from me. Each participant was provided a consent form detailing the research process, procedures to ensure their anonymity, and procedures to withdraw participation if needed. Confidentiality was maintained by creating an ID number for each participant. The ID number was used in the interview notes, resume, transcription of the interview, and consent forms. Names and other identifying information were redacted from resumes, and only the ID number was used to associate the information gathered with the correct

individual. All information in the final report provided to The Association and the data published in this research have been aggregated to ensure that the participants remain anonymous. According to university policy, all data collected will be maintained for 5 years.

Procedures

All women leaders who are heads of organizations belonging to The Association were sent a formal request to participate in an interview for this research study. Each interviewee was provided a summary of the research study and a consent form to review before agreeing to participate in the research study. Participants in this research study did not receive any incentives for their participation.

The interview process was organized with an established protocol for the entire research process (Jacob & Ferguson, 2012). The following is the interview protocol:

1. Before starting the interview process, the executive director of The Association sent an email to all potential interviewees to introduce the project and the individual conducting the interviews. The initial email was sent out on November 18th, 2022.
2. Once the initial introduction had been made and individuals indicated their interest in participating in the research study, they were provided information about their time commitment, the consent form, and potential signature. All consent forms were sent to the interviewee using signature software called DocuSign.

3. Upon the interviewee signing and returning the consent form, provided they are willing to participate in the study, the interviewer coordinated a time to conduct the virtual interview.
4. All interviews were conducted using a secure virtual platform and recorded for this research.
5. Before the interview, if available, I reviewed the resume/CV of the interviewee and prepared any clarifying questions.
6. I began each interview using a script reviewing the purpose of the research, the interviewee's consent, and the research format. The interview questions were read in order; however, if the interviewee prematurely answered an interview question by telling a story, I still asked the question to provide an opportunity for additional information to emerge.
7. Once the interview was concluded, I followed the final script to review the next steps of the research process, including member verification and the final product provided to The Association's leadership in the form of recommendations for the leadership development program.

Interview Questions

The interview questions were developed to align with the purpose of the study and the research questions. Based on the literature review, the interview questions were also designed to address (a) the story of how the interviewee became the leader of their current organization includes previous relationships, networking, previous affiliations with the organization, mentorship, and previous work history and (b) the leader's

recommendations for leadership development are based on their own experiences.

The research questions were grouped to initially discuss the interviewee's experience as they have ascended to their current position and leadership development questions to gather recommendations the interviewees have for future leaders and the creation of a leadership development program (see Table 1). The interview questions are a mix of closed and open-ended questions. Many of the questions related to the organization are simple. They do not leave much room for detail, such as "have any of the organization's previous leaders been a woman?" The questions about the interviewee's experiences and their recommendations for the leadership program are open-ended questions that provide space for the interviewee to tell their story. A complete list of the interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

Table 1*Research Questions Related to Interview Questions*

Research question	Resume/CV Data or Interview Questions
What are the experiences of the women leaders within The Association?	<p>How did you find this position?</p> <p>How did you get to the position of leader of your organization?</p> <p>Have you ever dealt with discrimination related to your gender in your current position? In your career?</p> <p>If a person came to you for guidance on how to ascend to your current position, what would be the most important thing that you would say helped you get to where you are in your career?</p> <p>Drawing from your experiences, what are some important things I should know about women in a leadership position in your organization or others?</p>
What are the components of The Association leadership development program?	<p>What do you recommend for a leadership development program for aspiring leaders?</p> <p>To create a leadership development program for supervisors, managers, directors, etc. What skills or knowledge do they need to demonstrate to get into your role?</p> <p>Does your organization have a leadership development program for aspiring leaders?</p> <p>Do you think that your organization would be interested in participating in a leadership development program provided by The Association?</p> <p>Do you think there will be many challenges in developing a leadership development program? If so, what do you believe those challenges will be?</p>
What tools did the women leaders use to advance their careers?	<p>Have you ever had a mentor? If so, tell me about your mentor(s) and how they have helped you throughout your career.</p> <p>Do you belong to any networking groups? If so, how have they been helpful to you?</p> <p>Do you belong to any professional groups, sororities, fraternities, or honor societies? If so, how have they been helpful to you?</p>
What was the career path/position that led to their current position?	Resume/CV review

Instrument Validity. A draft of the interview questions was initially established based on the literature review and the development of questions that would provide information related to the research questions and sub-questions. To gather feedback on the interview questions from other professionals, the draft of the questions were reviewed and validated by a committee of quantitative research and nonprofit leadership experts. The purpose of this process was to ensure that the interview questions aligned with the research questions. Each committee member was provided information about the research project to include the purpose of the research, literature review, methodology, and the proposed research questions. This information was sent to each individual in separate emails. Each member reviewed the questions, provided feedback, and ultimately approved and validated the final interview questions in writing. Each individual stated that the final interview questions aligned with the research question, purpose of the research, and literature. Below is a brief synopsis of each member of the research committee and their feedback:

- A research scientist with a Ph.D. in sociology is a tenured professor at a major university. This individual has published numerous research articles and books using qualitative research methodology and interviews as a source of data collection. In addition, this individual has also chaired multiple dissertation committees throughout her career as a professor. This individual approved of the questions currently listed; however, they recommended that the following question was added “Drawing from your experience, are some important things I

should know about women in leadership positions in your organization or others?” This question was added.

- A nonprofit executive also has their DPA and focused their research on resource management for programs working with individuals with substance use challenges. In addition, this individual has also authored articles using qualitative research. This individual suggested that some questions related to information, specifically about the organization be removed, as this information did not directly align with the research questions. This suggestion was considered, and many organization related questions were removed.
- An Executive Director of a nonprofit who has researched and implemented successful leadership development programs. Through her work, she has also advocated for the importance of leadership development programs in the nonprofit arena. This individual approved all the questions but suggested adding a question related to the potential challenges of creating a leadership development curriculum. A question was developed to address this suggestion.

The research interview process was developed to understand the experiences of the women leaders and, from that information, make recommendations on a leadership development plan for The Association. A semi-structured interview process was used to create an opportunity for the women leaders to share their experiences and find recommendations for The Association to create a leadership development program.

Research Methodology

The generic qualitative research study methodology was chosen because the

research methodology includes only one data source, the interviews. The review of the resume/CV is seen as an extension of the interview process; therefore, it would not be considered a case study. Other research designs were considered, such as phenomenological research or ethnographic research. While the data presented in section one shows the high number of women leaders within The Association, a phenomenological research design focuses on the meaning of the situation (Grossoehme, 2014). This research is less focused on the importance of women leaders and more on their experiences. Ethnographic research does focus on the experiences of those involved; the purpose of this research design is to develop an understanding of how a person has lived through their experiences (Grossoehme, 2014).

The focus of this research is to understand their experience as defined by what they have done or accomplished that allowed them to ascend to their leadership positions, including professional knowledge, education, networking skills, and relationships. It has been determined that a qualitative methodology is most appropriate due to the framework provided by a qualitative method that allows for the needed flexibility to use one primary data source, unlike a case study model where multiple data sources are required (Pearson, Albon, & Hubball, 2015). This methodology supports the use of both the interview data and the information gathered from the resumes/CVs of the interviewees. In addition, the data collected using a qualitative methodology does not provide a format to generalize or assume that the study's outcomes are applicable in all other contexts (Pearson, Albon, and Hubball, 2015). This research is focused on providing The Association with guidance

on its leadership development program. It is up to other organizations to assess whether the findings of this research may apply to another organization.

Analysis and Synthesis

The interview process was entirely virtual. The introductions started with an email. The consent form was sent to the participants using a DocuSign account. The participants were asked to email their resumes/CVs to the interviewer. All interviews were conducted using the Zoom platform. DocuSign is a secure online platform where documents can be sent and the participant can electronically review and sign documents, such as the consent form. Once signed, the interviewer and the participant received a copy of the signed document. Zoom is also a secure online platform that allows individuals to conduct virtual meetings with the option to record the meetings.

Considering the nature of the positions held by the participants, the goal of using technology is to make the interview process more convenient for the participants. All interviews were recorded to assist the interviewer in transcribing the interviews, and the participants will be notified before the recording begins. None of the participants stated that they were uncomfortable with the interview being recorded; the interviewer also took copious notes throughout the interview. A coding system was then established to analyze the information collected during the interview; Excel was used to enter the coded information to conduct further analysis.

Methodological integrity involves two primary concepts, fidelity, and utility (Levitt, Morrill, Collins, and Rizo, 2021). The researcher's commitment to the subject stems from extensive professional experience while previously leading a Community

Action Agency. As a woman leader, this topic is an area of interest, and significant research has been conducted to immerse in the phenomenon of women leaders of organizations associated with The Association. The unitality of this research was to establish a leadership development program for organizations related to The Association, the problem, purpose, and overarching goals are all in alignment with the interview process to ensure that the correct information is gathered to address the research questions.

The final report addresses any experiences that appear to be unique to only one interviewee. The research design developed for this study left space for participants to share their experiences and thoughts about leadership development. as expected, there have been some unique experiences, and the information will still be used to capture all experiences and stories; however, some information or experiences have not be used to create the leadership program.

The information gathered through the interview process has been analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. This form of analysis was chosen based on its effectiveness in applied research and the ability to robust analysis using coding mechanisms to look for trends in the narrative of the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2014). After the interviews were completed, the six steps of thematic analysis were followed “1) familiarization with the data; 2) coding; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing themes, and 5) defining and naming themes and writing up” (Braun & Clarke, 2013 p3-5).

1. Familiarization with the data – once all interviews were conducted, a comprehensive review of all notes, interviewee resumes/CVs, and the transcription of the recordings was completed.
2. Coding – after reviewing all data, a coding structure was developed that captures all information related to the research question.
3. Searching for themes – using the coding structure established, the coding was used to look for themes and trends in the information collected from the interviews. As the themes became apparent, they were recorded.
4. Reviewing themes – the themes were reviewed to ensure that the information collected provided an understanding of the experiences of the individuals interviewed.
5. Defining and naming themes – once the themes were understood, the information was assessed to review the collective experiences of the interviewees for information that provided recommendations to The Association on the creation of the leadership development program.
6. Writing up is the final phase of the thematic analysis process. In this phase, the researcher was armed with the needed information to tell about the experiences of the interviewees and how those experiences do or do not align with the literature. Further, this is also where the recommendations to The Association are explained in detail.

Throughout this analysis process, developing and understanding the establishment of themes has been very complex; the concrete measurements of how many times a topic

is mentioned was not established until the researcher was immersed in the data collected (Vaismoradi, Jones, et al., 2016). Once the data was collected, as a part of the development of the themes, a four-part process was conducted, including initialization, construction, rectification, and finalization (Vaismoradi, Jones, et al., 2016). All interviews were recorded, and transcripts were completed. The initialization phase included reviewing the transcripts of all interviews numerous times looking for content that develops coding, in addition to taking copious notes while reviewing each transcript. Once it appeared that all possible information was gathered from each interview, the construction process began. This included defining concepts discussed by varying participants to determine if the information was comparable. For example, all participants spoke of mentoring; however, there were two types of mentoring discussed (formal and informal) which needed to be clarified and defined separately.

The information collected and analyzed through this process was extremely informative and the rectification process provided the framework to compare the themes determined through this analysis process and the literature.

Summary

Using a semi-structured interview process with questions that were validated by a group of research scientists and practitioners, eight-woman executive leaders participated in the interview process outlined in this chapter. Once the interviews were completed, a thematic analysis approach was used to determine themes and further analyze the information gathered. Based on the final analysis and further review of the literature, recommendations have been made to The Association in the form of an executive

summary. The executive summary has been presented to the leadership of The association and all participants. Section 4 will provide detailed information about the number of participants and findings from the interviews and resume reviews. Section 4 will also include the recommended leadership development curriculum based on the interviewees' experiences.

Section 4: Evaluation and Recommendations

The Association supports the work of 19 CAAs throughout three states. The leadership of The Association has begun planning ways to support its member organizations to prepare for future leadership changes, as it is projected that 75% of nonprofit leaders in the United States will be retiring (Branch & Ford, 2022); however, they still need a leadership development program to build the skills of future leaders. In addition, there is a desire to maintain similar diversity among the leaders throughout the membership organizations. The Association and more than half of the CAAs are led by women, significantly higher than the 6.6% of nonprofits throughout the country (Zillman, 2019).

The goal of this study was to understand the experiences of the women leaders within The Association, the tools the women leaders used to advance their careers, the career path that led to their current position. Based on this information, I determined the components of a leadership development program for The Association. Semistructured interviews of eight women leaders of organizations within The Association were conducted to gather the information needed to address the research questions. Once the interviews were completed, a thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data. This form of analysis provided the ability to define and look for trends within the narratives of the interviews.

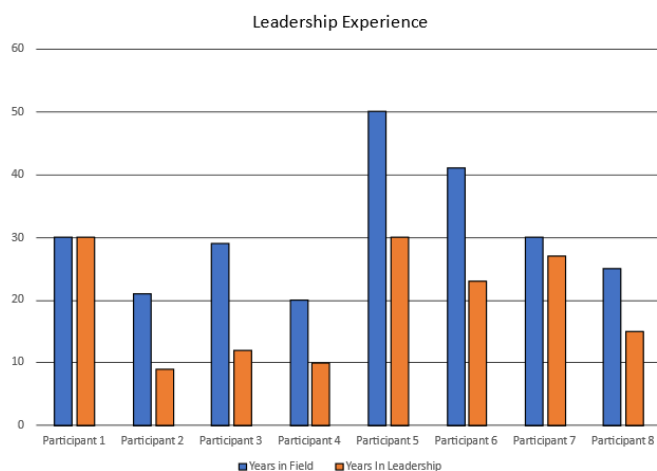
Findings and Implications

All eight participants spoke of enjoying the opportunity to talk about their respective careers and experiences with the hopes of helping other women aspiring to

executive leadership. Though their tenure in the field of human services and the number of years in leadership varied from 9 years to 30, they discussed how leadership development is an essential component of succession planning. The average percentage of years as a leader compared to years in the field—61%. The average number of years worked in the field before being in leadership—11.25 years (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Leadership Experience of Participants



All the women interviewed shared some commonalities in their path to their current positions. Four individuals held other leadership positions within their organization before being appointed to their current position. All participants learned about their current position from colleagues, and none used a headhunter. Only three had formal mentors, but all had informal mentor relationships that they fostered and created. Only three belong to a networking group, but two of the three were networking groups directly related to their current work/programs (i.e., Head Start).

Each woman told stories of how they ascended to their position. An external hire

into this position, Participant A had 15 years of leadership experience and 25 years in the field. Though she did not have any formal mentors, she discussed all the previous supervisors who invested in her and colleagues who supported her desire to grow in her career. Her passion for developing future leaders comes from all the people that have poured into her throughout her career. She spoke of the challenges of stepping into this position as a new person in the agency. She needed to learn the organization's inner workings by building relationships with her peers, team, and colleagues. She spoke about the importance of having "thought partners" with whom you can trust and talk through challenges.

Participant B was promoted to her current position; however, there were approximately 100 people who applied for the position, and she had to go through the interview and vetting process like everyone else. When asked how she felt about the process, she said, "I had to trust the process." This individual did have a formal mentor who worked with her before her appointment and continues to be a mentor. Despite her previous roles in the position, stepping into this role still had its challenges. She spoke of the importance of the relationship with her mentor, education (formal and self-study), and willingness to learn from her team as what has made her successful.

Participant C held multiple positions within her organization and indicated that the investment in developing relationships with colleagues in different areas was a key to her success. Understanding that "the structure is there, but you have to be intentional" helped her prepare for her current position. She also advanced to her position through promotion and had taken purposeful steps to position herself and educate herself in

preparation for this current role. Investing in developing the needed relationships also helped her make decisions. As she was looking to retire in a few years, so she is working to develop other leaders and developing a succession plan for the organization.

Stepping into the role as the youngest CEO of the organization, Participant D had already been serving as the organization's vice president. Her leadership style ensures that she is never too far removed from the day-to-day of the organization. She suggested it is important to provide opportunities for employees to grow based on their experience and skills, not solely on education. She said that pouring into the development of her team has been a key to her success. Though she has not had any formal mentors, she has fostered multiple relationships with people and sees mentoring as a component of "self-care." Balancing family, community, and work has been a challenge addressed by connecting with other leaders to share stories, resources, and a safe space to discuss various topics.

Participant E had a different leadership journey than most. She started her career in human services in a leadership position as finance director. Her role in the company spanned multiple decades, resulting in being asked by the board of directors to take over the company when her predecessor retired. She found her inspiration in the challenges, her creativity in the hurdles, and her drive in the responsibility for the organization. Though she has had both formal and informal mentors, she stated that her one regret in her career is that she did not seek out a mentor earlier in her career.

Initially hired as the interim executive director, Participant F was in the middle of a career change. After a career in higher education, she was approached by the board of

directors with the request to become the interim executive director until a new executive director was appointed. During that time, she not only fell in love with the mission but also with the staff. She showed that leadership skills and business acumen are transferable from one industry to another. Facing gender and racial discrimination head-on in her previous positions was feasible because of the support of her many mentors throughout her career. Her mentor relationships often started in a supervisor role and provided her with a safe space to help her make work decisions, career decisions, and sometimes life decisions. The value her mentors have had throughout her life encouraged her to become a mentor to many young women during her work in higher education and now in human services.

Out of the eight women interviewed, Participant G not only was an external hire but also moved from another state to take the position; however, as all the women interviewed, she learned about the position through a colleague. She may have been new to the state, but she was not new to community action. While understanding the importance of relationships, she had to start from nothing and has been successful throughout her tenure as executive director of her organization. When asked about the challenges she faced in moving to a new state and starting a new job, she attributed her ability to handle everything to her understanding of her skills, her faith, and her mentors.

Another leader whose background was in education, Participant H, began her career in education, and her initial role within her organization was still within the field of education. She learned about the position through a colleague. Within a few short years, the executive director decided to retire. She was encouraged to seek the position of

executive director by both the retiring executive director and other colleagues. When asked what she believed was a significant component of her leadership success, she spoke of the importance of developing yourself: “You need to become a leader that people want to follow.”

The journeys of these dynamic women varied significantly. Still, three things stood out consistently throughout all the interviews: the benefits of having mentors, the lack of their use of headhunters, and the importance of collegial relationships. Each participant spoke of the importance of having a mentor, how the mentor relationship assisted them throughout their career, and many continue to have a mentor while in their current position. The mentors were not identified as someone who assisted the leaders in finding or obtaining their current positions. Professionals use many different platforms to locate information about open positions, from social media to job listing sites. Some individuals engage in the services of a headhunter, who contract with businesses to facilitate the process of finding candidates to fill positions, typically highly skilled or executive positions, within their organization (Coverdill & Finlay, 2018). None of them engaged in the services of a headhunter to be matched with an organization, not even the individuals who were external hires. When asked the question of how they learned about the vacant position about the vacant position you currently hold, the individuals who were external hires heard about the vacancy through a colleague. They all followed up by discussing the importance of fostering collegial relationships with individuals with access to information about vacant executive positions. The women who were promoted into their current roles all spoke of the relationship they had with the incumbent head of the

organization and were recommended for the role. Being promoted to an executive leadership position comes from hard work and treating each workday as an interview. In addition to hard work, each leader discussed the importance of having a master's level of education.

The participants' degrees varied from education to business and human services administration. While conducting the interviews, it became apparent that these women went to school to align with their passions at the time. That education helped throughout their careers, but when reviewing their education, no trends were indicating that an aspiring leader should go on a specific educational track. A common educational characteristic of all participants is that they all held a master's degree. Table 2 contains a list of the degrees held by the participants.

Table 2

Participant Education

Bachelors	Masters	Ph.D. or Certifications
Early Childhood & Elementary Education	Reading	Neuroscience: Mind Brain & Teaching
Social Work & Science	Human Services Administration with a concentration in counseling psychology	
Communication	Management	
Psychology with a minor in African American Studies	Education Policy Planning & Administration	
Sociology	Education & Counseling	Ph.D. in Education
Speech Pathology & Audiology Minor in Early Childhood Education	Early Childhood Leadership	
Accounting	Business Administration and Finance	Certified Public Accountant
Sociology	Business Administration	

While each participant spoke of the importance of formal education, they all discussed the importance of being a constant learner through reading, participating in

workshops, purposefully learning from your team/colleagues, taking courses, and assessing other leaders. In addition to mentoring and education, each participant spoke of the importance of learning about themselves as leaders and purposefully seeking the knowledge necessary to lead their organization. Each of these leaders was in their current roles through the COVID-19 Pandemic. When asked about the ability to lead through a time when the entire country was in crisis, a topic that 86% of the interviewees volunteered in the conversation was the importance of knowing who you are as a leader. Three participants spoke of specific leadership assessment tools they used to learn more about themselves as a leader. Each participant who discussed understanding their respective leadership styles and having the correct human resources allowed them to maneuver through COVID-19.

Understanding how their respective businesses operate, the resources available to them as leaders and decision-makers, the strengths of their teams, and the potential challenges were all discussed. Each individual discussed the fact that while they are leaders of organizations that provide services to the low-income community, the organization is still a business. Participants discussed varying components of the business to address this concept, from human resource management, to finances, insurance, employee rights, and risk management. Three or more participants addressed each of the areas mentioned above.

Lastly, after discussing the many nuances of their careers, education, business acumen, and skills needed to be a successful leader, the question of whether they had experienced gender discrimination and what advice they would give a woman aspiring to

executive leadership. Ironically, 3 participants initially answered yes that they had experienced discrimination; however, when asking about the advice they would give to women, it was clear that they had experienced discrimination at some point in their professional careers. Participant Even stated, “well, I guess I have been discriminated against.” When asked the follow-up question of what they did when they realized that they were being treated differently because of their gender, 4 of the participants stated that they did not do anything at the time for fear of retribution.

As leaders in the nonprofit sector, 6 of the leaders talked about how fundraising fits into their role. Three of the women interviewed shared stories of meeting with donors who made inappropriate comments or offered to take them out for dinner while discussing their donation to the organization. They all discussed the dilemma they faced of whether to address an individual’s inappropriate comments versus risking losing a major donor for the organization. None of the participants reported that the situations went further than inappropriate comments, and they all decided not to address the problem at that moment but made sure that they scheduled meetings differently with those individuals moving forward.

The skills, education, and professional experience do not have to be different for women, but some of the challenges they face are directly related to their gender. The women interviewed all stated the importance of having colleagues, friends, or family with whom one can discuss these things, preferably someone who has shared experiences and can empathize with you. As more women are in executive leadership positions, have environments to discuss the difference in the affairs of women leaders, and have

leadership development programs that purposely work to develop women leaders, the increase in the potential growth in women leaders.

Recommendations

Five of the 8 women executive leaders stated that their organizations did not have a leadership development program; however, all 8 women interviewed indicated that it would be a great benefit if The Association provided a leadership development program. There is a need for trained leaders across all industries and the best way to fill that gap is for organizations to develop leadership leaders. (Kilchner & Akdere, 2014) The following is a summary of the reasons for a leadership development program as indicated by the participants.

- It would be an excellent benefit of The Association membership and would alleviate some of the financial burdens of creating a program within their organizations.
- Individuals participating in the program could enhance their network by collaborating with other aspiring leaders throughout the association.

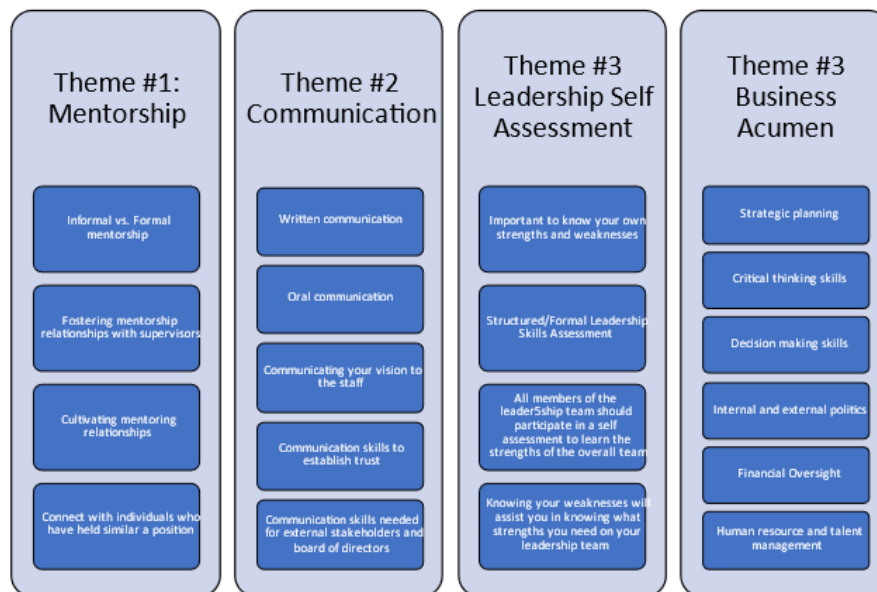
While all organizations need a leadership development program, 6 participants spoke of the significant amount of time required to develop a program. Several potential challenges/concerns were raised along with the program's benefits.

- The individuals who would participate in the program are already "stretched thin" and may not have the time to participate in a program.
- Will the program be virtual or in person? If in person, travel fees may be expensive and time-consuming.

- Who should participate in the program?
 - Will there be an application or nomination process?
 - Will an application process deter some people from participating?
 - Will there be a limit on how many people each organization can send to the program?
 - Each organization has different organizational charts and titles for their leadership staff.

Program Components

While there may be some challenges, none of the participants appeared to believe that any potential challenges overshadowed the benefits of having The Association's Leadership Development Program. From the interviews, the four themes were discussed by all eight participants (see Figure 2). From these themes, the primary components of the program addressed by all participants were mentoring, communication skills, leadership assessment, and business acumen.

Figure 2*Emerging Themes**Mentoring*

An effective mentor relationship provides the mentee an opportunity to receive feedback and guidance, and individuals with a mentor tend to feel more supported (Sipe & Testa, 2020). The mentor/mentee relationship can be defined as a relationship between two professionals where one person has significantly more experience than the other, and the former also serves as an adviser and role model for the mentee (Sipe & Testa, 2020). Each participant stated that they had formal and informal mentors who have assisted them throughout their careers. All participants believed that mentoring is a vital component of the success of future leaders. Further, participants recommended that a formal mentoring program be developed and train the program participants on developing and fostering informal mentor relationships.

Communication Skills

The ability to communicate effectively is needed to establish a mission and guide a team's work. (Rybakova, Venogradova, and Sizikova, 2019). All participants spoke of the importance of having effective written and oral communication skills. The findings of this research indicate that this program incorporates opportunities for participants to assess and develop their communication skills.

Leadership Assessment

Traditional leadership programs have a curriculum of courses or workshops that everyone takes together, but opportunities for online learning make it possible for individuals to develop their own "Personal Learning Cloud" based on their particular needs and skill development (Moldoveanu & Narayanda, 2019). Three of the women interviewed stated that the leadership development program provided by their organization includes a leadership assessment process. 75% of the participants in the research study mentioned the importance of a leader knowing their strengths, leadership style, and potential weaknesses. It is recommended that the leadership development program created by The Association include each participant completing a leadership assessment at the beginning of the program. The results of this assessment may also inform the courses each individual will complete as a part of their self-study.

Business Acumen

While leaders need to understand their industry, services, and products, some areas of business are important despite the industry. Top-level executives must have general knowledge of business even when they have teams of people who may handle the

day-to-day functions. (Holt, Hall, and Gilley, 2018). Below is a list of areas the research study participants thought were important for all executive leaders to understand.

- Finances
 - How to read a Profit & Loss Statement or a Balance Sheet?
 - How to make financial projections?
 - How to use financial reports to make business decisions?
- Marketing
 - How to effectively present your business to the community?
 - How to effectively use social media?
- Critical Decision Making.
- Team Development and building the culture needed for your organization to be successful.
- Time Management.
 - Using your time wisely.
 - Tools for organizing yourself.
 - Managing multiple projects and tasks simultaneously.
- Managing the politics of leadership.
 - Board management.
 - Leading down and up.
 - Stakeholder management.
 - Fundraising.

Leadership Development for Aspiring Women Leaders

None of the recommendations made thus far are gender specific and are essential for all leaders; however, unconscious bias, discrimination, and stereotypes still plague women leaders and may impact their leadership journey (Madsen & Andrade, 2018). Some research recommends developing women-only leadership development programs to provide a safe space for women to discuss the nuances, biases, and challenges that may occur for women (Madsen & Andrade, 2018). All the women interviewed for this research study acknowledge at least one story of gender discrimination throughout their careers. They discussed situations varying from sexual harassment, being treated as “subpar,” needing to prove themselves, feeling like they are not heard, and being overlooked. While the situations discussed did not happen within their current roles, they had impacted their professional journeys. Based on the findings from the interview, it is recommended that a separate group is developed for women in the program to provide a safe space to discuss any challenges that they may or may not face related to being a woman aspiring to become an executive leader. Based on this research, some potential discussion topics for this group of women may be:

- You do not have to assume the characteristics typically assigned to men to become a successful woman leader.
- How to find balance.
- How to stay true to yourself and your womanhood.
- How to effectively address inappropriate comments.

General Program Recommendations

The primary challenge raised by most of the research study participants was time and money. Below are a few recommendations that may address those challenges.

- Create a hybrid learning environment where participants can take self-paced online courses in the areas indicated in their leadership assessment. It is crucial to develop an environment that will work best for the members of the association (Klichner & Akdere, 2014)
- Establish a list of potential mentors from all organizations within the MCAP association and pair individuals with mentors that meet the needs of program participants.
- Establish both a nomination and application process to ensure that organizations have control over who from their organization participates in the program while also making the process simple and not too time-consuming.
- Each organization sending a person to participate in the program also needs to develop a plan of how the skills learned will be incorporated into their current position, allowing the participant to develop the skills learned in the program entirely.
- Formal mentoring should be virtual and long-term (at least six months after program completion) to provide ongoing support for the program participants.
- Create a team of people who can work together in developing the program. Encourage the team to consider nontraditional training methods such as a Personal Learning Cloud.

Leadership Development Programs are a dynamic way to enhance skills, prepare future leaders, and create a succession plan for the current leadership. When developing a program, it is important also to establish a way to measure the program results (Gurdjian & Halbeisen, 2014). To accomplish this, it is recommended that the participants are asked to complete a survey six months or a year after the finishing/concluding of the program to assess how they have incorporated the information learned during the program into their professional development. In addition, it would be beneficial to track the number of participants who also receive a promotion after completing the program.

Investing in your team increases staff morale, enhances the team member's skills, and creates a culture of growth (Holt, Hall, and Gilley, 2018). Creating a Leadership Development Program for aspiring leaders is a significant but worthy undertaking for any organization. In the case of The Association, they will develop a program to meet the needs of nineteen different organizations. While this research study focused on women executive leaders, the eight participants also represent half of the organizations associated with The Association.

To move this project forward, it is recommended that the following key steps are followed:

1. Establish a committee to use the information gathered in this research study to develop the entire curriculum for the leadership development program. Decide if a consultant is needed to assist with some of the work involved in creating this program.
2. Establish a vision and outcomes for the program.

3. Create a budget for the program and propose the budget for board approval.
4. Decide upon a leadership assessment tool that can be used as a part of the program.
5. Choose a training platform to provide the program's on-demand training components.
6. Develop a structure (and appoint a facilitator) for the Women Executive Leadership Sessions.
7. Develop a list of potential mentors willing to participate in that capacity.
8. Define the Mentor role to ensure that both parties are clear on the mentor/mentee relationship.
9. Develop an application process and eligibility criteria for individuals to participate in the program.
10. Establish key performance indicators that will be used to assess the impact of the program.
11. Create marketing materials to include information about the program, the time commitment (in-person vs. virtual), and the financial resources needed (if any) for organizations to have employees participate in the program. It is recommended that the marketing materials also highlight some speakers to increase interest in participating in the program.
12. Establish a schedule for the program, including application due dates, selection period, and the program's start date.

Strengths and Limitations of the Project

The leadership of The Association and the participants in this research study were highly cooperative and engaged in the process. The initial goal was to interview nine women executive leaders, and interviews were conducted. The use of Calendly, Zoom, and DocuSign platforms streamlined the process and made it simple for the participants to complete each step of the research process. The participant's physical locations were across two states, so using the Zoom platform made scheduling easy and removed the barrier of travel time. For example, two of the participants were only available less than an hour apart. If the interviews were to be held in person, those two participants would be located approximately three hours apart if driving. The use of the Calendly platform allowed participants to easily schedule their interview at a time that was most convenient for them. In addition, once their appointment was scheduled, the virtual meeting link was automatically sent to them. The use of DocuSign to review and sign the consent form was also successful, as all individuals signed before their scheduled interview. Once they completed their signature, they received a copy of the consent form in their email for their records.

There are three primary limitations found with this research study and all are grounds for recommendations for future research.

1. This research study was conducted solely with the organizations that have a membership with The Association; therefore, all the participants lead organizations with the designation of a Community Action Agency. This limits the types and services of the organizations led by the participants.

2. Having such a small scope of eight participants limits the ability to know if the findings would be similar in organizations providing different services. The small sample size limits the ability to assess whether there is a correlation between this research and the greater population of women executive leaders.
3. Understanding the journeys of the women leaders is essential; however, without conducting interviews with the men who run the other organizations that are part of The Association, it is unclear whether the findings from this research would be consistent when adding the education and experience of male leaders.

Considering these limitations, it is recommended that further research be conducted to include expanding to other associations similar to The Association and interviewing male leaders, and conducting a comparative analysis to assess the differences between men and women leaders.

Section 5: Dissemination Plan

Upon the conclusion of this study, an executive summary was developed to summarize the information. The executive summary includes an overview of the study, information about the purpose of the study, the methodology used, general analysis, recommendations, and a conclusion providing key steps for the development of a leadership development program based on the findings of the research. A copy of the executive summary is included in Appendix B (with information about The Association redacted). The executive summary has been provided to The Association for dissemination to the leadership team, staff, and board of directors. A copy of the executive summary will also be provided to the study participants. The findings and recommendations of this research will inform The Association's goal to develop a leadership development program as part of its strategic plan. There are also organizations similar to The Association throughout the United States; the leadership of The Association may release the executive summary to the National Association so the information provided may assist other associations in developing their leadership development program.

Summary

Taking the time to create an effective leadership development program increases the likelihood that the program will succeed and achieve desired outcomes (Holt et al., 2018). The participants in this study identified four key components that would help to prepare individuals pursuing an executive leadership role—mentoring, communication skill development, leadership assessment, and business acumen—in addition to providing

opportunities for aspiring women leaders to address the challenges specific to women.

Additional research using a similar methodology can help determine whether these findings are replicable for other associations or other industries.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Questions related to the interviewee's experience and education.

1. How did you find out about this position?
2. How did you get to your organization's leadership position?
3. Have you ever had a mentor that guides(ed) you through your career? If so, tell me about your mentor(s) and how they have helped you throughout your career.
4. Do you belong to any networking groups? If so, how have they been helpful to you in your career?
5. Do you belong to any professional groups, sororities, fraternities, honor societies, etc.?

Leadership Development Program Questions.

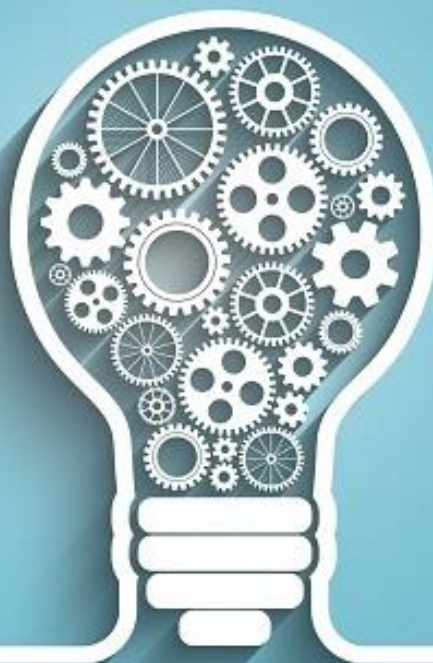
1. What do you recommend for a leadership development program for aspiring leaders?
2. To create a leadership development program for supervisors, managers, directors, etc. What skills or knowledge would they need to demonstrate to get into your role?
3. Have you ever dealt with discrimination related to your gender in your current position? ...in your career?
4. If a person came to you for guidance on how to ascend to your position, what would be an essential thing that you would say helped you get to where you are in your career?

5. Drawing from your experiences, what are some important things I should know about women in a leadership position in your organization or others?
6. Does your organization have a leadership development program for aspiring leaders?
7. Would your organization be interested in participating in a leadership development program provided by [REDACTED]?
8. Do you think there will be many challenges in developing a leadership development program? If so, what do you believe those challenges will be?

Women Executive Leaders:

Understanding their journey and creating a path for future leaders

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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AUTHORIZED BY: [REDACTED]
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OVERVIEW

Now is the time to start thinking about leadership development. With approximately 75% of nonprofit leaders soon to be retiring, there will be many opportunities for new leaders to emerge (Branch & Ford, 2022). In 2019, only 6.6% of executive leaders in the United States were women (Zillman, 2019). Due to projected leadership opportunities, this is also a great time to increase the number of women executive leaders. The number of women executive leaders within the [REDACTED] far outnumbers the average throughout the country at 63%.

Due to the high number of [REDACTED] organizations with women executive leaders, there is an opportunity to develop a better understanding of their ascension to leadership. The research conducted focused on the following questions and sub-questions: What are the experiences of the women leaders within [REDACTED]? Based on this, what are the components of a leadership development program for [REDACTED]? In addition, what tools did the women leaders use to advance in their careers? What are the components of a leadership development program? What was the career path/position that led to their current position?

PURPOSE

The purpose of this research has been to develop an understanding of women executives and their rise to leadership by understanding their experiences, education, and skills that have afforded them the opportunities needed to hold their current executive leadership position. The information gathered, as described later in this report, has been used to provide a framework for a leadership development program that will not only meet the needs of any organization within the [REDACTED] association but also incorporate topics specific to women who desire to ascend to executive leadership.

METHODOLOGY

Using a qualitative research methodology, semi-structured interviews have been conducted voluntarily. All women executive leaders throughout the [REDACTED] association were invited to participate in the research study. Eight individuals volunteered to be interviewed. Each interview was conducted virtually, and each interviewee provided written consent to participate in the interview process. As the consent form indicates, all participants will remain anonymous, and any identifying information will be redacted from the final report. In addition to the interview questions, each participant provided information about their work history for analysis. Upon the interview's conclusion, each

interviewee received notes from the interview for their review to ensure that the researcher's notes from the interview process were accurate.

ANALYSIS

The information gathered through the interview process has been analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. This form of analysis was chosen based on its effectiveness in applied research and the ability to conduct a robust analysis using coding mechanisms to look for trends in the narrative of the interviews (Braun & Clark, 2014).

All the women interviewed shared some commonalities in their ascension to their current positions. Below is a general analysis of the findings related to their professional journeys.

- All of the individuals interviewed have a master's degree or above.
- Degrees vary from education to business or human services administration.
- Four individuals held other leadership positions within their organization before being appointed to their current position.
- All participants learned about their current position from colleagues, and none used a headhunter.
- Only three had formal mentors, but all had informal mentor relationships that they fostered and created.
- Only three belong to a networking group, but 2 of the three were networking groups directly related to their current work/programs (i.e. Head Start)
- The average percentage of years as a leader compared to years in the field – 61%
- The average number of years worked in the field before being in leadership – 11.25 years

RECOMMENDATIONS

Five of the eight women executive leaders stated that their organizations did not have a leadership development program; however, all eight women interviewed indicated that it would be a great benefit if ██████ provided a leadership development program. The following are some of the reasons stated:

- It would be an excellent benefit of the ██████ membership and alleviate some of the financial burdens of creating a program within their organizations.
- Individuals participating in the program would have the opportunity to enhance their network by collaborating with other aspiring leaders throughout the association.

- While all organizations see the need for a leadership development program, many spoke of the significant amount of time needed to develop a program.

A few potential challenges/concerns were raised along with the program's benefits.

- The individuals who would participate in the program are already “stretched thin” and may not have the time to participate in a program.
- Will the program be virtual or in person? If in person, travel fees may be expensive and time-consuming.
- Who should participate in the program?
 - Will there be an application or nomination process?
 - Will an application process deter some people from participating?
 - Will there be a limit on how many people each organization can send to the program?
 - Each organization has different organizational charts and titles for their leadership staff.

Program Components

While there may be some challenges, none of the participants appeared to believe that any of the potential difficulties overshadowed the benefits of having an ██████████ Leadership Development Program. From the interviews, the four primary components of the program addressed by all participants were mentoring, communication skills, leadership assessment, and business acumen.

Mentoring: An effective mentor relationship provides the mentee an opportunity to receive feedback and guidance, and individuals with a mentor tend to feel more supported (Sipe & Testa, 2020). The mentor/mentee relationship can be defined as a relationship between two professionals where one person has significantly more experience than the other, and the former also serves as an adviser and role model for the mentee (Sipe & Testa, 2020). Each participant stated that they had formal and informal mentors who have assisted them throughout their careers. All participants believed that mentoring is a vital component of the success of future leaders. Further, participants recommended that a formal mentoring program be developed and train the program participants on developing and fostering informal mentor relationships.

Communication Skills: The ability to communicate effectively is needed to establish a mission and guide your team's work. (Rybakova, Venogradova, and Sizikova, 2019). All participants spoke of the importance of having effective written and oral communication skills. The findings of this research indicate that this program incorporates opportunities for participants to assess and develop their communication skills.

Leadership Assessment: Traditional leadership programs have a curriculum of courses or workshops that everyone takes together, but opportunities for online learning make it possible for individuals to develop their own “Personal Learning Cloud” based on their

particular needs and skill development (Moldoveanu & Narayanda, 2019). Three of the women interviewed stated that the leadership development program provided by their organization includes a leadership assessment process. 75% of the participants in the research study mentioned the importance of a leader knowing their strengths, leadership style, and potential weaknesses. It is recommended that the leadership development program created by [REDACTED] include each participant completing a leadership assessment at the beginning of the program. The results of this assessment may also inform the courses each individual will complete as a part of their self-study.

Business Acumen: While leaders need to have an understanding of their industry, services, and products, some areas of business are important despite the industry. Top-level executives must have general knowledge of business even when they have teams of people who may handle the day-to-day functions. (Holt, Hall, and Gilley, 2018). Below is a list of areas the research study participants thought were important for all executive leaders to understand.

- Finances
 - How to read a Profit & Loss Statement or a Balance Sheet?
 - How to make financial projections?
 - How to use financial reports to make business decisions?
- Marketing
 - How to effectively present your business to the community?
 - How to effectively use social media?
- Critical Decision Making.
- Team Development and building the culture needed for your organization to be successful.
- Time Management.
 - Using your time wisely.
 - Tools for organizing yourself.
 - Managing multiple projects and tasks simultaneously.
- Managing the politics of leadership.
 - Board management.
 - Leading down and up.
 - Stakeholder management.
 - Fundraising.

Leadership Development for Aspiring Women Leaders

None of the recommendations made thus far are gender specific and are essential for all leaders; however, unconscious bias, discrimination, and stereotypes still plague women leaders and may impact their leadership journey (Madsen & Andrade, 2018). Some research recommends developing women-only leadership development programs to provide a safe space for women to discuss the nuances, biases, and challenges that may

occur for women (Madsen & Andrade, 2018). All the women interviewed for this research study acknowledge at least one story of gender discrimination throughout their careers. They discussed situations varying from sexual harassment, being treated as “subpar,” feeling the need to prove themselves, feeling like they are not heard, and being overlooked. While the situations discussed did not happen within their current roles, they had impacted their professional journeys. Based on the findings from the interview, it is recommended that a separate group is developed for women in the program to provide a safe space to discuss any challenges that they may or may not face related to being a woman aspiring to become an executive leader. Based on this research, some potential discussion topics for this group of women may be:

- You do not have to assume the characteristics typically assigned to men to become a successful woman leader.
- How to find balance.
- How to stay true to yourself and your womanhood.
- How to effectively address inappropriate comments.

General Program Recommendations

The primary challenge raised by most of the research study participants was time and money. Below are a few recommendations that may address those challenges.

- Create a hybrid learning environment where participants can take self-paced online courses in the areas indicated in their leadership assessment. It is crucial to develop an environment that will work best for the members of the association (Klichner & Akdere, 2014)
- Establish a list of potential mentors from all organizations within the [REDACTED] association and pair individuals with mentors that meet the needs of program participants.
- Establish both a nomination and application process to ensure that organizations have control over who from their organization participates in the program while also making the process simple and not too time-consuming.
- Each organization sending a person to participate in the program also needs to develop a plan of how the skills learned will be incorporated into their current position, allowing the participant to develop the skills learned in the program entirely.
- Formal mentoring should be virtual and long-term (at least six months after program completion) to provide ongoing support for the program participants.
- Create a team of people who can work together in developing the program. Encourage the team to consider nontraditional training methods such as a Personal Learning Cloud.

Leadership Development Programs are a dynamic way to enhance skills, prepare future leaders, and create a succession plan for the current leadership. When developing a

program, it is important also to establish a way to measure the program results (Gurdjian & Halbeisen, 2014). To accomplish this, it is recommended that the participants are asked to complete a survey six months or a year after the finishing/concluding of the program to assess how they have incorporated the information learned during the program into their professional development. In addition, it would be beneficial to track the number of participants who also receive a promotion after completing the program.

CONCLUSION

One of the most profound and unexpected outcomes of interviewing these dynamic women executive leaders was a celebratory feeling that manifested in every interview. Each participant spoke of enjoying the opportunity to talk about their respective careers, and experiences and shared lessons learned with the hopes of helping other women aspiring to executive leadership. While their tenure in their current positions varies from just over a year to almost a decade, they all value leadership development as an essential component of succession planning. Further, investing in your team increases staff morale, enhances the team member's skills, and creates a culture of growth (Holt, Hall, and Gilley, 2018).

Creating a Leadership Development Program for aspiring leaders is a significant undertaking for any organization. In the case of ██████, they will develop a program to meet the needs of nineteen different organizations. While this research study focused on women executive leaders, the eight participants also represent half of the organizations associated with ██████.

To move this project forward, it is recommended that the following key steps are followed:

13. Establish a committee to use the information gathered in this research study to develop the entire curriculum for the leadership development program. Decide if a consultant is needed to assist with some of the work involved in creating this program.
14. Establish a vision and outcomes for the program.
15. Create a budget for the program and propose the budget for board approval.
16. Decide upon a leadership assessment tool that can be used as a part of the program.
17. Choose a training platform to provide the program's on-demand training components.
18. Develop a structure (and appoint a facilitator) for the Women Executive Leadership Sessions.
19. Develop a list of potential mentors willing to participate in that capacity.
20. Define the Mentor role to ensure that both parties are clear on the mentor/mentee relationship.

21. Develop an application process and eligibility criteria for individuals to participate in the program.
22. Establish key performance indicators that will be used to assess the impact of the program.
23. Create marketing materials to include information about the program, the time commitment (in-person vs. virtual), and the financial resources needed (if any) for organizations to have employees participate in the program. It is recommended that the marketing materials also highlight some speakers to increase interest in participating in the program.
24. Establish a schedule for the program, including application due dates, selection period, and the program's start date.

Taking the time to create a Leadership Development Program increases the likelihood that the program will succeed and achieve desired outcomes (Holt, Hall, and Gilley, 2018).

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